

JOURNEY OF THE SACRED KING

Book III

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

By

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Duty is where one finds it.

Creeyan proverb.

To question is to hesitate,

To hesitate is to become lost

To become lost is to die.

Guild Proverb

My Dear Alysyn,

It is extremely important that you return to Havensword. Bring your units into the city. After thirty years, I have reason to believe that the vampire has returned. While I fully understand your reluctance, it is time to put aside your personal concerns. The heir's life is in danger and so is your husband's. Come at once.

Eshraf,

Patriarch of the Nethergod,

Hadjys the Dark Judge

High Temple, Havensword, Creeya.

My Dear Eshraf,

I can't. I simply can't. The proofs you have sent me, do suggest a vampire. But not necessarily the same vampire. I will, however, bring my riders nearer the city.

Captain Alysyn Larkwind,

Riders of Hadjysymi

CHAPTER ONE

BROKEN RULES

Arruth huddled under the bushes on the Stalking Grounds, which lay within the wide spread walls of Ishladrim Castle on part of the palace compound made up by the Hadjysheen Temple University, the palace, the ancient libraries, and the High Temple itself, forming a quad on the spire of the mountain like a crown jewel with the city of Havensword wrapped around and beneath it. Hiding was not as easy as it had once been, since the twelve years old's sudden spurt of growth had turned her into a gawky six-footer. The bushes clutched at her like a thousand sharp fingers, catching at her sleeves and pants legs as they wrapped her in their shadows. The scent of pine dominated the air around her, overpowering the lighter fragrances of the wood. Dirt and bits of brush clung to her wavy black hair. She dug her fingers into the moist, black soil, softly breaking the rotted crust of leaves beneath its shallow blanket and disturbing the insects dwelling there, which then skittered away from her.

The shadows had lengthened with the approach of sunset and the air was turning cold. She did not wear a cloak because the warmth of midday had been pleasant when she fled. A sudden breeze chilled the sweat along her arms and neck. Arruth shivered. Her ears strained for the smallest sound of booted feet. She knew the Wrathscar soldiers were out there. If she moved, they would find her. Her heart

drummed loud in her ears, matching the sound of her breathing. She fought to control her panicked breath, her panting; fought hard to breathe as quietly as she could. Yet it all seemed loud in her ears. Arruth had recently reached that awkward stage in adolescent growth, when the rapid changes tended to interfere with coordination so that sometimes it seemed like she was all arms and legs. Arruth had lost much of that street child quickness, which had served her so well all her life, and she was painfully aware of it – it seemed as if her body had to struggle to find a new center of gravity.

She prayed again that the Wrathscar myn chasing her would not catch her. She desperately wanted to go home, wanted to be back in Shaurone. The grand adventure had turned into a nightmare and she had no one to talk to.

"And it is my own fault." Arruth covered her mouth with her hands, realizing she had spoken aloud. She froze like a deer, listening, ready to run. She resisted the tears pressing for release at the edges of her eyes.

Talons had given Arruth and her sister, Jysy, two rules when she brought them to Creeya as her protégés: no stealing and no kissing. They kept the no stealing rule. That one went without saying. The kissing rule did not immediately make sense to Arruth. In Shaurone, less than one in four children was born male and the attitude toward sex was "have a good time." Innocent prepubescent sexual exploration was regarded with affectionate indulgence and the females were the sexual predators.

Coming to Creeya, Arruth had never seen so many males in one place before in her life, so she had romped through like a sprite in a candy shop at first, which drove Talons to distraction, finally making her very angry. "Creeya is not Shaurone! It is dangerous to just go around kissing strange men. Promise me you will not break the rules anymore." Arruth had promised, but she had not kept the rules. By the time she understood what Talons meant, it was far too late to mend it and she was too ashamed to tell anyone: in Creeya the sexual predators were male. Which was why she was hiding in the bushes.

The densely forested Stalking Grounds, much of it left half wild to increase the difficulty of traversing it, was for those Assassins' Guildsmyn who were taking the roles of hunter and prey in the training exercises. Arruth had hoped that she could lose Lord Wrathscar and his myn here, but even now she heard them coming closer. Lord Wrathscar was Bryndel's father, soon to be Talons' father-in-law. Weeks ago, in a playful mood, Arruth had kissed him and learned why Talons made the "no kissing rule" – Lord Wrathscar raped her.

That afternoon, Wrathscar sent two myn to bring her to him, and instead she ran into the depths of the Stalking Grounds, going farther and farther until she was completely lost. Queiggy, the little chief clerk at the Guild Wing of the palace, had once told her there was a secret gate that would let out onto the mountain itself. So, thinking that if she could find it, maybe she could get away, Arruth had plunged

deeper and deeper into the undergrowth, heedlessly traveling places she had never been before. Arruth listened. It sounded like there were four of them. That meant more were coming. Why wouldn't he leave her alone? Why? She turned, pivoting slightly on the balls of her feet, ready to spring up and run.

"Hello, Arruth," said a deep masculine voice.

"No," her voice cracked, a hoarse breaking sound, and they had her. Wrathscar had anticipated her and been waiting in the Stalking Grounds all along.

* * * *

"They ... they raped me," Arruth sobbed to the little pinch-faced healer as he finished Reading her. Solance wore black robes, which made a soft swishing sound as they brushed the tops of his tall boots. He sashed the robe with a length of magenta silk in a curious bow to vanity while his purses and pouches hung from a narrow leather belt beneath it. He was the only healer available in the infirmary annex so early – dawn was still an hour away. His examination room smelled of oleander, castor beans, and rhododendron, although no greenery was present.

She gripped the wooden edges of the plain, unadorned chair until her knuckles whitened, her legs curled tightly around the bottom, ankles hooked together as if her body could deny the violation by clutching itself. The chamber was cold, sterile, and efficient. A desk and several tables with odd alchemist's equipment covering them: crystals for preserving tissue samples; bottles and beakers and tubes; a small oil burner for heating his concoctions. Many shelves of herbs, chemicals, bottles of powders and books lined two walls. All of it made Arruth that much more uncomfortable. Had any other healer been available she would have gone to them. But only Solance had been present in the healers' ell.

"Oh, I rather doubt that," Solance said, casually indifferent. "You broke the rules in the first place. Your reputation is well known. I doubt there is a male in Ishladrim citadel you have not at least brushed your lips across. You've enticed them all."

Arruth choked, stunned by his attitude. In Shaurone they would have placed a mace in her hands and gone after him, watched as she beat his head in and then cut his ears off so that she could wear them on a cord around her neck along with the tanned sack his balls had hung in. They would never have placed the blame on her. When Talons warned her that Creeya was different, she had never dreamed – never in her darkest nightmares – that it could be this different. This was what Talons had meant by *'the rules.'*

"Considering your reputation. All you Sharani are whores and sluts," he said distastefully, staring down at her. "Lord Wrathscar can have any woman he wants. All of his mistresses are far prettier than you are. Why should he go to the trouble of forcing an over-sized ox like you?" He took a jar of cream from a shelf. "This will take the tenderness out, help the tissues to heal. Try acting like a proper woman and

this will not happen again."

Arruth shrank away from him, her thoughts whirling in terrified, humiliated patterns. *A proper woman. Broken the rules. Broken the rules. Broken the rules. A proper woman. I'm not a proper woman.*

"You do want this, don't you?" he asked. "It will make it feel better."

Arruth snatched the jar from him and fled with a sob.

* * * *

"Sharani!" Solance shook his head at Arruth's rapid departure. "The world would be better off without them." He closed his door, then went to a basin and began washing his hands. Solance disliked even being near them, must less having to touch one of them. "Filthy creatures," he muttered.

The door behind him opened. Gylorean Galee, first lord-lieutenant to the Grand Master, stepped through. Her expensive perfume, called Asphodel, wafted over him. Solance knew she had been listening to the entire exchange between him and Arruth. Galee was an intensely sensual woman with a wealth of straight, glossy, blue-black hair, nut-brown skin, and delicately pointed ears suggesting sylvan blood. She could not afford to have Arruth's story drawing the interest of certain factions. Power and influence in Creeya was a delicate and, at times, precarious balancing between the Guild, represented by the Paladin-King – called the Grand Master – and his three lieutenants; the secular landed nobility with their Council of Lords on which the Grand Master and his lieutenants sat; and the Church led by Patriarch Eshraf. Galee was close to gaining the dominance she needed and refused to see it torn from her grasp by a promiscuous child and a lecherous ally who liked to break his women. They both knew that if forced to it, she would simply eat the child. She allowed her fangs to descend just enough to run her tongue across them.

That habitual gesture made Solance queasy, though he never dared tell her. To say to her that anything she did made him uneasy was inviting worse. She delighted in torment and torture and, like all of her pawns, Solance feared her. And wanted her. He did not know a male in all of Ishladrim castle who had not, at one time or another, wanted her.

"Keep an eye on that one, Solance. I don't want anyone taking her accusations seriously."

"They won't, Galee." Solance dried his hands off on a towel and turned to face her. "I've been sweeping Wrathscar's depredations under the carpet for years. That's why he pulled me out of the gutter and placed me here. Arruth's greatest fear is that Talons will find out she broke the rules. I've found some very interesting tomes on the Sharani. I would love to test the limitations of the Tinkerer's pets." He spoke as if the Sharani race were simply bugs to be placed under glass and examined. They

were not human to him; they were 'other'.

Galee's lips curved into a languorous smile as she tongued her fangs again. "One day you shall, Solance. But only when I am ready to allow it. For now, you can stick to your reading. And be very cautious with this girl. She and her sister were part of the gang that helped Talons defeat Prince Mephistis' Gold Ravens at Armaten."

* * * *

Yahni was Sharani, like his sister, Maya. Creeyan born and bred, however. He put up with a lot of teasing about his name because it rhymed with his race. They were womb-twins of a peculiar type, coming from a pod marriage, and it had taken a highly skilled Reader to sort the inheritances and bloodlines out. Most Sharani mastered the kyndi to a fare-thee-well and had from near total to total control of their fertility – so long as they paid attention and did not get careless. Lord Taurlys and his identical twin, Oakwithe, were Sharani on their ma'aram and 'lasah's side and they did two things that outraged the Creeyan aristocracy. First, they got a special dispensation from the Grand Master that adjusted the inheritance laws allowing for their first borns, regardless of gender, to inherit titles and lands as a compromise between the customs of their sire where only males could inherit titled properties and their mothers' Sharani culture in which only females could inherit. Second, they formed what the Sharani called a pod marriage in which the two brothers held six Guildsmyn Sharani wives in common. Then they all forgot themselves one raucous Jarienday and ended up with four children at a single go. Cleatè, the stoutest of the wives, boldly declared she would carry them all and the brothers stood and watched mesmerized as she kyndied with the other four, moving the embryos to her own body. It scrambled the genes in a joyous manner and they all got drunk again.

Yahni and Maya belonged to Oakwithe and were closer to each other than they were to their other siblings. Yahni became Guild. Maya did not. Like many Sharani males, Yahni was slight of build and agile, lacking in facial hair and delicate of feature, almost pretty. There was a lot of sylvan blood mixed into the Sharani lineages, but it tended to show most conspicuously in their males. He possessed that ephemeral youthfulness of his long lived race and could easily have passed for eighteen despite being twenty-six. Maya and he had one thing that stood out as different in their dark bronze-skinned faces: startling blue-green eyes like pieces of polished chrysocolla, the stone of peace. Women loved looking into his eyes.

Maya threw a light wool cloak around her shoulders. Mornings were always cool in the far northern mountains. She did a turn in front of the mirrors, shaking out her dark hair. Lord Derryl and his wife, Leslie, adored her hair. She dressed for riding in a split skirt with a sword at her hip, walking a narrow compromise between the customs of her race and those of her birth realm. They were courting her and Maya enjoyed it. The scandal was all over Ishladrim castle. The palace and the grounds buzzed with it. Derryl jested that she would even out-scandal the bedroom legends of Gylorean Galee herself. Now that would be something.

Yahni watched her, sitting in a corner chair with his ankle propped on his knee and a tiny smile just slightly puckering his mouth. He wore his Guild uniform. In Creeya, and especially the city of Havensword and the Palace Compound, they served as a religious military order and their fighting units were the elite of the elite: Black tunic and trousers with the book and the blade in gold. People tended to think that Yahni was slow because his verbal responses came just half a beat off. But it was usually that he was simply thinking all the time in a slightly distracted manner and taking too many things in at once to sort them out fast enough. He never missed anything.

There were three branches to the Assassins Guild, each acting independently under the command of one of the three lieutenants, the lords of the Guild: The military wing that they sent out to make the kills fell under the leadership of Gylorean Galee and her commanders; the training wing, which fell under the command of Hanadi Majios; and the clerks who maintained the records and research who belonged to Mohanja Raam. The Grand Master, however, held the true reins of power and a veto over most items and decisions. He could choose to send out anyone he wished from any of them on a whim and did so frequently. Each of the lord-lieutenants had a vote in the Grand Council that oversaw the realm.

Yahni was in records and research, Mohanja's domain, and was one of Chief Clerk Queiggy's favorite assistants. No one who was not Guild entered the Guild Wing without Queiggy's permission or Mohanja Raam's. "You be careful, Maya. I don't want to see another broken heart. Derryl's a rake."

Maya snorted. "What if I'm the rake this time, Yahni? I've learned my lesson. I'm just going to have fun. Besides, Leslie is going to be there."

"Playing triad?"

"Maybe."

Yahni shook his head. He loved his sister and felt intensely protective of her. "Too many folks, think we're toys. Exotics like Lord Channadar and his Fae. They treat us like fetishes. When they get tired of us, they throw us away. You be careful."

Maya sighed. She did not want to admit it, but Yahni was right. That was exactly what had happened with her previous lover, Karl, and they both knew it. They had no secrets between them. Yahni, possibly because he was male, had never experienced the kinds of difficulties that she had – it seemed to her that only the female Sharani were treated as exotics and then discarded when it grew boring. "I will be. But Yahni, Derryl is different."

"I hope so."

* * * *

Arruth curled up on her bed, pressing herself into the corner of the walls, dragging the blankets around her. She felt depressed and tired. Her sleep had been filled with nightmares of Lord Agasthenez Wrathscar and his soldiers. They had held her open for him. She could still hear him telling them to hold her legs wider, wider, until she felt that her hips would be torn from the sockets. An old glove had been shoved in her mouth and bound there. She could still taste the leather. And then he had entered her and... Arruth closed her eyes, leaning hard against the walls, feeling dirty.

When they first came to live here the two sisters, Arruth and Jysy, had moved their beds into the same room together, making it as near to the way they had had it at home as possible, finding comfort in the closeness. Their large apartment on the west wing was like having a house to themselves and just seemed to swallow them up after years of living in a crowded extended family home. They had been put on this wing of the palace because they were the heir's protégé's. Talons had not been the heir then, but she was the favorite grandchild of the Grand Master and she had wanted them close. There were three rooms at the top and two at the bottom.

Jysy entered the room, grabbed a handful of Arruth's clothes, and balled them up. "Get dressed," Jysy said, throwing the clothes at her. "We've got classes."

"Not going," Arruth said, dully.

"You have to go. You can't start skipping classes." Jysy pulled her kinky tangle of ringlets back, tying them. 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 that formed a delicate heart with her tiny chin, her black hair more wavy than curling, and already showing signs of having their height, being a head taller than her older sister. Jysy was like their oldest sister, Birdie, who was a priest of Dynanna the God of Cussedness, and took after her Jedruan sire, Zarim, getting her smaller than usual stature for a Sharani and curly hair from him. She grabbed at the blankets and Arruth slapped her hands.

"Don't touch me!" Arruth twisted away from her sister.

"What am I to tell Master Yukiah?" Jysy demanded, irritatedly. "He's the likeliest to demand an explanation." The armsmaster always demanded to know why one of them did not show up.

"Tell him it's my menses."

"Have you started getting them, Arruth?" Jysy asked, abruptly interested. Most Sharani started at ten, but Arruth appeared to be a late bloomer. They also were never the least bit incapacitating, no cramps like the outlands women complained of – however, both of the sisters had been quick to catch onto using them as an excuse to escape chores on occasion.

"I'm bleeding, yes." Arruth shrank even deeper into her blankets.

"You have some rags?"

"I borrowed yours."

"That's great! That's really great! I'll tell Master Yukiah."

Jysy ran out of the room. Arruth held it all in until she heard the parlor's door into the corridor click shut. Then she balled up and began to sob.

"I am going to kill them. I am going to kill them. I don't know how, but I am going to kill them. I will wear their ears on a chain around my neck."

A knock on the door made Arruth look up. Thinking that Jysy had returned, she hastily wiped her tears on a corner of the blanket to hide them. Then she heard the slight squeak of the wheels on Cass' cleaning cart.

Cass, the servitor, who cleaned the west wing suites, was clearing out the dishes from the previous day. She was a large matronly woman with five children – two of whom had been accepted into the school – and had been taking care of the west wing for as long as any one could remember. She also wiped noses, comforted broken hearts, and bandaged skinned knees for the younger occupants of the wing. Arruth liked Cass. Everyone did. Everyone trusted Cass.

"Still in bed?" Cass asked, inclining her head with a curious, concerned expression. "Not feeling well?" She pulled a pile of clean sheets from her cart.

Arruth shook her head.

"Have you seen a healer?" Cass left her cart by the door, placed the sheets on Jysy's nightstand, and sat down on the edge of Arruth's bed, patting her hand.

Arruth nodded. "The nasty one."

"You mean Solance? Want to talk about it?" Cass asked gently. "We've all had run-ins with Solance at one time or another. He's a nasty mon."

Arruth almost told her. Then she thought of Talons' and feared telling anyone lest it get back to her. The last thing she wanted to happen in the world was to see Talons disappointed in her. "No."

"All right then," Cass said patiently. "Can you at least move to the couch in the parlor so I can change the sheets?"

Arruth nodded and moved to the parlor, dragging the blanket with her.

* * * *

Lord Agasthenez Wrathscar sat with his daughters, Philomea, Elomina, Darguarite, and Belyla, in the lower floor study of his large suite. Lord Wrathscar rose from his desk once Belyla arrived. He watched her settle her slightly plump body into a chair, running her eyes nervously around the room, from face to face before dropping her gaze to her folded hands. Wrathscar and his other three daughters had waited for her to join them before beginning the planned conversation.

Lord Wrathscar was a darkly impressive man, tall and broad through the shoulders, olive-skinned and black haired. He weighed two hundred and sixty five pounds; and none of it was fat. His deep-set eyes had a brooding cast, as if constantly measuring every thing he saw. He wore his thick black hair in a club at base of his bull-neck. A heavy square-cut beard, which covered the lower half of his heavy boned face, and the curling hair on his arms combined to give him a bearish look.

A small divan and three chairs made an island in the center of the deep green carpets. All were sparsely padded, since Wrathscar did not wish people to become too comfortable in his presence. Only his own chair was padded to the point of comfort. It served his philosophy of dominance. It let his guests and associates know who ruled. His two oldest daughters, Philomea and Elomina, shared the divan, curled into the corners, watching him warily. Darguarite sat quietly in the farthest chair.

He rarely brought his daughters to court, keeping them carefully closeted at his manor, although they were allowed to visit their friends here from time to time. Many new shifts in power had begun taking place since the betrothal of his son, Bryndel, to Talons. So he brought all four of his daughters to stay in their West Wing apartments as pawns in his game.

"This is why I'm allowing you back to court," he said, running his eyes possessively over them. The oldest three were light-skinned blondes like their dead mother, but the youngest, Belyla was olive-skinned like himself.

Wrathscar walked over behind the divan, closing his hands on Philomea's shoulders, kneading them. Philomea leaned back against him for a moment. He smiled at that, a lips-only smile. His eyes never lost their hard edge.

"I want you to listen to the gossip and bring me all you hear." He moved about the room as he spoke, going from daughter to daughter. He stroked his fingers through Elomina's yellow hair and chipped Darguarite under the chin to force her head up. Each one nodded obediently at this contact and he came to Belyla last. Belyla was his only disappointment – other than her brother.

Belyla flinched when he ran his fingers desultorily along her arm. He gripped her arm, tightening it to the point of causing her pain. If she would not love him, then at least she should fear him. Belyla stifled a whimper and he released her, leaving a

darkening bruise on her arm.

"But stay away from the Guild. I don't want you associating with Guildsmyn. They're too dangerous." Wrathscar dismissed them with a curt wave and returned to his desk.

* * * *

Talons Trollbane sat on a balcony of the Music Chamber, a large cabaret and canteen maintained to keep the students and holy-assassins-in-training to the nethergod Hadjys the Dark Judge on campus until the priests could ascertain whether the deity would confirm them or not. The Assassins' Guild did not prey on innocents, but took their victims for a price within the strictures of their religion as an offering to their god. They were the holy avengers of their god who then claimed the souls of their victims, dragging them into his nine hells for purging and punishment.

From where she sat, Talons could see nearly all of the central section of the castle grounds. Below her, the quad, a large green and gardens located in the center of the compound, sparkled with light from oil lamps hanging from tall poles along the winding paths. At any other time she might have enjoyed looking at it. The city of Havensword had been chiseled into the side of a tall peak in descending walled levels wrapped around and around it. Ishladrim Castle sat at the highest point. The castle grounds held the palace on the north side, forming a quad with the Guild school and university to the west; the library and the high temple of Hadjys to the south; and the Guild training grounds to the east. The training grounds included a substantial bit of forest called the Stalking Grounds, an equestrian section with lists and a salle as well as several obstacle courses.

She did not want to sit there in the Music Chamber, bored by the sound of harps and lutes coming from the interior. Bryndel, her betrothed, had insisted upon their coming here ... and she had promised her grandsire she would not hurt him for simply being obnoxiously male. Talons moved the candles around the table listlessly. It was supposed to be romantic, but she simply felt trapped.

"Hello, Talons." Gylorean Galee smoothed her blue-black hair as she took a chair beside the granddaughter of Takhalme Gee. The Guild's first lord-lieutenant claimed to be of Nordrei descent, but those who knew that sylvan race well would have found her hair and nut-brown skin a taste off.

Talons tensed. She had never been able to say exactly what it was about Galee that set her on edge. The woman was vain, with a bedroom reputation of immense proportions that only her standing with Talons' grandsire allowed her to get away with. Maybe it was simply that Galee seemed prepared to take anything between her legs that carried the proper equipment. The woman was a hedonist unrivaled in the court. The clinging fabric of Galee's ice blue gown left nothing to the imagination – as usual. Talons lifted her glass of wine in a casual salute and then sipped it. She had

to be, at least, somewhat polite. If the Grand Master had not chosen to place her among his core elite, she would have found herself under Galee's command. Talons felt thankful that she was not and never had been one of Galee's agents.

Galee's slanted eyes, with their conspicuous folds at the corners, slid around the balcony and then over her shoulder into the main chamber as if making certain they were not watched. "And where is your betrothed? I thought you came here together."

"Bryndel is fetching us some food."

"Ah. Bryndel is such a nice boy." Galee turned, closing the small privacy doors. Galee's fangs slid from their sheaths and she thrust with a sudden rapier of fascination into Talons' mind, taking her. All Talons' will and focus faded from her grasp. Her arms folded across the table and she leaned forward, staring empty-eyed into the deserted quad.

Galee smiled, reached to stroke Talons' face, and noted that the heir no longer so much as flinched. It had become so simple after all these months. She stretched across the table, and murmured softly as if her words were the sweet nothings of lovers. "When I have destroyed the Guild, replacing it with my people, I will have crippled or possibly even slain Hadjys through the symbiosis. If that doesn't kill him, this will." Galee flexed her fingers, her nails became claws and venom oozed from the tips. "Your god will die and he will not be the first I have slain."

Deep beneath the upper layers of her consciousness, Talons heard Galee and her thoughts thrashed, screaming like a man chained to the bottom of the sea, unable to break the surface and breathe. *Dynarien! Dynarien, where are you? Can't you hear me?* She called out to the man she loved in desperate trapped silence and he did not answer. Tomorrow Talons would remember nothing at all of this, except the residue of her terror, which had been the pattern for months.

The vampire felt the way she struggled, inclined her head to watch Talons' face interestedly, and tightened her hold, causing Talons' mind to go still and empty. She drew a vial from her robes, pouring it into Talons' wine. "It is time to drink your death."

Talons raised the glass to her lips and drank it, smiling. "It tastes like cherries, Galee. I like it." Galee was so good to her, so kind and sweet. She loved Galee.

"I am glad you enjoy it, dear." Galee laughed softly. "You are a sweet cow who will give me the world."

"Thank you, Galee. To serve you is to love you." Had Galee asked her to, Talons would have put a blade through her own heart to please her.

* * * *

Bryndel Wrathscar came out onto the balcony with a platter, slices of steaming beef pink in the middle with gravy over them, thick biscuits and chunks of potatoes. His mouth opened and he stared a moment. "Galee," he asked stiffly. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw you and thought to say hello. Do I need a reason?" She pouted at him teasingly.

Defiance glimmered for an instant in his eyes, like a trapped child. "No. Of course not." Bryndel Wrathscar was darkly handsome like his father, but slender and lighter of build. He moved with a studied boneless grace as he placed the platter on the table. "Talons, are you all right?" Bryndel noticed how she stirred sluggishly as if coming from a trance and frowned suspiciously at Galee. He knew that Galee was a vampire of some kind, as well as one of his father's secret allies. Should the Guild discover that she was one of the undead, they would kill her. Bryndel also knew that Galee was a creature of secrets, withholding many things from him. Which he believed was just as well, since he doubted he could ever handle knowing them without going mad.

"Yes. I'm fine," Talons answered.

Bryndel kissed her, glaring at Galee. The woman had done something to Talons, he felt certain of it.

"You will both be at the party tomorrow night?" Galee asked.

"Yes, we'll be there," Bryndel said without so much as a glance in Talons' direction.

Galee smiled, rose, and left.

Talons still refused to wear dresses for him, but he did not complain as much since she allowed him to touch her and she never refused him sex. Those deadly black, fingerless gloves that could summon her magical runed tiger claws never left her hands. She slept in them. That still bothered him. He had not been able to convince her to give them up.

"I love you, Talons," Bryndel's hands closed on her breasts, pinching.

Talons stiffened, endured it, forcing herself to relax. "I am beginning to love you, Bryndel. Truly."

"I want that, Talons. I want this to be a love match."

Bryndel released her, cut up the meat, and began playfully feeding her.

Talons forced herself to laugh and made a game of it, but the food seemed to stick

in her throat. *Edouina, please come home. Dynarien, Dynarien, Dynarien, you promised to come when I Called. Where are you?* The matchless assassin who had made her first kill at eleven, felt caged and trapped. She felt an undercurrent of unfamiliar and inexplicable panic, which she could neither explain nor escape, haunting her. She had not cried since childhood and yet the tears were there now, close to the surface and demanding expression. Talons had never been a player, avoiding politics and social interaction; she was a loner, a hunter, operating in the shadows, and answering only to the Grand Master; and now she was in over her head and she knew it. When games needed to be played, it was her lover Edouina who played for both of them. But Edouina had been in Shaurone cleaning up the rest of the mess caused by the infiltration of the Guild by the Waejontori's Gold Ravens. Six months without Edouina. And now five weeks without Dynarien.

"Let's take the food to your rooms," Bryndel suggested. "I'm ready for a ride. I cannot understand why it's taking so long to get a child."

"I cannot understand why you are in such a rush. The wedding isn't until fall."

"My father wants proof you're not barren."

"Perhaps one of the Readers should check me," Talons suggested, as Bryndel stroked her between the legs. *I hate you. I hate you. I hate you*. She wished she were far enough along to feel Dynarien's children moving.

"Let's go."

Talons stood up and walked out. *Dynarien. Dynarien. Dynarien. Answer, damn you!*

* * * *

Dynarien heard her calling through the link they shared. She could not hear him, but the voice of her emotions reached across the distance to his mind. He grabbed the edge of the cot, used it to roll himself onto his side, and cried out at the pain in his ribs and shoulder before he could stop himself. His long, red-gold hair fell across his fair-skinned shoulders and into his face as he pushed again at the cot, struggling to rise. Two novices in brown robes rushed to him. Dynarien shoved them away, tipping himself out of bed only to stumble to his knees hard and cry out again, clutching his arms tightly across himself. His crushed bones, ribs, chest, and shoulder were healing; but not fast enough for what he heard in her voice. His was the only cot in the canvas tent, since they had wanted him to be apart from the common soldiers because of his rank. But they always had people sitting in the tent with him in case he needed anything.

Cool hands touched his face. He looked into the earthmage Laurelyanne's eyes which were like dark leaves. Lines had come into her face and white in her hair since the death of her youngest and last surviving son, Brendorn. "Why are you doing

this?" she asked him.

"Talons calls to me ... she's in trouble." Dynarien's sweet tenor was edged with desperation and pain.

"Is she the one you said you loved?" Laurelyanne asked gently.

"Yes." Dynarien swallowed, fighting the anguish.

"She's marrying another. She says she loves him."

Dynarien shoved at the cot angrily. "It's a lie."

Laurelyanne sighed. "You can't know that."

"She carries my child. I promised to go to her. There's more."

"You are in no shape to do that, lord. Rest. Let yourself heal."

"I can't. She needs me." And then it all poured out in soft, half-choked anguish, of how both Patriarch Eshraf and Talons herself had argued with the Grand Master that a plot and a vampire existed; how they had argued against the match between the Wrathscars and Talons, and gotten nowhere. Dynarien, because he was neither Creeyan nor Hadjysheen, had been forced to remain silent and in the shadows – impotent.

Laurelyanne's eyes went soft and maternal. "Perhaps I can speed things up. We have a common affinity in the earth. Let me move you into the tent I'm sharing with Josiah where I can tend you both at the same time."

Dynarien gave her a smile of gratitude.

* * * *

Terrys' bedroom in her private apartments reflected the character of the mon to a degree that Belyla always found enchanting. Delicate white furniture imported from the east, with legs wrought in patterns of arching daffodil stalks. An ivory bed stood in one corner covered by a lace-edged spread, white with appliqué pink flowers all over it. Even the lace and linen curtains on the open windows reflected the dainty femininity of the young mon who gone against the court's grain to befriend Belyla when no one else would. As the last of her family line, Terrys had been allowed to inherit the fortune, lands, and titles that gave her a freedom Belyla envied. *To be free!* Oh, *to be free*, thought Belyla.

"There's a party tomorrow," Terrys said, twirling and watching her skirts flaring out like a morning glory's petals. The morning sun, flowing through the open windows and shafting between the lacey curtains that were blowing restlessly in the early

breeze, brought out the golden highlights in her chestnut hair. Terrys was a lovely, light skinned Creeyan with slanted, dark East Creeyan eyes; and she was everything Belyla wished she could be: pretty, talented, energetic, and witty. She adored Terrys, basked in her reflected glory; at times, that reflection made her feel lonely, but she would never tell Terrys that.

"I know," Belyla answered listlessly. "Father insists we all come."

"Well, it's good he's bringing you. But you don't sound happy about it." Terrys gave another twirl about the room.

"No one talks to me at parties." Belyla's eyes dropped. "I'm not pretty like my sisters."

Terrys paused in mid-whirl, causing her skirts to settle abruptly around her legs and regarded her friend closely. "Nonsense, Belyla. A little make-up and the right clothes and we'll make a swan of you."

Belyla shook her head. "I am going, but I don't want to, Terrys. I get snubbed."

"Well, you won't this time and I'll introduce you to Yahni Kjarten."

"I've noticed him ... he's so handsome." Belyla sighed heavily.

"He's my age. Twenty-six is not too old for you. The male should be older. Ten years is not such a difference, especially since he's Sharani and they don't age as fast as the rest of us." Terrys added with a smile, "He likes women who can talk about books."

Belyla brightened. "Really?" She read constantly and the thought that someone as wondrous to the eye as Yahni Kjarten could prefer a woman who liked to read gave her a thrill of hope.

"Yes. He gets bored quickly with the others who are always throwing themselves at him... Or being thrown at him by his parents."

Belyla sobered as quickly as she had brightened. "But my father doesn't like the Kjartens."

"Hmmp! A lot of people don't like your father. We'll be discreet. You'll be with me, after all, and no one's ever questioned that." She shared a conspiratorial wink at Belyla. "Yahni and I go way back ... all the way to nappies."

Belyla flushed and then laughed.

* * * *

Yahni lounged about the edges of the party, watching the rest of the nobility and their little fluttering entourages, catching bits and pieces of the various conversations, but hearing nothing to interest him. If he continued to lean against the wall in this corner sooner or later his father or other relatives would notice him and drag him off in the direction of one female or another. He needed to move on soon, if he wished to avoid them. He watched his father, Lord Oakwith Kjarten, talking to Lady Milady, an exceedingly slender woman most of the younger set called the "matchmaker from hell" and winced. He pressed his back against the wall and slid a little lower, murmuring a small prayer to the god of love that they did not notice him. Derryl, Leslie, and Maya stood just in back of Lady Milady listening to them.

"Nooooo. I do not need this."

He fiddled with his wine glass while scanning around for a direction in which to escape. His buddies, Jajinga SwallowsWing and Ceejorn Osterbridge had already managed to attract a couple of pretty ladies and he saw their backs as they deserted the party in favor of the gardens by heading through the stained glass doors on the far right of him. Damn! There went his best excuse for getting out of here. He had gone out of his way to get them invited just so they could help him escape. Yahni glanced back at his father. They were still talking. He moved casually along the wall until he came to a table, not wanting to appear to be in full flight and thus draw familial attention to himself.

Yahni kept thinking about his conversation with Maya yesterday, he had tried to conceal his own bitterness and disappointment in love from her, as he always did. They chased him, played him, and then tried to change him; and when he couldn't stand it any longer, Yahni broke the relationship off; or they did because they became bored by his intransigence. His family believed he was being too picky and were beginning to despair that he would ever marry. Their expectations were turning these requisite court parties into nightmares. "Damn it, Jajinga! Osterbridge! You were supposed to be my excuse to leave." He cursed again and edged closer to the door, but still had half a hall to go.

They were commoners and had absolutely no idea what it felt like to be in his position. The only thing working in his favor was that a godmarked Guildsmon could not be forced into marriage easily unless he were the only heir to major estates like Talons. Yet it could be done and was not entirely unheard of and the thought of some woman dragging him off like a prize horse made him shudder. Yahni checked one more time and saw that the dreaded Lady Milady had wandered off with his sister, Derryl and Leslie in another direction. That gave him some breathing room and he grinned. He felt a good deal safer now.

Yahni straightened and began sipping his wine again, noticing that something was going on around the Grand Master, where Takhalme sat flanked by his first lord-lieutenant, Gylorean Galee, and Lord Wrathscar. Bryndel and Talons had come up to them. Yahni could not hear what they were saying across the noise of the

party, but he saw the flash of displeasure and then weary resignation cross Talons' face. She placed her hand on Bryndel's upraised own and was led away in a cheap display of ownership. "Why that sorry son of a gutterwhore..."

What they were doing to her angered him. For Yahni, anger was a soul-deep slow moving force, like tectonic plates inching together. An earthmage who could see those things tried to describe them once. She had even made drawings. Yahni just shook his head, but the image remained. That was definitely the way he felt, watching Galee and Wrathscar move Talons around in front of him like a toy. He had never been part of her circle, only an admirer, yet like so many of the students a few years older than the heir, he watched her rush up through the ranks and then run past them with that incredible precocity. So he felt a simmering anger at seeing the flashing hawk brought down. Yahni pushed away from the wall, feeling the pieces inching together inside him. He sat his wine glass down on a small table and put his hands together like the mage's drawing, and then brought them up and thought, "*boom*."

"I wish there were something I could do," he muttered. Then he picked up his glass and started to move into the crowd to lose himself a bit more before any of his family could spot him and prevent him from making another approach toward that garden door. "I've come, I've spoken, I've done my duty, and I'm getting out of here."

"Yahni?" a soft voice spoke at his side. "I wanted to show Belyla your eyes."

At first he wanted to just walk away, but instead he turned. Terrys was always showing other girls his eyes. She had been doing this since they were children in school together and for a time they had been lovers, but now they were only friends. So he found himself smiling at Terrys and beside her a girl of sixteen who he did not recognize. Terrys' friend was slightly plump and olive complexioned, but pleasing in a way. She looked a little uncomfortable, maybe shy, Yahni thought. Shy always drew him. The shy ones tended to be less shallow and silly than the others Terrys threw at him. Sometimes he suspected Terrys was in league with his family in their attempts to get him married.

"Yahni, I want you to meet Belyla Wrathscar, Lord Wrathscar's daughter. Belyla, doesn't he have the most beautiful eyes?"

Yahni lifted her hand and kissed it. *Poor girl! With a father like Wrathscar, no wonder she's shy*. Belyla's face changed, flushed, and for a moment she was pretty. "You have arrived to rescue my poor soul from a boring party. Would you ladies care to escape into the garden?"

* * * *

"Your brother is stealing my lines, you know," Derryl observed dryly as he passed them with Leslie on one arm and Maya on the other. Both women laughed. Derryl had a perpetual "naughty boy" swagger and a playful gleam in his blue eyes

suggestive of a rapier that was always seeking an opening for a thrust. He delighted in uproar, a target for his wit – but always to make a point, not simply for the sake of knocking someone down, when he thought one needed to be made. Coming from a family that delighted in uproar for the fun of it, Maya fell into the game with him more often than not. Although at first she had shied away from him, forcing him to chase her, having gone through a period of trying unsuccessfully to fit in at court – Karl's idea and a painful one at the end – and had fled from both things that reminded her of Karl and things that reminded her of her family.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, my lord," Maya said. While Yahni had been properly trained to courtly manners, he had only recently begun to steal lines and mannerisms from Derryl, whose intense panache and style had many of the younger myn mimicking him – with far less success.

"Don't encourage him, it will go to his head, Maya. Look how big it is already," Leslie grabbed at the clubbed knot of Derryl's thick, wavy blond hair, giving it a yank, and then she glanced more closely at the young women disappearing with Maya's brother. "Wasn't that Belyla Wrathscar?"

Derryl's eyes hardened. "That's a dangerous woman."

"Belyla?" Maya responded. "Nonsense. She's very sweet."

"Not because of who she is, but because of who she belongs to."

Maya was silent.

* * * *

Talons retreated to the edge of the party, hating formal functions, and then disappeared into one of the little side rooms where people, especially the younger set, tended to conference, tryst or otherwise vanish into for a variety of purposes – those who could not manage to escape completely into the palace gardens. This room held a long bench in the back left corner with a table before it and several chairs around it. Talons slid onto the bench, pressing her face into her hands, feeling weary in body, mind, and spirit. She moved farther into the corner, desperately wanting to shake her feelings of being exposed and naked, caught up in a meshing of fears she could not set name to. She drew the vial of rose essence from her pocket, opened it, and sat smelling it. Dynarien always smelled of roses: it was an unconscious expression of his divinity. Gradually the scent, reminding her of him as if he sat near her, filled her with reassurance and calm.

"Have you heard from your young scoundrel of a yuwenghau?" asked a pleasant baritone.

Talons immediately closed the bottle and shoved it into her pocket again before looking to see who had spoken. The yuwenghau were divine-knights errant, rouge

younger gods and demi-gods of the Light that fought against the Hellgod's minions and other dangerous creatures. Sometimes they died. That was what Talons most feared: that Dynarien might have been slain at the Battle of Errilyn.

"Patriarch," Talons smiled, rising to hug him across the table. Over the last stressful months much of the formality had gone out of their relationship, replaced by a growing friendship. As her relationship with her grandsire grew ever more distant and strained, she leaned more heavily on Eshraf. "No, I haven't."

His eyes searched her face with an expression of concern. "You look tired. Are you resting?"

"As much as they let me." Talons forced a smile.

"I did not see you at Temple last week for services."

"Galee had things for me to do."

"That is no excuse. I will send Mikkal for you in the morning." Eshraf sat down, covering her hand in both of his very large, broad ones. He had risen in the church from among the peasants; and when he felt his spirit troubled, he chopped wood to relieve it. His assistant, Mikkal, who had been a solicitor of the court before entering the priesthood on the death of his Guildsmon wife, found that infinitely amusing, although they were devoted friends.

"Have you had any word from Norendel?" Talons asked.

"Only that the battle was fought and Rowan victorious. No word from your scoundrel?" He pressed gently. "Or from someone who knows him?"

"None." *Dynarien. Dynarien!*

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Excuse me, Patriarch, but I need a word with Talons, privately." Galee swished into the little room, moving to Talons' opposite side, two glasses of wine in her hands. She set one down before the young Guildsmon.

Eshraf regarded Galee, his eyes going cold as drawn steel. Takhalme had made the mon Guild by fiat, by-passing the temple, thus his god had not been given an opportunity to either confirm or deny her. He never trusted her and kept tally of her allies. For thirty years, from the first day she appeared in Creeya, he had watched her and written it all down out of a nameless suspicion, a haunted instinct that he had yet to share because he had no proof. He discreetly acted to keep her people out of the temple, banning them even from attending services. He excommunicated them for the smallest trespasses once he became Patriarch. He could sense the wrongness in them, yet could not explain, or justify it.

"Of course." He patted Talons' hand again. "We'll talk later, child. You'll visit with me tomorrow after services?"

"Yes."

"Good." Eshraf left without another word.

Galee knew his abrupt exit was meant as a snub, but shrugged it off. She always got that from Eshraf. She closed the doors and settled back with Talons. "Bryndel will be coming for you soon. The party is breaking up."

The vampire stroked Talons' cheek, slipping into her mind. The paladin smiled at her, reaching to open her tunic so that the vampire could feed and Galee stopped her. The triggers and sways had become so deeply set that the first touch now set the pattern of responses off without Galee having to direct them.

Galee took out the vial, pouring it into Talons' wine. "Drink your death, child. The best things in life take time to achieve." She almost laughed aloud. *Humans. Cattle.*

"Will there be pain, Galee?" There was the tiniest note of resignation within a distant hollowness.

Galee eyed her closely, thinking that was a very strange question to ask. It was not the first time Talons had asked it. "Yes. And I will drink it in." The Lemyari, demon-vampire, stroked her face, watching her drink, wondering at the fact that she still possessed that tiny bit of awareness. Her mind was stronger than Galee dreamed. Galee sipped her own glass, savoring the taste, wishing it were stronger stuff, the sweet, salty vintage of living veins. She stroked Talons again, resenting the godmark between the paladin's breasts that prevented Galee from turning her. Talons would have made a powerful child of her blood. No matter. When the palace slept, Galee would drink from her consecrated veins and be satisfied for a time. To open the God Box she would require the blood of a sacred king and the flesh of a nekaryiane. Then she could drain this world dry if she wished, or gather its people as her herds – her cattle. That was where Bellocar had gone wrong; he had improperly maintained his herds of cattle, gluttoning heedlessly on death and destruction instead of establishing breeding programs. Galee had learned much from observing the Tinkerer over the past centuries since the last godwar. Once this cow was in calf and she had stolen Creeya – well, that thought could wait, she did not have Creeya yet.

Galee stood, taking Talons by the shoulder and waking her from the spell. "Come, Bryndel is looking for you."

* * * *

The crowd in the great hall of the northeast wing, the Grand Master's private wing, had thinned to almost nothing. The Grand Master sat in a large chair near the front

beside Lord Wrathscar with Bryndel at his elbow. Bryndel immediately went to Talons and extended his hand for her to place hers within it. Talons winced. He was going to make her act like a lady. She could refuse, since she was Guild and they operated under a differing set of customs, yet this had to mean something had been discussed. She glanced at her grandsire and at Lord Wrathscar, saw their expectant expressions. That confirmed her suspicions.

"Take his hand, Talons," Takhalme ordered. "And for future functions, it would behoove you to show your acceptance of this alliance by acting more the Creeyan lady and less the Sharani Guildsmon."

Talons felt chilled to the marrow of her bones, her stomach hollow. "As you wish, grandsire." She placed her hand in Bryndel's so that he could lead her.

"And start wearing dresses," Takhalme said.

Talons nodded and then allowed Bryndel to lead her away.

Lord Wrathscar smirked. "You spoiled her, Takhalme."

"I made her a Guildsmon. The finest we have ever had. My matchless Talons." He sighed, a weary note of resignation in his voice.

Galee draped herself across Takhalme's chair. "And now you must make her a lady. The two need not be mutually exclusive, my lord."

"Think you not, Galee?"

"Some of our best Guildsmon are ladies."

"When that is their nature, perhaps. But it is not Talons." He watched Bryndel lead her away, feeling a trace of sadness watching her. "Where is Mohanja? I am tired and I wish to return to my chambers."

* * * *

As the party waned indoors, it waxed outdoors, winding around and through the intricate sculptured labyrinth of gardens, hedgerows, and the vine-wrapped alcoves of stone and trellis. Belyla followed Yahni with Terrys beside her. She had initially felt overjoyed to find herself actually speaking with Yahni Kjarten, but now her old fears of rejection had reared their hoary heads, and she dragged her feet. She wanted to run away and cry from fear of what she wanted most.

People feared and resented Lord Wrathscar and they took it out on Belyla by snubbing her. So she, not Wrathscar, paid for her father's sins. She held back, her feet catching reluctantly at the ground so that at times it seemed that Yahni was half dragging her or she was half stumbling. Terrys elbowed her several times with an

inclined head and an impatient look. A crowd had gathered just ahead of them and Belyla shrank against Terrys, who patted her back reassuringly.

Lord Channadar sat nearby on a couch surrounded by his Fae and others of his entourage, waving his golden fan while he told his stories to the delight of his audience – he always attracted an audience from among his peers, their households, and even those servants who managed to find the smallest excuse to delay and watch – both from the allure of his magic and his sheer exoticness. A second fan lay tucked in his belt. Seven nobles stood around listening while others sat upon the grass. His narrow, slanted silver eyes glowed as he gestured, illustrating his tale with small illusions that trailed from the fan as he spoke. The half-Fae lord of Hellsguard – a large holding in eastern Creeya, bordering the Katal Escarpment where the Nine had sealed up the Hellgod, Bellocar – loved an audience. When he saw Yahni and the two ladies he straightened with a flourish.

"Ah, Yahni! I wondered when you would appear. And such lovely ladies. Especially Belyla. Where have you been hiding? Behind the butterfly bush?" He bushed his fingers in front of her face and they trailed butterflies in all the colors of sparkling jewels. Belyla gasped.

"No, not butterflies," Channadar said, rising in a slow, languorous fashion and drawing his other fan to circle her, assuming a pose like a crane beside her. Belyla froze, uncertain. Everyone was staring at her, and she flushed. Until then, Channadar had always ignored her like the rest of the court. His fans moved, trailing swans with long tails that swirled in a mad dance around her. "Yes, it is swans for Belyla, the birds of love and harmony. Dream happy, sweet Belyla." Channadar made another pass and a black swan came among the white, causing him to frown, but he said nothing, simply returning to the couch.

Belyla clutched at Yahni's hand and he caught it. "It's okay, Belyla," Yahni said. "Channadar didn't mean anything by it. It's just one of his stories."

She nodded at him. "He's never spoken to me before," she whispered hoarsely. "People don't speak to me." She stiffened at the social gaff she had made by saying that.

"Well, they do now." Yahni drew her close, pulling her into the circle of his arm, feeling suddenly protective of Belyla's sweet, helpless fragility.

Lord Channadar stretched out, yawning, seized Lady Montani with a sly grin, and imprisoned her in his arms while they watched. His head dropped and pulled back in response to her protests, his eyes gleaming as he looked at her through the drifting strands of black and copper hairs. His lips curled into a smirk as he drew his fan, tapped her shoulder, and she vanished.

"Oh!" Belyla gasped.

"Don't worry," Yahni said. "He hasn't hurt her. Does this all the time."

"So then she knew he would do this?"

Yahni felt her start to relax in his arms and it felt good. "No. The Fae don't play fair, just tag you're it. Startling. But they won't hurt you, otherwise our Lord of the Eastern Marches would have been minus a head long ago."

"Channadar! Oh there you are!" Lady Montani and three others rounded a corner of hedge walking quickly toward them, "I have been looking for you for over two hours. I was telling Derryl—"

The garden erupted in applause. "Oh, that's a fine one, Channadar!" someone shouted.

"And we thought she was here all this time!"

Channadar dropped his head and shoulders in a tiny bow of guilty pleasure, his lips pursing with the corners twitching. Then his Fae began a leaping dance, led by Tiderider, the only trueblood in his entourage – the others were half bloods like himself, part of the enclave, which had gathered at his Creeyan court. Tiderider had come from the Isle of Faewin itself in the Sundering Flood section of the Hillora River. The humans adored watching the Fae in their silken robes, dancing with their golden fans, thinking them silly and shallow – which was such a lovely conceit. *How many Fae can dance on the head of a human? As many as can get their attention!*

Yahni, seeing his sister, Leslie, and Derryl, pulled Belyla deeper into the concealing hedgerows. If he had to have an argument about seeing a Wrathscar, at least he would not have it in front of Belyla. "Let's walk, find somewhere we can sit and talk."

"Terrys—"

"Terrys is used to me kidnapping folks." By then he had her running with her skirts held up in one hand to free her lower legs. "Always bringing them to see my eyes. She's been doing that for years. Then, if I like them, we lose her." Yahni laughed. "It's a game."

Belyla laughed with him. Yahni decided he liked the sound of that. He knew his family's feelings toward the Wrathscars, but some rules were made to be broken.

M,

His lordship has brought his daughters to court, but ordered them to avoid the Guild. A waste of talent. Put the two eldest girls into play, but do not tell their father. Additionally, keep an eye on the youngest. She is unstable.

Star.

My dearest, Star,

At once,

As always,

Your beloved,

M

CHAPTER TWO

LITTLE GIRL LOST

Tiderider lay in the middle of his large bed between his fireflies with a golden-skinned arm around each of them. Leeza nestled beneath one arm with her glory of bright auburn hair and dark-maned Chucomei Who-Calls-The-Birds, Mage of Wings, curled within his other. He felt satisfied with the day, laying there in still serenity, observing the stars, and waxing moon through his windows. Signs of warding, written on the sills, sealed the edges against the entry of evil things.

He watched a thin cloud sketch skeletal lines across the bright white moon like clawed, grasping fingers. A trace of unexpected tension stole along his arms and up his back. *Is this an omen forming? A warning?*

"Look at the moon, Chucomei. What do you see?" He wanted her opinion, for she read moon omens better than he: she had been godmarked by Tala in infancy.

Chucomei rolled onto her side and glanced across his chest to study it. Leeza pushed herself up on her elbows to see it also.

Tiderider captained the Thirteen Chosen, a Fae battle unit. The Chosen had watched the enemy for another day, waiting for them to make the smallest misstep in their dance. They had come to court three years ago with their lord, Channadar of Hellsguard on the eastern marches of Creeya, and still they watched. They pretended to be simply Channadar's companions, never explaining to the silly humans exactly what it meant to be a Chosen. The enemy was clever, but so were the Fae. Yet, watching that cloud cross the moon, he wondered if that sign meant that they were not being clever enough by half.

Chucomei shivered. "A warning from the gods, I think." She crawled from the bed and went to the window, opening it and trilled. The air around the windows filled with the fluttering of wings and a multitude of noises from chirps to caws to shrieks and as suddenly it was gone. "I will know in a few days what the omens portend. I have sent the winged ones to speak with Tala. She-Who-Holds-Back-The-Darkness has ever loved me." Chucomei shook back her sleeve of her flimsy nightgown, revealing the godmark burned into her arm, a moon, three stars, and a runic squiggle. "Her daughter was slain here thirty years ago. She will answer all the sooner if there is a chance of bringing vengeance."

Tiderider rose from the bed and joined his lover at the window, slipping his arm around her shoulders. His bond with Chucomei was a quiet one, with little speech between them. Which was good, because compared to his fellows, Tiderider was taciturn and laconic; although he could laugh, sing, and dance with the best of them when it suited his mood. His name among his own kind in distant Faewin meant the Golden-Fae-Who-Has-Seen-the-Sea. But it was simpler to call himself, using the common tongue, Tiderider.

"Say my name," he whispered in Fae. Chucomei was the only firefly that could actually pronounce his Fae name and he loved to hear her say it.

She trilled it softly, bringing a small fond smile to his lips. Then the cloud engulfed the moon and Chucomei pressed her face into his shoulder in a sudden flinching. Tiderider gathered her closer.

Channadar's mother had sent Tiderider from Faewin to Hellsguard in Creeya to train the half-Fae lord's Chosen and lead them in his defense. Tiderider was the only trueblood among them: the rest were half-bloods and quarter-bloods. Tiderider was golden-skinned, light caramel-haired with golden highlights, stood nearly six feet tall – an effect of the unbridled magic still found around the edges of his homeland – and golden-eyed. His eyes, like all the Fae were very narrow, like slits in his face from the double epicanthic fold of skin along the edges of his eyes. That characteristic was more strongly pronounced among the Fae than with any other of the sylvan races. The Chosen he led were strong despite their mixed parentage. The only rough stone among the gems was Juna, Channadar's younger brother. They were both sons of Tiderider's Queen and the human lord Ky of Hellsguard who had perished fifty years ago, leaving his lands and titles to young Channadar.

He found himself thinking about Juna as he tangled his fingers in dark Chucomei's hair, stroking her head. For once Juna had not managed to spoil the day. Channadar was wise beyond his years, while Juna was Juna – a child forever. It was a twist of the spirit, not of the mind or body, for Juna was a flawless warrior when he chose to be. There were days when Tiderider despaired of his learning anything, for Laughing Juna, as they often called him, was rash, heedless and joyfully erring in life and in love. Tiderider feared that Juna would one day cause his brother's death through some negligence or inattentiveness. Then Tiderider's Lady Queen would weep and

he would mourn with her.

"You're thinking of Juna again?" Chucomei asked, nestling closer to him. His arm tightened around her.

"Yes. Juna worries me." He kissed the top of her head distractedly, his thoughts circling again over the day and Juna. "Could this omen be about Juna?"

Chucomei, the Mage of Wings, had slept in his bed for five years. He knew her well and loved her deeply. Both she and Leeza wore the slender crystals around their necks with his runes that marked them as his fireflies. The crystals would capture their memories of shared love for him to savor for all the long span of his years. All fireflies and their partnered Fae wore them; it made falling in love with one of the short-lived more bearable for the Fae, the most magical of the sylvan races. They called their short-lived lovers 'fireflies' because of the comparative shortness of their lifespans.

Leeza remained a mystery to him. He prayed that she was not, also, a mystery to Channadar. So far as Tiderider knew, Leeza had told no one anything about herself, though she had lived with them for three years. Tiderider often wondered what she might be hiding, but had been unable to discover it. He was the only one of them who haremmed other than Juna, though they all flirted and occasionally trysted in brief passages. His haremning was with these two alone and that was a deception; not a truth – for he kissed Leeza chastely on her forehead, telling her, "Go now, and do not be seen."

* * * *

The auburn-haired woman slipped from Tiderider's bed and then quietly from the room to the connecting chamber. Tiderider's room stood immediately to the right of Channadar's. She checked that it was clear and slipped into the lord's private chambers. Channadar rose from the table in his parlor. Wine, a garish red-violet in the dark green bottle, sat in the middle of the table beside two glasses. His elaborate robes lay thrown askew over a chair and he wore only his pants, royal blue with delicately woven palest azure patterns of birds. She took Tiderider's crystal from around her neck and drew Channadar's crystal from her pocket, fumbling with the catch.

"Leeza! I had begun to wonder..." Channadar gently took the chain from her and fastened the crystal around her neck.

"I always come." She wrapped her arms around him, her cheek pressed against his smooth chest.

"I love you, Leeza. Don't ever leave me. I have loved you since the moment I first looked into your furious eyes after you knocked me in the mud."

Leeza chuckled softly at the image. "How was I to know who you were? Just some preposterous dandy?"

Channadar did not laugh and that made her look up into his face. "I am serious, Leeza. I would not want to live without you."

"I will never leave, unless you wish me to."

"I will never wish that." He pressed his face into her hair, inhaling its fragrance. "It's just ... sometimes I think you are unhappy."

"Never with you."

* * * *

Mikkal came for Talons at nine bells and found her, along with Jysys and Arruth, struggling with the fastenings of a black dress. The Patriarch's assistant was a thin mon, his white hair long on top and trimmed close on the sides, the skin of his face starting to sag in three long half circles beginning beneath his eyes and softly shiny because of the fairness of his complexion.

"A Guildsmon in a dress?" he inquired mildly, watching them miss match the hooks in back of the bodice, which also laced loosely on the sides over a long silk blouse and matching chemise. Arruth and Jysy looked up from trying to unhook and rehook it all over again.

Talons' eyes lit with irritation. "My grandsire has commanded it as a bone thrown to the Wrathscars. This dress was delivered to me this morning. A gift from Bryndel."

"Ahhh. Well, there are ways around that."

Talons paused in her struggles. Jysy and Arruth, who were helping her even though the dress confounded both of them, sat down to listen. Sharani did not wear dresses, at least never such intricate things as these. Soft comfortable robes among the upper classes for leisure at times and frequently among the scholars and mages. They had gotten the fastenings all mixed up, including the side lacings.

"How?" Talons asked.

"What they want is something with a skirt on it. Loosely defined in our culture as female. My late wife explained it to me once."

"You miss her."

He gave a tiny snort at such an obvious understatement. "Yes! Yes. I miss her. Now, let me help you with this." He set to work immediately with a deft hand, which displayed familiarity with such garments. His eyes went soft with memories of how

many times he had done this for his wife. "I'll speak with the Patriarch, have my duties set aside for a few days and get your wardrobe straightened out. Past that, I suggest you defy them a bit."

"They want me to give up my gloves."

"Simply wear some elegant women's gloves over them. Camouflage them."

Jysy grinned. "I like your way of thinking."

"Thank you," Mikkal gave her a sweeping bow. "Eshraf likes my thinking also."

He got all the hooks and ties done up and then stood back. "I must say you do not look like a troll-slayer now. But I guess that is what they are wanting. They are trying to take away your sense of identity, Talons. We must not let them do that. Lord Wrathscar likes to break his women and by extension his son's. Eshraf has asked me to do everything in my power, use every trick I know to protect you. We're a pair of old foxes, but even old foxes need cooperation." He turned to Jysy and Arruth. "If either of you young scamps learn of anything concerning the Wrathscars that we can use against them, you must tell us. Do not be afraid, or ashamed, or whatever. Trust us to keep it private, but tell us."

His eyes rested on Arruth for a very long time. Something was wrong with that girl. She seemed withdrawn in some vague, almost indefinable way. Especially in comparison to her sister.

"Come now, all of you. You are my ladies for the day. You are under my priestly protection and I shall be your champion." Mikkal smiled broadly, escorting them out. Talons took his arm and he noticed the way she leaned upon him. "Are you tired so early?"

"Yes. I don't seem well."

"Then just lean on me all you require," Mikkal said, studying her face and seeing that her color was off as they crossed the green. "Have you talked to the healers?"

"No. The Wrathscars insist that I see only Solance, and I don't like him."

"So they are even dictating that are they?" Mikkal did not bother to hide his intense dislike of the Wrathscars and their controlling ways.

"Yes." *Dynarien. Dynarien, where are you? Dynarien* . Talons called out to him and continued calling all the way to the temple.

* * * *

Dynarien could feel Talons calling to him, wondering still more strongly why he did

not come. Her need sent him lurching upward in bed. The pain still made him nauseous. Laurelyanne was at his side instantly.

She sighed at him and made a soft, clucking sound. "I wish you were one of the Willodarussos who possessed the tree gift like Teakamon and Jaran, your bones would heal faster."

Dynarien tried to smile at that. "I would not be as handsome. I get more ladies than they do."

Over the centuries, like most of his kind, he had scattered his seed widely across the inhabited continents, leaving a string of half-divine children in his wake. He had made love, but not been *in* love for four thousand years until Talons entered his life. Which was why Talons and others called him a rakehell and a scoundrel.

Laurelyanne touched his red-gold hair lightly, affectionately. She never expected to find herself mothering an injured godling. She took his wrist and Read him. The yuwenghau, young rogue gods who wandered the world as divine-knights errant, fought monsters and the most dangerous of the hellgods' minions. Many of them perished. Most were half-bloods born of sylvan or human mothers, and a very few were like Dynarien with two divine parents. From what Dynarien had told her they might be in the first days of a new godwar. His enemy sounded powerful indeed. The aging earthmage wrapped her arms around him, hugging him gently. "I think you are strong enough to go to her. Just barely. Summon your pack and I will fill it with medicine for the pain and more of that brew to quicken the healing. Do not go openly. Go to the Patriarch first. He sounds like a canny fellow."

"If you ever need me, find a way to call me, and I will come. My Hearing isn't as keen as Dynanna's, but I frequently Hear. Sometimes it's hard to get my attention," he confessed, ruefully.

"I'll build an altar."

Dynarien laughed. "That's what the catkin did. No humans or sylvans ever have though."

"It will be a first. I'm sure that will get your wandering attention."

Josiah, who had lain listening to the conversation from a cot on the opposite side of the tent, pushed himself to his feet, and walked slowly over when he realized that Dynarien was leaving. The mage-master was terminally ill, the healers' were calling it a recurrent fever for lack of a better diagnosis, but Josiah and Dynarien knew different: Josiah had cast a dangerous spell to rescue the mon he loved from their enemies and the residue of the spell was killing him. He squatted by Dynarien, pushed his indeterminate shade of grayish brown hair back from his battered face, and said, "If you need me, fetch me."

"We messed up your life," Dynarien said uncertainly. "My sister and I should have looked out for you better."

"That is the past. You did the best you knew how." Josiah placed his weathered hand on Dynarien's shoulder. "If you need me, I will come. I did this to myself. Now I pay the price. It's paid willingly."

Dynarien felt overwhelmed by the strength and generosity of the mage's spirit and a welling of love for him, the kind that is felt by comrades who have gone through many battles together, trusting each other with their lives and knowing the other will not fail them. "Thank you, Josiah. I will remember."

* * * *

Yahni piled the first stack of books on the second, and had to fully extend himself to hook his chin onto the top. If he put too much pressure, the stack would buckle in the middle, sending everything flying out, and he still had to negotiate his way out of the library, across the grounds into the palace, and then around to the Guild Wing. He hoped he had not forgotten anything. Queiggy would be quick to send him back. Whatever Queiggy was researching had to be queer indeed. There were some fairly obscure items here and he had had to sign for several so that the librarians would know whose hide got tacked to the walls if they failed to come back.

"Let me help," said a soft voice as smooth hands closed on the topmost volumes.

Yahni looked into a pair of shy eyes, and his thoughts went round in a dozen directions. He tried hard to imagine what Lord Derryl would have said in this situation. Yahni had been imitating him for months, and he had memorized countless volumes of romantic verses, although he rarely used them since he had to first feel completely comfortable with a woman or have a certain mood on before he could even remember them. While his looks always attracted women, the involvements were always brief and unsatisfactory for Yahni. Although he could fake the rest and was good with his blades, he was a scholar at heart, which was why he was in records and research instead of out in the field. But he could not think for a moment and the very last thing he wanted was for Belyla to leave, much less feel hurt by anything he said or did. Belyla hesitated, releasing the books. "No," he said. "It's just, you can't enter the Wing."

"I know. But I could stand at the edge in plain view," Belyla said hopefully. "They could watch me close. See I didn't take anything."

Yahni blinked, nodded, and thought for a minute. "Okay."

They did not talk much, crossing the green, in an almost awkward silence. The night of the party it had been mostly a mood and a handful of Derryl's lines. A bit of a game he had taught himself to play; oh, he knew all the courtly arts, but they were not really part of his nature. Now here he was all unprepared, and not nearly so glib

as a result. They reached the doors to the wing. The steel entry doors, which operated on a series of gigantic gears and wenchers set in the basement, stood open and beyond that a desk sat, flanked by two long benches along the walls to either side.

Queiggy himself sat at the guardian desk that barred entry to the wing, although he had countless assistants to sit it for him. The querulous old chief clerk and wing master liked to man it himself in the mornings and showed up at odd hours throughout the day and night to check on those who manned it in his absence or to take over if it suited his whimsy. He never allowed himself to become predictable. He had pecan colored skin and his face was a gaunt web of folds and seams. Queiggy's hair, which hung in half-tangled disarray as if he could never get it combed through properly, was a brown barely two shades darker than his skin. Overall, he looked like a walking stick that had sprouted limbs with the currycomb's catch of discarded horse's hair on top.

"I was wondering..." Yahni began, setting a stack down and returning to take the rest from Belyla.

Queiggy watched him interestedly, but said nothing until the all of the books had landed on his desk. "If I had anything else for you to do? Be careful."

"I take it that I'm free?" Yahni asked hopefully, glancing at Belyla who smiled at him

Queiggy's expression made it clear that he did not approve at all. "Until tomorrow. Keep your eyes and ears open around that one. Understood?"

Yahni could hear the deep distrust in Queiggy's voice, and it irritated him. He refused to believe that anyone's worth should be judged by the actions of their parents – especially Belyla. "Of course."

Yahni walked quickly back to Belyla, his eyes shining. "There's this little eatery on the South Leaf..."

"I've never been to the Cloverleaf," Belyla said, her hand sliding into his.

Yahni could not conceal his astonishment, unable to imagine how anyone, especially someone their ages, had not been to the underground Cloverleaf of shops and eateries beneath the Ishladrim compound. He immediately thought of all the things he could show her and found himself wondering if maybe this time he had found someone more like himself. Someone who could appreciate him without trying to change him. The main entrance stairwell lay in the center of the Great Central Hall, once there you could reach the temple, the library, the university, and the music chamber from the underground. "You'll like it."

* * * *

Arruth crossed the green on her way to the training grounds, walking slowly, her shoulders hunched. When she reached the benches, she picked a spot as far removed from the other students as she could find, practically hiding in the shadows of a tree. She closed herself up with the contained, hyper-alertness of an injured animal. Arruth wondered how much longer she could manage even this much, just walking through the Great Central Hall and onto the training field had taken all the courage she could muster. Exhaustion settled through her – an exhaustion of the spirit manifesting in the muscles of her body.

She watched the others working out, some in small groups, others paired off, and still more simply moving through the exercises on their own. Arruth saw the armsmaster watching her and she huddled down further into herself, wishing he would leave her alone. She did not want to talk to anyone, but Yukiah would insist – he always did.

* * * *

Yukiah almost missed Arruth, for she had arrived quietly and seated herself as unobtrusively as possible. He could tell something was wrong, so he let her be for the moment. There wasn't a student he couldn't read to a fare-thee-well, and Arruth's body language required no effort to begin with. Yukiah started toward her, pausing to work with one of the thirteen year olds, a slender girl named Isen, one of the special-gifts who tended to slip into a rhythmic semi-trance state when she fought if they did not watch her. Isen's eyes followed him closely as he left her and her partner nearly knocked her down, but Isen deftly moved at the last minute and eluded the throw.

When he had gotten all the others working, Yukiah went and squatted in front of Arruth, touching her shoulder to get her attention. She winced sharply. He removed his hand. The armsmaster had never seen her react that way. It baffled and distressed him. He could be hard on his students, yet he was also intensely protective of them. Their lives would one day depend upon his training; for now he stood as guardian father to them, giving them a brief passage of safety into the dangers of adulthood – if he could. He was fifty-three years old, beginning to get a few strands of gray in his shoulder length brown hair, but still quite strong and hale – enough so that he remained a terror on the field.

"Arruth, what is wrong, child?" he asked with all the gentleness he could project into his voice. "Has someone hurt you?"

She stared at her hands, folding forward over them. "No."

"Yes, they have. I can see it. Talk to me, Arruth." He reached for her hand, the way he used to do, and hesitated, uncertain of what her reaction would be.

"No."

It made Yukiah ache to see one of his two precious Sharani rogues like this. The pair had been such a joy to work with when Talons first brought them to him last year. They had always gotten into trouble, but not in a mean or petty way. Everyone still laughed about the time Arruth had shoved the noodles into Bryndel Wrathscar's pants in the middle of the student-dining hall. And there was the time he had had to rescue both girls from off the roofs after their climbing ropes got tangled, trapping Jysy and Arruth on one of the spires onto which they had adventured as a lark.

He observed the way she stared at her intertwined fingers. Whatever was wrong had to be bad. "Arruth, I want to help you."

"No one can help me. I broke the rules. I'm in trouble." She turned her head away, her tone listless.

"Everyone breaks the rules at least once. I'm very good at getting people out of trouble. Who did you kill?"

Arruth blinked. "Not that rule."

"What rule then?"

Arruth started to speak and stopped. She stared, with widening eyes, behind Yukiah. He followed her gaze.

"Lord Wrathscar wants to see the girl." A pair of soldiers rounded the grounds, coming swiftly toward them.

Arruth shrank back, her eyes reflecting a gathering panic.

If Wrathscar's hand is in this, Yukiah decided, I'll find out and put a stop to it. Fast. Yukiah straightened, stepping between the girl and the two soldiers who had come for her. "Lord Wrathscar has no business with one of my students."

"The Grand Master will not be happy that you interfered with Lord Wrathscar's wishes."

"I'll hear that from the Grand Master himself. Wrathscar does not speak for the Guild. The child is Guild."

"Are you refusing to give us the child?"

Yukiah ran his thumb along the burn scar on his neck as he always did when something bothered him, and the massive ruby ring on his middle finger flashed in the sunlight like an angry red eye. "I am."

The soldier reached for his sword. Yukiah's hand snapped back from thumbing the scar, closed into a fist, and caught the man in the face decking him. The other two

soldiers rushed Yukiah who gave them a small smile and let them come. The armsmaster spun suddenly into a solid roundhouse kick. Several students and teachers had quietly gathered as they spoke and a brawl ensued between Guild and non-Guild.

* * * *

Yahni and his friend, Jajinga, a part-Fae Guildsmon finished their match at the farthest edge of the field, which abutted on the Stalking Grounds. Jajinga was dark brown to the edge of black, like his human sire, and had his half-Fae mother's silver eyes. He extended his hands for the work out blades. "I'll put them away. I'm certain you've no wish to keep your ladies waiting." Jajinga gave him a small smile and a wink, tucking both blades under his arm in their sheaths as they headed for the nearby benches where Belyla and Terrys waited.

Ceejorn Osterbridge sat with them. He was the quietest of the three young myn, a follower, not a leader. Yahni led and the others followed; that was the nature of their friendship. They were all three clerks in records and none of them were the bold adventurers that populated the other branches of the Guild, but Yahni came closest to it. That came of being a lord's son who had been born and bred to the sword and court.

So far as Osterbridge was concerned, Yahni was god. Yahni had taken him under his wing the way an older student would and befriended him, although they were the same age. Yahni had helped Osterbridge study – both of them then just boys – had taught him to research and tutored him in blades, passing on what he learned from his armsmasters and private tutors provided by his family in addition to his Guild training. Jajinga came in a close second to Yahni in Osterbridge's opinion and the three were very close, eventually adding Terrys as another buddy. However, they had also subjected Yahni to endless rounds of smug, friendly harassment when they discovered Yahni had gotten laid by Terrys the first time. Terrys had eventually tasted all of the three myn's wares before deciding that she would rather just be friends with them all.

Yahni took his shirt off, used it to mop his sweating face, and tossed it onto the bench beside Belyla. Belyla and Terrys sat looking up at his fine unblemished body. They had come there to watch him training as he did each afternoon with his two friends.

Voices raised in anger caused the young myn to pause and stare at the far end of the field.

"I wonder what that is all about?" Yahni asked, watching the fight. He drew Belyla to her feet, slipping a protective arm around her shoulders. "You should leave while no one is looking. It appears that your father's soldiers started this one."

"They always do," Jajinga said.

"Think we ought to have a look?" Osterbridge asked.

Belyla must have sensed Yahni's decision to investigate the fighting, because she caught hold of him, clutching desperately to his waist. "Don't go. I'm afraid for you."

Yahni grinned, saying impulsively, "I love you, Belyla." He held her tightly then, kissing her deeply and felt the way she pressed her sweet body into his in response.

Jajinga stepped close to Terrys, giving the young pair privacy by turning his back on them. Osterbridge grinned and looked the other way. Each time Yahni became involved with a woman, his friends always hoped that she would be the one to catch him.

"Make love to me," Belyla whispered in Yahni's ear and he realized she was offering herself to lure him away from the strife to safety.

Jajinga's keen hearing picked that up and he pulled at his pointed ear with a bemused lift of his eyebrows at Terrys and Osterbridge. Terrys shrugged, smiling and accepted his hand up so that they could move further from Yahni and Belyla.

"Belyla ... there are things a man must do," Yahni replied stubbornly. He ran his fingers through his hair as he frequently did when he was trying to get something clear in his mind.

"Please!" She worked her leg along his crotch and he knew then that he was lost.

"Quickly!" Terrys said. "Belyla, I see your father."

"Yes." Yahni said, feeling Belyla's hand tremble. He wondered at both her terror of her father and her desire to offer herself to protect him. He would have to think about it. While he would leave with her, he would not ask her to make good on this exchange.

"Come on," Jajinga said, taking Terrys' arm and heading into the Stalking Grounds where they would not been seen. "Your lady doesn't need this, Yahni."

Yahni and Belyla followed them with Osterbridge trailing protectively.

* * * *

Arruth fled when the fighting broke out, glancing frequently over her shoulder. She ran across the quad heedlessly, wanting only to be away from it all. Twice she nearly stumbled into the manicured bushes before reaching the library steps. Her breathing was labored, more from stress and fear than exertion, and she paused looking up at the doors to the library. The great, white stone building with its spring coat of ivy

thickly covering the walls beckoned. It was one of the few places she felt safe, other than her rooms or Talons' suite. Arruth sucked in a breath to fortify her, to help still her racing heart and put her foot on the lowest step.

"Hello, little slut."

Arruth stopped dead still in her tracks, her body tensing like whipcord, ready to run again. The one man she most dreaded stepped in front of her and she quailed: Lord Wrathscar. Although Wrathscar was barely as tall as she was, the maturity of his presence and his heavier body dwarfed her, making her feel every bit her age. She shrank and dwindled in his presence, losing all sense of herself. He grasped her wrist, twisting it painfully. He had several of his guardsmyn about him. She could not move for the merest instant it took his guardsmyn to surround her.

They threw a robe and a veiling headdress over her, and propelled her along with firm hands on her arms. Wrathscar's carriage waited near the gates of Ishladrim Castle. He shoved Arruth in and, with his myn riding before and behind, they rolled out into Havensword heading for the principal mansion he maintained in addition to his rooms in the palace. Wrathscar had spent many years acquiring properties in Havensword: warehouses, shops, and small industries – usually through proxies set up with care. Several of the noble houses maintained dual residences in the form of a house in the city and apartments in Ishladrim palace – and some like Derryl Tormuth had well guarded hunting lodges within a three days' riding.

* * * *

"Where's Arruth?" Yukiah asked as a group of priests broke up the fighting.

Mikkal brought matters firmly under control, parting the combatants, and taking down the names of those who had participated.

Yukiah separated the Guild students from the non-Guild students in a curt, expeditious manner, signing them over to one side. "Where's Arruth? Did anyone see her?"

"She ran off," said one.

"I saw her going in the direction of the library," Isen said, touching Yukiah's arm to get his attention. "Arruth hides in the library sometimes."

Yukiah looked down into Isen's large dark eyes with flecks of gold around the edges. The girl's eyes reminded him of swans in a way he could not exactly describe, triggering images in his mind. She made him reach for another face in his memories, but even there the armsmaster was stymied. He knew very little about her, despite the fact that she came from the same large village as he had. The church had sponsored her to the Guild and school because of her gifts, while giving out no facts about her family. So Yukiah had assumed she was either an orphan or born on the

wrong side of the blankets.

"I'll take the library," Yukiah told them, earning himself a small smile from Isen. "But, I want her found. I think she's in trouble. That's what started this. Wrathscar's soldiers came for her. You, you, you," he pointed at them as he told them off into little groups. "Check her rooms, the heir's apartments. Someone find her sister. The rest of you spread out across the grounds. Stay in groups of at least three. Four of you come with me. We're going to the library."

They searched until dark and found no sign of Arruth. Finally the students began to trickle back to the dorms, and found Yukiah waiting for them in the common room. As he took their reports he grew increasingly uneasy. He knew Wrathscar's tastes and habits, being a cautious man who studied what he hated or sensed a potential threat in. Wrathscar, to Yukiah's knowledge, had never taken a Guild student before, but there was always a first time. Tomorrow he intended to go to the Grand Master.

* * * *

Bryndel moved away from his window at the knock on his door, he had been watching the students still making a few hopeless searches of the quad and training grounds for Arruth as the day lengthened toward night and his stomach clenched tighter and tighter. He would pull himself away, only to return. He knew what had happened even if he would not quite let himself say it.

"Who is it?"

"Your sister." Philomea's arch voice came from beyond.

Bryndel had dropped the bar earlier, something he did not usually do, but in his distress he had not wanted to be troubled and felt uneasy. "Go away."

"Oh, come now. What would father say?"

That did it. Philomea was always dragging their father in as a threat. Bryndel opened it and found Philomea with Milady and her husband Ambrose. His least favorite people. Only Galee and their father were worse.

Philomea played with her sapphire pendant as she swept in with her cohorts, her head at a proud, teasing angle. Her dress matched her pendant, and fur lined the hems and sleeves. She was accustomed to having her way and to being noticed, every turn of her body, every article of dress suggested it. She wore her blonde hair loose. She was Talons' opposite in every way. Bryndel suspected that was part of why he had always been so attracted to Talons. "Milady thought it would be simply terribly sweet if you would start introducing us to your betrothed and her friends."

"No," Bryndel replied firmly.

Philomea made a moue. "Oh, don't be obstinate, Bryndel! We're going to be family. It has to happen sooner or later."

Bryndel's expression darkened into a harsh glare. "No."

"Father has kept me isolated from most of the court all my life, it is time I started moving in this world. Especially if I expect to make a fine marriage while I still have my looks."

"Talons doesn't move in the kinds of circles you're looking for, Philomea, and you know it. She moves in Guild circles. Forget it."

Philomea's eyes examined the room and she started to move past him. He followed her. She ran her hand along a cherry wood table near the door in a desultory gesture. Then she snatched a book from off a shelf beside it. "There are some perfectly lovely Guild lords."

Bryndel snatched the book from her, replaced it on his shelf, and grasped her shoulder, moving her toward the door. "No."

"You're being such a bore, Bryndel."

"Get out!"

He saw the amused looks on Milady and Ambrose's faces as he propelled his sister across the threshold and into the corridor. Ambrose gave him a curt bow and followed with Milady.

* * * *

Yukiah organized a second search the next day and, when it proved futile, he went to the Council with his suspicions. Galee immediately shunted him aside into a small private chamber with only herself, the Grand Master, Mohanja Raam, and Wrathscar – whom he was accusing. Yukiah felt certain that he had been in this room before, because of its location, but if so it had changed much: All the tapestries of saints and heroes were gone, replaced by huge paintings of debauchery. It made him uncomfortable, but he shook it off.

"Where is Arruth?" He stalked up to the Wrathscar. "I demand that this city residence of yours be searched." Yukiah turned to Takhalme. "I believe that Lord Wrathscar, whose tastes are known, has taken Arruth. His myn were asking for her minutes before she vanished."

"That is a very, very serious accusation, armsmaster," Galee purred, leaning forward, and draping herself over the edge of her chair. "I would consider carefully who I was accusing. Lord Wrathscar is a powerful mon."

"Our Guild is not about power, Galee, but about justice. Or have you forgotten that?" Yukiah snapped back at her. The mon was an abomination in his sight. Having been made Guild by fiat, he did not consider her Guild. Yet he was forced to deal with her as if she were.

Galee shrugged, a simple, eloquent movement that could have been nothing more than an effort to flick back her hair. "Return tomorrow, armsmaster, and we will have an answer for you," Galee told him.

"Since when do you speak for the entire Guild, Galee? Grand Master?" Yukiah again tried for a single word from the silent ruler.

"Tomorrow, Yukiah. I am very tired," the Grand Master told him.

Mohanja Raam frowned and shook his head. The big black mon who was second to Galee in the absence of Hanadi Majios – and indeed voted Hanadi's proxy at her request, the nomad being gone on a wanderyear – could scarcely believe what he heard. A Guild child had been stolen off the training grounds, and not just any child, but the protégé of the heir. Yet nothing would be done at all before still another day had passed? He liked it not at all.

He prided himself on being a mon who was as much a mon of thought and reflection as of action – which was why he ruled the Wing, records and research. There was no secret knowledge, no source of lore or legend he could not discover, no depth of reality he could not plumb; nor a battle he could not win because he entered it without anger, without rage, and with the cold clear clarity of logic and serenity of purpose with his god in his heart, his mind, and his soul. The lionskin, which he wore around his waist over his trousers, bore testimony to that. He had straddled the beast's back with such calm and tranquility that it was like a trance state, a walking with his god, and snapped its neck. A mon like Mohanja could not listen to what he heard now and not wonder at what it meant on every single level and layer of meaning.

* * * *

Lord Wrathscar walked around the large bed in the bright top floor room of his large mansion. Solance had mentioned to him that he wanted a Sharani to test some things on. Wrathscar had offered to provide one and he had. He did not fear the Grand Master or the heir whose protégé he had stolen. He was becoming the only true power in the realm. The heir belonged to his son, and he already thought of her as mere property. What he wanted he took. His alliance with Galee rendered the Guild impotent against him.

The Guild had tried to prove that he killed his wife. Wrathscar resented their intrusion into his private matters. His wife had been his property to dispose of as he wished; but he did not tell them that. That matter had come to naught through the subtle manipulations of Galee. He had never forgiven the Guild for threatening him.

Arruth lay naked in the middle of the bed, her limbs secured to the posts, opened wide enough for Wrathscar to observe everything. He had seven of his soldiers standing ready around him, while an eighth rode her vigorously. Wrathscar leaned closer to watch the soldier's movements and Arruth's reaction in a cold, dispassionate manner that masked his pleasure. Solance stood on the far side of the bed, preparing his potions for testing on a small table.

"I got you your immature Sharani," Wrathscar said. "Now you say you can break the kyndi and induce premature pregnancy. So do it. If you can break the kyndi, you can break the bi-kyndi. Then we can break all the Sharani succubae. Their magic will be defeated and become no danger to me." He knew Edouina was bi-kyndi. She had never made a secret of it, nor had the un-trained heir. It was fortunate that Talons had not been trained, for that made it easier to bring her to heel. Edouina, on the other hand, was an accomplished threat.

"She must be ridden continuously while I work. The magic must not be given a moment's rest." Solance told them. This worked well for him, since he did not have to touch her himself, which would have offended his sensibilities. The Sharani were a dirty race.

"There are enough of us here to do that." Lord Wrathscar waved his hand and the men laughed.

"She'll be storked fore the day's out," said a soldier.

Solance began opening his jars and vials of smelly chemicals. It would take more than sexual violation to break the kyndi.

* * * *

Galee went to Wrathscar's apartments first, searching through them angrily. If he had wanted a Sharani so bad, he should have consulted her. She could have gotten him one that would not have brought Yukiah screaming to the council and the Grand Master. Yukiah was dangerous. Yukiah was arguably the most dangerous man in the palace next to Eshraf. She found nothing missing, but Lord Wrathscar did not need to take anything with him if he had merely gone to his home in the city. She went to her own rooms and changed into riding clothes.

The narrow streets of Havensword wound around the mountain, the city having been carved out in the paths of least resistance. Galee knew Wrathscar's mansion well, they spent many, many hours there plotting their various treacheries over the years and for a time she had been his mistress when Bryndel was a child. The affair covered a great many things, which would otherwise have not borne watching and added to her bedroom reputation. Then she dumped him in a tremendous row that was still the talk of the court and continued their relationship in secret.

The place was a thinly disguised fortress with a pounded earth and brickwork wall that supported a decorated catwalk, pretty and functional at the same time. It kept out both the riff-raff and prying eyes. Wrathscar liked his privacy and kept it well defended.

"Mistress Galee!" Old Rugee emerged from the stable to take her horse when she rode through the gates and she threw him the reins without a word. "The master be busy."

"I imagine," she snorted, stalking to the door, throwing it open and continuing in. Her sharp hearing picked up the whimpering cries and the males eager panting and grunting. A brief silence ensued and then it began again as Galee mounted the stairs.

"Just how many are using her?" Galee growled. *What the hell is Wrathscar doing ?* The odor of cooking chemicals wafted down the stairwell. Galee's nose wrinkled, her lips drew back from her fangs. She climbed rapidly. By the time she reached the second floor she was running.

"What in Hell's name do you think you are doing?" the vampire screamed, bursting in on them.

Wrathscar was crouched down, observing closely a soldier's thrusts into the bleeding child. Solance had Arruth's head twisted back and was forcing an ugly yellow liquid down her throat.

Solance and Wrathscar straightened. "An experiment," Solance explained. "I am trying to break the kyndi."

Galee stalked around to the pinch-faced little healer. "I did not give you permission to act on your own."

She jerked Solance up by the collar before he could straighten and spilled the last of his concoction over him and the bed. If she had not still required his skills, she would have killed Solance then. Galee wanted to make certain that he obeyed. She did not like her pawns acting on their own initiative and thereby complicating matters.

Solance had developed the bi-kyndi blocker that allowed Bryndel to rape Talons during the weeks before the bi-kyndi was bound. That had been Galee's first attempt at breaking one of the Tinkerer's creations. She had fed him a lot of nonsense along with the truth about the bi-kyndi, demonizing the Sharani to him. Solance was the source of most of the dark rumors concerning the Sharani, which he had spread through the castle compound at her suggestion. In that, at least, he had shown some skill.

"Yukiah went to the Grand Master. I'm taking the girl," Galee informed them.

"Then you'll take her back dead," said a soldier, drawing a blade and reaching for Arruth.

Galee smiled, flexing one hand. Her secondary nails slid from beneath the primaries and venom beaded on the tips. She shoved one into his neck, striking the carotid artery. He screamed and fell, dropping his blade. The others stared as he convulsed on the floor. Galee picked up his knife and cut Arruth loose. She stroked Arruth's face, sending the girl to sleep, and then she scanned their faces again. "Wrathscar, order your myn away or I will begin eating them."

Wrathscar waved them back.

"Solance, you are not to take another from the palace. I will get you a Sharani that will not be missed for your experiments."

The healer bowed. "Thank you. I will obey and await your pleasure."

"I expect you will." Galee wrapped Arruth in a blanket, carrying her out draped over her shoulders. She paused just outside the door, listening to the sounds of the soldier dying on the floor and stepped back inside. "When I no longer need or want my pawns, I kill them. Take a lesson from that soldier." She gestured at him sharply, and then looked to Solance who had gone pale. She left before he could answer.

* * * *

Shaheeramaat emerged from Arruth and Jysy's bedroom. The healer was small and dark, a plain-faced mon with a spiderweb of lines around her pale cornflower eyes. Sha, as they called her, was the only palace healer that Yukiah, sitting on the couch beside Talons, completely trusted. Jysy curled up in a chair, her face tight.

"She doesn't remember anything at all, Sha?" Yukiah asked. He had gone after Arruth himself when word reached him about her location, and what had happened, bringing her home in his arms. He would never stop believing that Wrathscar was involved somehow, even though he couldn't prove it, and anger simmered beneath his calm demeanor.

"Nothing. Nothing at all between the time she says she fled the training grounds and that taverner rescued her from those toughs who were raping her in the alley. Normally Sharani are very tough minded about rape. When it happens, they put a mace in the victim's hand, clean them up, and take them after the perpetrator."

"She wears his ears and his sack around her neck," Talons added. "And then she never gives it another thought."

Yukiah snorted. "Tough women. I like that."

"The taverner recognized her as Sharani and gave her their ears. So we still have no

proof that she was even kidnapped. If you'll visit me later, Yukiah, I have some other things I need to discuss. I've given Arruth a sedative. Jysy, take a few days off from class and stay with your sister." Shaheeramaat gathered her things and left.

Yukiah squeezed Talons' shoulders. She had been his prized pupil. "I'll look into this further. You have a lot to concern you right now. Leave the scoundrels to me."

"Thank you, Yukiah."

"Get on about your business. If you need anything, holler." He could see how tired Talons looked and it worried him. A lot of students had begun to carry their troubles to Talons over the last few years, especially the females. He would have to put a stop to that and find someone else to listen to them. Talons did not need more things pressing on her than she already had.

Talons rose and walked through the corridors to her apartments.

* * * *

Belyla lay sleeping in Terrys' guestroom on the second floor of her palace apartments. And she dreamed.

"Please don't hit her again, father. Please don't hit her." She clutched at the bleeding mon on the floor, staring up at the large, dark, faceless shadow that she knew was her father. Terror gripped her, but desperation overrode it. Belyla threw herself across her mother as a shield. "Please, father."

"Get out of the way, Belyla, or you'll get a taste of it too."

"No!" She felt the impact as she was thrown across the room and struck a dresser, causing all the bottles and jars of her mother's cosmetics to tumble over her. Belyla could not breathe. Her ribs hurt. She could not move, but only watch.

Wrathscar dragged her mother up and began to pound her. Her mother no longer moved or made a sound, hanging limp like a rag doll in her father's grip ... and still he hit her. It seemed like forever before Wrathscar dropped her and stalked from the room. Belyla crept forward and cuddled against her, crying. Bryndel came in, his eyes wide and frightened. He knelt, touched their mother's neck, and began to cry. Belyla looked up at him, wet-faced also. Bryndel gathered his little sister into his arms.

"Come away, Belyla. She's dead."

Belyla woke with a scream. Terrys appeared, sat down on the edge of Belyla's bed, and held her close while she wept. "Another nightmare?" Terrys asked.

"Yes." Belyla's voice was distant, desolate.

"You wish to talk about it?"

"No," Belyla lied. She had wanted desperately for years to tell someone, anyone, but fear kept her silent. Belyla had a deep-seated belief that her father would one day kill her as he had her mother.

* * * *

Belyla waited for Yahni at Terrys' apartments on the West Wing. She could not believe that anyone like Yahni Kjarten could be seriously interested in her. So she always felt this fluttering of insecurity each time she waited for him. Belyla worried that he would change his mind and not come, or that he would find someone else, someone prettier than 'Lord Wrathscar's homely daughter.' He was everything that her father wasn't: strong, yet kind, and gentle, romantic with his knowledge of all the verses, which he had memorized. He knew so much about so many things – nearly all of it things her father disparaged – that it made her mind swim at times. She clutched the book of verses to her breast tightly when she heard the knock at the door.

"He's here," Terrys said, answering the knock.

Yahni entered, looking so strong and handsome in his uniform that, for a moment, Belyla could not breathe. His slow engaging smile warmed Belyla to the bottoms of her feet as he settled next to her on the sofa.

"What are you reading?" he asked, touching the book.

Belyla put the book in his hands.

He grinned broadly at her and read the title. "The Black Swan... You like Alysinjin?"

"Yes." She blushed. *The Black Swan: Verses to Alysinjin* was her favorite, and letting him hold it gave her another flutter of insecurity. The book had been her mother's and became part of the inner fantasy world that sustained her through worst parts of being Agasthenez Wrathscar's daughter.

"So do I."

Warmth spread through Belyla, built partly of relief that he had not rejected the book as unworthy and partly of joy knowing he approved.

Yahni set her book aside, drew her into his arms, and kissed her thoroughly. The world faded to nothingness and they did not even hear Terrys' departure. "I love you, Belyla."

Tears filled her eyes suddenly and he lifted her head with a crooked finger beneath

her chin. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," Belyla said in a very, small voice. "Hold me. Hold me tight."

Yahni took her in his arms, pressing her head into the corner of his neck. He felt so strong. Yet Belyla shivered and began to cry softly.

"Come upstairs, Yahni. Stay the night with me. Please."

"Belyla, are you sure? Are you sure you want me to?"

"Yes. Terrys won't mind."

Yahni knew Terrys wouldn't mind. He had done it before with other women she had set him up with. Belyla pressed herself against him. Yahni's conscience failed him. She stood up, pulling at his hand and they went upstairs.

* * * *

Sha sat late, writing slowly on her records, transcribing her notes. Her office was neat and tidy with a desk in one corner and three chairs set close to it. The walls were hung with pleasant pastoral scenes of shepherds and their charges with a single scene of peacocks in a garden. Embroidered pillows in the chairs helped to make them comfortable. A knock preceded Yukiah's entrance. The armsmaster wore battered old clothes with a hood around his face, but she had known him too many years not to recognize him. He settled himself across from Sha, folding his arms on a clear space.

"You're certain about this, Sha?" he asked.

Sha gave him a long look and shoved a folder at him. "Yes."

Yukiah opened it and began reading. "Undead?"

"Yes. I've checked and crosschecked the genetic samples I took. At least two of those who raped Arruth were undead."

"But that would mean that more males were involved than those the taverner caught." Yukiah idly rubbed a long, tapering burn scar on his neck about the width of a blade. His two rings glinted in the candlelight, one a massive ruby with a nine and an arching cat etched into the surface, and the other an agate with a crust of emeralds. The information and Sha's confidence in her findings unsettled him.

"Exactly. Furthermore, from the extent of the irritation to the vaginal tissues, I would estimate a sustained period of rape by a large number of males – perhaps as many as ten."

"Then Wrathscar did have her?"

"I can't prove it without asking for samples from him to match these against. And you know damned well I'm not going to get them."

"Do what you can, Sha. I'd like to personally nail the lid on his coffin."

"I'll try, Yukiah. I promise I'll try."

"Good enough."

* * * *

Belyla woke at the first light of dawn and snuggled closer to Yahni. He lay with his arms folded under his head and his eyes tracing the patterns of clouds through the guestroom window. Belyla stroked her fingers across his godmark, the tendriled rune of Hadjys burned into his chest just over his heart. She loved touching it, touching him. Yahni's face brightened in a smile as he caught her hand and brought it to his lips.

Belyla quoted the verses from the book of the Black Swan:

In the Light there was Darkness

And in the Darkness there was Light

For there was the Black Swan and the White

In their love they were found

And by their love they were lost

"Yahni, I am totally lost in my love for you."

My dear Alysyn,

A Guild child was taken and raped by undead, possibly vampires. Your husband immediately involved himself. That places him at grave risk. Surely you still have feelings for him; else this would be a divorce not a separation. If you have any feelings at all for him, come now. Do not allow your feelings to keep you away from Havensword.

Eshraf

Holy Father,

My primary allegiance is to guard the hidden branch clan and the escarpment

along Hellsguard. I have begged my husband for years to give up his command in Havensword and join me here. 'Duty is where you find it.'

Alysyn

CHAPTER THREE

SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

Belyla Wrathscar mutinied in silence against her father by seeing Yahni, by carrying no tales of him or the other lords and nobles to Lord Wrathscar, nor of the Guildsmyn she gradually came to know; she spoke to him instead of inane silly things, of harmless nattering, and casual flirtations; and if she did learn anything he might want to know, she made herself forget it, letting it slide through her mind like water through a sieve – the way she shrugged off the things that hurt, the little snubs and snips that she let slide past without focusing on them, making them there and not there like one of Channadar's illusions.

Belyla sat across from Yahni at a little table in a small eatery. They had chosen this spot because it lay in the farthest corner from the haunts of their friends and those who might report their meetings to her father, stealing every moment alone together that they could manage to. Yahni had spent many nights with her in Terrys' guestroom. It had been wonderful. She watched Yahni fall silent, his gaze drifting off to settle unfocussed between her and a point near the glass counters of pastries and wondered whether she had bored him with something she had said. Or perhaps not said. Belyla often worried that she did not really know how to properly speak to people, her father had always kept them so close and tightly in his grip, isolated on their properties and with no one they could speak to openly.

Yahni must have caught the odd way she looked at him because he said, "Some folks think I'm slow, because I get distracted, sliding off into my thoughts like that."

"Like you were just then," she encouraged, not knowing what more to say and afraid to remain silent. She knew he was not slow, merely dreamy at times.

"Um hum."

"What were you thinking about?"

"I don't know."

Belyla looked suddenly hurt and uncertain. "Don't want to tell me?"

"No. Just don't know. It's like what Queiggy says; I slide out my third eye. He says

I'm not slow, he says I'm so fast, my mind runs seven steps ahead and then I forget the first one. Except when I have a blade in my hands. That's what just happened."

Belyla laughed softly.

Yahni grinned, his cheeks warming. "It's like chess, that game the Euzadi play. I learned it from Hanadi. I get all my moves set up in my head. It's got all these pieces." He started gesturing, moving the food and condiments around on the table, an excited grin on his face. "And then I forget what my first move was, but I can remember what my third or fourth one was going to be. Which is probably why I never made it into the field." Then he saw the smiling intent way she continued to look at him. "You're the one not listening."

Belyla shook her head; her lips pursed in a tiny smile, smugly playful, fond.

"You're just watching me."

She nodded.

"You want to walk in the gardens? The section way in the back with all the nice little hidey holes?" His tone turned even more teasing.

She nodded. *The kissing spots*. It was so nice being kissed by someone she actually wanted, rather than someone she hated.

* * * *

Edouina knocked on the door and, when she got no answer, she used her key to let herself in. She threw her pack and bedroll down on the couch in the parlor, shoved some wood into the stove, and got a fire going. Then she put a kettle on for tea. It felt good to be home. She had fifteen more kills to her credit and looked forward to sharing her war stories with Talons. Edouina knew that her lover had been in Shaurone during much of the same period that she had, although she had been unable to contact her because of the Guild quarantine of Armaten. Shaurone had been a long, ugly mess from the time she arrived last autumn until a few weeks before she left there. She and Talons would soon be supplying the missing pieces to each other's adventures in quiet conversation as they always did. Edouina was already trying to decide upon which tale to tell first and phrasing questions in her mind to put to Talons. She felt certain that, between the two of them, the rogue guild known as the Gold Ravens had been stamped out. The one nagging question was how it could have gotten started in the first place and allied itself with Waejontor.

She dug around among the canisters in the cabinet until she found her favorite black tea, filled a tea ball with it, and sat it in a cup while she waited for the little kettle of water to heat. Edouina was tall and storkishly slender with a narrow face and an overbite: unmistakably a Hornbow. Being of Sharani blood, her skin was a rich red-bronze and her long silken hair was black. She had high ample breasts that she

kept bound tightly so that they would not get in her way. A pair of swords criss-crossed her back in Shaurone's Aluin borderer style, which took substantial upper body strength to use, the hilts jutting above her shoulders. She unbuckled the swords, hanging them in their place on pegs near the door, and then went into the bedroom she shared with her lover, Talons Trollbane. The afternoon sun slanted into the room through the large windows. The room smelled of roses. Edouina had never known Talons to favor that scent before.

She spied Talons huddled in the blankets on her low bed, looking pale and worn. "Talons! You're home. Why didn't you..." She broke off. "Oh, honey, what's wrong with you? Are you sick?" Her voice, deep and throatily sensual, emerged from her lips in a long drawl. She knelt by Talons, feeling her forehead with her hand and then her lips. "No fever."

Talons sat up and the covers slid down around her, revealing her nudity. She seized Edouina in a desperate embrace, clinging to her for a long while before pushing away and staring at her hands. "Bryndel will be here soon. He's always here at this time of day."

"Is that why you're buck-naked?" she asked, taking her lover in more closely.

"I've stopped dressing, except for dinner. He comes so frequently."

Edouina gave her a long glance, this soft hesitancy did not sound like Talons at all. At barely twenty Talons had more than a hundred kills to her credit, all difficult extractions requiring the utmost care, planning, and cleverness in their execution. Talons had a reputation as a matchless assassin, a stone cold killer, impervious, unfeeling, and relentless. This worn-out, haggard young mon bore no resemblance – beyond the physical – to the Talons Trollbane that Edouina had loved for ten years: it seemed as if something had broken her spirit and will during the six months they had been apart. "What's happened while I've been gone? You sound like you've had more than you could handle."

Then Edouina saw the distinctive, half-healed wounds on her breasts and arms: vampire. "What the hell?"

Talons shivered as Edouina touched them. "Forget them. It's not safe to speak of them."

"Then what..." Edouina hissed, her face going hard. "What is going on?"

"I'm betrothed. The bi-kyndi has been suppressed." There was a catch of helplessness in Talons' voice, an uncharacteristic desolation.

"I've heard all about Bryndel. I don't like him, or what your grandsire is trying to do to you."

"Shhhh." Talons scanned the room, meaningfully. "Don't say that," she whispered. "We can't speak openly yet." She bent forward, her breasts settling around her hands as she finger spelled: *scrying* .

Someone knocked on the door. Edouina decided to ignore it, certain that whoever it might be would go away soon.

"Let him in, Edouina."

"I don't know why you're letting him do this to you," Edouina growled, frowning. *Had she seen the spelling right? Was someone scrying the room? Why? And the wounds, clearly a vampire's mark. Were the two linked?*

"I don't have a choice," Talons replied wearily.

"Just because you're betrothed—"

"I don't have a choice! Let him in." She sounded almost frantic and Edouina did not like that one bit.

Bryndel knocked once more and this time he rattled the doorknob.

"You'll explain it to me?"

"Not yet." Talons pulled Edouina close, kissing her and using their bodies to conceal her fingers once more as she spelled: *scrying*. There was no mistaking it this time.

The knocking repeated, vigorously.

Edouina opened it, and Bryndel swaggered in, running his eyes up and down her. "Hello, Edouina. Where's Talons?"

"In bed." Edouina's eyes raked him.

She had never had more than a distant glimpse of him during his brief tenure in Guild training. The young man had been sacked by the Guild when he was fifteen and barred from further training at the Guild level of the University for reasons she never bothered to look into. He could still take the non-Guild classes and he had. She decided he was not much to look at and took an immediate dislike to him for his attitude. He appeared to be even worse than she had heard. Some folks would have considered Bryndel to be darkly handsome with rugged features, a cleft chin, and a precisely groomed goatee. Some folks would even have considered him graceful, moving bonelessly like a cat. Edouina, however, caught far subtler nuances than most people: his movement was practiced, not natural, as if he had spent long hours watching himself in a mirror to get it right; his hair too meticulously groomed, suggesting he spent more time on that than on anything else.

Bryndel grinned. "Right where I want her! You joining us?"

"Maybe." Edouina followed him into the bedroom. The Sharani were triadic by nature and necessity since it required three parents to produce viable offspring: sire, bloodmother, and wombmother.

Bryndel shrugged. "As you wish."

Talons threw the bed covers aside and lay back. Bryndel opened his pants; spread her legs wider and pushed in without preliminaries. Talons cried out in pain and then closed her eyes, as he grunted and shoved.

Edouina watched him, frowning. "You're hurting her," she observed dryly.

"She likes it this way. Don't you, Talons?" He sneered. "Most Sharani do."

"Yes, Bryndel," Talons said softly, her voice catching.

Edouina knelt, cupped Bryndel's chin, and turned his face to hers. She looked him in the eyes and kissed him, deeply and expertly; and then, letting just enough of the bi-kyndi energy rise, she sent a jolt of pleasure through his body. He came instantly. Talons sighed in relief.

"Now, boyo," Edouina told him, patting his shoulder. "You come back after dinner and I'll give you the ride of your life." *And when I get done with your ass, you'll not be hurting her any more.*

Bryndel shivered, his eyes wide. "I'll do that." He closed his pants and fled.

Edouina barred the door and returned to Talons. "He's just trying to swell your belly. Nothing more, nothing less."

"I know that."

"Are you going to let him do it?" Edouina did not bother to school the irritation from her voice.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I have to. Lord Wrathscar wants proof I'm not barren."

"If you're not going to tell me all of it, I intend to find out somewhere else." Then she left, rather than get into a shouting match – she could feel that kind of serious anger rising – with Talons on their first day together in six months. She stopped long

enough in the parlor to take the kettle off, setting it aside and retrieved her swords before leaving the apartments.

* * * *

Dynarien...Dynarien, where are you? Are you dead? Is that why you haven't come? Oh Hadjys, Dear My God, don't let him be dead. Tears slid down Talons' cheeks, and she would soon have been weeping hard, except for knock at the door. She wrapped a robe around herself to answer it and found herself facing Galee. The Lemyari pushed past her with a swish of her robes. Galee wore a startling shade of scarlet shot through with black and gold, carrying a soft over-sized mink bag hung from her shoulder.

"I hear your lover, Edouina, has returned. How does Bryndel feel about that?"

"They're considering a triad."

"Oh really? And how do you feel his father is going to react?" Galee snapped. "Or your grandsire? You are behaving like a spoiled child, Talons."

"I don't believe this is any of your business, Galee."

"As your grandsire's first lieutenant in the Guild, everything to do with this marriage and alliance of houses is my business." Galee dropped the bar.

Talons reached for it and Galee caught her chin, lifted her face so that their eyes met and took her mind. The heir stilled, her arms going slack at her sides.

"Go sit down," Galee growled, her voice low and dangerous. "I've been neglecting you for days because of the mess Wrathscar and Solance created stealing Arruth. I've had to rely on Bryndel to get the medicine into you. Well, I'm back to having time for you. Matters will be handled right again. I need to calculate how Edouina will affect matters."

Talons sat at the parlor table, folded her hands, and waited, her eyes fixed upon Edouina's abandoned teacup.

Galee opened a cabinet, got a wine glass, and placed it on the table before Talons. She set her bag on the table, took out a bottle, filled the glass, and then added the contents of a vial. "There now, I have added the medicine. It is time to drink your death." She folded Talons' hands around it.

"As you wish."

"With this one there will finally be enough in your body for you to begin to die." The vampire stroked her face, extending her awareness through Talons' body to taste it, going deeper than she had ever bothered to do before while the paladin

drank. "Ahhhh. So my cow is with calf. Had you told me, I would have increased the dosage. You would already be writhing on the floor each day." Galee poured her another glass. "When do you intend to tell them?" She produced a second vial.

"Next party... How soon the pain?"

"Why do you keep asking about the pain?" Galee demanded in annoyance, her eyes narrowed. She pushed the glass toward her. "Do you fear it?"

Talons struggled against the bindings in her mind, grabbed at Edouina's teacup, and accidentally knocked it on the floor. The cup shattered. Galee lunged in deeper, savagely, seeing that Edouina's return had somehow strengthened the heir's will.

Talons stiffened, going pale. "I wanted to die in battle. You're cheating me."

"Drink your death like a good little paladin and perhaps at the last I'll put a blade to your throat instead." Galee finally realized that the statement about pain, the question was really a testing of the bonds. Talons was attempting to focus on that and get free. Galee would stop her from asking it.

Talons held for a moment more and then sighed as the strength drained from her and she drank the glass.

Galee smiled and kissed her. She opened Talons' shirt, her fangs lengthened and she sank them into the heir's breast. Talons stiffened, moaning softly as Galee fed. When she finished, Galee took a soft cloth from her bag and wiped her mouth.

"Go to your bed, Talons, and take a nap. I intend to remove Edouina quickly. No one is going to interfere with me."

* * * *

Bookshelves dominated the Patriarch's study, reaching to the ceiling. Sliding ladders, attached to the shelves, could be pushed along to access different sections. His large desk sat near the broad window, which was open that day to let in the pleasant spring air. The Patriarch 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.

"You cannot be Jysy and Arruth's sponsor," the Patriarch explained in a patient manner, warming to the young male. "You are not Guild."

Dynarien sighed. "I must have a reason for being here. I absolutely must," his voice filled with a desperate earnestness, which the Patriarch found charming. "Otherwise people will ask too many questions."

"So I'll give you one," Patriarch Eshraf told him. "Hadjys has granted you many

special dispensations, so my liege-god wants you here for Talons' sake. She has become a favorite of his. Therefore, you are now a mage employed by this temple."

A smile spread over Dynarien's face. He had never had a job before in four thousand years. "Will I have duties?" he asked eagerly. *A job! He was going to have a job!*

"Yes," the Patriarch laughed, it was a deep, hearty laugh. "I think you'll learn many things living among humans like us, living by our rules. From all I could glean in the lore books, you've done nothing but wander through our lives from time to time."

Dynarien nodded. "Mostly I've stayed in Imralon, or wandered, or followed my sister around, trying to keep her out of trouble. This feels good." As the God of Cussedness and Perversity, his twin sister, Dynanna, was always getting into trouble. She drove him to distraction. She always had a dozen plots going at once or she was stealing from gods and demons, or raiding the hoards of dragons and other monsters. Sooner or later something terrible would happen to the little godling and that would break Dynarien's heart. She took too many chances.

"And you'll help me protect Talons from that monster that's stalking her and these unholy intrigues."

"Of course!" Dynarien sobered, "I love her."

"You would have been a far better mate for her than Bryndel. This whole situation is unfortunate, but the state must be served. Furthermore, under no circumstances are you to touch her as a woman. She belongs to Bryndel and the repercussions for her would be severe."

"I am learning to understand that." What would Eshraf say if he knew that last warning had come too late and Talons was already pregnant by him? He would not touch her again, unless she asked him to; but should she ask, no one and nothing would stop him from answering.

"Good. Promise me another thing: you must not go to her until I give you permission."

"Why?" Dynarien bristled, his face flushing brighter than his hair.

"Because when I was a young mon we had another rash of vampire attacks, much like the ones involving Talons. There was a yuwenghau. A Taladrim ally of the Guild, a daughter of Tala by Kalirion. She made no secret of what she was and who she was. The vampire butchered her. As powerful and resourceful as you are, my young friend, you are in no way her equal. I will not see you die as she did. We will handle this with caution. I am certain that we are dealing with a royal, possibly even a Lemyari."

Dynarien went silent. The thought of a Lemyari, especially an ancient Lemyari, sent a cold shiver up his back. "I thought they were all destroyed at the end of the Age of Burning, more than twelve thousand years ago. Closer to twenty by some accounts."

"There is a rumor that Lord Hoon of Waejontor possesses claws that secrete a venom. That sounds like a Lemyari. There is also a mon here, First Lieutenant to the Grand Master, a Nordrei woman, who happens to have the same name as that which an obscure lore book lists for your grandsire's lover who betrayed him and vanished at the time of your betrothed, Melorien's murder. Would you recognize her?"

"It might be a Lemyari." Dynarien frowned deeply as he thought. "I cannot imagine a Nordrei taking Galee's name. It cannot be her. My grandsire killed her. I will be careful."

"Good. I will spend a few days establishing your identity, introduce you to some people, and then you are on your way to Talons as a mage of the temple."

As desperately as Dynarien wanted to go to Talons, he could see Eshraf's point. He felt that his decision to take Laurelyanne and Josiah's advice to go to Eshraf first had been the correct one. Talatiel had indeed been far more powerful than he. They had met briefly a few centuries ago. This was not a situation that he could simply plunge into in his usual reckless manner. Normally, he was only this cautious when Dynanna was about and issuing orders. His sister was the trickster in the family, wandering around in various guises. Talatiel had been more like himself, always out in the open with her moonwolf by her side. Dynarien shivered at the knowledge that it was here, fighting this monster, that she had met her end.

* * * *

Arruth carried her books as she walked down the corridors of the West Wing. She had promised Jysy she would begin going to classes again, and work hard at getting over what had happened to her in that alley in Havensword; after all, she wore their ears and that was supposed to be the end of it for a Sharani. But that wasn't the end of it, and she was desperately afraid to tell anyone. She found her feet slowing down as she neared the doors to Lord Wrathscar's apartments, which he shared with his daughters when he allowed them at court. Then she simply got up her courage and ran past them.

The Great Central Hall was already filling with people when Arruth reached the chamber. She remembered how she had once thought this place beautiful, with its forest of green-veined marble columns, vaulted arches, and broad skylights in a tremendous central dome. Now her experiences colored it with shadows. Arruth hesitated on the wide second floor gallery, looking down at everyone. Soldiers in the umber and pine of House Wrathscar were sprinkled throughout. Her skin crawled. She started to turn back and flee, feeling as if all of them could see her and were lying in wait to catch her, to take her to him. A laughing cluster of females swept

down from the third floor, fanning around her. Several males followed them with the casual attentiveness of guards who did not wish to be easily noted. One of the females must have seen the distress on her face, because she stopped. "Are you all right?"

Arruth started to nod and then shook her head instead at the auburn-tressed mon.

"Someone has frightened you?"

"Yes," Arruth said in a very soft voice.

"Where are you going?"

"Classes."

"Why don't I walk you there? How old are you?" the mon asked gently.

"Twelve. My people are large."

"Sharani?"

Arruth nodded.

The lovely mon with the auburn hair wore a pale blue gossamer and silk gown with strange birds embroidered upon it and a crystal, rune-banded in silver, on a silver chain. "I'm Leeza."

"Arruth." Then she noticed a tall – no, very tall – golden haired and skinned male waiting behind Leeza with a dark-skinned, silver-haired female. They dressed in silken short tunics and breeches, heavily embroidered, and carried two golden fans in their sashes.

Leeza followed her gaze and smiled. She gestured at them. "Come here." They approached and now Arruth could see their narrow, deeply slanted eyes and the points of their ears. "This is Tiderider, his name in Faewin means The Golden Fae who has Seen the Sea. And this is Blue Lily."

They smiled briefly at Arruth.

"My love," said Leeza, sliding her arm around Tiderider's waist. "This is Arruth. Something downstairs frightens her. She's just twelve. I promised to let her 'hide beneath our arms' and we will walk her to class." She used the traditional Fae phrase for something that was hidden in full view, often a mon.

"Then we shall," Tiderider said, favoring Arruth with another of his enigmatic hints of a smile.

As they walked, Arruth became aware of the way in which her necklace of ears had become twisted and the upper edge of one desiccated ear rubbed against her neck. She shoved it down hurriedly, hoping they had not noticed.

She reached her classes without incident, getting through the day better than she expected and had just started to cross the green from the library when three myn stepped out of the thick bushes and seized her. She started to cry out when she felt the cold edge of a blade at her throat and she froze.

"You surely didn't believe I'd forgotten you, Arruth? Or had more interesting things to do?"

Arruth began to cry. "Let me go, Lord Wrathscar. Please let me go."

"When I'm finished."

* * * *

"I wish I knew what had frightened that child," Leeza said, walking back to the Great Central Hall with her head leaning against Tiderider's chest. "I've never seen a Sharani that frightened."

"She's been raped." Tiderider's steel in velvet voice masked something that Leeza, for all of her three years among them, could not catch. So she wondered what she had heard there.

Leeza stopped. "How do you know?"

"She wears their ears on a cord around her neck," Blue Lily supplied. "I saw it also, Tiderider, before she shoved them into her shirt better."

"Who would do such a thing here ... to a child?" Leeza was appalled.

Blue Lily exchanged a knowing glance with Tiderider, and Leeza felt them closing her out again. After three years, she still wanted to cry when they did that. She felt certain that it was on Channadar's orders. No matter what Leeza said or did, she could not convince them that she was as strong and able as they were.

"Do not think about such things," Tiderider said after a long pause. "You will be happier."

* * * *

Edouina strode across the quad, stretching her legs to the maximum trying to force some burn into the pace just to work her anger out. She knew where she would find Yukiah this time of day and the armsmaster usually knew everything that went on that concerned the Guild since he never left on assignments and all his old students had a

habit of coming back to talk to him. It had been that way since he took the post ten years ago, as it had been with his predecessor.

"Yukiah!"

He glanced, saw her, and gestured for his assistants to take over as he strode swiftly across the field. "The cleaning lady returns!" They jokingly called her that, when what they meant was that she cleared out the worst rats nests of corruption and monsters imaginable. He embraced her briefly. "Thank the gods you're back."

"Talons refuses to tell me what's going on. She kept finger spellingscrying ."

"It's possible." Yukiah led her to a spot away from everyone else where there were a few scattered benches among a stand of maples. He sat down and she settled beside him. Bending forward, Yukiah pulled idly at a tall stalk of grass, twiddling it thoughtfully. A silver chain slid forth from the neck of his tunic.

"You still carry her picture close to your heart, don't you, honey?" Edouina drawled.

Yukiah straightened. He pulled the chain out and palmed the locket for a moment, before pushing it back inside his tunic. "Always will. I don't know if my swan-may is alive or dead. I haven't heard from her in years. But I'll never love anyone else." He dropped the blade of grass and began rubbing the burn scar on his neck. "Let's talk about Talons."

Edouina's expression darkened as Yukiah told her everything he knew, which was far from all of it, and added in a few guesses. Then Edouina told him what she had seen on Talons' body.

"Vampire. He's back." Yukiah's hand went to the long burn scar on his neck, pressing and then rubbing it in uneasy alternations, his eyes going distant.

"I would think so. I cannot imagine the odds that we could get a new one out of nowhere."

"I suppose it could be one of his get that has suddenly risen to power, Edouina. One we missed."

"One strong enough to slay Talatviel? What odds, that? Same one, I say, honey. He's come back."

Yukiah continued to finger the scar. "I don't want to believe he's been here all this time, Edouina. Just sitting here watching us after he killed her."

"Yukiah! And Edouina!" Eshraf's baritone broke across their awareness. "What fine fortune. I have brought someone to meet you."

Yukiah nodded, sizing Dynarien up. "Didn't I used to see you out here last winter? Watching the little rogues with Talons?" Yukiah stood, extending his hand to Dynarien.

The yuwenghau grinned and shook, being careful not to grip too hard, lest he crush Yukiah's hand unintentionally. "I met Talons in Shaurone and the girls too. Gave them a bit of help there."

Edouina stalked around him with a silly grin on her face. "Ummmmnn ummmnn ummmnn looking at you, honey, has just made my day." He was broad through the shoulders, strong-chested – without being excessively so – and almost impossibly narrow through the waist and hips with a tight little butt that made her hands ache to squeeze it. Fair, fair skin like fresh churned cream, guileless blue eyes like a summer morn, and a wealth of red-gold hair hanging loose down his back and over his shoulders, like no one she had ever seen before, so very different from her own dark skinned race.

Dynarien flushed, completely flustered, and at a loss for words.

"Dynarien, allow me to introduce Yukiah, our Guild armsmaster, and Edouina Hornbow, Guildsmon."

"Talons' Edouina?"

"Oh, she's talked about me, has she?"

"She's in love with you," Dynarien blurted before he caught himself and blushed two shades deeper.

Everyone laughed.

"I like this one, can I keep him?" Edouina grinned.

"Dynarien recently became a mage for the temple," Eshraf explained, motioning them closer. "Seven nights hence at the stroke of midnight meet me in my study. Dynarien is to be trusted implicitly if Talons is to be saved. I fear that Creeya and perhaps even the Guild itself is in peril."

Yukiah and Edouina exchanged glances, and then Yukiah spoke for both of them. "You have our word."

"Now let's introduce Dynarien to Lord Channadar. That will be a test." Eshraf grinned mysteriously.

"That's a Fae name," Dynarien said, trying to read Eshraf's face.

"And so it is. Channadar is half Fae. He is the Lord of Hellsguard."

Yukiah and Edouina looked at each other curiously wondering what Eshraf meant by 'a test.'

Dynarien leaned very close to Eshraf's ear and whispered, "If I have to summon my armor in his presence, he'll know who I am."

Edouina caught part of that, which made her even more curious and she shared it with Yukiah after signing him to fall back a bit from Eshraf and Dynarien as they followed them.

"Armor? Battlemage, he's got to be, and a famous one," Yukiah whispered back to her. "I wonder if his name even is Dynarien. That's a sylvan name, and he doesn't have the ears."

"No. But he's awful pretty."

Yukiah gave her a good-natured shove. He genuinely enjoyed working with Sharani, which many didn't.

* * * *

Leeza drifted along the little shops in the Cloverleaf, not noticing that she had become separated from her companions. She passed by two tailors and a general clothing shop coming finally to the small glass blower's place she favored. Her collection of unicorns and peacocks was steadily growing and already filled two shelves in the suite she shared with Tiderider and Chucomei. Most of the shops were carved out of the natural niches formed by the cavern system beneath the palace compound. Some were the result of stone and mortar divisioning of the larger chambers.

"Of all the women I have tasted, none have ever satisfied me the way I think you would, Leeza."

Leeza jolted from her thoughts at his voice. "Lord Wrathscar. Let me be. I don't want you."

Agasthenez Wrathscar tried to capture her arm, but she slid away from him into a cautious stance. Although her training had been crude and brief, Leeza had been a member of Channadar's yeomynry before that fateful day that she knocked him in the mud. Wrathscar frowned deeply. "I want you, Leeza. And I will have you."

"Touch me and die," Leeza hissed. "Tiderider would kill you." Before becoming involved with Channadar, she would have threatened him herself, but she had learned the game from the Fae, although she had yet to master the dance.

"Not if you came willingly," Wrathscar pointed out. "How can you bear to be with those dancing fops, when you could have a real man."

"That is an old line and it has an older answer. 'No.' You are not a 'real man.' You are a bully, a tyrant. I want nothing to do with you."

Leeza glanced around from the corners of her eyes, knowing that Wrathscar rarely traveled alone. He always had at least one soldier at his back. She spotted the soldier. "To hell with your rapacious appetites, Wrathscar!" Leeza kicked the nearest cabinet of glass items in Wrathscar's direction and darted out onto the central concourse as the shop owner ran from the backroom to see what was happening to his merchandise. Leeza hated damaging the beautiful items, but it had seemed her only option. She snatched her skirts higher, thinking how much she hated dresses and ran.

She found Tiderider looking for her at the far edge and threw herself into his arms, panting. "Wrathscar."

Seeing the soldiers – still a few yards off – headed in their direction, Tiderider's golden eyes narrowed to slits. He shifted her to one arm and drew a single golden fan, snapping it open in a menacing manner. The soldiers slowed, watching him. Wrathscar came up behind them. "Chasing my firefly again?" Tiderider asked in a soft voice as dispassionate as steel.

"I am not chasing her," Wrathscar said. "If I were, I would have caught her."

"Stay away from Leeza."

"I don't want her. Why should I want used goods? Your whore has a twisted imagination if she thinks I want her." Wrathscar turned on his heels and stalked off with his soldiers following.

Tiderider nodded, his eyes unreadable. "Have you finished your shopping?"

"Yes. I've lost my taste for it." Leeza nestled tighter against him. Despite her earlier defiance, Lord Wrathscar frightened her.

"Then there is one who waits for you."

* * * *

Tiderider arrived late to the Great Central Hall where Channadar held his little court of stories. Leeza still clung to him, although her shaking had subsided. Eshraf was there with Yukiah and Edouina, and another whom Tiderider failed to recognize: A young man who was sylvan trueblood pale and red-golden haired. Channadar rose from his couch as Tiderider arrived, smiling and unfolding his fan with a languid flick of his wrist. He waved it at Tiderider.

"Allow me to present to you, my First of Thirteen, Tiderider. Tiderider, this is Mage Dynarien Briarrose. Patriarch Eshraf's new mage-assistant."

Power shimmered around the mage. Tiderider could taste the aura, sense the way it moved, see the patterns in his inner vision with an intense vividness that he had only encountered with Queen Meileilyki. It spoke to him of green leaves and woodland shadows, star-lit paths and the full moon on the meadows. And roses. The man smelled of roses. His mind and awareness filled with roses, and he had to close his thoughts to them. It took great effort. The mon had too much power. Tiderider hoped this mon was not an enemy, because he felt a certainty he could not take him.

"Where are you from?" Blue Lily asked, prancing closer to Dynarien, and tilting her head, flicking back her silver hair.

"Here and there."

"I mean where were you born? I doubt someone found you under the butterfly bush." She snapped open her fans a fraction of an inch from his mid-section, and Dynarien sucked in a sharp breath, but did not move. Blue Lily's eyes snapped to Tiderider's with the identical suddenness of her fans, having caught Dynarien's reaction. A tacit understanding passed between them: the mage knew what the fans really were and what they could do.

"Imral... Vallimrah."

Channadar laughed. "Did a goat nibble your ears?" The Fae lord danced up to Dynarien next, a sudden frown flashed, and was gone as he entered the mage's auric field.

Dynarien blushed, and put his hands on his ears. Tiderider could tell from the mage's expression that he was thinking swiftly and felt certain that they would still not get the truth. "Darr. I'm from Darr. I'm just a commoner with an uncommon talent. But I'm fresh come from the Battle of Errilyn where I fought under Aejiystrys Rowan's banner. And I've the wounds to prove it."

Eshraf nodded at that. Dynarien had gotten the conversation off on another track.

* * * *

Belyla and Yahni drifted into the nether reaches of the far gardens carved into intricate moldings along the mountain itself, using the rocks as sculptures. The hiding places for lovers were many, exquisite, and deliberate. One of the early Grand Masters had been a lady who decreed that love deserved a place for its games as much as did death – a reference to the Stalking Grounds and the Guild itself. The Guild respected love in a way that often ran counter to the mores of the general nobility because they were aware of how incredibly fragile life was. They were freer,

knowing there might not be tomorrow, and reluctant to make promises they might not live to keep; yet some did wed and some had families; and a few even managed to grow old. With luck, Yahni might have been one of those last ones, but Belyla doubted it strongly because he kept telling her he loved her. It made her sad. She should never have let things go this far, but she was lonely. No one else had ever even noticed Wrathscar's plump homely daughter.

As Yahni's hand moved to her breast, stroking the nipple, she stiffened, catching his hand. They had been sleeping together for weeks, so it was not new, only her attack of conscience was. "Don't. If my father catches us, he'll kill you."

"I'm Guild."

"Don't be an innocent. He won't do it himself. He has a thousand ways to get what he wants. Your family is right about me." Belyla sounded bitter.

"We could run away. I have relatives in Shaurone who would understand."

Belyla's eyes filled and Yahni dabbed at the tears with his fingertips. Sucking in deep shuddering breaths, she wondered how far her father's reach was. Could he reach to Shaurone? But there were worse things to tell him. "Yahni, I'm not inexperienced. I'm used." That was such an awful way to put it.

"You're what?" Yahni said, caught off guard. He felt her tense. He had stopped trying to be Derryl when he realized he did not have to be with her. Belyla always allowed him to be himself. He wanted only Belyla and the warm feelings he had around her. So he pulled back, turning her to face him better, seeing more tears. "I love you, Belyla. It doesn't matter. Honest. You're the only woman I could be myself with."

"I want you."

"Then let's run away." His words quickened into a rush, desperate to hold onto her. He could sense her readiness to flee and, if she did that, he suspected he would never see her again. Yahni could not bear the thought of that. "I'll write the letters tonight. As soon as I hear from them, we'll leave. Mikkal could marry us and give me a letter of wanderyear."

"But our families..."

"Who would you rather have? A noble foisted on you by your father or Yahni Kjarten, Guildsmon? Granted, if we run off my father will disown me, giving everything to Maya. But I can support us through the Guild. We wouldn't be rich, but we wouldn't be poor either. I love you, Belyla."

"Yahni Kjarten, Guildsmon is what I want."

Belyla pulled him down with her behind the veiling ivy. Yahni wondered briefly at her curious choice of words in calling herself "used."

* * * *

Talons heard Galee calling her in her dreams, calling her out of sleep, demanding and imperious. She hurt. Her stomach felt tight and sour. Her head ached, throbbing. Edouina lay spooned around her. Talons slipped free, sliding off the low bed. Tighter and tighter wrapped the chains of Galee's coercions around her mind, dragging at her. She had to go. Her body moved now of its own accord. She staggered against the door, opened it, and got through, closing it softly behind her. Talons fumbled with a robe, bumped the couch, and almost fell. There was so much pain. What was wrong with her?

She set aside the bar, opened the door, and went out into the corridor, again closing the door quietly behind her. The pain had become so severe she had to keep one hand on the wall to remain standing. She walked past four suites and paused. Galee's call came from Lord Wrathscar's suites. Talons opened the door. Galee sat at the table with the wine and vials waiting alongside a slender-stemmed green goblet. Lord Wrathscar leaned against the wall by the door into the bedroom. Unseen by either of them, Philomea watched and listened interestedly from the top of the stairs, hidden by the balusters where she crouched.

"Close the door and sit down," Galee ordered.

Talons obeyed, taking a chair across from her and folding her arms on the saffron brocade table covering.

"Does she know it's poison?" Wrathscar asked.

"Yes. You can see how much pain she is in. Talons, it is time to drink your death. Pour both vials into the wine and drink it."

Talons did as she was told.

Lord Wrathscar marveled. "Will I be able to do this when you have turned me?"

"Yes. But I will not turn you unless you continue to take orders. Defy me once I have turned you, and I will destroy you. I do not tolerate the existence of rogue children."

"I swear it, Galee."

"Talons, go into the bedroom and undress. Lord Wrathscar wishes a ride."

Talons removed her clothing, dropping everything on the floor before walking into the next room.

"She's pregnant?"

"The cow is in calf ... by your son. Try not to be too rough with her."

Wrathscar growled, "It should have been my calf."

"There will be no more calves for you, Wrathscar, once I've turned you."

Wrathscar laughed. "The city crawls with my bastards. But this one would have been fun to break."

"The council would never have agreed to a match between you and the heir. They would never have allowed her in your bed. Your habits are too well suspected."

"It is power I want, Galee."

"And it is power you will have."

He nodded at that and went into the bedroom.

Philomea waited a long time, listening to her father take the heir. Then she crept back into her rooms to think. She hungered for the power Galee offered her father. Her smug satisfaction at the way her father humbled the heir pleased her. The house of Gee was failing and House Wrathscar would replace it, especially now that Bryndel had managed to get the heir with child. It had taken her brother long enough – sometimes Philomea wondered if he could get it up at all, mostly while hearing the disparaging remarks her father made about him, throwing his very manhood into question. Philomea was certain that she would have made a better son than Bryndel had.

* * * *

Jysy and Arruth bounced into Talons' apartments bright and early one morning. Arruth seemed perkier that day and it made Jysy feel more hopeful. There was no one in the parlor and the bedroom door stood open. They could hear noises coming from it. They went closer and then stared open-mouthed at Bryndel riding Talons hard, both of them naked.

"Holy shit!" Jysy shouted before she could stop herself.

Bryndel turned with a curse and the girls fled. "Hasn't anyone taught them to knock?"

Talons lay breathing hard, listening to him scream, resenting the sound of voice, his anger, the self-righteousness of his attitude. He had not once said anything about her. He had not even asked if she felt like making love, he had simply shoved his rod into

her both times as if she should feel privileged to receive it. More and more she dreamed of Dynarien, and wondered where he was, why he had not come. She felt alternately angry and worried: angry that he might simply be off chasing someone else and worried that he might have been injured or slain in the Battle of Errilyn. There was no way to know what manner of monstrous things Lord Hoon of Waejontor could have fielded against him, knowing that a yuwenghau was coming for him. *Please be alive. Please be alive. Oh, Dynarien, why won't you answer? You said you loved me.*

She had told neither Bryndel nor Edouina how sick she felt nor how much pain she was in. Bryndel shoved her roughly as he rolled off the bed, dragging his pants on. "Get dressed," he said crossly. "They'll have it all over the palace, so we might as well have breakfast in the Music Chamber."

"I'm tired, can't we have something sent up?"

"Wear something nice."

"I'll dress."

The door opened and Edouina came in. "Bryndel, your father is looking for you."

Bryndel gave a wordless snarl and ran out.

"Is he?" Talons asked, sinking back into bed.

Edouina sauntered to the outer door, dropped the bar, and swaggered back grinning. "No, honey, but I did not like the expression on your face. And I figured it was time to give you some news. A friend of yours got in a few days ago. Eshraf did not want me to tell you. We're introducing him around in a gradual fashion. He was hurt real bad at Errilyn and he's still a long way from whole. We're just saying he's a mage, but I get the impression he's a battlemage of some kind. A Willodarian. He's working for Eshraf."

"Dynarien." She could not suppress the small catch in her voice when she said his name. It could only be he. Wounded. That was why he had not answered in all these weeks of her calling him.

"There's something you're not telling me?" Edouina cocked her head, regarding Talons thoughtfully, wondering how she had guessed his name. Talons had been in Norendel just before the Alliance Armies of Rowanhart, Vallimrah, and Shaurone marched into Errilyn. Had she met him there?

"A lot of somethings." She fingerspelled 'screaming.'

"You feel like going out? Eshraf said he was not to come here yet, but said nothing about us running into him accidentally on purpose, honey. Yukiah is introducing him

around today."

Edouina helped her dress and they walked to the quad together. Along the way, Edouina bribed some students she knew to fetch them one of the basket lunches – it was already getting too late to call it breakfast – that one of the underground eateries specialized in. The underground compound called the Cloverleaf was a warren, but a carefully guarded one with only a few exits and they all curved about into the center. Talons kept her arm slipped through Edouina's as they walked, leaning against her in a worn way.

"I don't understand why you're so tired, honey."

"Bryndel. Don't ask too many questions. I don't have any answers."

"Tell you what, you sit here." Edouina settled Talons in a pleasant sunny spot. By then the student had shown up with the basket. "I'll spot them and motion them over."

Edouina wandered further than she intended before she spotted Yukiah and Dynarien with Jysy and Arruth in tow. Did they know him also? The girls looked a tad downcast and she wondered what that was about. When they returned to Talons there was a small crowd of students seated around her. Talons held a wine glass in her hand.

"Where did that come from, honey?" Edouina asked suspiciously.

"Galee, a toast to ... I forget." *What had Galee said? Drink your...?* She had been sitting all alone at that moment, and then Galee had come upon her, and then...? A chill ran down her spine. She started to hurt again. Then she saw Dynarien; their eyes met and everything else vanished from her awareness.

Yukiah saw the look passing between them and understood why Eshraf had wanted to take things slow. Talons might claim to love Bryndel; yet this was the mon she truly loved. As soon as he could get them alone, Yukiah intended to warn them in no uncertain terms about guarding their faces. Talons should know better. Even taking into consideration all the stress she was under, she should know better. If Lord Wrathscar caught wind of it, he would kill this mon.

"You were at the Battle of Errilyn, the Patriarch says." Jimi offered Dynarien his hand. The scruffy, light brown-haired youth of fifteen, whose roguish smile concealed an iron-will and a well-disciplined mind, came from the eastern steppes where they hunted giant, flightless, predatory birds from horseback, armed only with javelins and bolas. Jimi was madly in love with Jysy, but determined not to tell her before she turned fourteen.

"I was," Dynarien replied, accepting his hand and shaking. When their eyes met and the yuwenghau's slow, almost shy smile emerged, Jimi knew he had met his match in

roguishness. The Guild tended to attract a certain type of devil-may-care, edge-walking rogues who liked the adrenaline rush of pitting their skills and wits against great odds in the name of vengeance and justice for those who would not otherwise get it. The Guild did not work for free; they were hired and worked within the tenets of their faith. However, a poor woman might pay them in bread or by sweeping the temple floors. The nature of a mon's payment was kept secret. The nethergod they worshipped, Hadjys the Dark Judge, demanded this of both parties as an act of faith. They did not harm the innocent. The souls of the guilty they killed were sent to nethergod's Nine Hells to be judged and punished until they were cleansed and returned to the wheel.

Jysy, seeing the students start to crowd in too closely at that, shoved them back, "Don't start bumping him. Ribs and that shoulder," she indicated the left one. "His wounds aren't healed yet."

Talons' face took on an odd expression, noticeable to those who knew her. She could see the way Dynarien stood, favoring his shoulder, yet trying not to. The days when Talons could maintain her icy assassin's mask had melted away like the winter's snows, but it was a spring of nightmares and not of hopes. She could not hide the concern in her eyes, nor the love. More than anything she wanted to touch him. All those desperate days when she had begun to feel abandoned, he had been laying somewhere in pain. "What happened?"

"Stone trolls. I killed two. Clemmerick got the other two." At the awed faces he added, "He's an ogre."

Edouina found herself grinning. Battlemage, had to be: a blade in one hand and power in the other. She imagined him that way and felt her loins grow wet. And if this was the male Talons had fallen for then she knew how to pick them. Now, if he looked as good with his clothes off as he did in them – she liked the hair, definitely liked the hair.

Yukiah changed some of his assessments in light of the trolls. Perhaps the mon could prove more than Wrathscar bargained on. He looked forward to the meeting with Eshraf. He fingered the scar on his neck. Maybe they would get the vampire this time. What they needed was a yuwenghau; a divine champion. At least Eshraf had found them an extremely potent battlemage. Two stone trolls and lived to speak of it. Battlemage. Had to be.

Introductions continued to go around for over an hour until finally Talons reluctantly put an end to it. "I'm tired. Yukiah, tell Eshraf I must see him today. At once. That it's urgent. Edouina, walk me back."

Dynarien frowned after them. "She doesn't look well."

"They say Sharani cannot be poisoned," Yukiah said.

"It isn't true."

"I didn't think so."

* * * *

"Eshraf, I want him to simply Jump in here and Jump out again tomorrow. But he's the only one who can set the wards and shields and tell-tales that can protect me to the degree I need to feel safe." Talons sat at her parlor table with her feet propped in another chair. She had a hard look in her eyes that showed she would brook no excuses in the matter.

"Talons, you have not looked well in several days."

"I am not discussing anything here or elsewhere until this place is warded."

The Patriarch sighed. Talons was being very much the heir with him and she had never done that before with him. Her reasoning could not be argued with – they both knew what Dynarien was. "So be it. Nine bells, tomorrow. Be certain your friends are prepared to keep Bryndel away."

"They will be."

* * * *

Channadar sat with his Thirteen Chosen, which included his brother Juna, in an upstairs study. They sat around their lord in a circling of chairs two deep, arranged by rank. Tiderider sat on his right hand, as First of Thirteen, and Juna at Channadar's left as second. "What do you make of this new mage of Eshraf's? He radiates power," Channadar said.

"Battlemage." Tiderider said. "A powerful one."

Channadar glanced at the closed fans in his lap. Until that morning, no one – except the evil one – had recognized their 'pretty toys' as anything more than a cultural affectation. Yet this new mage had immediately seen the truth: They were weapons of gold washed kenda'ryl, the sharpest metal on their world and capable of holding an extremely potent magical charge. "And the fragrance of roses? Do you think he's trying to convince us that he's Dynarien Willodarsson?"

"Why would he do that?" Blue Lily said. "I sensed no threat in him."

"To keep us in our place." Juna suggested. His face was thinner than Channadar's, his eyes more rounded. Juna grinned as if to take the bite out of what he had suggested.

Tiderider threw Juna a glance of utter contempt. "Eshraf would not do that."

Channadar toyed with a fan thoughtfully, and laid it down again. Something about the mage tugged at him and he could not say what that was. "Could he actually be the Rose Warrior?"

"I don't know," Tiderider responded. "I would have expected Eshraf to find a Badonthian or a Hadjysheen if he sent for a yuwenghau."

"Talons may have met him," Blue Lily said. "The armies that gathered to invade Errilyn would have attracted at least one yuwenghau."

The lord of Hellsguard steepled his fingers and tapped them against his lips for a moment before speaking again. His eyelids lowered until they hooded his eyes. "So we are assuming he's yuwenghau and not a mage?"

"He feels sylvan, even if he doesn't have the ears," Starsilent said. He had the silver hair and eyes, almost frost child look of a trueblood, which he was not.

"And he walks with the easy grace of a sylvan warrior." Juniperarrow sounded admiring and Jangflower pushed her with her fingertips lightly.

"He could be a Valdren half-breed, like he said," Blue Lily interjected. "Not all get the ears, just most. Some of them have become battlemages."

Channadar flicked a fan open in a silencing gesture. "Whatever he is, whoever he really is, Eshraf has found an extremely powerful ally. The question becomes, why did he seek one out?"

"Clearly Eshraf expects a war." Tiderider said.

"We best keep our guard up."

Alysyn,

While I have found others to aid us, I fear that this time it will be much worse than last time. The monster would only have returned if he believed his power sufficient to overcome the best we can field against him. You must bring your riders and the Netherguard as well. If you wait too long to bring them into Central Creeya, you might never reach us in time.

Eshraf

Eshraf!

The Netherguard? What can you be thinking of? So far you have given me no proofs to think that it is that bad. Furthermore, if I bring any forces at all, the dark one will know that members of the branch clan have become hidden under his

very nose. *It is out of the question.*

Please, understand me, Eshraf. It is not simply memories of what happened to Rygen thirty years ago, that make me reluctant to return. I have my own sources in Havensword. I fear that my presence alone there would betray the very ones we're trying to protect.

Alysyn

CHAPTER FOUR

PLOTS

Talons' friends rallied to keep Bryndel out of her apartments that morning so that Dynarien could arrive and leave without being seen by him. Talons listened to hurried conversations in the parlor, lying awake in her bed, too tired to rise. Edouina and Alora linked arms with Bryndel the moment he appeared and rushed him down to the Cloverleaf on a long shopping trip. Bryndel was receiving more female attention than he ever had before in his life thanks to Edouina's machinations, and that took a lot of the burden off Talons. She appreciated that as she heard the door into the corridor close and she knew that she was finally alone.

Talons turned over, dragging the covers around her, to try and get a little more sleep before Dynarien arrived to place the wards. Despite awakening exhausted, Talons could not still her mind enough to do so. Bryndel's sexual demands kept her sore and worn out, but at least they no longer drugged her to get her into his bed. The drugs had frightened her most; that and the way the vampire could get inside her mind and waltz her around saying that she loved him when she did not.

Now she pretended to the parts they had once forced upon her, which seemed the only way to retain her sanity. Yet her hold on that sanity seemed tenuous at best. There were times when the sharp tugging toward the dark depths seemed so seductive, to simply close her eyes and slide into the beckoning dreams seemed so sweet. They were warm and oddly comforting, calling her to let go, to surrender and there would be no more pain, no more suffering, no more worries. Then she would claw her way out of it; telling herself that had to be the vampire trying to get past the godmark on her breast. If just once she surrendered to it, her soul would be lost.

Seeing Dynarien yesterday, being so close to him – he would have come sooner, if he could have, and knowing that restored her faith in him so that she no longer felt abandoned. She must have come so close to losing him. What if he had died and she had never known it? *How the hell did I ever manage to fall in love with you, you silly rakehell?* She sniffed, pressing a hand to her face, realizing with a start that she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm getting soft. I can't afford this."

Talons had stolen a march on Bryndel by arranging for Jysy and Arruth to catch them in bed together and then spread it to the biggest gossips in the school. Give it another week and she planned to go to her grandsire, if he had not sent for her first, and tell him she was pregnant by Bryndel. The single thing she regretted about using the girls to make the discovery was that it had not gone entirely as she had wanted it to. She dared not ask them to lie for her, since they might be Read, and they were the only ones left she truly trusted and could call on, so it had to be them – she had set it up days before Edouina's return or learning of Dynarien's arrival. Talons had intended for Bryndel and she to be caught in bed together, not in the middle of the act. Bryndel usually fell asleep afterward when he came to her in the mornings. That morning, however, although he dozed briefly, he had roused abruptly and shoved into her without so much as saying her name.

Talons gave up on trying to sleep and walked into the parlor with weariness dragging at her feet as she moved. Her chest hurt as she breathed. She clutched at the edge of the table to steady herself, and sat down. Her nose felt damp. She brushed the back of her hand across her nose, and stared down at streaks of blood on it. A nosebleed? She had never had one before. Then she saw the wine glass. She remembered Galee sitting here alone with her saying something. "*Drink your...?*" *Drink your what?* Talons felt first panicked and then angry. She grabbed the glass, threw it hard, and watched it smash against the wall. Everything felt so futile.

"Talons?"

The scent of roses swept across her and she turned, throwing herself into his arms, clinging to him. "Hold me, please hold onto me." Abruptly she thrust him away. "Oh gods, don't touch me. Get the wards up fast. Scry wards first."

He blinked in hurt confusion, yet went to work. This was, after all, what he had been sent to do. Eshraf had not sent him here to touch her, to hold her. Furthermore her shattered vulnerability disturbed him. This was not the same woman who had once said to him with chilling dispassion, "*Touch me, and we'll see if gods bleed.*"

"Permanent wards and shields. And make that window opaque to anyone from the outside. And set tell-tales. I want to know if anyone comes prying."

Talons walked to the door and barred it.

When Dynarien finished, she pointed him at the bedroom. "There are a lot of pillows in there, I can tell you're hurting. I can make you comfortable. How badly are you injured?"

"Crushed ribs, left shoulder, right chest."

"Crushed?"

"Crushed."

She shivered. Stone trolls. Two of them he had said yesterday sitting on the quad. She had fought only one and nearly died. She remembered how badly she had hurt after the stone troll nearly crushed her; she killed it and Dynarien saved her with the elixir of Idyn, which his twin-sister Dynanna had stolen from the gardens of the sun god Kalirion. Did he hurt like that? The possibility made her heart ache for him. Talons softened, reaching out to stroke his face, to run her fingers through his hair, realizing again how close she had come to losing him. "Silly rakehell, tell me what happened?"

"Clemmerick and I took on four stone trolls." Between the shoulder and the ribs, it was hard for him to get comfortable, sitting against the headboard of the bed, wedged into a corner with pillows stuffed around him. Talons laughed at him sitting there, telling his story with humorous embellishments to take the edge off the grim sequences. When he got to the part about the healers' frustrated attempts to pry the dead stone troll's severed head loose from his shoulder she was shaking her head and holding her sides at his wry descriptions. They had finally taken a hammer and saws to the thing, and then dug the shards of its teeth out. It should have been horrifying, but not the way that Dynarien told it.

He stroked his sister's mark on her neck, a little question mark scar. "You know, if you'd let me mark you, right there next to hers, you would always get my attention when you called. Just like you can get hers. It's a link."

Talons stiffened. "I've already been marked by two gods. That's enough. I feel like I'm being passed around like a deity's party favor. She made me think she was a vampire and I thought I was going to die. It was not funny. Your sister has a twisted sense of humor."

Dynarien sighed. "Dynanna is the God of Cussedness, what do you expect?"

Talons nodded. "Can't pick your relatives. My grandsire always stood by me and now he treats me like a broodmare, forcing me into a cage. Wrathscar is demanding proof that I'm not barren and my grandsire wishes me to give it to him. It's like I've never really known my grandsire at all. He'll get his alliance, but he'll get no joy of it. I'm going to kill Bryndel and his father. And this vampire too."

Dynarien's eyes turned to steel. "That is why I am here, Talons. I'm going to help you. As I promised."

He was the Rose Warrior, the Twice-Born Son of Willodarus. Talons had seen him in battle, scything through the ranks of the undead with a terrible, raging fury like a sudden, fierce storm. He had many sides, changing like mercury. Talons loved him, even if he needed to be kicked sometimes. She had fallen in love with him on a distant riverbank, listening to him spin tales of forgotten realms and times. The

intense sweet fragrance of roses from distant shores and ages past clung to him as a manifestation of his divinity. It was not something he did; it simply was. And sometimes he left blue roses in his wake.

"I know you will." She watched his eyes drift and his attention turn inward as if troubled. "Is this about the kissing again?" Talons asked, sitting on the floor in front of him.

"Talons, I – I have dreamed about touching you for months now. When I – we..." Dynarien sighed heavily. "It was so quick and without feeling. It was like the coupling of beasts. We had sex, but we did not make love. You would not let me touch you – caress you."

Talons' eyes dropped, her expression going still colder, unreadable and as she spoke her tone became emotionless, the chill words hard. "Bryndel doesn't make love either. He just gets it in and gets it off. I don't like it. I don't feel good afterwards. Edouina has been sleeping with me. We make love and I feel wonderful. Bryndel does not object because she's female and 'you*know* how Sharani are!'" She was heartily sick of hearing people tell her how her about her own kind; as if they knew it better than she did.

"That's not the way it would be with us," Dynarien's softened. "I would be a considerate lover, if you would let me."

Talons shook her head, her eyes sad. She stroked his face, her fingers lingering on his lips. "He's keeping me so sore I would not enjoy you."

"Sore?" Dynarien sounded incredulous and then outraged. In response to his emotion, the scent of roses intensified. Suddenly the bed became covered in blue rose petals.

"Too often, too rough, no foreplay. Most of the time I'm still dry as a bone when he shoves into me. He hurts me." Her tone was emotionless, matter-of-fact. "He takes me four or five times in a day and thinks nothing of it."

"I'm sorry," Dynarien stroked her head sympathetically. He did not understand how she could allow this. For the entire year he had been chasing her, she had always been the kind of mon who set unbreakable boundaries and limits. Yet, here she sat, telling him that Bryndel was using her as callously as if she were a common whore. The situation had to be much worse than she had given him to suspect: he knew her too well to believe that any of it could be her fault.

"Don't be. I'll get past this."

Someone knocked on the outer door. Talons threw on a robe and answered it. Jysy and Arruth boiled into the room.

When they first arrived in Creeya last winter, Jysy and Arruth were irascible. The enemy had been far easier for the assassin to handle than the two youths were.

"Your grandsire and the Patriarch want you in the study right now. Bryndel and Lord Wrathscar are with him," Jysy burst out breathlessly.

"I think the rumor found its way home," Arruth said, her eyes on the floor and her mouth twisted unpleasantly.

Talons returned to her bedchamber, followed by the two youths and dressed quickly. Mikkal's selection of clothing for her was mostly loose robes that could be comfortably belted and only came to mid-calf. The compromise between what her grandsire and the Wrathscars demanded and what she was willing to wear was holding so far.

Dynarien could see from her sprattle legged walk just how sore Bryndel was keeping her. It angered him; yet he said nothing, having no right to interfere with her decisions.

When Jysy and Arruth saw him, they came and sat close to him. "Does it hurt much?" Jysy asked. They had an easy, comfortable relationship with the yuwenghau who was the twin brother to their family's liege-god, Dynanna.

"Not much," Dynarien assured her, tousling her hair. "I'm tough. It was only two stone trolls. I could take on an army," he added, for their benefit, wanting to reassure them.

Talons rolled her eyes. "Be careful what you wish for."

Dynarien glanced up at her sharply. "I'm not wishing." He thought briefly of this drink his sister made called "Be Careful What You Wish For," which had strange, unpredictable, transmogrifying results and shivered – he was definitely not wishing.

"Jysy, come with me. Arruth, stay with Dynarien and keep the doors locked until I come back."

Jysy obeyed and followed her out.

* * * *

Belyla basked in the attention from Yahni and his friends as they gathered in the Music Chamber, pulling two tables together in order to seat them all. They stood for a moment around the tables, talking, deciding who would sit where.

"I want to see his eyes," a softly sensual voice said from behind Belyla. "That's all anyone talks about."

Belyla saw Philomea approaching them. She quailed at the thought of competing with her tall, willowy, blond sister, who looked so much like their mother had. Whatever Philomea wanted she always got. Including men. Belyla left Yahni's side, and retreated behind Terrys with a sigh. She could see the appreciative look in Philomea's eyes as her sister regarded Yahni. Belyla felt certain that Philomea had come for Yahni, having heard so much about him these last weeks at court, the longest span their father had allowed to them to remain here continuously.

All of Yahni's friends were so kind to her, and yet how could she endure watching Philomea take them all away from her like she always did? Why would anyone want her when they could have Philomea?

Yahni frowned at Belyla in question.

Terrys stepped into the void. "Yahni, I'd like you to meet Philomea Wrathscar, my friend Belyla's sister."

Philomea stepped very close to Yahni. "My, my. Your eyes are as beautiful as they say. Everyone wonders why a young mon with your looks has never wed."

"Philomea!" Terrys snapped. "You're not wanted here."

"You are very handsome, Yahni Kjarten," Philomea continued as if she had not heard Terrys. "It is a shame you're Guild. My father doesn't like Guild. I suppose if we were discreet, I could make your life very interesting."

Belyla colored, turned, and disappeared out the doors onto the quad, leaving Yahni staring after her in dismay. She did not see Terrys go for Philomea's face with her nails.

* * * *

The Grand Master's apartments were the finest star rooms in the palace and his study formed the first chamber in a circular nest of rooms laid out like the unfolded petals of a rose with his bedchamber at the center. This room served both as study and casual audience chamber, and had the sole access to the rest of the palace complex from his star room besides the secret one known only to himself within the bedroom. The walls had once been hung with runed banners, but those had been taken down several years ago and replaced with tapestried scenes of hunting and sport at Galee's insistence. Scattered bookcases in red-glazed oak shared space with the tapestries. The two long couches flanked the chairs set close to the fireplace. This far north – and Creeya was one of the most northerly kingdoms with only the icy realm of the Winter Mages of the Iron Glacier beyond them – it tended to get cool in the evenings, even in the summer. The two largest chairs had high throne-like backs to stress the importance of their occupants and in one of them sat her grandsire. In the other sat the Patriarch. Lord Wrathscar stood beside her grandsire. Galee lounged on the claret silk brocade couch, looking sluttishly smug as usual.

Talons detested her. The Patriarch leaned forward in his chair, regarding her thoughtfully. Bryndel stood in the middle of the floor as if he were on trial. Talons glanced at Bryndel, giving him a small smile. He smiled back. Her grandsire gave her a long look and did not ask her to sit.

"It has come to my attention," he said sternly. "That you and Bryndel are sleeping together."

"We're betrothed, grandsire." Talons hated this meeting already. His words were just for show; he and Galee had both pressed her to start sleeping with Bryndel as soon as Galee returned with a drug to block her untrained bi-kyndi, which could kill a male touching her intimately.

"But not yet married. Are the rumors true?"

Talons dropped her eyes to the floor, calculatedly demure. "Yes. I've come to love him. I... I..." She started to say more, but went suddenly pale. Her lungs screamed for air and her muscles turned to water. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she fainted, falling against Bryndel. He caught her, lowering her gently to the floor and cradling her head and shoulders on his lap.

"What's wrong with her?" Bryndel shot Galee a suspicious glare, but she only shrugged.

Everyone came to their feet. The Patriarch reached her first, Reading her. "She's pregnant. She's very weak and ill as well. I want to see some of that medicine you had been giving her to control the bi-kyndi."

Bryndel felt chilled for a moment, wondering if the children could possibly belong to the myn he had rape her. She did not remember it because of the drugs he and Galee had given her. How would it be explained? Could the Patriarch find a way to restore those memories? And what if the medicine was hurting her? At Galee's urging, he had continued to slip a little into her drink before bed. So long as nothing unexplained happened, she never noticed. He did not understand what it was supposed to do; only that Galee added it to the memory drops and the bi-kyndi blocker.

They moved Talons to a couch, putting one of the decorative pillows under her head. At the Patriarch's suggestion, Jysy went for a basin of cool water and a soft cloth. Two of the lounging palace cats followed her out.

The Patriarch continued to Read Talons. "She's carrying triplets."

"Triplets?" Lord Wrathscar exclaimed.

The Patriarch looked up at him. "Rare, but not unheard of among the Sharani. They frequently produce twins."

"Are they Bryndel's?" Lord Wrathscar demanded.

"She came to me virgin, father. I saved the sheets." Bryndel had, indeed, saved the sheets, but if they were Read, they would find the seed of two other males as well as himself upon them. He had had to let the bi-kyndi kill one mon each time and expend its energies before he could safely ride her for the rest of the night. It had taken several tries before they got the dosage right to completely block the bi-kyndi. Then Talons had found an Ishlani mage to block it permanently so the drugs were no longer needed.

"That is easily proved. Come here, Bryndel," the Patriarch ordered. Bryndel knelt beside him. The Patriarch took his wrist and laid it beside Talons' wrist. Then he Read them both together. "Yes, they're Bryndel's."

Relief flooded Bryndel and he stroked her head, his face filling with concern. He kissed her forehead. "I love you."

Talons' eyes opened at his touch and she smiled wanly. "I love you, too."

"You're with child," Bryndel told her, his tone gentle and full of love.

"So soon?"

Bryndel laughed softly. "Yes, beloved. It isn't as if we haven't been trying."

Takhalme beamed, standing over them with Lord Wrathscar at his side. Talons was the last of his descendants, and he had feared that the bi-kyndi, which was part of Talons' Sharani heritage from her mothers, would make the continuance of his lineage impossible. "We must get the details of the marriage worked out quickly."

"I agree," Lord Wrathscar replied. "Young people!"

"One other thing, Father, Lord Takhalme." Bryndel knew he had to get this out now and in public, otherwise his father might find a way to deny his request. Both Galee and his father disliked Edouina, although they had never met her. "Talons is nearly full blood Sharani. We would like to make the marriage a formal Sharani style triading."

Lord Wrathscar and Takhalme glanced at each other and then at Talons. "Who is the third?"

"Edouina Hornbow. The late Wilstry'n's cousin," Talons said. "We've been lovers since childhood. She loves Bryndel also."

"Well, my son?" Lord Wrathscar asked, an edge entering his voice.

Bryndel flushed. "I – I've been sleeping with both of them in the same bed. It's the Sharani way."

"And is she pregnant too?" Takhalme asked.

Bryndel's flush deepened. "Not yet. We're working on it. When it happens, the child will be passed to Talons to carry."

The Patriarch's gaze slid discreetly across Bryndel's features and then away. Something in what the young mon had said did not ring true. Eshraf knew of the intricate complexities of Sharani reproduction and genetics – while there existed a wide variation, it was all within certain boundaries – and Bryndel's words, while not completely off, were just slightly askew. It sounded alarms in an intuitive corner of Eshraf's mind, though he could not yet be certain of why. Bryndel could be nothing more than confused. Nonetheless, he would say nothing until he had had an opportunity to speak with Talons and Edouina privately.

* * * *

Jysy knelt with the cats for an instant. She doubted they would find anything. The odds that someone was poisoning Talons seemed extremely unlikely. For one thing, the only people with anything to gain from Talons, needed her alive to gain it, and that was the Wrathscars. Secondly, the poisons and venoms that could affect a Sharani were so rare that most folks, including most Sharani, believed that Sharani were immune to everything.

Jysy knew different. She had seen a Sharani die of venom. She had only been four years old, but it had been so terrible that the image still hung in her mind. Lizard, her brother-in-law, lost his sister to the bite of a hydra during the war. Things existed that could hurt them, very unusual, rare things, mostly occult and magical, and there were exceptions to every rule. Jysy knew about exceptions too. That same creature later wiped out an entire military patrol, except for its captain. The captain, severely bitten and envenomed, nonetheless managed to track the creature to its lair and kill it. By the time a relief unit arrived, the captain was recovering from the venom on her own, her natural resistance having risen to the challenge. It had been that young noble's first command and now she was King of Rowanhart on the Blood Coast.

Jysy realized with a start that she had gotten lost in her memories when the large pearl-gray cat with lush, long fur jumped onto her shoulder, pressing its head against hers. The light from the long corridor's stained glass windows fell over them in rainbow patterns. She blinked at the colors just as Lo'Ah caused the link to flare between them. Jysy did not have the gift of mind-speech, but once he initiated it, she had no trouble using it.

<Get samples of the medicine and whatever other drugs you find from Bryndel's suite before anyone can move or switch them. > Jysy sent.

<Consider it done, > Lo'Ah sent back, jumped down and raced off.

* * * *

Yahni searched the gardens, guessing that would be where Belyla would hide, finally finding his way to the ivy-veiled bench they sometimes sat upon and heard weeping in the innermost recesses behind the bench itself, where the tree, a boulder, and ivy made a cave. "Belyla?"

"Go away!"

"Belyla, I escaped as quick as I could. Your sister and Terrys are having a catfight. Pulling hair, the whole twelve yards. Osterbridge and Jajinga are having one hell of a time separating them. I think Terrys is angry enough to whip all their asses."

Belyla gave a sniffling laugh, and Yahni was uncertain which half of it was strongest. "Belyla," he called again, making a guess as to why Belyla left and Terrys went hell-bent to shred Philomea's face. "Your sister's damned pretty, but I like you better."

What came out then sounded like a sob and that had Yahni totally perplexed. He tried to think of what Derryl would say in this situation, but he doubted that Derryl had ever been in this kind of situation. Derryl was every woman's dream, while Yahni was a frequently awkward Sharani exotic. Then he tried to think of things he'd read in books, all the romantic lines, and failed utterly. His distress blanked his mind. Finally he said sternly, "Come out of there, Belyla, or else I'm coming in after you and things are apt to get serious."

She giggled.

"Are you coming out?"

Belyla giggled again. "No."

"Okay, you asked for it." Yahni lunged forward and to the side, hit the bench and rolled off, landing on top of Belyla. She struggled for a moment, laughing and forcing Yahni to resort to dirty tactics: he kissed her. "I ought to arrest you, Belyla, for resisting romance." Then he kissed her again, this time long and thoroughly. "I love you, Belyla. Just you. I never really knew what love was until I found you."

Belyla pushed his tunic up and pulled his shirt out, running her hands over his smooth, hard body, stroking the tendriled rune of Hadjys burned into his chest. "I love you, Yahni." She unbuckled his blades, laying them aside and opened his pants. She stroked his cock with gentle fingers while he undressed her.

* * * *

Jysy returned with the basin and cloth. She knelt by Talons, dipped the cloth in the water, wrung it out, and placed it on her forehead. Her eyes discreetly scanned the serious faces, especially the stern expression the Patriarch wore.

Talons sighed. It felt good.

"Bryndel," the Patriarch reminded him. "You must get me some of that medicine to test. She's too weak and I need to be certain that it is not a side-effect of the medicine."

"As soon as we can get her back to her rooms, Your Holiness, I will bring it to your offices."

"Thank you."

Jysy trailed after them as Bryndel carried Talons to her rooms. As a child of the Sharani streets, she knew almost nothing of politics and social gamesmanship: so she regarded his latest news as surprisingly poor judgment on Talons' part. Talons should never have allowed so wretched a male as Bryndel to get her with child. Especially with such an obviously superior stud as Dynarien hanging on her every word.

"We left Arruth here and told her to lock the doors," Talons said.

Bryndel knocked. Arruth let them in, smelling heavily of rose oil. Talons wore it constantly to mask Dynarien's visits. Jysy and Arruth raided the bottle at every opportunity. Even the female knights had started wearing it and some of the males. Creeya had no knights, as such. The knights were a secret student organization founded by Jimi and Alora when they began to suspect something bad was happening in the palace and school. The only man of authority who knew about the knights was the Patriarch, who now shielded them from discovery and helped in every way he could.

"What happened?" Arruth's eyes turned to saucers at seeing her carried.

"I fainted," Talons said.

"Why?" Arruth asked suspiciously, glaring at Bryndel.

"I'm pregnant."

Arruth snatched a pillow off the couch, hitting Bryndel with it, her eyes wild. If there had been an actual weapon within reach she would have used that instead of the soft, ineffectual pillow. "How dare you! How dare you! You shoved your bloody rod in too many times. You shouldn't've. You shouldn't've." Then she burst into tears and fled.

Talons glanced a question at Jysy who simply shrugged. Neither of them understood what had gotten into Arruth. Even though Talons had planned the discovery of her and Bryndel in the bedroom with the young pair's full knowledge and cooperation, the actual sight of Bryndel riding her had apparently caused something within Arruth to snap, despite its not having been the street girl's first glimpse of such things in the course of her life.

To Bryndel's credit, he ignored the youth: although Arruth was as developed as some adults, she was still just twelve years old. He had almost completely stopped responding to their taunts and assaults since Talons began taking him into her bed willingly.

He lowered Talons onto her bed of cushions and blankets. "Jysy, would you find Edouina? Talons needs her."

Jysy nodded and ran off.

Bryndel tucked Talons in and sat stroking her head. "I had no idea that you were not only pregnant, but suffering. If the medicine did it, I'm sorry."

Talons forced herself to smile at him. *And if the vampire did it? Gods in Haven, if I could only remember!* "I don't like to show weakness, Bryndel. You know that." Edouina had found three more wounds on her before Dynarien set his wards, and she had no memory of it happening: apparently the vampire had been calling her from her rooms at night. "I wasn't sure about the pregnancy. I've only just missed my menses," she lied. She had sensed the conception, through the kyndi, the instant Dynarien's seed spilled into her. She had let him place three of the reclaimed souls from the captured soul vault at Dragonshead within her, cognizant of the fact that Bryndel – and whoever his vampiric ally was – were trying to get her with child. It was a subtle vengeance. Dynarien had blocked the kyndi and disguised the genetics so that the children appeared to be Bryndel's.

"As soon as Edouina gets here, I'll take the medicine to the Patriarch to be Read. But I'm not leaving you alone."

* * * *

"So we're pregnant, are we?" Edouina knelt, kissing Talons deeply and thoroughly. "I thought we were going to time this better. Bryndel and I are still trying."

Talons managed a small laugh. "I didn't plan it this way."

"Oh course you didn't, dear one," Edouina said. Then she turned and wrapped herself around Bryndel, kissing him expertly, letting just enough of the bi-kyndi rise to send a jolt of pleasure through him. She considered making him come in his pants, but didn't. Fucking Bryndel until he could not think clearly gave her a certain malicious pleasure. Eventually she would just take his mind with the bi-kyndi through

the pleasure centers and fix all their problems. It was that kind of sheer sexual power that made her a bi-kyndi master. Only Talons knew what she was. The fact that the masters – the saer'kali bi-kyndi – existed at all was a closely guarded Sharani secret. The manifestation of the kyndi – and even more so the bi-kyndi – varied in form and intensity according to the abilities and affinities of the woman possessing it. The kyndi moved the embryo from one woman to the womb of her na'halaef. Edouina was a master of masters – as Talons could have been had she been trained as a child. But an adult bi-kyndi was too dangerous to train.

"I – I – I," Bryndel stammered helplessly. "I need to get some stuff to the Patriarch." He pulled away and left.

Edouina laughed long and hard at his retreating back. Then she got up and started to close the door, when Arruth and Jysy bolted inside: they must have been watching for him to leave. Edouina locked it and dropped the bar, then returned to Talons.

Arruth huddled against Talons, weeping. Talons sat up and Jysy immediately put pillows to her back. The assassin drew Arruth into her arms and held her tightly; wondering at the way the girl trembled violently as if caught in a storm of emotion so strong it threatened to sweep her away.

"You shouldn't've let him do it. You shouldn't've," Arruth moaned, pressing her face into Talons' body.

"It's all right, Arruth. It's all right. I don't understand why you're letting it bother you so."

Edouina settled beside them. She ruffled Arruth's dark hair. "Honey, why don't you and your sister go down to the kitchen and tell them Talons is eating for four now. Then bring us up some munchies."

Edouina followed them to the door and secured it before returning to her lover. She gave Talons a long, thoughtful look. "No more games. How far along are you? You're bi-kyndi, you should know to the minute."

"Eight weeks. I've got control of the situation, now. It's well known that we've been sleeping together. Bryndel has acknowledged the children and..." Talons was breathing hard with little intermittent catches, as if struggling to get enough air down.

"Stop," Edouina interrupted, grasping her shoulders. "Honey, stop. Eight weeks? Why haven't you passed it to me? You're perilously close to ... too close to the point of being unable to pass them safely without bi-kyndi intervention." If they were not passed they would be born sterile androgynes, azdrin.

"I can't..." Talons' voice caught, getting a strained edge into it. She sucked in a long breath, steadied and repeated, "I cannot."

"Can't or won't?" Edouina eyed her closely, reading all the body language, which spoke far more eloquently than her words. Talons had a game going.

"Can't. It's isn't just suppressed, Edouina, it's kweigeyl."

Edouina sat for a long time, uncertain of what to say. "It wasn't just some little Ishlani mage that did this, it was a yuwenghau."

The nature of kweigeyl was debated among the masters. The effects ranged from simple and temporary blockage of the kyndi to its permanent elimination to the complete and utter destruction of a female's – and some said a male's – sexual nature and attributes. The art of kweigeyl only appeared in four of the major divine lineages (Ishlani, Willodarian, Daverani, Kalirioni) and with frequency in only two (Willodarian and Ishlani). *To make an azdrin of an unborn child just to strike back at its sire ...* That was cold-blooded – even for Talons. Edouina shivered. "You must hate Bryndel."

"Them. I hate them. All I have to do now is get past the wedding and births. Then I'll kill them both. Bryndel and his father. A widow cannot be forced to remarry. I'll be free." She paused, and then added, "I just don't understand why the pregnancy makes me so tired."

"Neither do I, honey. Pregnancy doesn't make Sharani faint. You've got a lot of plans. You want to tell me about them? That little cockwhore shit is sterile. I fried his seed the first night I slept with him. I had to protect you, didn't I? How was I supposed to know you'd already gone and done this?" She stroked Talons' belly. "So, what else have you been up to that you haven't told me? And don't lie, I know you too well." She waited for a reply, and when Talons did not venture one, said irritably, "Go on, the place's shielded now, isn't?"

Tears started from Talons' eyes, as her long pent up emotions escaped in a rush, and she threw herself into Edouina's arms. "I'm going to get them. I'm going to get them."

"I'd say that condemning the Wrathscar lineage to end as azdrins is fairly cold. The coldest thing I've ever heard of."

"The children aren't Bryndel's." Talons began to pull herself together a bit, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes.

"Talons, what have you done? Did you damage a male to get these children? You know what happened to the last male you kissed – he dropped dead with his brain burned out. Or did you do this after the kweigeyl?" Edouina's voice had gone very soft and very hard.

"The sire is yuwenghau. The children are yuwenghau. He's the yuwenghau who set the kweigeyl, and disguised the genetics so that Eshraf would think the children were

Bryndel's."

"Oh thank the gods, Talons. I did not want to believe you so cold as to damage children." Edouina hugged her, kissing her thoroughly. Talons settled deeper in her arms. "You were very fortunate to have found one. I suppose, knowing the Lion of Rowanslea's reputation, her camp on the eve of a major battle would be the likeliest place to have found one. Good bloodlines?"

"Yes."

"Lineage?"

"Willodarian."

"Figures with all those Valdren. Fireborn or tree-gift?"

"Neither. Sylvan." Talons nestled deeper, wedging her face into Edouina's breasts, feeling safe and warm, her nightmares receding.

"Handsome?"

"Very."

"What was his name? Do you even know it?"

Talons laughed softly. "Dynarien, the Rose Warrior. Twice-Born Son of Willodarus. You must not tell anyone about the children."

"This guy? Eshraf's mage is *that* Dynarien?" Edouina grinned. "I promise. You don't mind if I taste his wares?"

"I wish we could have triaded with him. I love him."

"Now that that's established, tell me the rest of it. All the details."

So Talons did, pouring out her pain, rage, humiliation, and misery. It had all started out with the betrothal. Talons had never liked Bryndel and never trusted his father, Lord Agasthenez Wrathscar. However, her grandsire had been determined to make the match for political reasons, going so far as to pressure her into Bryndel's bed. Shortly after the betrothal, Talons had begun suffering from memory lapses during which she declared her love for Bryndel in public and then awoke the next day in his bed with his juices coating her loins. Dynarien found traces of a drug in her system the morning after the first of those episodes, but it was so subtle that most, if not all, Readers would never have found it. Clearly the drug was intended to prevent her untamed bi-kyndi from killing Bryndel long enough for him to get a child on her, thereby – she assumed – preventing her grandsire from reneging on the wedding. Talons had been furious. She suspected the drug had also clouded her mind and

accounted for her public announcements of "love" for Bryndel. That or the vampire's mind-magic called "fascination." She had deliberately allowed Dynarien to get children on her and disguise the genetics so that Bryndel – and any Gene-Reader checking her – would assume they were his. Dynarien set the kweigeyl so that she might safely sleep with Bryndel and complete the deception.

"I thought it best to allow them to believe they had broken me – then they would stop trying. If you hadn't come home when you did ... I'm not certain how much longer I could have held out. There is no one alive who cannot be broken. And I knew they were scrying. That's the only way Bryndel could have known about certain discussions I had with Jysy and Arruth. They're very close-mouthed unless I ask them to be otherwise."

As Edouina listened, a cold anger formed in the pit of her being. It had been years since Edouina had seen Talons give way to tears. When Talons finished, Edouina held her at arms length, looking her in the eye sternly. "You've been playing a very dangerous game, honey. You've never done anything like this before. You don't know what kind of chances you're taking. From here on, if there are games to be played, let me play them. Promise?"

"Edouina... I'm going to get them. All of them."

"No. We're not talking about fighting. I know you can handle yourself there." Edouina allowed herself a small smile, protective and tolerant, with just the smallest smidgen of affectionate condescension. "We're talking about games. That's my arena, not yours. All right?"

"If I feel a game does need to be played, I'll consult you first."

Edouina chuckled. "Still won't give me an inch! Stubborn woman!" She leaned in and kissed Talons, long and lingering. "Must admit I've liked what I've seen of your Dynarien. I've wanted to get him out of his clothes since Eshraf introduced him to Yukiah and me on the training grounds two days ago. There's a meeting set for midnight in the temple with Eshraf in a few days. Seems we have two sets of enemies. Wrathscars are bad enough. With the vampire having shown up again – and I've a feeling it's the same one – this is going to be a mess. Wish I knew whether the two are related."

Talons gave a small groan and then a whimper, balling up in Edouina's arms. The pain started in her stomach, gripping and grinding, and then shot through her chest. "Edouina!" She rolled away to curl up on the bed in a tight ball, chanting, "Dynarien. Dynarien. Dynarien."

The scent of roses rushed over the room, Dynarien materialized by the bed, and knelt at her side. He stroked her face, and summoned his pack with a snap of his fingers. Talons gave him a wan smile as he brought out a vial, filled a tiny glass, and raised her up to drink. Soon she was able to uncurl. Dynarien snapped a glance at

Edouina.

"How long has she been like this?"

"It just happened."

"I've been having these spells for two weeks," Talons confessed.

"And you haven't told anyone?" Edouina demanded.

"Solance is the only healer the Wrathscars will let me see. I don't trust him."

"That stops now," Edouina said firmly. "I'll take care of it. Now that you're here, Dynarien, we need to get some private business taken care of. Talons has told me that you're the sire."

Dynarien stood up, retreating a few feet. "You told her?"

"Edouina and I were intending to handfast."

"Sharani triad. I also know who and what you are, Willodarussan." Edouina raked him with her eyes. "As Talons' mate of seven years, I have certain privileges. Take your clothes off and turn around twice, slowly. I want to see how you're hung and then I want to see your butt."

Dynarien flushed. "What's going on?"

"Dynarien, Edouina has privileges. We've been together ten years, actually. We're Sharani."

"Well?" Edouina demanded, flicking her fingers at him.

Dynarien striped and turned around twice. Even with the bandaged ribs, chest, and shoulder he was fine to look at and very well hung.

"Not bad. Not bad at all. I can see how he could give you three at a swat. Can we keep this one, Talons?"

"I'd like to, Edouina. I'm in love with him." She spoke softly, tentatively, all her shields taken down by stress and suffering. Seeing his injuries exposed to her sight made them that much more real and the breath caught in her chest at the thought of how close she had come to losing him without ever knowing it. He could have perished in that battle and she would never have known why he did not answer her calls. She had thought for weeks he was merely pouting or off chasing someone else, being his usual irresponsible self; she always wavered between accusing him of being irresponsible and knowing that he was not.

"What about me? Don't I get a say in this?" Dynarien protested.

"No," Edouina said sharply. "I can make you or break you. Your choice."

"This isn't fair!" As the grandson of Willodarus, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures, he had always had his choice of women – now he was suddenly the chosen, not the chooser and felt uncertain of how to react. From the first day that he and his twin sister had encountered Talons, she had been turning his well-ordered world upside down.

"No," Edouina repeated. "I can make you or break you. Your choice."

"But I'm *yuwenghau* ." Dynarien protested more strongly as if, being one of the young rogue gods wandering that world, he could resist her power.

"Hmnp. I know," Edouina sneered. "Offer still stands." She rose and kissed him. Dynarien's knees buckled and he sat down with a thunk, his eyes like saucers. He crossed his legs to cover his arousal.

"Now," Edouina continued, as if nothing had happened. "I want you to do a deep Reading on Talons. Not the little ones you did before. She's ill and it isn't just the pregnancy. I've never seen a Sharani this sick with a pregnancy. A little morning sickness, yes. This kind of exhaustion, no. It's either the vampire or the drugs they were feeding her. And add in these spells she having – something bad is wrong."

"Can I put my clothes on first?" he asked, sounding oddly vulnerable in his nakedness.

"Certainly." Edouina flicked her fingers at him. "I'm just sorry I was away so long. There was a lot of cleaning up to do in Shaurone and now it looks like there is some to do here. That's my specialty."

Dynarien dressed and then took Talons' wrist. Superficially there was nothing more than tiredness and pregnancy. A little deeper he found a terrible weakness and exhaustion throughout her muscles. He closed his eyes, going to the deepest fiber of her being. What he found there horrified him. He snapped out of it in a flash.

"Talons, lie down and be very still. I'm not a lifemage, but there are things I can do."

"What? What did they do to her?" Edouina demanded.

"After I'm finished." Dynarien put his hands on Talons' temples. With delicacy he removed the coercions, sways and triggers, replacing them with wards. They would no longer be calling her from her rooms or snaring her in the halls to feed on her. Then he moved one at a time through the shaukras, cleaning out each of the energy centers.

Edouina answered the knock on the door to let Jysy and Arruth in, securing it once

more. They were heavily burdened with trays of food and pitchers of juice. She helped them get the stuff settled on the tables.

Arruth glanced through the open door and saw Dynarien working on Talons. "What's going on?" She ran for the bedroom.

"Don't disturb them!"

Arruth slowed, then entered, and sat quietly, watching. Jysy and Edouina joined them.

Dynarien was shaking and sweating when he finished. "I've never encountered anything this strongly made. The vampire's powers must rival my own."

"Now explain this to me," Edouina said. She moved closer to Talons and stroked her head. Talons looked exhausted, but there was a clarity and relief on her face that had not been there before and her breathing had eased. Talons blinked sleepily, yawned widely, and slipped away into slumber.

"The vampire has been feeding Talons her blood to increase the coercions," Dynarien explained. "She's been taking over her mind. If you had not insisted I go deep, I would never have found them. I've never encountered a vampire before that could set them that far down. Talons must not be left alone. Not even for a moment. Fascination begins with a look that snares the mind and deepens from there. I think I've routed most of it. I want to make another examination tomorrow after I've rested. There is damage from the drugs also, on very deep levels. I will handle it with herbs and medicines. Unless the Patriarch comes up with something sooner, I'll Jump to Imralon tomorrow and fetch them. Don't let Bryndel give her anything. Keep several cats with her also."

"Cats?"

"Jysy and Arruth can fill you in, Bryndel's coming." Dynarien Jumped, his form flickering for an instant before disappearing.

A knock came at the door. Edouina flicked her fingers at Jysy. "Let him in and fetch me some cats. You can explain later." Edouina kissed Talons lightly on her forehead, not enough to wake her. "Once I know what's going on, dear one, I'll take care of it."

She rose and greeted Bryndel with a kiss. "Talons is sleeping. I sent for her mage-friend and he was able to help her a bit."

"Dynarien?" he asked suspiciously.

"Of course. He's the only Willodarian in the city. You understand how that could make a difference, don't you, honey? Healing's one of their specialties," she lied.

Bryndel relaxed a little. "He helped her?"

"Yes. He's also promised to bring some herbs and medicines tomorrow. Come in quietly and look at her, you can see from her face that she's better."

Bryndel followed, settling quietly beside Talons. Edouina joined him, observing him closely, certain that he was, at least, partially responsible for the drugs that were hurting her lover. Bryndel sighed heavily. "She does look better."

"I've heard from Jysy that you were jealous of Dynarien at one time."

Bryndel nodded. "They seemed so close..."

"Hmnp. You know she'd never touched a male before you. She couldn't until now. She and I have been lovers since childhood. Take my word for it, she loves you."

"That's what I've always wanted. For her to love me. When I saw her sitting with him, chatting like old friends in the training hall..."

"You jumped to conclusions. It's understandable. She doesn't go for pretty little rakehells like Dynarien. She needs substance and commitment. Has she ever kicked you?"

Bryndel looked thoughtful. "Once. Just once."

"Jysy and Arruth have seen her kick Dynarien a dozen times – clear across a room." Edouina watched Bryndel closely, wondering what she had seen flicker across his face.

Bryndel brightened.

"I think Talons made a very good choice in you," Edouina purred, tousling Bryndel's hair. "If the girls weren't due back soon with some things I sent them for, I'd have you between my legs right now."

Bryndel moved closer to her, pressing his body against hers. "Sharani males are so fortunate."

"Yes, they are. There are so few of them, that some are expected to play stud to every female in whole villages." *And you are so silly, honey.*

Bryndel's eyes glazed over at the image.

"Now, don't you have things to attend to? I'll come to dinner in Talons' place and we'll make them all jealous. Then, when she's feeling well enough, we'll make it a threesome and show them what a Sharani triad looks like."

Bryndel nodded. Jysy and Arruth returned with five cats in tow. "You certainly have a way with cats," he told Jysy as he stepped out the door.

"Yes, we do." Jysy replied smugly.

Edouina looked up, and turned to see what exactly was going on. The big, fluffy pearl-gray male jumped onto the table, and smelled all the forgotten food. She started to shoo him off, but Jysy stopped her.

"That's Lo'Ah. Let him do his job."

"Which is eating everything?"

"No. He's making sure nothing we scrounged is tainted. Sit down and let them smell you."

"Your call." Edouina shrugged and sat down in a chair near the table. She was not certain what to make of Bryndel. Someone was pulling his strings. He shifted back and forth between this almost naïve, definitely insecure and socially inexperienced—too inexperienced for a son of the nobility – young male and this angry, abusive, inconsiderate lout. Like triggering a crossbow. It's not dangerous until you load it and put your hand on the... who is pulling the trigger? His father? Probably. He puts him up to it, gets him angry, tells him what a male is supposed to be like and shoves him in Talons' direction. *I doubt they'll invite me to the parties, but I can try. I need to get close to Lord Wrathscar. Close enough to kiss him.*

The other cats, all female, two black with white markings, another an odd ginger and the fourth a ginger and black stripped swarmed over her. They smelled her legs, jumped on her lap and shoulders, sniffing her mouth and face. Satisfied, they proceeded into the bedroom with the ginger-and-black leading.

The male finished his inspection of the food and drink, and jumped onto Edouina's shoulder, pressing his face against her ear.

<I am Lo'Ah. Healer and Shaman to the Crimson Yarn Tribe . >

Although it startled Edouina to hear a cat speaking in her mind, she did not show it. "And just what are you? Wiros?" The word was Sharani and encompassed all forms of shifters from the wind-folk, who acted as expensive couriers, to the lycans, who were wolves. Moonies were not wiros, merely shifters, since they could neither control their shifting nor breed true.

<Perceptive human. The three queens who serve Dynarien have sent twenty of us here to seek and protect. Under my leadership. He has promised them many powerful kittens. >

"Dynarien has allies in strange places."

Lo'Ah gave a little cough as if chuckling in her ear. *<You'll do, human . >*

"I hope so." Edouina laughed at him, it rose from her belly and filled the room.

Lo'Ah jumped down. His form shimmered and shifted. A small furred male, just four feet tall, stood before her, his slitted and slanted eyes twinkling. "We are the catkins of Dynarien."

* * * *

The seventeen knights had gathered in an upstairs audience chamber of the temple to discuss various rumors and the latest news regarding the situation with Talons, who was quickly becoming their main concern. Jimi sat on a window seat with the sun shining halo-like around his head. The others were scattered about on the chairs, the floor, and the top of the desk. They planned to have two of their number in the temple at all times, waiting for the results of the priests' examination of the medicine. The priests would first examine the bi-kyndi blocker that Bryndel had given them, and then compare it to the various things the catkin had taken from his chambers. None of this could produce or prove anything, it had simply been a guess made by Jimi who had made a specialty of poisons and venoms. The only way to prove anything would be for a Reader to actually find something suspicious in Talons' system or catch someone trying to slip her something – all very unlikely. However, Jimi wanted an idea of what to look for beyond Dynarien's nebulous descriptions of a drug no one else could find traces of in Talons' body; and he felt certain that Bryndel was involved – a deep, visceral certainty.

"It's an outrage, that Talons had to let him get her pregnant," Jimi told the assembled knights.

"I agree," Alora replied. "But it was that or keep waking up in his bed until she ended up pregnant anyway. You know very well Bryndel was drugging her to get her there, and then trying to convince her that she was losing her mind or something. It was her call." Alora was a rawhide whip of a youth, slender and hard-muscled. Her dark brunette hair hung in a thick braid that brushed her hips.

Isen, the youngest except for Jysy, listened quietly from a corner, seated on the floor, half concealed by a large chair. She liked watching from out of sight places and often startled the others when she spoke up and they realized she was there. It was always very easy to miss Isen. She would be fourteen just after midsummer. Isen was a pan-eidetic, remembering the smallest nuances of voice, manner, pages of manuscript. It also affected her fighting skills, since her body never forgot a movement once she had done it. "I believe this goes beyond Wrathscar," she said softly, causing all heads to turn.

"I hope she knows what she's doing," Tulik, a heavy-set big-boned youth, blurted

out before anyone could address Isen's statement.

Jysy slipped into the room. "Talons always knows what she's doing. She's not telling us, but that doesn't mean anything. She's playing her own hand, just like we need to play ours. And it's a lot more serious than you realize. There's a vampire in the palace."

"What do you mean?" Jimi demanded shocked.

Isen nodded in her corner, murmuring, "Yes, layers and layers."

"Talons wasn't feeling well the other day. So I helped her bathe. I saw two fresh wounds on the inside of her thigh. And old ones all over her. You haven't lived on the streets like I have. I've seen that kind of thing before. It's something you never forget."

"She's a god-marked paladin," Jimi said, addressing the others, his eyes touching each in turn. "They can't turn her, but they can still feed on her or even kill her."

A roar of outrage submerged the cross talk as the knights reacted to his words.

"I can't stay," Jysy said abruptly. "I have to find Dynarien, and get back to her. Think about what I've told you. Talk to the Patriarch. Some of the female knights need to be with her at all times. Arruth and I can't handle this alone."

Isen sprang up and ran to Jysy, catching her hand before she could get away. "If there is anything I can do, ask."

Jysy smiled thanks and fled back to her errands. No, she and her sister definitely could not handle it alone, and the strange, listless way Arruth had been acting for the last two months – when she was not erupting into rages – made it even harder. Ordinarily Jysy would have had a serious discussion concerning these changes with her oldest sister Birdie, who always seemed to know how to handle a crisis; but Birdie was somewhere between Vallimrah and gods-knew-where, on her way to her new home in Rowanhart on the far northwest coast. And her second choice, Talons, was too caught up in her own present difficulties for Jysy to even consider asking for help. Arruth refused to discuss what was bothering her. Jysy had no one to talk to.

* * * *

Dynarien sat on the floor across from Yukiah with his legs drawn up. Students and a handful of instructors filled the outer parlor of Talon's apartment. Alora answered a knock at the door, and found Philomea, Milady, and Ambrose standing there. None of the trio offered to step inside. Isen bent forward to see them better, studying them intently.

Milady smiled at the gathering, but only Philomea peeked inside. "We were hoping that Talons and my brother would join us at the Music Chamber, but I see you've quite a crowd."

"Yes, we do," Alora replied stiffly.

Yukiah rose, going to stand behind her. "Lady Milady, Lord Ambrose? There's something you want?"

"Nothing at all, really," Ambrose said, eyeing Dynarien over Yukiah's shoulder. "I see Eshraf's new mage is here. Do you fence, young one?"

Dynarien joined Yukiah at the door, looking at them over the armsmaster's shoulder. "Yes."

"Come down to the grounds some time, allow me to test your mettle, young mon." Ambrose gave him a courtly smile. Much smaller than Dynarien, lithe and agile, Ambrose had pale blue eyes, a weak babyish chin and a full lower lip that jutted over the upper. His gaze darted around them to take in as many faces as he could before the two myn blocked him entirely.

"You don't have to, Dynarien," Yukiah said so quickly that Dynarien frowned suspiciously.

Dynarien's expression melted into an impish smile. "Oh, I don't mind."

Talons had risen and moved closer to the door to hear, Alora at her side. Bryndel came last and tried to see around them.

"Now, perhaps?" Ambrose asked. "I've quite run out of things to occupy me and it would be relief from my boredom."

"A pleasure," Dynarien responded.

"I'll get my cloak and come with you." Yukiah scented trouble. Although smaller, Ambrose had a dangerous reputation for accidents and was a skilled hand. The only one Yukiah believed could match the mon was himself. He glanced at Dynarien whose smile had widened.

Yukiah wondered again at what made Eshraf believe in Dynarien so strongly. The young mon was an odd mix, alternately naïve and confident. Yukiah never felt certain how to read him. The crowd in Talons' rooms walked out together to the training grounds, and spread over the benches and lawn to watch the show. Philomea promptly hauled her brother to their side to root for Ambrose. Bryndel went with his feet dragging. A couple of students set off after blunted work out weapons, but returned to find that both myn had already produced their own. Yukiah had not noticed where Dynarien's had come from and that puzzled the armsmaster.

Dynarien had a golden blade, definitely a practice once since it had not been given an edge, but entirely too expensive for the average mon. It had even Ambrose looking at it with envy. Dynarien tied his hair back. Talons, sitting on a bench with Alora, smiled at the goings on and Yukiah stood by them.

"I am certain Ambrose means trouble for your friend with this," Yukiah told Talons. "I'll call it off if it gets rough."

Talons gave the armsmaster a small secret smile. "I'd worry about Ambrose, myself. You haven't seen Dynarien fight. I have. In fact, old friend," she grinned. "I'd place odds in his favor even if he went a round with you."

Yukiah raised an eyebrow at her. "Scamp! Are you saying I'm getting old?"

Talons lowered her head, glancing at her hands to cover her amusement. When she raised her head again, her smile had been replaced by a radiant joy and faith in Dynarien. "No. I'm saying he's that good."

"I'll be careful not to hurt you too much," Dynarien told Ambrose. "Two out of three?"

Ambrose glared at him. "I'm one of the finest blades in Havensword. In all of Creeya."

"Was," Talons said softly.

Yukiah shot a quick glance at Talons. "What?"

"Was," she repeated. "So long as Dynarien is here, he's the finest swordsmon in all of Creeya."

Yukiah gave the order to begin and swiftly decided that he had never seen anyone like Dynarien, anyone at all.

Dynarien opened with his blade lowered. Ambrose started high. The blades flashed back and forth, dancing in the light, striving to force or find an opening. Dynarien struck with a twist that landed on Ambrose's hands, knocked his sword aside, and hit him in the stomach just below the sternum.

"Touch!" Yukiah called it.

Ambrose glared.

Dynarien grinned as they took stances again, waiting for Yukiah to give the order to begin. This time he used a circular motion, left foot planted in front of him. Ambrose's face tightened in concentration as he made several feints from each side.

Dynarien was faster and read his movements, blocking and then lunging. Once more he struck Ambrose under the sternum.

Ambrose gave a shriek of rage and stepped back. Instantly, Milady and Philomea were at his side, casting nasty glances at Dynarien and making soothing comments to Ambrose. They left in high dudgeon, leaving Bryndel looking uncertain of whether to follow them or remain with Talons and the others. Then he darted after his sister.

"You're right, Talons," Yukiah admitted, watching the students swarm Dynarien. "He's the best I've ever seen."

Only a single student had remained close to Yukiah and Talons. Isen moved near to Yukiah, watching him intently until he left. Only then did she fall into step with the others.

* * * *

"Takhalme," Mohanja Raam sighed. He had been patiently arguing with his beloved master for nearly an hour; he had served in the Guild for more than twenty years and had believed he knew Takhalme Gee well. "I cannot believe what you are doing to Talons."

A small black cat curled up beneath Takhalme's chair, apparently asleep, except that from time to time its ears would twitch and the tip of its tail would flick back and forth as if annoyed by what it heard. Mohanja scarcely recognized this room, it had become so changed. One tapestry kept drawing his eyes back, a scene of six naked women butchering a bull in the middle of a forest glade, woven in dark colors except for the women's flesh, which was very pale. It disturbed him. A tapestried scene of St. Oriijn executing the demon-king, Tohmranu, had hung there since Mohanja was a boy and now it was gone. Galee had replaced all the old tapestries of saints and heroes. She had replaced even those in the Council Chambers. The room felt dark. *Hanadi, where are you? I need you. I cannot stop these changes of Galee's alone.*

"I am not doing anything that is not necessary for the sake of the state, Mohanja, understand me, my friend." Takhalme pulled his heavy robe more tightly around him, leaning closer to the fire. High up in the mountains of the far north it always seemed cold at night, even in the spring, and Takhalme had more trouble than ever keeping warm and he was always tired of late. The healers could find no explanation for it. They did say that his blood seemed thinner, but that could be that he was just getting old.

"The vampire wounds..."

"She is faking them to delay the marriage," Takhalme snapped irritably. "She does not want to marry Bryndel."

"She's pregnant. Why would she want to delay the marriage? And the drugs in her

system. There's an implication of poison."

"There's been nothing found in her body. Sharani can't be poisoned."

"Takhalme, hear what you're saying. Please hear what you're saying, my lord."

"I insisted she sleep with Bryndel. I had to know that the bi-kyndi would not prevent a pregnancy. So that I could then try something else. So I could then send again to Ishla's temple. I had to know that my line had not been extinguished when the rest of my grandchildren died."

"Takhalme..." Mohanja extended his hands in a gesture that bordered on pleading.

"No. I don't wish to talk anymore. I know what I'm doing, even if you do not. My mind is absolutely clear. Help me to bed, Mohanja. I am tired."

Mohanja's heart felt heavy. He loved the Grand Master like a father. Takhalme had befriended him when he first came to Creeya as a young mon and guided him as he rose through the ranks, but he had changed this last year and sometimes Mohanja did not even know him anymore. The big black mon shouldered his frail lord and helped him from the study into the bedroom, settling him in. The small cat attempted to run in between Mohanja's feet, but the big man was quick and caught him. Mohanja scooped him up, cradling him gently and stroking him.

"No, no small mon, the Master does not like cats in his bed chamber."

Mohanja carried the cat downstairs with him, talking to him for a long time. He had a great fondness for cats. His people kept them in multitudes since they killed the venomous serpents and scorpions that got into peoples houses. "I bet you are a fine hunter. Let's get you some cream." He fiddled with the cat's half-length tail, which had clearly been broken at least twice. A name popped into Mohanja's mind and he had no idea where it came from. "Twizzle... Have I heard someone call you that? Twizzle, if you don't belong to anyone else, you can belong to me."

Twizzle purred.

* * * *

The high window opened softly, and she entered quietly as a wraith. Takhalme stirred in the warm half dream between sleep and waking, scarcely noticing when she opened his garments and began to feed. Once sated, she gave him his next set of orders concerning his heir and her allies. It would be handled with a mix of boldness and discretion. If only a way could be found to strike directly at the Patriarch.

Galee licked the wound to close it, wishing she dared take more blood, but she could not risk killing him yet. She still needed him. Takhalme moaned, begging her silently with his eyes to bite him again. Thirty years ago he had been too strong for

her to take, at the height of his faith and powers. He had stopped her get from seizing Creeya. But Takhalme belonged to her now. Soon Creeya would also. Then she would enjoy watching him die.

The Grand Master pulled weakly at her. Galee smiled. Perhaps just a little more? She bit him again.

* * * *

Eshraf kept his midnight meeting small to all appearances, just seven people, and five cats. The heavy drapes had been closed long before anyone, but the cats, arrived. Eshraf used every caution he knew. No one seemed to notice the cats, which made Eshraf smile, since the cats noticed everything. Eshraf brought Mikkal, both for his insights and to take notes on the meeting; Yukiah brought Queiggy the head clerk for the Guild, a wizen old paper shuffler who had not been given a field assignment in over thirty years, yet probably knew more secrets than anyone alive. No one knew what race he came from or even how old he was – it seemed as if he had always been there. Dynarien, Edouina, and Jimi made up the last of the seven; and then there were the cats.

"First I intend to make a confession of my sins and they do not leave this room because I do not intend to cease committing them." Eshraf surveyed the room with his steady, patient gaze while he stood beside his desk, resting on his knuckles. "Then I will have Mikkal read you some lists I have made and you can add your comments and observations. I am of the opinion that we have two enemies and not one."

"Sins, Patriarch?" Yukiah asked.

"Sins. For years I have arbitrarily used my influence in every way possible, to the fullest extent possible to persecute a single group of people simply because of a blind instinct."

"Who?"

"Each and every mon, however minor, who supported or worked for Gylorean Galee. Excommunication, blackmail, banning, snubbing, and, in a few cases, murder. Whatever it required to keep them away from the temples. When I get near them, I can feel this – it's indescribable." Eshraf shivered.

"That's an ill-omened name." Dynarien sounded shocked, even having heard it before from Eshraf he had not completely allowed it to sink in. "What does she look like?"

"Beautiful. Black hair, nut brown skin."

Dynarien shook his head. "No. No, that's not her. Galee was fair, beautiful beyond

imagining. My father loved her." He sucked in a fortifying breath. "She betrayed us both, helped my cousin murder my betrothed on the night before we were to wed."

"And now you're wondering if this could be the same woman?" Yukiah asked.

"My grandsire sealed her in a cave. She should have died there. There is no way she could have gotten out alive."

"We need to stop this line of questioning," Eshraf said. "We are going in a direction that will reveal something I wish to keep secret for the time being."

Jimi raised an eyebrow, but none of the adults would say anything, and Yukiah seemed as puzzled as he did. Jimi took another look at the mage, what caught his attention was the fragrance of roses. The youth always favored patchouli and spicier scents, but had heard some of the girls saying they liked the way the mage smelled. He needed to find a roundabout way to see what would please Jysy.

"Mikkal, start with my findings about Wrathscar's intentions," Eshraf ordered.

Mikkal began to read. "Takhalme's grandson Asrethamon vanishes on assignment in Larquental. That's seven months ago. A unit of Guildsmyn is sent to investigate. Raiders descend on the city, burning the temple where the records are kept, killing these Guildsmyn. No further word reaches us.

"I'm from Larquental," Jimi interjected. "Could this be why I've not heard from my family in months?"

"It is a possibility, Jimi," the Patriarch said. "My guess would be that they have either gone into hiding or..." The Patriarch sighed. "I'm sorry I don't know anything definite about them. I will try to find out."

Jimi's face hardened into a stoic mask, and he nodded.

Mikkal began again. "Takhalme's four grandsons, Aryn, Tolan, Myr and Sellyn are hunting when their lodge is destroyed by a convenient avalanche. Five months ago."

"Avalanches happen. However, this one was extremely convenient," Eshraf said.

"Galee is sent by the Grand Master for a bi-kyndi blocker to the Temple of Ishla in Larquental. She returns with it. That temple also was subsequently destroyed by raiders – no survivors."

"Again, too convenient," Yukiah said. "There's no way to prove Galee even went there."

A small chorus of agreement followed his statement.

Jimi looked increasingly disturbed and uneasy. It was evident to all that he was thinking of his family.

Mikkal resumed after waiting to see if anyone wished to discuss this further. "Talons was repeatedly drugged and raped for the purpose of testing the blocker and to get her with child until the Ishlani mage blocked the kyndi."

"You're certain of that?" Yukiah asked.

"Dynarien found it in her system. He's the only one sensitive enough to do so," Eshraf stated. "And his word is gold with me. Furthermore, I believe the Wrathscars, with the cooperation of the Grand Master, have been deliberately pursuing a course of breaking her to their will in order to control the throne once she and Bryndel are married. It is a fact that Wrathscar breaks his women and by extension his son's."

Edouina nodded. "Forcing her into dresses, forcing her to walk with her hand upon Bryndel's at formal functions, forcing her to put up with even the most outrageous behavior from him. I'd say that's exactly what they're doing, honey. They are also dictating which healer she sees. Solance. But I've put a stop to that."

"Solance," Mikkal snarled, startling everyone with his vehement hostility. "Wicked, malevolent, execrable little anthropophagite. When I still practiced law, I had him thrown into the dungeons dozens of times before Wrathscar became his patron."

Eshraf stepped to Mikkal's side, dropping his huge hand on his assistant's thin shoulder. "Enough, Mikkal. We know what Solance is. There is only one last point to be made. Gentlemyn, I also believe that someone for reasons unknown, possibly to prevent the marriage from going through, is poisoning Talons."

"If she did not go to the temple, then where did she get the blocker?" Jimi asked, leaning forward in his seat, his fingers laced between his knees, his lips tight, his struggle with inner demons written large upon his face.

"I believe that Solance developed it. His background is arcane, bio-alchemy and mage craft as well as healer," Eshraf said.

"And in and out of trouble," Mikkal growled. "I've had him up on charges numerous times when I was a barrister. Had Wrathscar not made a pet of him, he'd be rotting in the dungeons still."

All eyes briefly averted from Mikkal's face as he refused to let it go. Only Eshraf had seen him like this before, and suspected it might be personal.

"At least five of the ingredients of the formula, the one the catkins stole, were things we could not identify," Eshraf told them.

Yukiah blinked. "Catkins?"

"Yes, I should have introduced the rest of our allies, Yukiah. We are going to give our vampire a serious fight. Lo'Ah, if you please."

The pearl gray male stretched, yawned, and changed.

Yukiah, to his credit, managed not to jump. He accepted the furry hand and grasped it. Then Lo'Ah leaned in and chin-marked him.

"I am Lo'Ah, Shaman to the Crimson Yarn Tribe. The four queens, who serve a certain yuwenghau who has come here in disguise to aid you, have placed their forces under my command. We have infiltrated the ranks of the palace cats and are scattered among them."

"We have a yuwenghau, Eshraf?" Yukiah's face brightened.

"Yes, we have a yuwenghau, we have catkin, and we have several other magical creatures. We are gathering an army. I am assembling temple battle units. The vampire will not beat us."

"Thank the gods. Now what is this about the poison? Have the healers found it?" Yukiah asked.

"No. Only Dynarien and the yuwenghau have found it. For obvious reasons that isn't enough to convince anyone. Dynarien is a foreigner and not Guild. The yuwenghau cannot reveal himself until we find the vampire."

"You're certain about the vampire? I have heard that from other sources, but I wasn't certain."

"Yukiah, it's Talons the vampire has been feeding on. It may even be the vampire who has been poisoning her. He may have been making her drink the poison herself, calling her out, handing her the poison and telling her to drink it."

The look that flashed across Dynarien's face was terrible in its horror and fury. The room filled with the scent of roses. He spun up and out of his chair, striding across the room. "No! No, no, no. Talons!"

Yukiah started from his seat, but Edouina was already rising and Eshraf stopped him. They watched her wrap her arms around him, laying her head on his shaking shoulders.

"He loves a woman he can never have," Eshraf said, his voice filling with compassion. "Perhaps Edouina can find a place in his heart instead."

"Sharani are triadic, Eshraf, Edouina belongs to Talons."

"*Belonged* to Talons. Wrathscar will want someone submissive for what he will view as nonsense."

"You'll have to prove Wrathscar guilty of something before you can have the Guild take him out." Yukiah rubbed the burn scar on his neck. "You remember what happened last time. I will always believe he killed his wife. He squirmed out of it."

"I'll find it."

Eshraf turned to Queiggy, who up until then had been silent. "Old friend, I have a special task for you."

"Oh, yes? And what would that be?" Queiggy's voice was a tenor, cracking with age and growing whispery.

"Go through all the records of deaths for the last years, especially the period of the vampire attacks thirty years ago. I believe that the Lemyari still exist."

"Lemyari be a myth," Queiggy's words were skeptical, yet the intonations were a challenge and a suggestion of belief, as if perhaps he knew something that he was not telling. "And how would I know that I had found what I was looking for, Holy Father?"

"Poison, venom, a kind and type that could not be identified." Eshraf extended his hands, flexing his fingers. "They carry it in their hands and discharge it through their secondary nails. Small, perfectly round punctures. Either a single puncture or spaced in a pattern that could not possibly have been made by fangs. A tiny amount paralyzes and a larger amount kills. It is similar to a neuro toxin. Hit an artery and you're dead in seconds. They can also lay their arts of fascination far deeper than other vampires, places where only a yuwenghau could find them. They are demon-vampires."

"If it's there, I'll find it."

* * * *

Bryndel had lingered late in the library with a stack of volumes by romantic poets, jotting down poems he wanted to memorize, creating his own small collection in careful calligraphy to please Talons and Edouina with a reading in the garden. He expected the librarians to appear at any moment and chase him out, considering that it was past midnight. Running footsteps made him raise his eyes and then he heard a soft, rare laugh he recognized as his sister's. Bryndel went very still, hoping they had not noticed him. He saw only the back of the Guildsmon's head and the mon's uniform as he bent to kiss Belyla, long and passionate, before they raced down the stairwell and into the Cloverleaf. She wore a hood and had covered her face with a veil, which she lifted slightly for the kiss, but Bryndel would have known his favorite sister anywhere.

"Oh gods, Belyla, what are you doing?" Bryndel muttered. He knew his father would be enraged to find Belyla in a relationship with a Guildsmon. Suddenly all the papers in front of him, all the love poems were forgotten. He wanted more than almost anything for Belyla to be happy. He knew what his father did some nights in his sisters' rooms. He knew how it hurt her because he could see it in her eyes the next day. But a Guildsmon? His father would certainly kill the mon and break Belyla's heart. Well, if anyone told their father, it would not be him, Bryndel vowed.

"Be careful, Belyla. Please be careful ... be wise."

CHAPTER FIVE

A RECEIPE FOR DEATH

Galee set the wine glasses on her table and the vials next to them, forming a triangle with the wine bottle atop the crimson table covering. The new blend was darker red, more concentrated than what she had been giving Talons before. She had had to send to the Master of Blood for this. Solance's skills left more and more to be desired as Galee's plot progressed. Talons was stronger than she expected. The first collapse should have come a week ago. The Master had also sent her several interesting new drugs to introduce on the streets for testing among those who catered to such things – some of which, she had been assured, could in appropriate combinations and dosages bring down a Sharani in moments. If Solance did not watch his steps he would find himself becoming expendable far faster than he dreamed.

She began her silent call while still moving about the room, taking her journal off the shelf, and setting it next to her pen and bottle of ink. That room, like all of Galee's suite, was done in black lacquered furniture, delicately carved so that there were tiny leering, malevolent faces hidden among the leaves and flowers; cushions, curtains, and every bit of cloth was some obscene shade of orange or red, running the gamut from flame to blood. The walls matched the cushions with black trim and cabinets. She settled at the table, took up her pen, and began to record the progress of the poison in the column next to her calculations in the old language. There was almost no one alive – to her knowledge – who could read it, save herself. But it would not hurt to make certain of that by consulting the Master of Blood. Tonight she would do a deep Reading of Talons' body, and record her findings in more detail. Solance had had the right idea in kidnapping Arruth; he had simply chosen the wrong victim. Once she acquired a kingdom to play with, she would build some laboratories and get some decent bio-alchemists, mages, bio-magicalists, and geneticists to carry out her explorations into breaking the Tinkerer's Toys. None of her own creations had proved strong enough to defeat those minions in open combat yet.

"Come, Talons, come drink your death," she spoke the triggering phrase. "Come, it

is time."

She tongued her lips in anticipation, allowed her fangs to descend, and tried to decide where she wanted to sink them this time. Perhaps it was time to begin taking Talons in the neck where all could see the wounds. That would frighten people and frightened people were easily stampeded. Then she could set herself up as their savior and protector before eating them.

Consecrated blood tasted the best of all. Well, not best, but the others – yuwenghau and sacred kings – were rare, hard to find, and dangerous to get. Still Talons did not come. Galee frowned, reaching into the room with her awareness only to be shoved out hard. Someone had warded and shielded it. Galee opened her awareness further, sniffing around the edges. No ordinary mage set these wards and shields: she could taste the divinity in them. Damn the holy rakehells scattering their seed in all directions! The mage must have at least half-blood or even be fully yuwenghau. Galee hated the yuwenghau. She had killed and eaten several in her long life and intended to devour more – starting with this one.

"I am the Glistening One. I am a god. The cow is mine. These people are my cattle." Galee raged around the room, breathing hard. "Mine. I will not be balked. If she will not drink it tonight, she will drink it tomorrow. And sooner or later I will drink from her. On the day she dies, I will hang her corpse from a pole and drain her blood into my bottles like the juice of the grape. It will be a very fine vintage; and I will do the same for the yuwenghau. Damn him."

Then she went to her mirror, slid her fingers along the back, and caused it to swing forward. A small cupboard showed behind it. She pulled a magic, golden preserving bottle from the shelf and tore it open, drinking deeply of the contents. She rolled a swallow around in her mouth like fine wine and then drank more slowly.

The label read in the old tongue: Lord Ky of Hellsguard.

A few months back, the Master of Blood had given her seven bottles filled with the blood of Channadar's father, whom Blood had murdered fifty years ago at her request. Lord Ky had interfered with her hunt for the branch clan, after she had narrowed her search down to Hellsguard.

* * * *

"The palace is a warren," Yahni laughed, pushing open a door Belyla would never have guessed was there. "There are always rooms no one expects to find unless you know where to look for them. Finding them is a hobby of mine. Each and every master kept adding onto the palace and the compound."

Belyla giggled as he ran her up a narrow spiral stair and they came into a small tower room with a lovely bed shaped like a swan preparing to take flight, wings just spreading, a fantasy in pink and white beneath a mirrored ceiling. A high relief of

swans and swan-mays dancing covered one wall, while a tapestry of those paladins of Willodarus in their silver armor and cloaks of black feathers vanquishing dragons filled another. A dresser with a large mirror edged in swan scrollwork stood in one corner beside a chest of drawers, also decorated in swans. The carpets were swans in black and silver. Belyla caught her breath in wonder. "It's lovely, Yahni."

"Isn't it? I remembered how much you loved the *Verses to Alysijn*. This is her room. The sixth Grand Master, Chamche, built it for her. Swan-mays are long-lived, but humans are not. When he died, she took their youngest child and left, never to return. There is swan-may blood in the Gee lineage. It is thinning now."

"That's sad. I've always loved *The Black Swan: Verses to Alysijn*. I was so afraid you'd think it was silly of me when I handed you that volume."

"The Verses is why I went looking for this room four years ago and found it. I've never brought anyone here before. It is always sad when a long-lived falls in love with a short-lived. That's why the Fae calls a human lover their firefly. Because their lives are so brief. I love you, Belyla." Yahni lifted her easily onto the swan-bed. "I should hear back from Shaurone soon. Even if I don't, we should just leave."

"I want to, Yahni. I'm getting frightened."

"Then I'll talk to Mikkal tomorrow." Yahni kissed her.

* * * *

Galee spent the first part of the morning making another set of entries in her ledger. The unknown yuwenghau had thrown her careful calculations off. She could not afford to have Talons start missing doses, especially this early in the process. Later, when the damage had progressed farther it would not be as crucial. She needed to find Talons immediately, and get a dose down her throat by whatever means necessary. Then she must find Wrathscar; she had promised that today she would turn him. Ah, but that would be delicious. Until now theirs had been a relationship of equals; after today she would be master. Last, before the day ended, she would need to force Bryndel to resume dosing Talons himself. She had never told him that blended in with the bi-kyndi blocker and memory drops had been a poison. Sooner or later he would begin to suspect, then she would either have to take his mind completely or bend it some other way.

Galee packed a basket with several glasses and a bottle of wine so deeply red it looked black, dressed, and went to Talons' rooms. She could not enter because of the wards, but she could stand at the door and speak. Jysy answered.

"I need to speak with Talons. Is she here?"

Jysy shrugged. "She isn't here."

Galee frowned. "Can you tell me where she is, child? It is very important."

Jysy gave her a sullen look. "No idea."

Galee swallowed back an imprecation and left. Talons' little band of companions clearly disliked her. Especially Jysy. But she chose not to make an issue of it – yet. She walked out of the wing onto the sweeping second floor landing from which she could see Channadar and his half-Fae sycophants along with their fireflies sitting on couches in the Great Central Hall as they frequently did, telling their magic stories.

Channadar was too much like his father and would end like him once the Master of Blood arrived. He'd caught her in Hellsguard, his holding along the edge of the escarpment, looking for the Gate of the Hellgod and had banned her from his lands. It had caused a political uproar, and cost her tremendous loss of prestige. She had tried unsuccessfully to force him to allow her there, since she was First Lieutenant to the Grand Master. Eshraf had intervened on Channadar's behalf and she had lost. It still rankled, despite the fact that she had gained a small victory in that Channadar had lost his seat on the council.

Juna, Channadar's younger brother, haremmed. He had four fireflies: Tongari, Sysymi, Pelaui, and Yolany. They draped themselves about him. Galee drifted toward them, asking each mon she met whether they knew where Talons might be this early. Four of Galee's Lemyari, dressed as Creeyan nobles, fell into place behind her, smiling. They paused beside Channadar's entourage. She caught Yolany's eye with a suggestive glance. The young woman was lovely, blonde, like a bit of butter frosting.

"Have any of you seen Talons?" Galee asked.

"In the gardens," Yolany told her.

Channadar paused in his story, snapping his golden fans closed in irritation. Tiderider's firefly, an interesting auburn haired woman, called Leeza, stepped to Yolany's side, bumping her elbow. Galee had tried several times over the last three years to get close to Leeza and been rebuffed. She knew that Wrathscar had been trying to get a ride on that one and been scathingly rejected.

Yolany frowned and shoved Leeza, but she did not say another word to Galee.

"Thank you, you are kind, Yolany," Galee said. "I will go to the gardens."

Galee should have thought of the gardens immediately and her irritation increased for not having done so. The early summer made the gardens especially lovely and Bryndel had kept Talons imprisoned with her legs spread for months until the pregnancy became known; so the gardens must seem irresistible. Bryndel and Talons sat upon a spread blanket with a basket lunch. Talons wore a loose shift. The heir no longer dressed as a Guildsmon and Galee considered that a psychological

victory. The cow's belly was swelling rapidly with Bryndel's triplets; no doubt that was part of the reason for the clothing change.

She simpered at Bryndel and Talons, her hand sweeping out to indicate the four Creeyans in expensive silks suggestive of the nobility. "My Lords, I wish to introduce you to our heir Lady Talons Gee, called Trollbane, and her betrothed Sir Bryndel Wrathscar, son of Lord Agasthenez Wrathscar."

As Galee continued to make introductions, Talons felt that the whole day had been ruined, but she coped with it. Her grandsire and the Wrathscars expected her to behave like a lady, and she was putting forth an effort to do so.

"Please, join us." Talons indicated the edges of the blanket and the newcomers sat down. Creeya was a large kingdom and, having rejected politics growing up, there were many of the nobility she did not know. She had never wanted to be the heir; that had been for her cousins. But now they were dead. She missed them.

Galee filled the glasses, handing one to Talons first and then the others.

Bryndel glared at her, shaking his head at the proffered glass. "I have my own," he said in a petulant tone, continuing to sip the white wine in his glass. He refilled it from the bottle he had brought with him, making it clear that he was annoyed at Galee for interrupting his visit with Talons.

"A toast to the wedding and the children, Bryndel," Galee said, her voice smoothly refusing to become irritated.

"Toast away, Galee. I'll drink my own."

Talons felt a certain nagging admiration for Bryndel's refusal.

They shared out that bottle of strange red-black wine and polished it off in a series of toasts. It tasted oddly familiar to Talons, although she could not say why. She was glad when they finally left.

* * * *

Galee handed the basket to the tall Lemyari walking beside her as they moved deeper into the rear gardens. They spoke in an obscure tongue as they traveled. "Carry that for me, Meilurk. When I am finished here, you may take it to my rooms and leave it there. Then you are free to mingle as you will."

"That was too simple, Galee," the tall Lemyari said to her. "Five demon dead sit drinking poisoned wine with a human."

"Why didn't you just take her mind?" asked another.

"Because I had hold of Bryndel's instead, to keep him from drinking it." Galee did not add that she could not get into Talons' mind because a yuwenghau had shielded it. The only way to take Talons' mind at this point would be to rip it to shreds. She was not ready, yet, to speak of the yuwenghau. She wanted to find him first.

"Ahhhhh," said Meilurk. He pulled at his long mustaches thoughtfully.

"Come with me, there are others I wish you to become acquainted with." Galee led them deeper into the gardens. "Today Lord Agasthenez Wrathscar becomes one of us." They walked through the forest of hedges and trees and flowering bushes. She halted abruptly when she saw, from the corner of her eye someone who looked very much like Belyla kissing a Guildsmon. They moved away and Galee could not be certain of what she saw or who the mon was – there were simply too many dark haired myn here. Belyla and a Guildsmon? That would never do. Galee needed to quietly ask around and discover who he was.

* * * *

Sha released Belyla's wrist and regarded her for a long moment. The girl had come into her office wearing a heavy veil and a long black dress like one of the Sisters of Novra. Sha had been startled to see who it was when Belyla settled the veil around her shoulders. Clearly the girl was trying to hide something. Tollo, another healer, had referred Belyla to her. "Who is the father, Belyla?"

"You mustn't tell anyone. Especially my father."

Sha leaned back against her desk, resting her weight on her hands. "Do you want to keep it? Or did you come here to ask me for something to help you lose it?"

Belyla's eyes teared up, and she bent forward, crossing her arms over her stomach protectively. "I want to keep it."

Sha considered that. "It will not be long before it's noticeable. Knowing your father's temper, you should request sanctuary from the temple. I could speak to Eshraf."

Belyla winced. She had not been in the temple since her mother's death. Her father would not allow it.

Sha patted her arm. "Have you told the father yet?"

"No. I wanted you to confirm it first."

"I want to help you. Let me. Who is the father?"

Belyla sucked in a long, shuddering breath. "Yahni Kjarten."

Sha shook her head. This was a disaster. The Kjartens hated the Wrathscars. The feeling was mutual. Wrathscar also hated the Guild since they investigated his wife's death; and Yahni was Guild. But Yahni was a good mon and Sha suspected he would do right by Belyla. "You must tell Yahni, then we can decide how to handle this. I will protect you, Belyla."

Belyla began to cry and Sha fetched a clean handkerchief from a drawer in her desk to dab her tears with. The older woman held Belyla and let her get it out. Sha had wanted children, but had only loved a single mon and the relationship had not worked out. Twenty years alone was a long time. She had put the energy that she would have put into children into helping her patients and those who came to her for aid. Being young and in love was hard. "Promise me, Belyla. Promise me that you'll tell him and then come back and let me know what he said."

"I promise," Belyla said in a very small voice.

* * * *

Galee lounged on Lord Wrathscar's broad, pine green-curtained bed. She rested her weight on her elbows so that her substantial breasts were thrust forward in a provocative pose. "Are you certain you wish to do this?" Galee asked.

"I've already told my servants I was leaving for a few days to take care of some matters pertaining to the wedding. I also told them that no one was to enter my rooms until I returned, not even to clean. Now that her belly swells, it is time to move on to our next step." He opened his tunic, offering her his throat. In the decades of their alliance – all the years that he had known what Galee was – he had refused her the smallest taste of his blood. They had lain together in love only. His massive, powerful body attracted Galee. He was patient in his plotting, yet given to rages when balked. Age and a waning of his powers – as yet noticeable only to Wrathscar – brought him to this moment. They had discussed it for months.

"I have made few children. You will be incredibly powerful. You will not need to hide from the sunlight like other newborns. Like the lesser bloods."

"Make it so, Galee. I am ready."

Galee smiled, her fangs lengthened.

Lord Wrathscar disrobed and climbed onto the bed. She wrapped herself around him. His heart hammered and his pulse raced. Galee had promised she could take him directly from life into the immortality of undeath without the middle step he feared. But with Galee, treachery was always a possibility. It made him doubt for an instant; before he could change his mind, her fangs found his throat. First there came intense pain and then a dizzying rush of pleasure that caused his manhood to react and explode over him. He collapsed beneath her with a moan.

Galee had considered this carefully. She never turned those people who possessed a true capacity for love: they usually fell prey to the madness and obsessions of the newborn and consumed their closest friends and loved ones – mistaking appetite for love – and were, therefore, the easiest and first to be discovered and destroyed. Lord Wrathscar did not love his family. They were simply the means to other ends. Therefore he would not be likely to eat them. With work and time, Lord Wrathscar might even become as powerful as Brandrahoon. Or more so. Galee knew far more things now than she had when she made Brandrahoon. When she felt his heart start to falter, she released him, opened a vein in her breast, and raised his head to it. His lips closed on her, sucking weakly at first and then more strongly. His teeth lengthened into fangs and he fastened hard upon her.

Ah, yes. This one will be very strong – a paladin of the night.

When she began to feel dizzy, she sank her fangs into him again. They lay wrapped together all night, the blood passing back and forth between them.

* * * *

Arruth no longer went to classes or practice. She spent all her energy in simply trying to avoid Lord Wrathscar. She never walked anywhere; she ran. That morning she was simply trying to get from her own apartments to Talons' suite, since that was the only place she felt safe. She had a bundle of her clothes, which had gone unwashed for weeks. Jysy had begun complaining about it. Arruth tried to argue, but none of her answers made sense to Jysy and she was unwilling to tell her the truth. She intended to put her clothing with Talons' so that would get it washed by the servants.

Wrathscar stepped out of his rooms at the sound of her feet and confronted her. "Come here, Arruth."

Arruth hesitated. He was alone, no one was with him. She could turn around and flee or try to run past him. Wrathscar moved first, crossing the distance between them swiftly, his hands closing on her arms. His eyes met hers and she fell away into nothing, all the will and heart dissolving.

"Come along, little slut," he said. "You'll like this one." He pulled her into his rooms, flashing a mouth filled with fangs.

Arruth whimpered as his fangs plunged deep into her neck.

* * * *

"Sounds like you had a pleasant time," Edouina said, soaping Talons' back and then sliding the washcloth around her front. The water was hot, the room comfortably steamy. There were already places Talons could not reach.

"If you consider spending it with Bryndel when I would rather have been with you or Dynarien or best of all with both of you, pleasant, then yes, it was. Ahhh. That feels good." Edouina had begun to soap beneath her belly and between her legs. Talons stiffened, a frightened expression on her face. A grinding, gripping pain in her stomach seized her, tearing into her chest. "Edouina ... help me."

Talons' limbs jerked, spasming, her chest heaved up in convulsion as her eyes rolled into her head. Edouina made a grab for Talons as she slipped under the water, and screamed for Jysy and Arruth in the next room. Edouina caught hold of her hair and got one arm under her shoulder, dragging her out onto the floor. She rolled Talons onto her side, striking her twice between the shoulder blades, which made her cough up some water and Edouina could see she was breathing.

"Fetch a healer!" she shouted at the girls. Arruth gave her an uncertain look, fingering her necklace of ears, which she had begun to wear on the outside of her tunic. Despite the heat of the day, Arruth's tunic and shirt were buttoned to her throat with the collar flipped up. "All right, Arruth. Jysy, fetch a healer, and do not, I repeat, do not come back with Solance. Arruth, turn the blankets back while I get her into bed."

Edouina wrapped Talons in her robe, shouldered her, and started toward the bedroom. Arruth saw this and took her other side. Together they got her lying down.

"Call him," Arruth suggested.

Edouina nodded. "Dynarien!"

In spite of everything, her eyes brightened in a misty way when he appeared with the fragrance of forgotten roses clinging to him and a scattering of blue petals this time.

"Talons went into convulsions and nearly drowned in the bathtub."

A small cry from the bed stopped the conversation. Talons writhed up, tangling in the covers and then went still. Dynarien summoned his pack. "She's not breathing. Get the amphereon out. Better, if you've got it, would be enlokieyn." He knelt over her, tilted her head back, pinched her nostrils, and began to blow air and power into her lungs.

Bryndel came in and stared. "What the hell is he doing?"

"Shut the hell up," Dynarien shouted. "Get in here, and help me."

Bryndel ran into the room, realizing that something was badly wrong as he dropped to his knees, expression suddenly contrite. "What do I do?"

"I'm going to blow and you're going to push. Edouina's getting the amphereon out. The healer's coming."

* * * *

Shaheeramaat had everything under control very quickly, being an efficient, capable woman. When she finished, she left without so much as a backward glance at anyone. Bryndel trailed after, trying to drag out every last bit of information he could get. When Sha reached her office, she sat him down in a corner and faced him with arms folded. She told him in no uncertain terms before he could get a question out of his mouth, "Dynarien saved her life, young lord, and that, as they say is the final word. When she had the first convulsion, whatever its cause, and I cannot find its origins, she hit her head and swallowed a lot of water, most of which got stuck in her lungs. She has a concussion which brought on the second convulsion I assume and, coupled with her already damaged body – damaged from something I cannot identify I might add – she stopped breathing. If, as you claim, you love your betrothed and this is not simply a marriage of convenience, then you owe Mage Dynarien a debt. I suggest you find him and thank him. Now get out of here. I am not so terrified of the Wrathscar name as some are."

Bryndel started to protest that last statement of hers, met the unremitting look in her middle-aged eyes, and withdrew with a curt nod.

Sha muttered a long time about the Wrathscars as she filled in a report about it. Had Dynarien not acted so swiftly, the godmark on Talons' breast would have sucked her soul to Hadjys' Hall of Heroes and they would never have been able to save her. Hadjys' mark was intended to call home the souls of his paladins too swiftly for the sa'necari necromancers and vampires to steal them: sometimes it got in the way of a healer trying to restart their hearts and breathing. A great debt was owed indeed.

* * * *

Galee felt it when Brandrahoon turned his thoughts toward her, searching for her with his mind and powers. She went to the mirror in her room; it reached from the floor to the ceiling. She had had it made special. Everyone in the palace thought it to be merely an object of her legendary vanity: it was far more than that. With a languid wave she set it glowing. Crimson swirled across its surface, and cleared. Brandrahoon stood in his study at his estate near Minnoras before the silent fireplace. He had changed little in the nearly four millennia since she turned him, first of her blood. He was tall, dark with finely drawn features, dressed impeccably in black velvet and blue silk. Another sat in the chair behind him, his face intriguingly sensual with full lips, and an almost feminine delicacy to the lines of his cheekbones and small chin, with a tiny goatee. She recognized the blood of Waejonan, her first student, in him; he was sa'necari – the living embodiment of the undead with all of their powers and gifts as well as some of his own.

She knew that Brandrahoon's valley had fallen: several of his retainers had made their way to her, mostly minor vampires of far lesser bloodlines; and she had taken

them into her ranks, already putting them to good use in her plots to seize Creeya and the Guild. "What is it, Brandrahoon?" she hissed.

Brandrahoon bowed low, an elegant old-fashioned movement, with a long sweep of his arm. "My dearest mother-in-blood, most lovely Galee, allow me to introduce you to my companion, my prince, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan."

"Don't waste your time on pleasantries, Brandrahoon," Galee snapped. "I recognize the blood of my first student in him. Get on with it, why have you called me?"

"A puzzle, Galee. Josiah Abelard has returned. I gemmed his soul. How can he have returned?"

Galee laughed. "Check the vault you left it in."

"I gave it to a sa'necari, a trade for something I needed. They would not have released him. If anything, they would have put his soul on a hellblade."

Galee's laugh grew louder, more insulting. "Check the vaults, Brandrahoon. That idiot god, Dynanna, has been raiding them."

Brandrahoon's face tightened almost imperceptibly, but Galee knew him well and caught it. "My prince suffers from deijanrael. He needs a greater death."

Deijanrael – stolen death – when a sa'necari or other necromancers were interrupted in an act of mortgiefan and deprived of their victim in mid-rite, they withered away to nothing unless they reclaimed their victim or took another of equal or greater power. That piqued her interest, it had been centuries since she had heard of anyone with the audacity to steal a sa'necari prince's meat in mid rite. "Who stole it?"

"Abelard. The meal was Aejystrys Rowan."

"Was there a mortgiefan link? Why didn't he kill her through the link?"

"It was severed when she drew the Spiritdancer from the altar."

Galee's eyes blazed. "Fools! Both of you. That blade must not be brought into play. The wielder must die. Abelard as well. We do not need the mage-master getting loose again." She had given Brandrahoon the texts to create the nekaryiane, which she would require to regain her full godhead. Galee did not wish to see that undertaking interfered with. Brandrahoon had no idea what he would be unleashing, but Galee did.

"We cannot achieve that goal until my prince is healed. To do that we require your aid and wisdom."

"I will expect favors, Brandrahoon. Two favors from each of you."

Brandrahoon glanced at Mephistis, who nodded wearily. "We accept."

"Go to a cave near Charas. A dog-eared rock sits atop it. There is a stone door that will only open to one of my blood. Choose what you need from my armory there. I have cached weapons there from before the Renewal, when I saw that Bellocar would lose the godwar. There are things there that can kill a god. Do not be too greedy. When you have found it, contact me again. I will have a list of things I wish sent on to me. Pay especial attention to a small box that says it cannot be opened except at my destruction. It is my legacy to you, Brandrahoon, as my first born."

* * * *

Arruth shivered in the bedclothes, pulling them tight around her. She could not tell anyone what had happened. He had done something to her mind this time. She could feel it like a heaviness lying across her neck and along her scalp. The vampire had turned him. He had ordered her to wait for him, that he would call her tonight. Cold sweat ran down her body. If she pulled the covers over her, then she was too warm, but when she dropped them she felt as if she were freezing. So, she decided on hot.

Jysy sat up in bed and looked at her curiously from across the room. "What's wrong with you, Arruth?"

"Nothing."

"Then go to sleep."

"Can't sleep."

"At least try. And take that scarf off. It must be making you hotter."

"I like it. It's for luck."

<Hello, little slut. Come to me. >

Arruth stiffened.

"Arruth?" Jysy got up and moved to sit on her sister's bed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I guess I just need to eat something." Arruth threw on a robe and walked out, heading for the parlor.

Jysy followed her. "You're acting weird."

<Come to me, little slut. >

Arruth shivered. "Leave me alone."

<Little slut. >

"Arruth?" Jysy got a wide-eyed look.

"Leave me alone!" Arruth bolted from the stairs into the parlor and out the door. She ran until she found herself outside Wrathscar's apartments. Her stomach tightened painfully. The door opened and Wrathscar stood there smiling.

"Come in, Arruth," he said, extending his hand to her.

Arruth stared at the hand and then put hers into his. He led her inside. Six myn loitered in the parlor. Two of them were soldiers. The others were Solance, Lord Naren, Lord Westli who was Knight-Commander of the city guard, and Lord Lemyk.

"Go into my bedroom and take off your clothes," Wrathscar ordered.

Arruth walked into the bottom floor bedroom, and disrobed. Terror threaded through her. She wanted desperately to cry. The myn followed. Arruth waited by the bed, obediently. He was going to hurt her again. Her mind writhed beneath his grip, trying desperately to break free. He sensed it and snarled. Arruth's eyes filled with tears as his mind ripped into hers. She fell upon the bed, clutching at her head.

"Tie her well, Solance. Get her legs open as wide as you can get them." Wrathscar snarled still more savagely. The soldiers seized her, and Solance bound her. Wrathscar checked the bindings. "Good job, Solance. Therefore, you go first."

Arruth tried to scream, but her throat would not work. The others came close to fondle her and watch while they waited their turn.

* * * *

Queiggy motioned Yahni, who lounged on a bench between the doors and the main desk, to him. Yahni's friends, Ceejorn Osterbridge, and Jajinga SwallowsWing, sat with him. It was their turn to sit as on call assistants. The first pale fingers of light would not stretch across the heavens for at least another hour. The Guild tended to assign their myn in the same small groups they had bonded with during training. "Yahni, you and your blood-sworn sit the desk for me."

Yahni stretched his legs and stood up. Queiggy had asked before, there was nothing to it, but as he came close, Yahni noticed something different in Queiggy's eyes, it set the Guildsmon in him on edge. Queiggy caught his arm, yanking him tightly to him to hiss into his ear, "By the sap and soul of the tree at the heart of the world, Yahni. I charge you and geis you to guard the desk, which is the gate and my back and the gate in all its forms as I suggest it's required. The heir is dying. I search for the traitor, and I require your aid."

"Dying?" Yahni's voice caught. Jajinga and Osterbridge, hearing the change in Yahni's voice, rose and came near.

"If you listen," Queiggy warned his two companions, "then you are bound into the geis also."

"Bind us." Jajinga told him and Osterbridge nodded.

Queiggy did so. "Yes, dying. You will keep silent for now. Your job is to guard, giving me time to search the records. They poisoned her. Up drawbridge, down portcullis. Now. Not even Galee gets in. No non-Guild."

"Galee is Guild," Jajinga said.

Queiggy snorted. "By fiat. Doesn't count. Not a fig." His head tilted to his shoulder and he simpered primly for a moment, twisting from side to side, balanced on one foot. He shouldered his knapsack, took his cane from the desk, walked quickly to the records room, and descended the stair. The light from the high, narrow windows disappeared the further into the depths he journeyed. There were a scattering of clerks on the first two levels and no one on the third. He paused on the landing where they kept a table to strike a lucifer and light a lamp. As he replaced the chimney and adjusted the flame he could not help but marvel at all the information. When the first Old Man of the Mountain built this place a thousand years ago, Queiggy could never imagine his being able to fill it up, but sure enough he had. His search would start here. Then he would check out the palace healers. One of them was secretly Guild and only he and Yukiah knew which one. Hanadi knew, but she would not return until next spring. Queiggy sighed. They had begun to see the need for keeping things from the Grand Master shortly after Galee found a place at his side. Many people did not like that one, and it led to that first flaring of a silent mutiny.

The Guild kept more records on death, its means and types, its occurrences, than even the sa'necari of Waejontor. They observed it. Now he could start with the subject of poison or mysterious deaths in Creeya or unsolved murders. Very few murders in Creeya went unsolved. The Guildsmyn always caught their mon.

Queiggy set his lamp on one of the central tables. Smaller desks punctuated the ends of the isles of bound volumes and little alcoves made sheltered private recesses for study throughout the floor. The Holy Assassins of Hadjys knew their business. That was what had fascinated Queiggy and caused him to pull up his roots and leave his garden to enlist with them. Hadjys had laughed at him. Oh yes, how long and hard had Hadjys laughed. But the god had accepted him. Queiggy's old bones ached and he leaned heavily on his cane. He needed to return to his garden again to renew himself, but that would have to wait until the dangers were past. The Guild needed him.

He ran his hand along the shelves and found the book listing deaths by poison from thirty years ago. Taking down the volume, which listed only those deaths in Havensword itself, Queiggy tucked it under his arm and carried it to the central table. He turned to the index at the back. There were seven unexplained deaths. Just seven that the poison experts could not identify. Queiggy opened his pack, which he had set beside the table, taking out pen, ink, and paper to make notes and then he turned to the first one.

The floor was deathly quiet. His ears ached and hummed with the silence. Single puncture yet shaped like fang wound or single claw/nail insertion. *As if someone took kitty's finger and shoved it in.*

Initial paralytic reaction. Hmmm. Queiggy wrote that down. Arsenic like reaction, nasal bleeding. Odd. Reader says stomach pains. Convulsions. Clotting failure. Massive internal bleeding throughout the body. Respiratory failure. Doesn't sound like a Lemyari. Queiggy continued to write. He turned to the next one. Initially the symptoms were the same. Neuro-toxic reaction. Lungs locking up. Hallucinations. Coma. Lemyari! The third and the fourth case were the same. "We've got you, damn it!"

Queiggy heard a rustling in the stacks and the stealthy creeping – he was not alone. He closed the book, slipped it into his pack, and clicked a button on his cane. Then he gave the band a twist and slid the blade of the sword out. The old Guildsman had barely time to pull it before the three lesser bloods rushed him. He saw more coming out of the stacks.

* * * *

Yukiah, Jimi, and Alora came looking for Queiggy and found Yahni at the desk with his friends. The hour was very early and they had not really hoped to find him here yet. They would probably have to go to Queiggy's rooms and dig him out. They had hoped he might have chosen to arrive before dawn as he sometimes did, so that they would not have to wake him up. Queiggy always got crotchety when woken.

"Yahni, you're pulling a late one." Yukiah said. "You been here since midnight?"

"Queiggy doesn't want the desk left empty these days," Yahni replied. "Even before the main door opens."

Yukiah laughed. "Getting paranoid in his old age?"

Yahni Kjarten glanced at the two students. "Can't say, orders are up drawbridge. We'll be relieved in another hour."

Yukiah frowned. *Up drawbridge? What had Queiggy discovered that he would decide to close the wing?* "Where can we find him? I have information he asked us to bring him posthaste."

"Records. I don't know which floor."

"Thanks."

Yukiah could see the concern in Alora and Jimi's eyes as they went to the first floor of records. They were far enough into their training to know what it meant. As Yukiah lit a lamp, the sounds of struggle reached them. "Queiggy!"

They rushed down the stairs with their blades in hand. Jimi had his short sword in one hand and his bolas in the other. Queiggy had backed into a corner, one hand pressed to his bleeding chest, his sword drooping in his hand. Two lesser bloods faced him and four lay unmoving on the floor. Jimi's bolas whirled and a lesser blood went spinning across the aisle, its feet entangled. It slammed into a bookcase. Books showered it. It grabbed at the case to keep its balance, but only succeeded in toppling the entire thing on itself. Alora charged in, stabbing through the chaos. Black blood and ichors exploded over the precious books; the creature stopped moving. Yukiah shouted dark words of rage, demanding the second hell spawn turn. It did. The armsmaster ended its existence with a single skilled thrust.

Queiggy regarded them, his eyes heavy lidded as he slipped to the floor. "They got the book," he whispered, and then coughed, bringing up blood. "The vampire ... he's Lemyari."

Alora cradled his head and shoulders, crying. "We'll get you to the healers."

"Can't help me. Yukiah, carry me to the garden quickly. Somewhere ... somewhere no one can see me."

"Queiggy..."

"Quickly... Please."

Yukiah lifted the dying old man in his arms and carried him out, dismayed at how light he was. Yahni and his friends straightened when they saw them. Yukiah shook his head at them. "He was attacked. I'll explain later. We've got spooks."

As Yukiah carried Queiggy, he could feel the way he grew weaker. "Alora, talk to him. Keep him talking." They exited the wing through a postern door, emerging into the gardens as the first orange of dawn lit the sky.

"Queiggy, remember the books? The ones you used to read me?"

"Alora, the ... red books?" His eyes fluttered open, his voice had grown so faint she had to strain to hear it.

"Red gryphon."

"Big gryphon." A fresh fit of coughing took hold of Queiggy and more blood came up.

"Blue gryphon." Alora fought down an urge to weep as the blood became a trickle from the corner of the old man's mouth and Jimi slipped an arm around her.

"Smart gryphon."

"White gryphon."

"Sweet gryphon."

Yukiah strode into the Stalking Grounds beside the gardens where the woods were wild and dense. If Queiggy did not want anyone to see him die, this was the place. Yukiah knelt, easing Queiggy onto the ground.

Queiggy sighed deeply, gazing up at the clear sky streaked with the first colors of dawn, drawing in the air. His fingers pressed into the earth and his voice strengthened from the contact.

"Move back, all of you. I need space," Queiggy told them.

Yukiah looked concerned. "We cannot simply leave you to die alone."

Queiggy smiled then and it was a pure sweet smile. "I am giving you my secret, now move back and give me space, for I am not going to die. You have saved my life, bringing me here in time."

Yukiah blinked and moved back.

Queiggy's fingers grew long, sinking into the soil, becoming roots. His hair became leaves. His clothing tore as his body changed. Because of his prone position the tree grew sideways. Queiggy managed to control it enough to retain his face. "Please, have someone camp with me for a few days to guard me until I can heal."

The stunned Guildsmyn did not immediately respond. "Certainly, Queiggy. Who and what are you exactly?" Yukiah asked.

"I am Queig, son of Teakamon, a yuwenghau of modest talents. I watched the first Old Man of the Mountains build Ishladrim Castle and joined the Guild. When I grow old, I become a tree for twenty years and restore my youth. It is an odd life for a yuwenghau. We are a peculiar breed. This is the longest I have spent in my human form. But I have been so very concerned about the vampire. I am so sorry I lost the book. I cannot prove what he is. I have been geising Guildsmyn to watch the desk. Up drawbridge."

Yukiah laughed. "You're doing your job, Queiggy. Better than most."

"Thank you. I'll need about three days and then I'll be back at my desk."

"There are other records, Queiggy. I'll have Sha check the healers' accounts."

"Tell her to be careful. Solance makes me nervous."

Alora bent and kissed him. "I'm so glad you're not dying, Queiggy."

The tree laughed. "Be careful. When all this is over, I'm going to get young again and come looking for you."

"Dirty old tree." She slapped him and giggled.

Yukiah hoped that Queiggy was not the mysterious yuwenghau that Eshraf had referred to. They needed someone with serious firepower like that battlemage, someone who could blow things up with spells like conflagration, throw some fireballs around, singe some whiskers. Someone who could stand toe to toe with this Lemyari – otherwise they were all going to die and the Guild with them. They needed someone out of the legends like Josiah Abelard or Lokynen Willidar. Hell, he'd even take this mage's namesake Dynarien Willodarusson, that scoundrel brother of the God of Cussedness.

* * * *

Belyla lay with Yahni in Alysijn's bed, staring out the window at the sunrise, wondering how to tell him, wondering if he would reject her for it. She was so young and so relatively inexperienced compared to him. He was ten years older than she. Her hands ran along her belly. What would he say? Would he accuse her of doing it deliberately to trap him? She was afraid. She remembered what happened to her older sisters who became pregnant by their father. How could she tell Yahni? How could she tell anyone? He promised to run away with her. Would he change his mind when he found out she was pregnant?

"Yahni..." She stroked his sleeping head, too lightly to awaken him. "Yahni..."

Yahni stirred as the sun fell across his eyes, blinked for a moment, and then reached for her. Belyla stiffened under his touch and he frowned his concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing ... maybe everything... I don't know."

He sat up, the blankets sliding down around him. "Belyla, I love you. You can tell me."

Fear of rejection filled her eyes with tears. "Yahni, I'm pregnant."

To Belyla's relief, he smiled and his entire face brightened. "Is that all? How long have you known?"

"A week. I didn't know where to get the stuff you were talking about, so I couldn't prevent it."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Belyla glanced away and then back to his face. "I was afraid..."

Yahni kissed her hands. "Haven't you believed a word I have been saying? I love you. I intend to marry you."

But it could have been lies. You could have changed your mind. Denied you fathered it. Belyla fought down an urge to say those things. She had overheard too many lies spoken by her father, had them spoken to her by others. "Yahni."

"With a child on the way, Belyla, Mikkal cannot refuse to marry us. Have you forgotten we're speaking with him today?"

Belyla swallowed and then smiled hesitantly. "It's just that. No ... no it's not you, Yahni. It's me. I kept doubting that you really meant to go through with it. I'm not trying to trap you with a child."

Yahni ran his hands over her belly and then lifted her face. "I was caught the first day I met you, Belyla. And you'll like Shaurone. It's a good place to raise children. I was already so certain that Mikkal would allow the marriage that I had arranged for Jajinga, Osterbridge and Terrys to meet us there today as witnesses."

Belyla's eyes widened. "You had?"

"Yes." Yahni kissed her.

* * * *

Galee sat at the table in her apartments, feeling more irritable than normal. Her journal lay open and beside it a copy of Shaheeramaat's records of her examination of Talons two days ago. It took expert creativity, but Talons never missed a dose. Solance had broken into Shaheeramaat's cabinet and copied them. Talons' companions were careful to prevent Solance from being the one to examine her. Normally it should be the healer on call or the healer the family had selected – which was Solance. Wrathscar and the Grand Master, who had specified that Bryndel, as her betrothed, had the right to choose, had chosen Solance. However, her ever-present companions simply went and fetched Shaheeramaat. Galee would find a way to fix that even if it meant killing Shaheeramaat and every other healer in Ishladrim Castle.

Dynarien. Every single time Talons had a bad episode the healers recorded the presence of Dynarien and that he had administered herbs. He was that Willodarian mage who had humiliated Ambrose. Could he be the yuwenghau she was looking for? There was a yuwenghau named Dynarien, one of an obnoxious pair of divine twins. It was a fairly common sylvan name. She knew of at least three other minor yuwenghau named Dynarien. There was also Dynarien Fire-heart the Battle-Master, a Badonthian. The possibility of having that one on her doorstep made her blood run cold. Why the hell did some names have to become so popular?

She finished her notations and threw the copies of Shaheeramaat's records into the fire, stirring them around until she was certain they were well and fully destroyed, then she closed her journal and went to her cabinet. Her alchemists had prepared the new formulation of the drug to her direction. The medicine was ready for distribution to her pawns who would administer it. She also needed to turn the wheels of the rumor mill, demonize the Sharani. Galee swept from the room and along the corridors. She spied Wrathscar across the room in the southwest hall of the southernmost spine of the palace star. Something appeared to be going on and she paused to listen.

Wrathscar occupied a corner nook, jabbing a table with his thick finger for emphasis as he held forth to Lords Chakri and Anhgee, and to Lord Derryl in particular. "I barely consider Talons a fit woman to marry my son. If she weren't the heir and Takhalme had not made me a very fine offer, I would never have considered it."

Derryl met Wrathscar's savage gaze evenly and coolly, with absolute presence of mind and a twist of savoir-faire, very much aware of his audience. "Whyever not? She's the finest Guildsmon we've had in a generation."

Chakri and Anhgee both nodded to that, they had Guild in their families.

Wrathscar snarled. "She is coarse and unnatural."

"How so? She's noble, kind. Good with children. My wife likes her." Derryl's voice went abruptly hard, striking like the thrust of a rapier in a sudden lunge. "She's also pregnant by your son, who treats her as shamefully as you treat your women. It is well known that you like to break your women. I see either of you doing that to the heir and I'll break you both."

The three most powerful lords in Creeya were Wrathscar, Derryl Tormuth, and Channadar – although Channadar had lost his council seat as a result of his skirmish with Galee three years ago.

"I'll call you out for that, Derryl. I'll call you out."

"Do so, Wrathscar. I look forward to it. Better myn than you have called me out."

They're dead." Derryl turned to Chakri and Anhgee, smiling pleasantly as Wrathscar continued to scream threats. "My lords, it was so very nice to see both of you. I enjoyed it so much. We must have lunch again. Truly." He bowed elegantly and left.

Chakri and Anhgee looked at each other for a moment and then at Wrathscar before retreating from the table. When they were a safe distance away, they stepped into an alcove and laughed until they had to hold their sides. They could still hear Wrathscar screaming.

Galee listened until she could not stand it and then grabbed his arm. He knocked her loose and she hissed at him. "Wrathscar, shut up! You're making a spectacle of yourself. Everyone is staring at you."

Wrathscar quieted, glancing around the room. "I'll get him."

"No, you will not. After this demonstration the Guild will know you did it and come after you. Derryl is a total loss. There are still others to be persuaded to our side. Come along. Talons and Bryndel are going to the Music Chamber for lunch."

* * * *

Edouina always put her own clothing in the guest bedroom because Talons had so much stuff packed into her closet and wardrobes that there was no space left. Yukiah insisted she come each day and continue to get in some practice, so she planned to change and head for the training grounds. Edouina went to the closet and jerked the door open. Huddled in a corner was Arruth. The youth wore three scarves swathing her neck and a tunic that was far too warm and enveloping for the pleasant summer weather.

"Arruth?" Edouina asked.

The girl dropped her head and looked away from Edouina, muttering something Edouina could not make out.

Edouina squatted, reaching out to touch her and Arruth flinched away. "Arruth, honey, what happened?"

"Don't touch me." Arruth moved farther from her, shoving her feet against the floor to push herself into a corner.

"Okay, I won't." Edouina held her palms upwards, fingers spread. "If you don't feel good, wouldn't you be happier in bed?"

"Don't make me leave."

"All right, honey, I won't make you leave. But, you can talk to me. You know that?" Edouina tried to keep her tone even, slightly coaxing.

Arruth nodded and huddled deeper into the corner. "Just let me stay here."

"You mean in the closet?" Edouina frowned. "Are you sure? It doesn't look very comfortable."

Arruth nodded.

"Well, if the closet gets uncomfortable, you can sleep on the bed there. No one's using it."

Arruth shook her head.

"Just the closet?"

Arruth nodded.

Edouina could see that someone had either frightened or hurt Arruth, but the girl wouldn't tell her. Maybe if she was patient, then when Arruth felt more secure the girl would say who it was. So Edouina left it at that, taking down her practice clothing. Then she shut the door and left to change in her room.

* * * *

Maya changed into a blue gown that matched her eyes and sat down at her dressing table to run her brush through her hair one more time. She wore her dresses in subtle split skirts to allow more movement and never entirely gave up her weapons. Compromises. Always compromises. Derryl did not mind. Nor did Leslie. In fact, had she decided to wear a Guildsmon's leather work harness over it with full gear they would probably have laughed delightedly and gone off to the music recital in happy accord just to see how many appalled glances they could collect.

She started to drag the boar's bristle brush through her hair when a soft hand closed on her own and Leslie's voice said, "Here, let me."

Maya laughed and released the brush. She shivered in delight as Leslie worked the brush through her hair with loving care. Maya had not told Yahni that she had begun sleeping in Derryl and Leslie's apartments, returning to theirs only occasionally to pick up a few of her things.

"Please wear your sword, Maya. Derryl adores it when you wear your sword. So do I." Leslie finished brushing Maya's hair, tying it up with ribbons that matched her dress.

"I fear a sword belt would hardly match the dress." Maya pushed her sleeves up and showed Leslie her stilettos. "I'm not unarmed."

"Nice. But the sword would match the dress. I have brought you a present." Leslie indicated a package lying on the bed.

Maya retrieved the package and returned to her table. When she had undone the delicate tissue paper and opened the box, she saw inside a sword belt and sheath of fine leather dyed to match her eyes. "Oh My! You are both so outrageous! No wonder my family loves you both."

Leslie laughed. "You think we're outrageous now? You should have seen Derryl at sixteen when he was first thinking up all these lines of his and trying them on for size." Leslie walked into the center of the room, tucked her chin in and drew an imaginary sword and swaggered about, saying in a deepened voice, "Ho, bullies! Blackguards! Turn and fight, Spawn of the Devil!"

Maya giggled and then sobered. "I'm worried about Yahni. He's still seeing Belyla Wrathscar. They're trying to be discreet. But sooner or later her father's bound to find out about it."

Leslie sighed. "Love is blind, Maya. Impossibly blind. Let's talk to Derryl about it. He's very resourceful."

* * * *

Mikkal made it a small ceremony, elegant in its brevity, and held it in one of the smaller, private chapels within the temple. Jajinga, Osterbridge, and Terrys stood as witnesses to the marriage of Yahni and Belyla. He wrapped a white stole around their wrists to bind them together, received from them the proper answers to the ritual questions, and blessed them both by marking their foreheads with holy water. Then he unwrapped the stole and blessed them again.

The priest stepped away and allowed the young couple a moment with their friends. Jajinga and Osterbridge kept slapping Yahni on the back, sometimes half staggering him and everyone had to kiss Belyla. Mikkal smiled at it all, remembering his own marriage to his late wife when he had been studying for the law. He had never dreamed he would outlive her and decide to spend his later years as a priest. Belyla glowed in such a lovely rush of happiness it moved Mikkal's heart to see it.

Finally, Mikkal knew he needed to end this and went to her. "Belyla, child," Mikkal patted her hand. "Gather whatever possessions you feel you cannot part with and come back to me. I have rooms prepared to hide you in within the temple until Yahni's letters arrive. The sooner you are safely hidden from your father, the better."

"I'll go with you." Terrys volunteered

"No," Belyla said. "Father does not like me to bring people in without asking him first. I'll go quickly." Then she left.

Yahni settled on a pew to wait for her. Mikkal had other duties and he left them alone, checking back throughout the evening. One by one Yahni's friends left until Mikkal found only Yahni still waiting for his bride. The night passed without sign of Belyla.

* * * *

Yahni woke to find that someone had thrown a blanket over him after he fell asleep on the little pew in the chapel. Morning cast its light through the windows. He had waited all night for her to return and she hadn't. He vacillated between worry and rejection. Worry that her father had found her packing and feeling that perhaps she had reconsidered and decided that marrying him against her family's wishes was wrong. Yet, somehow, he could not imagine the latter and so he grew more concerned.

Mikkal came to him and gripped Yahni's shoulder. "My son, I am certain she will come eventually." He had sat the last half of the night with Yahni. "I could see the love in her eyes and heart."

Yahni raised his head and looked at Mikkal. "I love her, Father Mikkal."

"I saw the same kind of love in her eyes for you that I saw in my late wife's eyes for me. She will come when she can. I am certain of it. Go on about your other business and we will continue to watch for her. When she arrives we will hide her for you."

"Thank you, Father." Yahni tried to feel relieved, but he could not shake the feeling that something was very wrong. He rose and left, heading through the temple and out across the quad. He reached the Guild Wing and found Jajinga sitting the desk. Usually at this early hour it was Queiggy.

"Where's the old mon?" Yahni asked, looking around.

"Odd things are happening, but you'd better ask him yourself," Jajinga replied, then dropped his voice very low with a knowing grin. "So how does it feel to be married?"

"She didn't come back. And I'm worried."

Jajinga frowned. "You want us to look for her when we're off shift?"

Yahni shook his head. "I'll talk to Terrys first."

* * * *

Talons and Bryndel sat together at a small table in the Music Chamber, listening to a harpist accompanied by two on lutes. It was the largest and most popular of the places maintained for the students so they would not leave the grounds looking for

entertainment. There were a multitude of shops, taverns, and eateries in the underground Cloverleaf, but none as fine as the Music Chamber, which was located on the quad. Everyone living or working in the palace compound tended to show up from time to time. The Grand Master and the Patriarch preferred to keep their holy-assassins-in-training on a close leash until they knew whether the Dark Judge would confirm them or not. Hence the entertainment and shops.

Galee and Lord Wrathscar spied them and waved, making their way along the edges to their table. Talons sighed. It seemed as if every time she went anywhere with Bryndel, Galee found them. Bryndel had insisted he and Talons come up and listen, because all of the other students were raving about the trio. They each had a glass of wine in hand. Talons' glass was nearly empty.

"Would you like a little more?" Galee asked, poking at Talons' glass.

"Actually, I would," Talons replied. Talons turned her attention away from them. Feeling irritable, she saw no reason to even pretend to pleasantries of conversation. She had begun to dispense with such things as her physical problems increased.

"Bryndel, why don't you get her some more?"

Bryndel rose, taking Talons' glass with him as he headed for the bar.

"Bryndel is such a dear boy," Galee said, reaching for Talons' mind only to be thrown back. Galee seethed: when she found the interfering yuwenghau she would rip his heart out with her teeth. She consoled herself knowing that she had another resource this evening. She never left herself with only a single pawn in play when she could have three or more.

She spied her minion: a server going from table to table with a drink cart. Galee signaled him and he came. He already had three glasses filled, two red and one white wine. Galee knew Talons' preferences well, having studied her for years.

"What are you drinking, Talons?" Galee asked, her tone pleasant and casual.

"Red, like always."

Galee's eyes met the server's, a tiny look of understanding passing between them. He reached into his apron, leaning forward against the cart to conceal the movement as he brought the vial forth. Galee shook her head. She flashed him three fingers. She was very angry and she wanted to pay the yuwenghau for his interference. The server slid the vial back, bringing forth another, this one with contents so red and strong they were black. Galee smiled with a tiny nod as the drug went into the wine. He handed Talons the glass while Galee paid.

Talons sat drinking and talking until Bryndel returned with a red for her.

"You took so long," Galee admonished him, "that we got something off the cart."

"I think I have had enough," Talons yawned, blinking sleepily, and finished it. "Will you walk me back, Bryndel?"

Yes, I think you have, Galee smiled. She would call Bryndel to her tonight, activating the triggers she had placed in his mind long ago. Bryndel belonged to her and it was time to teach him obedience again. She also needed to take a look at that book her lesser bloods had stolen from Queiggy. Just what was so important that the records keeper was searching through all those years?

* * * *

Belyla went directly to her family's apartments after leaving the temple. Her joy at finding herself Belyla Kjarten and no longer Belyla Wrathscar had grown tempered by fear as she entered her room. She took a small traveling bag from a closet and placed it close to her dresser, where she could shove it under in a hurry and hide it with the stool. She knew she should have done this to begin with, but a part of her had never really believed the wedding would happen, simply because she wanted it so badly.

Luck was with her, and when she arrived no one else was home. She had decided to take only two dresses, and the handful of things she had from her mother. Belyla had everything in quickly and then remembered the *Verses to Alysijn* under her pillow. She moved the bag back under her dresser and went for the book. That was when she heard her father come in and broke out in a cold sweat of terror.

Lord Wrathscar's voice, raging downstairs in the parlor about Lord Derryl, carried up to her. Glass shattered. Her stomach tightened and she swallowed. *Please don't come up here. Please don't come up here.* She could hear him opening and closing doors, calling her sisters' names. There were no answers. With a feeling of sick dread, Belyla knew she had to answer. If he found her and she had not answered he would beat her. Her hands went to her belly and she covered the unborn protectively. She sucked in a deep shuddering breath and waited for him.

"Belyla!"

"Here, father!"

She heard his heavy footsteps on the stairs, each one setting another stone in her stomach until she felt as if she would vomit from the sheer weight of them. He slammed the door open, causing all her bottles of perfume and cosmetics to tumble from the dressers. The doorway framed him like an image out of nightmare and she forced herself to remain sitting with her hands in her lap on the little chair before the dresser. A terrible flash of prescient dread swept over her. *Yahni, I think we waited too long.*

Wrathscar dragged her roughly to the bed and pushed her down, pulling at her clothing, his hands ripping through it carelessly. The light burning in his eyes went far beyond anger. It was unlike anything she had ever seen before in his face, even his face when he murdered her mother.

"You're tearing my dress," she whimpered. Usually he was never this rough so long as she submitted meekly. Something was terribly, frighteningly different. Her father seemed even more gigantic than ever as his body pinned her beneath his heavy bulk. As he parted her limp, unresisting legs, her skirts, and petticoats became bundled into wall between them on her stomach, catching against her breasts as he entered her. He roared, infuriated by it and then, grabbing a handful of all those layers of cloth, ripped them cleanly and effortlessly away, more surely than the slice of a knife, like a child with a bit of soggy paper. The sudden vulnerability of it all left her stunned.

Her father slowed in his assault, his hand traveling over her belly. She would have sworn the pregnancy was not yet noticeable beneath her usual slight plumpness. Yet, somehow he saw or sensed it because he roared in fresh rage. "The cow is in calf. By that Guildsmon of yours?"

"No, father."

"Name him! So I can kill him! Filthy slut."

"No," Belyla said stubbornly, praying to Hadjys for the strength to protect Yahni from her father.

Wrathscar backhanded her and she cried out, but still refused to say Yahni's name. He caught her by the shoulders to be certain she received the full driving force of his rage in his next thrusts and she screamed in pain. That seemed to finally please him, because he bent his face, breathing along her neck. "You'll like this, Belyla."

He sank his fangs into her throat.

CHAPTER SIX

TO KILL A GOD

Edouina had reached the middle of the quad, walking a winding, lamp-lit path through the darkness, when a young pair accosted her. They looked as if they were fresh from the training grounds in old leathers with swords and belt knives, but the hour was much too late for that. The female was of middling height and her face too soft and full of emotion for Guild. Edouina suspected she was either a daughter of the nobility or one of the general students. The male, on the other hand, looked quick and able. Under other circumstances, Edouina might have wondered if he

could be Guild. However, Guildsmyn did not go looking for casual trouble as this pair obviously was.

"What's wrong with you?" the female demanded. "I've learned about Talons' long-term condition. She's been sick for years."

"She has?" Edouina asked suspiciously.

"You know it!" the second one said. "You won't let her take the medicine. What are you trying to do? Kill her?"

"You watch yourself. I'll call you out so fast—" the female said. "Just because you're a high and mighty Guildsmon..."

"You have it wrong. The medicine was hurting her."

"You're lying." The male swung, managing to land a solid blow to Edouina's face. She staggered back and then snapped a driving fist into his chin, decking him. The other one tackled her and they went down in the mud. Edouina heard someone shouting from across the quad for them to stop; and chose for the moment to ignore it in favor of kicking the shit out of them.

* * * *

Talons and Bryndel walked arm-in-arm through the underground corridors of the Cloverleaf connecting the music chamber to the palace, nearing the main turning where it branched off between the libraries and the training grounds. Oil lamps set in black metal brackets mounted to the gray, white and orange speckled stonewalls lit the walkway in glaring brightness. Nausea soured her stomach. She slowed, frowning. Sudden, cramping pain flared in her stomach and lanced up through her chest. She staggered, collapsing to her knees, breathing in short, sobbing gasps. "Uh ... uh ... uh." Her face tightened. She doubled over, clutching at her stomach and chest; then fell against him.

He brushed his fingers across her face. She felt cold to his touch and there were small drops of blood around her nose. Bryndel lifted her into his arms, running toward the palace. Her head rested against his shoulder and she looked at him in an unfocused manner. "It's happening again. What ... is causing ... this? I hurt ... so bad."

"I don't know," he said worriedly, pressing his cheek against her head. "I'll get a healer as soon as I get you to bed."

* * * *

Brandrahoon found the dog-eared rock easily, knowing the area around Charas well. It reared its unmistakable head above a sea of briars along the shores of the Hillora

River. He had made the journey to Charas on the wing, as a huge bat. Then he had picked up horses at one of his holdings and ridden out alone that morning, determined to keep the location of Galee's cache secret. Several centuries' growth of brown briars with three-inch thorns covered the area around the rock in thick natural armor. Brandrahoon tried cutting them away with his sword, only to watch them spring back, their growth redoubled almost as if they flashed back into existence. He cursed this magic and Galee for not giving him the key to undo them, slashing at them again. Galee had said nothing of this. In a screaming, heedless, uncharacteristic rage he began to strike with wild abandon. The briars caught his arm, ripping his flesh. Brandrahoon cried out, pulling his arm into his body and cradling it. Blood stained his sleeve and glistened for a moment on the sharp briar blades. The thorns drank in the blood greedily and the briars began to shrink, drawing back as he watched with widening eyes. He remembered that single statement of the ancient monster's – that the entrance would only open to one of her blood. *Blood, indeed.*

The mouth of the cave stood open to him, the smooth planes of its stones looked chiseled, as if it only mimicked the natural, the edges were too sharp and finely turned. This place was not an accident of nature discovered by Galee in her wanderings. No, this place had been made. Though whether that had been by the hand of Galee, or her servants, or someone else entirely he had no way of knowing and chose to disregard it. He stepped cautiously into the first chamber, watchful of guardians she had not mentioned. Galee liked to test her allies and her servants within an inch of their existence, honing them like living blades to her needs and requirements. She also, tended to break her tools when she no longer needed them – especially when they were mortal. Brandrahoon's eyes adjusted to the darkness, seeing shelves and cabinets thickly coated in a dusty film to his right. He lit a bit of candle he found waiting atop the nearest cabinet and looked about. He did not even bother to open the cabinets certain that anything of real value would not be found in the first room. That was where Galee, treacherous thing that she was, would set her traps for the eager and unwary. Further back he found two doors, sealed and lacking any apparent means of opening. Again he remembered her words about the blood – the undead blood. Brandrahoon cut his palm, pressed the bleeding wound to the doors and they opened. He smiled broadly, showing his large teeth and long fangs. The first room contained bladed weapons of all descriptions with strange, unreadable runes on both blade and hilt. The vampire lord could sense the power rising off them like the shimmering haze of heat.

"Good. Very good."

She had told him, in an off-handed way, that here were things that could kill a god. Which was exactly what he had in mind as the greater death that he had promised Prince Mephistis for his healing. Brandrahoon desired the deaths of a certain pair of aggravating divine twins or their progeny. He took his crystal orb of carrying from his pouch and, with a thought, sent several stacks of the weapons into it. Then he returned the orb to its resting place, walking into the next room where he found what looked like spellcords, but different, and nets that appeared to be made of the same

material. Being careful not to touch them, uncertain of what effect they would have on magic, Brandrahoon slipped on his gloves and he gathered the cords and nets into bags. Once secured, he put the bags into the orb. Finally he found a tiny casket of base metal with a note that said it could only be opened if Galee had perished and then only by one of her blood. That had to be the box. The sight of it made him hungry. Brandrahoon picked it up, discovering that it pulsed like a beating heart. He brought it to his face, sniffing. It smelled of blood and, before he could stop himself, he licked it. It tasted of power, screaming and shrieking through his mind. Brandrahoon staggered and almost fell. The box dropped from his hands. The chamber filled with images of cities burning; gigantic bonfires and people being thrown alive into the flames; demons and strange creatures dancing; and he saw Galee laughing as she embraced the vampire that had made her; he was strange beyond Brandrahoon's imagining, his image shifting and demonic. And then Brandrahoon realized he was watching the moment of Galee's turning. He dropped to his knees, covering his ears to close out the sound of her laughter. How could she laugh at the pain of her own death? When it finally ended Brandrahoon used a corner of his cloak to pick up the box again. He stowed it in the orb.

The final room stood empty save for a long mirror. Knowing how Galee used mirrors, he stood before it and called her name. She answered.

"I assume you found the box," she said, without so much as greeting.

"Of course."

"It contains the wisdom of the ages past. If anything should happen to me before you complete this creature you are making, open it beside her head on the night of the full moon, which is when it will awaken, and the knowledge will pass to it. It can only be passed to a newborn on its rising. It cannot be passed to one who has already risen. Then close the box and lock it away. It can be used again when that one has perished."

"Why only after you've perished?" Brandrahoon asked suspiciously.

"Because, I'll not have it used against me. That is the lock I placed upon it. Nor will I have my blood deprived of it. It is the knowledge of the Age of Burning. I have recorded the locations of all the caches of weapons the gods themselves fear in that box. I have mapped the uncleansed continents. There are several hoards, both magical and material, whose locations are marked. But I will not have these things put into play against me by one of my blood grown overly ambitious. If the newborn goes rogue, you can destroy him and make another. The knowledge is imbued in the box itself. But it must be closed and then opened again. Follow the instructions on the note."

"You trust me, Galee?"

"No, Brandrahoon," Galee smiled from the mirror. "I quit trusting you a long time

ago. However, our allegiances are to the same god. And for the sake of my soul, I will not see my work come undone."

* * * *

Galee watched the mirror go blank. Brandrahoon now had the final pieces he needed to create the nekaryiane, the death-angel. She needed the flesh of the nekaryiane and the blood of a sacred king to restore the fullness of her godhead, which had been stolen from her by Bellocar, her husband, when she rebelled against him and was thrown down in the days of the last great godwar. Brandrahoon believed it would give him mastery of the world, but he was wrong, the mastery would be hers.

"You are pleased, Galee?" Meilurk rose from his corner where he had sat beyond the sight of the mirror. The mirror magic was an old technology predating the godwar, which few had the art of.

"Yes." Galee rose, stretching. She hungered, but there were things to do before she could afford time to hunt. So she unlocked the door behind the mirror and took out another bottle of Lord Ky's blood. She carried it to the table and sat it down, then fetched two glasses, deciding to be generous.

Meilurk watched her pour and then turned the bottle in his hands to read the labeling. He could read the old language, for Galee had taught him. "Channadar's father? I suspected you had a hand in that."

"You are my favorite son, Meilurk. More loyal than Brandrahoon and Frozbrodarbrin. A gift from the Master of Blood. He will arrive for the party eventually."

"Have you found the branch clan? You know very well they'll try to take Creeya from you once you have it, raise the countryside."

"I am chasing them. I nearly had them a fortnight ago near St. Jon Dulac."

"Ambrose seems of the opinion there might be one of them in Havensword already." Meilurk sipped from his glass, rolling the blood around in his mouth like fine wine to savor it before swallowing. "A good vintage."

"Channadar's blood will be an even better vintage."

"I will cut him for you." Meilurk lifted his glass in toast.

Galee smiled. "I adore you, Meilurk. First we must find him at a disadvantage. I will not risk you needlessly against the Fae. Soon, soon, I will have Creeya and the means to free my accursed husband, which will release me from the geis. And the box will be opened and I will be restored. I will make you my priest and we will reign

over hell on earth together."

"Together, Galee." Meilurk raised his glass again and this time Galee clinked hers against his and they downed their drinks. "And if there is a member of the branch clan here, may I have him?" Meilurk brought the conversation back around again.

"If you find him before Ambrose."

* * * *

Twenty Guildsmyn from the military deployment branch entered the wing as Queiggy stood leaning upon the guardian desk speaking with the young mon manning it. Leonè led them in. They wore their dress uniforms with the gold embroidery at every seam along the heavy black fabric and the book and blade emblazoned large upon their chests with the crossed swords on the shoulders to show which branch they belonged to.

"What is this?" Queiggy muttered to his companion. Leonè was second to Galee in the deployment branch. The senior wing officer pushed away from the desk to face Leonè, his slender frame very straight, his hand on the sword at his side: Queiggy no longer needed the cane since partially renewing himself in the earth.

The stocky mon with the close-cropped sandy beard approached and dropped to his knees before the Wing Master. "We have come to pray, and wish your permission to withdraw into the wing."

"We need to discuss this in private, Leonè," Queiggy responded. "I grant it now on condition that I can and will rescind it if forced."

"We stand before you," Leonè's voice was harsh with strain and emotion. "We stand before you penitents, risen against the blasphemy of fiat, our lives be forfeit to Hadjys if we have chosen wrongly."

Queiggy's eyes widened in shock. The oath would demand that they take their own lives before the altars to Hadjys if their decision was proven to be wrong. Twenty-one myn willing to die by their own hands rather than obey Galee's orders. "You are all welcome here."

He knew he should have given them a more formal response, but he could not think. He snapped his fingers at an aide sitting on the benches.

"Show them to quarters and then to the chapels."

* * * *

Philomea entered the apartments, and as she went up stairs she saw that the lamps were still lit in Belyla's room, which meant that her sister must be upset. Belyla was a

weather vane and Philomea knew that Belyla's mood usually reflected their father's. If she had caught hell from him, then sooner or later the rest of them would also. Belyla might be the quietest of them, but she was also the most rebellious and outright defiant. And she was running with the wrong crowds – all of Terrys' Guild friends. Especially Yahni Kjarten. Philomea had noticed the way they looked at each other the day she made her pass at Yahni. Yahni was so beautiful. Philomea had wanted him terribly.

She decided to investigate what was wrong with Belyla and headed for her room. Philomea found the door cracked open. She heard nothing and pushed it completely wide with a soft knock. The room was a mess. Their father had been angry again. Bottles had been thrown from the dresser. She went further inside and, as she drew near the curtained bed, a scream welled in her throat. Her sister lay nude, ankles and wrists tied to the posts, staring sightlessly at the canopy, a long tear in her neck showed Philomea how Belyla had died. There was blood on her lips as if she had bitten him in her futile desperation to get free.

Philomea backed away from the bed, another scream trembling in her throat, pressing at her clenched teeth. She bumped into a chair, stumbled, and strong hands caught her. Philomea twisted in their grip, but they held her fast. She screamed again.

"Philomea," her father whispered in her ear.

Philomea looked into her father's face, his shining red eyes, his lips with blood smeared across them – Belyla's blood. "You killed her..." Philomea accused. "Like Mother. You killed her."

"She got what she deserved. She was seeing a Guildsmon, carrying his child. What is his name?"

"Father ... I don't know," Philomea lied, wishing desperately that no one would tell them. Certainly she would not. Yahni. What a pure sweet mon he was and too good for someone as stained as herself. She was terrified. Her father had been raping and beating them since early childhood, but he had never killed one of them as he had their mother, although he threatened often enough. Philomea prayed that she would not be next. She had done nothing wrong, except in her heart by wanting Yahni. She had obeyed the admonition to avoid Guildsmyn.

"I'm still hungry," Wrathscar said. That was when Philomea saw the fangs and knew it was all in vain and she would follow her sister into death. The monstrous mon had become a monster in truth and he would kill all of them.

* * * *

Talons lay in the middle of her low bed, her dozens of woven and embroidered pillows littered the floor. The west-facing windows looked down like blank, staring eyes above a long mahogany dresser. A wardrobe and a plain oak cabinet framed a

small closet. The healer rose from Reading her a second time, and gestured for Bryndel to step into the little parlor with her. She closed the door quietly as she turned to him.

"Well?" Bryndel demanded.

The spiderweb of lines around Sha's cornflower eyes deepened with her frowning. "I don't know," she said bluntly. "The children are fine. I found nothing at all untoward in her body. Anything strong enough to knock a Sharani down should leave a residue of some kind. There isn't any. For now, keep her warm and, when she wakes up, try to get liquids down her." She walked past him and out the door without another word.

Bryndel returned to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bedding for a long while after the healer left, watching Talons sleep. He brooded about Galee. Every time he thought he had matters under control and working nicely, she talked him into doing something shameful, or stupid, or just plain mean. His bad reputation stemmed mainly from actions that Galee persuaded him were the right things to do. Then once he had done them, he hated himself for it. Time and again, he promised himself that he would stop listening to Galee only to find himself persuaded once more.

"Face it, you're spineless," he muttered to himself. He remembered his mother, how much he had loved her, the soft hands that brushed away his tears. He should have gone to the Guild when his father killed her, but he had been too frightened, too terrified. The image of poor little nine-year-old Belyla curled up against their mother's body erupted from his memories. Bryndel had been fourteen. He took Belyla to his room and held her all night, both of them crying. That was when he stopped praying, which caused his dismissal from Guild training. Sometimes he wanted to kill his father. He shook it off.

This episode had set him to wondering whether his decision to stop slipping Talons the medicine had been the right thing to do. The medicine had been one of three drugs Galee mixed together.

Bryndel heard the door and saw Edouina come in. She held a piece of meat to her eye, her clothes were torn and muddy and her frown was enough to frighten the dead.

"What happened to you?"

Edouina lifted the meat for a minute to display her eye, black and swollen.

"Whoa! Who gave you the shiner?"

"None of your business. But, oh, honey, you should have seen the other two. A priest broke it up." Brawls were not infrequent; however, drawn-sword quarrels were strictly forbidden and formal dueling highly regulated. But that did not mean they did

not happen. Since the betrothal, the Wrathscar soldiers seemed more ready to draw steel and no one was stopping them. Protesting to the Grand Master achieved nothing.

"What was it about?"

"Idjit shit. Said I was trying to kill Talons by not giving her the medicine. Everywhere I've gone today, people are handing me shit about the bi-kyndi being a disease. A disease that requires medication. I explained to them as patiently as I could that it is not a disease; it is a result of the god Ishla Twice-Gendered's deliberate genetic changes and that I should know because I am one. I even tell them the story about how Ishla came up with it, looking for a non-magical solution to a magical problem – even you've probably heard about that problem we had with Aurean's curse, right?"

Bryndel nodded.

"You know what their response was, honey?" She had a droll grin as she waited for him to request the answer.

Bryndel shook his head, grinning back: he liked listening to her talk and watching the way she punctuated each sentence with theatrical gestures.

"They ask me what I'm taking for it."

"Edouina," Bryndel grabbed her hands to stop her from talking. "Edouina, Talons had another attack. Not as bad as the last one a few days ago. But bad. Real bad."

Edouina froze, swallowing. "When? Where did it happen?"

"The Cloverleaf. We were on our way back from the Music Chamber."

"Who did you meet there?"

"Several people, including Jimi and Alora, Sirikit, Tulik, Dynarien, Yukiah, a lot of students, foreign nobles. Galee and my father sat with us."

"Galee and your father?" Edouina's tone turned suspicious.

"Edouina! They would never hurt her. They have too much invested in this alliance. Galee gains too much influence. So does my father. I love her. I love you too. We're the planets revolving around her star."

Edouina sighed, lowering her eyes. "Bryndel, I want you to leave. I need to be alone with her."

"I understand. I truly understand." Bryndel gathered his things, preparing to depart,

when abruptly he turned, saying desperately, "Edouina, the healers cannot find anything in her body, no poison, nothing at all. She's sick, Edouina. That's all. No one's poisoning her. No one is doing anything at all to her. She's sick. All this morbid talk is not helping. I want it stopped. And I want it stopped now."

"Get out, Bryndel." Edouina advanced on him. "Get out now."

"You will stop, Edouina."

"To your face, but not behind your back."

Bryndel lifted his fist to strike, and Edouina gave him a withering smile. "Honey, throw that punch, and you'll wish you were dead."

Bryndel fled.

Edouina checked the closets first, and finally knocked on the pantry. "Arruth? Arruth, are you in there?"

The door opened a crack.

"Did you hear everything?"

"Yes," Arruth said in a very small voice.

"Come out and tell me what was said."

Arruth emerged, followed by three catkins.

* * * *

Queiggy sat alone with Leonè in his cellar apartments. When he had declared the 'up drawbridge' Queiggy had decided to move his living quarters here as it better served his needs. He wanted to be able to discreetly shove his fingers into the earth and draw power from it. It would not be as good as his garden, but it was far better than nothing at all. He grew more and more certain that he would need all the strength he could call on.

"So, what is going on, Leonè?" Queiggy demanded querulously.

Leonè dropped his head, rubbing at his beard in silence, considering for a long time.

"You have placed yourselves in my hands, now you must trust me," Queiggy pursued his point.

"My branch is withdrawing all over Creeya."

Queiggy's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "What?"

Leonè nodded. "The blasphemy of fiat has become too much. Our orders are becoming questionable. We believe we have been compromised. But we cannot prove it. There are no actively deployed Guild in Lord Wrathscar's domain, they have all retreated into the temples to pray. Two thirds of the deployment wing in Creeya has withdrawn into the temples. So far as I can tell, this is happening all over the continent. What is more, there are people who are calling themselves Guildsmyn and attempting to enter the temples. The priests refuse them entrance, claiming they sense a taint in them."

"Galee is losing her command to a silent mutiny."

"Yes." Leonè's voice was somber, his expression tired. "I felt that it was time that I joined them. That I showed my support for what they were doing."

"Your courage and honor are great, Leonè. I pray to our god that it does not cost your life."

"If my life is forfeit to my god, then it is forfeit. I have prayed long about this, my old friend. I know that you have made a similar choice."

Queiggy nodded. "With the 'up drawbridge' I have made myself complete Master of the Wing. We no longer trust Mohanja. Nor any of the upper echelons."

"Hadjys will look into our souls and decide when the game is played."

"As he will."

* * * *

Edouina walked down the long corridor at the top of the northeast wing. The council was not meeting that day so she had decided to try and see the Grand Master for herself. The corridor was a series of tall windows to her left, their stained glass throwing multi-colored light in distorted patterns across the floor and the intricate fresco of saints and heroes to her right. She noticed that some sections of the fresco had been covered over in fresh black plaster that made her skin prickle. There were too many troubling changes in the building. She arrived at the heavy carved mahogany doors leading into the Grand Master's star room and pounded on them.

The door swung open and Mohanja stood there. He did not ask her in. "Edouina, what do you want?"

"To talk to the Grand Master. About Talons."

Mohanja's eyes took on an odd look that Edouina could not interpret. "He does not

wish to speak to you. Go away."

"It's important. It's about Talons," Edouina repeated, annoyance creeping into her voice. She could not understand why the Grand Master could be so unconcerned about his granddaughter. He had always loved Talons so dearly.

"The Grand Master is sleeping."

"Then I will talk to you now and the Grand Master later."

A small black cat slipped around Mohanja's feet, listening. Edouina scooped the cat up. "Hello, Twizzle."

"That actually is his name? I thought I heard someone call him that." Mohanja thawed a bit.

"Yes, that's his name. Now do we talk?"

"With me, yes. The Grand Master, no. He refuses to talk to anyone concerning Talons. That is his policy." Mohanja stepped aside, allowing Edouina to enter the outer chamber.

She glanced around, startled at how much it had changed since the last time she had come here. Her eyes went to the tapestry of the naked women butchering the bull and she shivered. *What in Hell's name could have possessed the Grand Master to put that thing up?*

"Sit down," Mohanja said, indicating a chair.

Edouina sat and Mohanja did also. Twizzle jumped from her hands and found a corner under a chair to curl up. "Someone is poisoning Talons."

"Talons is ill. Possibly from having the bi-kyndi bound," Mohanja replied patiently.

"No one gets sick from having the bi-kyndi bound. I should know."

"I am sorry, Edouina, but I cannot take your word for that."

Edouina rolled her eyes, seeing that that would go nowhere. "And the vampire marks? There definitely is a vampire in Creeya. And it's been feeding on Talons."

"She created the marks herself. She doesn't want to marry Bryndel." Mohanja said, a vague discomfort entering his eyes.

"She's pregnant by him for Hadjys' Sake! Why wouldn't she marry him?"

"She's promiscuous. She wants to be sole regent for the grandchildren."

Edouina stared. Until then she had considered Mohanja a friend as much as a commander. Now she wondered seriously in whose camp he was actually in. "Yes, Lord Mohanja," she said stiffly.

"Everyone knows how the Sharani are. With the bi-kyndi bound, she can not get enough of it."

Anger rose hot in Edouina. "As you say, Lord, so it must be. With your permission, I will leave." Edouina stood at Mohanja's nod.

Mohanja stopped her at the door. "Edouina, a bit of advice. You will find no sympathy for Talons here. Look for it elsewhere."

"Yes, Lord, I will." Then she stalked out.

Mohanja watched her go, and closed the door. He had merely parroted back the information as he had been ordered to do by the Grand Master; he felt dirty for doing so. He had believed nothing that he had said, except the last. There was no sympathy for Talons among the upper echelons, except that of which he dared not speak. All of his attempts to reason with Takhalme had failed. His hands were tied.

* * * *

Edouina and Dynarien sat in the parlor at the little table, nibbling on a cheese plate that Jysy and Arruth had fetched from the kitchen. None of them were taking meals outside those rooms with any regularity, mounting a watch on Talons with unspoken accord. The incidents of her collapsing had grown more frequent, rather than less, and had them all worried. What made matters worse was the way Takhalme was closing himself off more and more, refusing to see anyone for any reason, especially if it concerned Talons; which had Patriarch Eshraf increasingly worried.

Edouina had chosen to downplay her fight on the quad as well as the attitudes and rumors she encountered daily whenever the subject of the kyndi and bi-kyndi came up or was – more often than not – shoved in her face by strangers. She suspected these rumors had been deliberately started, but had no clue as to why or with whom they might have originated. When she asked people where they had heard them, they usually did not remember or refused to answer and she got no farther. Apparently someone stood to gain by demonizing all the Sharani in Creeya. Or were they doing it just to take down a single Sharani? Herself or Talons? Or both of them? She wondered how the rest of the Sharani were managing in the face of this. There were a dozen or more just within the palace compound itself.

"Why would anyone, except the gossips, think Talons needed medicine? She's always been disgustingly healthy."

"I have no idea. I don't move about the palace or the school much, so I don't hear

the rumors. The drug has me puzzled," Dynarien said. "I keep finding trace amounts of something I don't recognize. I'm also finding damage I can't account for. The two don't seem related. Yet they must be."

"We get complacent some times. I mean 'we' as in Sharani, honey. It's very hard to poison us. Ishla's tinkering gave us a resistance to venoms and poisons that's almost immunity. A pound of arsenic wouldn't give us any thing worse than an upset stomach. I knew a Sharani – we had gone to Jedrua on assignment – got bit by a snake, something called a mamba, the venom didn't give her so much as a rash. Trouble is, we forget that there's still stuff out there that can bring us down. We forget to be careful."

* * * *

Yahni dropped by Terrys' apartments that morning. He looked haggard and worried. For the last three nights he had had to struggle for whatever sleep he managed to get. "Have you seen Belyla?" he asked. "I cannot find her. I waited all night for her to return to the temple and she didn't come. I've sent messages, but our friends cannot find her either. Nor have I heard from her in any way."

Terrys sighed. "I'm certain she's all right."

Yahni's expression turned sad. "Could she have changed her mind about me? Regretted the marriage?"

Terrys put an arm around his shoulder, giving him a companionable hug. "Belyla loves you, Yahni. If it's any consolation, none of Wrathscar's daughters have been seen in days. He must have taken them away again. He does that sometimes."

"Is there a way to find out where they are? To get word to Belyla?"

"Well, I tell you what, Yahni. I do know where Wrathscar's manor is in town. I'll find an excuse to go look for her. I've been there and they know me."

Yahni smiled. "Thank you, Terrys. I appreciate it." He carried in his pocket letters from his relatives in Shaurone. They had agreed to allow him and Belyla to come there and live; to allow him to serve in their household as befitted his talents. He imagined the smile on Belyla's face when he shared the letters with her. They could finally run away together. Then their marriage would no longer need to be a secret.

* * * *

Galee opened the book and, as she read, she changed her mind and decided to postpone putting Bryndel into play for a few more days. Queiggy had suspected the vampire was a Lemyari. Interesting. How could his mind have made such an incredible leap? At least they were looking for a male vampire. In that much she was safe. She shoved the book into the fireplace and watched it burn. The Guild worked

in teams when the game was this dangerous. Who were the others? She had lost all but one of her Guild Wing lesser bloods – they could only enter if invited and that was not likely to happen now – and the up drawbridge had been declared which meant Queiggy's entire division was on alert. She needed to discover who the leadership units were. Who planned this little escapade? Yukiah? Yukiah was a very dangerous mon. Where and who was the yuwenghau? It had to be Dynarien, yet she had not caught so much as a glimpse of him entering or leaving Talons' rooms.

The healers' records and tissue samples, which they had crystaled, would need to be destroyed also. That should be easy to take care of. A knock came at her door.

"Come in!" she yelled crossly.

Six guardsmyn began dragging long chests into her apartments.

"What is this?"

"A shipment for you, My Lady," the captain answered.

Galee rose, looking at them curiously. She strolled over, noticing the black and crimson crest, and her eyes widened. "Lord Darmungaard! All the way from Charas! I must inform Lord Wrathscar that the gifts have arrived for the wedding."

"Awful heavy gifts, My Lady."

Toys that can kill a god usually are. Galee smiled, clapping her hands delightedly, and then laughed. Brandrahoon's alias in Creeya was Lord Darmungaard.

"I believe you will want to examine my wares as well as the gifts from Lord Darmungaard, My Lady?"

"Zarliche!" Galee exclaimed and her whole face lit up with undisguised pleasure as the simple mon of middle height emerged from the shadows beyond the doorway. He wore an open sided black coat with pockets over a nondescript brown tunic and baggy trousers tucked into polished boots. Two large satchels stuffed to capacity hung at his sides, their wide straps criss-crossing his chest. "Zarliche! You came yourself! I knew you were coming eventually, but I never expected you so soon. This is marvelous."

She kissed the Master of Blood impulsively on the cheek.

Master Zarliche Blood embraced her. "You always were a favorite, Galee, even when you were just a wee little bit of a thing. Your letters intrigued me, so I thought I'd have a look and see what kind of fun I could get into with you."

"Can I offer you a drink?"

"You know my tastes, Galee."

"I certainly do and I've already put several bottles by."

He grinned broadly. "That's my girl."

Master Zarliche Blood of MZB Cartage and Hauling, doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that on the side for those who knew what to ask for, was a strange creature who passed for human – but was not to an eye that knew what to look for. She needed to caution him about the Fae.

* * * *

Sha arrived early at the healers annex on the east end of the palace, the one laying between the Grand Master's Wing to the northeast and the Guild wing to the southeast. The door stood ajar and that sent a chill of suspicion up her spine. She carried in her hand Queiggy's requisition of all healer records and tissue samples from the period of the last vampire attacks thirty years ago, plus the results from three odd cases of soldiers found dead in alleys with evidence of fast spreading necrosis around tiny single puncture wounds. One of those bodies had been found to be unclean and Eshraf had removed its heart so that it could not rise undead.

"Tollo?" Sha called the name of the healer who had been on call during the night and should have been inside. There was no answer. She nudged the door open with her foot and saw the edge of the room littered with broken glass, pieces of shattered furniture and pooling liquids from shattered containers. Tension threaded her body as she gave the door a solid kick to open it all the way. Tollo's corpse lay head down and broken backed across the edge of a table that had half its legs broken off so that it rested like an off-kilter pyramid in the middle of the debris covered floor. His entrails had been torn out and distributed across him like a contemptuous after thought. Sha's stomach heaved and she forced it to settle.

"Sha?"

Shaheeramaat turned to see three of her healers heading up the corridor toward her. "Go back! Dorie, tell Queiggy to get someone up here fast. Tollo's dead."

"Shall I fetch the guard also?" Dorie, a plump, soft-faced woman asked calmly.

Sha almost smiled at Dorie's clear-headedness and lack of panic. "No. Just tell Queiggy to send someone."

Then Sha went in. She stepped carefully amid the debris, not wanting to disturb the scene before they could get a Guildsmon up to look it over for clues. However, she doubted they would find much. Her eyes scanned the room and a small movement caused her to pivot, a swift twist of her hands freed the throwing stars in her armsheath to slip into her palm. Tollo's pet mouse, Zinny, quivered in a corner. Sha

scooped him up.

"Poor little thing, I wish you could talk." Sha put Zinny on her shoulder and stepped to Tollo's body, squatting beside it. Zinny immediately burrowed into her thick black hair. She saw the fang marks in Tollo's neck – vampire or sa'necari, they both fed in that manner. Vampires fed from need and sa'necari for pleasure mainly, since their physiological requirements for blood were modest and infrequent. The fangs of each type of hemovore differed slightly. Sa'necari fangs were like needles, vampire fangs were broader with a tiny hook on the end, which tended to leave a scrape mark.

Tollo's sleeves and pants legs were torn. She flipped one dead wrist over, found more marks of feeding, and Read him. They had broken his back first and then fed. The entrails art had been done after he was dead. That was small comfort. His eyes stared sightlessly at her with an expression of horror in them. Sha sucked in a series of fortifying breaths.

"What is going on?" Aramyn's crisp voice in the hallway alerted her to his arrival. She turned Tollo's wrist back into the position she had found it in and straightened.

"I'm in here," Sha said. Of all the ones Queiggy could have sent her, Aramyn was the best. He was a cool-headed investigator, a mild-looking mon in his mid forties, clean-shaven and dark.

"Holy damnation!" Aramyn muttered, stepping into the room. "Sha, check and see if anything is missing."

Acting on instinct, Sha pulled open several cabinet drawers. "Files. All the files from thirty years ago are gone." Then she walked to the sample room and cursed in a long string at all the broken crystals on the floor, drawers turned out and thrown around, shelves pulled down and furniture smashed. "And all the tissues samples. What they didn't take, they destroyed."

Aramyn and she went through each room, finding all of them in the same condition. It made her stomach tighten. She checked her office last and started sucking air again. Written on the wall in blood was a message:

"BACK OFF, SHA!"

"I suspect that whoever did this does not like me," Sha observed wryly.

"Guess not." Aramyn shrugged. "You know what killed him? I'm assuming you've already Read the body."

"About four vampires and a sa'necari."

"We've got sa'necari in Havensword?"

"That's what I said." She replaced the throwing stars in their sheaths.

"If I were you, Sha, I'd start keeping a heavier weapon around than those stars."

"I have a couple of crossbows in my apartment."

Aramyn gave a nod. "I'd get them, if I were you."

* * * *

Galee shrieked. "You turned all four of them?"

Meilurk and his three companions stood just behind her, ready to intervene should Wrathscar and his four daughters try anything untoward. They sat in the upstairs study of Wrathscar's mansion in Havensword; Philomea, and Elomina – as always – seated upon the divan, and Darguarite and Belyla in chairs. Wrathscar's daughters averted their eyes from the scene, to stare at their hands folded precisely in their laps.

Standing in the middle, Wrathscar shrugged.

Galee caught him by the throat, slamming him against the wall of his study. "All four? What about Bryndel? You didn't touch Bryndel, did you?"

"My daughters yes. Bryndel no."

"Bryndel belongs to me." Galee scanned the room. She released him as her eyes were drawn to Belyla.

"Belyla..." Galee sauntered over to her. "You will kill your Guildsmon. He will be your first kill."

Belyla cringed and began to weep. Galee imprisoned her chin, forcing her face up. "I know the smell of consecrated blood. I will know if you did it or not. Disobey me and I will punish you for eternity. I will find him myself and kill him in front of you." Galee released her, turning to the last three. "Philomea, Elomina, Darguarite. You will come with me and we will decide who will become your first kills. But they will be made tonight. Belyla, go find your Guildsmon immediately, and do not return without his blood on your lips."

* * * *

Belyla fled to her bedroom as soon as the others left the study and threw herself down on her bed. Her father had given her her first taste of blood from a bottle days ago and, to her horror, she had liked it. She craved more, yet sorrow and fear overrode her cravings and she had not yet plunged her fangs into a living mon.

I have lost my child and now you intend that I lose my mate? Belyla wondered, feeling chilled. *I will fight you. I won't hurt Yahni. I won't!* There was blood in the house, but they had refused to let her feed once Galee discovered what she had become. Galee was determined that the only blood she received was from her Guildsmon.

"You're wanted in the study," Meilurk said from her doorway.

With dragging feet, Belyla obeyed and returned to her father's study. Her three sisters sat in their usual places. Blood splattered their clothing, rimmed their mouths, and they had expressions of satiation on their faces. Philomea licked her blood-coated fingers clean with slow sensuality.

Belyla flinched, casting her eyes on the floor.

Galee watched the way Belyla wavered and gestured at Meilurk. "Bring me one of the captives."

Belyla cowered lower into her chair. *Yahni, my husband. My love.*

Meilurk returned, dragging a gagged and bound male. Galee took him to Belyla. "This is how you will do it, Belyla. This is your lesson." Galee caught Belyla by the arm, pulling her close and forcing rapport. Belyla cried out at the intrusion into her mind.

<The throat, Belyla. That is the fastest way to kill them. That is how you will do it. Like this. > Galee sank her fangs into the captive who shuddered and tried to scream, but the sound could not escape the cloth.

Belyla wept, even as a sensation of intense pleasure swept through her, feeling the way the man convulsed and twitched and jerked before finally going still. She felt hungry. *No. No. Not my Guildsmon.*

<Damn you, Belyla! If you will not kill him quickly, at least sweep his mind away and dance him to death. I want him dead and you will do it . >

Belyla crumpled and Galee released the rapport. Then and only then did Belyla let herself think of Yahni's name and it made her hungry. *Yahni, I love you. I can't. I can't.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIES

Galee waltzed down the double line of the long tables toward her place beside the Grand Master on the dais at the head of the hall. Nearly every woman at the long

tables watched her surreptitiously beneath the veils of their eyelashes or from the corners of their eyes, their expression burning with either envy or jealousy – most of them wives or sweethearts who feared her next bedroom conquest would be their nearest and dearest. Men watched her with hungry eyes, cataloging the well-displayed charms of her body. Galee's bedroom reputation grew larger with each re-telling and, as the Grand Master's principal lord-lieutenant in the Guild, she had sufficient rank to carry it off with no one hassling her about it – at least not to her face. Servants hurried around her. She spotted a brawny male pushing a beverage cart. Galee put her hand on his shoulder, briefly draping herself around him as if making a lascivious suggestion. "A little medicine with dinner. Make it black. Then a roll in the hay later?"

The servitor laughed and she swished on.

Galee had begun to rotate the formula, three days red, fourth day black; with the black being the most highly concentrated form. She halted at Talons' back, draping an arm around her shoulder. "You're looking beautiful tonight. Pregnancy becomes you. It's a shame the wedding can't be held until fall. There's sooo many details, you know."

Talons looked up at her, uneasily. "I know."

Galee smiled to herself. Even with the makeup the servants had begun putting on her face, Talons looked weaker and more wan with each passing day, although not yet outright sick – that would come. When people noticed the changes, they usually wrote it off to the pregnancy combined with weird Sharani genetics. *If I could just get past those wards, my work would be far easier. I could once more have her drinking it while I watched. I enjoyed that. Such a pleasant time we shared.* "Please, enjoy this wine, it's very good." Then she continued on to her place beside the Grand Master.

* * * *

Blood red wine. Talons stared at it as the server set it by her plate. Every night it was blood-red wine. The lack of variation bored Talons and she found herself losing interest in even her favorite things. With Hanadi gone on her wanderyear as a Shardith, Galee seemed to have set herself up as queen of the palace in her place, overseeing every thing. Takhalme – having chosen not to remarry after the death of Talons' last step-grandmother – had given over most of the day to day running of the palace to his female lieutenants: Hanadi and Galee. Now, for a year, it was just Galee.

Talons sipped the wine, at least it was a good vintage, she had to grant Galee that much. Bryndel watched her ignore the food going by and started filling her plate himself.

"You must eat, Talons," he admonished her, looking so excessively concerned that

it was almost comical.

"It makes me nauseous looking at it. Especially the meat. It looks ready to crawl off the plate." Talons pushed the plate away, taking a large swallow of the wine. "The wine is the only thing that seems to go down right."

Bryndel removed the meat to his own plate. "Well, you can't make a meal on wine." He piled some large roasted mushrooms in sauce on Talons' plate and pushed it back at her. "There, please eat some of the mushrooms. They were always your favorite."

Talons finished the wine and turned to Bryndel, "How did you know that?"

Bryndel smiled. He cut a piece of mushroom on her plate, extending it on the fork like a parent with a reluctant child. "Eat this and I'll tell you."

Talons accepted the mushroom, chewing it slowly. It tasted good. She did not want to eat: she felt so exhausted that even chewing and swallowing took effort.

Bryndel's smile widened. "You never paid any attention to me. Rank meant nothing. Everyone knew your grandsire had promised you a love match. I have loved you since we were children. I watched everything you did. I made note of everything you liked. I dreamed about you." He rattled off a list of Talons' favorite things, so complete it stunned her. "I never dreamed – until your cousins died, making you heir – that there was the slightest possibility for me. I did not want to annoy you by pursuing you."

The server came by and, after a glance at Galee, which got him a nod, refilled Talons' glass. She reached for it, but Bryndel covered it with his hand. "Eat the mushrooms first, please."

Talons smiled slowly, realizing that she had started to like him now that he was not making an ass of himself. "Okay." She ate determinedly, finishing the mushrooms.

"That's better." Bryndel let her have the glass.

Talons drank the second glass more quickly than the first. Bryndel's hand stole onto hers and stayed there. Dizziness came over her in a sudden wave. She clutched his hand. "Bryndel..." She toppled over, falling against him.

"Oh, gods!" He rose, sweeping her into his arms. "Call a healer! I'm taking her to her rooms."

Galee nudged Wrathscar, "Quick, my lord, see that there's no healer available for him to send for save Solance."

Wrathscar left the table.

* * * *

Yahni returned another stack of books to the shelves, wondering what Queiggy could possibly be searching for now. Everyone was talking about the murder in the healer's chambers, and yet here was Queiggy going over stuff that happened in Havensword last year, last ten years actually. And he wondered where Belyla was. Tollo was the healer who confirmed her pregnancy before sending her along to Sha. Could there be a connection? Was Belyla all right? The last three days seemed to drag with interminable slowness.

"Yahni?" Jajinga stood at the base of the ladder, his hands on the rungs, looking up at him. "I have something for you."

"If it's more work, forget it!" Yahni forced a grin as he looked down at him.

"It isn't. It's something you want." Jajinga pulled a small folded paper from his pocket and waved it at Yahni.

"Belyla?"

Jajinga grinned. "Yeah."

Yahni came quickly down and took it from his hands, opening it.

Yahni,

I love you. Come to Terrys' suites, I'm waiting.

Belyla

* * * *

Galee sat at her desk, writing steadily. Wrathscar paced, pausing now and again to watch her. Evening had darkened into night and Wrathscar was always more restless and irritable at night. Galee tried to ignore him. She wanted to get all of her notes recorded before Solance finished with Talons and brought her more. Belyla had not yet returned with the blood of her Guildsmon and that aggravated her as much as Wrathscar's pacing.

"You are always writing in that damned book. You promised me a hunt." He walked over and stared down at it. "I cannot read the words."

"You are not supposed to read them. If you wish to hunt, go without me. Meilurk will be glad to accompany you."

"I do not wish to go without you. Put the damned book away."

"When I have finished."

Wrathscar snatched it out of her hands and threw it against the wall. "You will hunt with me."

Galee's eyes blazed red and she seemed to rise from her chair like flame, catching him by the throat without her feet touching the ground, floating. She hurled him effortlessly across the room to strike the same wall as the book. "Pick it up."

"Fuck you, Galee. You're never there for me, anymore." He turned on his heels, striding out.

"Meilurk!" Galee snapped and the Lemyari emerged from his room onto the top of the stairs. "Follow him and keep him out of trouble."

* * * *

Bryndel carried Talons to her apartments followed by two servants. A third had been sent for a healer, and Solance showed up at the doors at the same time as they reached them. Edouina let them inside, following Bryndel closely and glaring at Solance.

Edouina's eyes met Bryndel's and they locked for an instant. "Don't say it, Edouina. She's sick. She*is* sick."

"I don't want him in here," Edouina pointed at Solance.

"He stays. Argue with me and I'll summon the guard and have you put out until he's finished."

Edouina withdrew to lean against the pantry door in case Arruth decided to appear.

Solance, left alone with Talons, ignored them. He opened a vial of liquid so dark red it was black and added it to wine, which he helped Talons drink. Then he put the vial away, wiped the glass out to make certain no traces remained, packed his things and left.

As soon as they were alone, and before Edouina could start on him, Bryndel turned with his hands palm outward. "Let me explain. I told him them I didn't want Solance, but if they couldn't find anyone else to bring him."

Edouina relaxed. "Oh. That's different. Give me room to cool off. We'll talk tomorrow."

Edouina chased Bryndel out immediately and then summoned Dynarien. The evening was pleasantly warm, yet Talons lay shivering under a bright blanket, caught

in cold sweats and chills, only half-aware of her surroundings. The lovely embroidered pillows she loved to nestle among were pushed aside into little heaps along the edge of the bed against the wall. Small whimpering noises emerged from far back in her throat and she stirred restlessly.

Holding her wrist, the yuwenghau Read Talons.

"I've found it, but I don't know what it is." Dynarien was the only Reader sensitive enough to find the drug. "If they keep getting this stuff into her, sooner or later, she'll die."

"I can't understand why they'd want to kill her," Edouina sounded exasperated. "They've got what they want. She's pregnant, they're getting handfasted. The throne will eventually belong to the Wrathscar lineage. Why are they doing this? It can't be Wrathscar; he stands to lose too much if she dies. The mon must know an incredible amount about Sharani and their resistance factor to get around it so easily."

"We're missing something, and we don't know where the vampire fits into all of this. I wish I knew who we're dealing with."

"Well, I say she stops going to dinner. Too many people have access to her there. They're probably putting it in her wine or something. That's standard procedure for Guildsmyn who like poison. Might even be a servant. They've been subverted before, honey."

"I'm starting to dislike your people."

"Dynarien, I did not mean to imply that a Guildsmon was doing this. Guildsmyn would not hurt an innocent. We take our oaths very seriously. However, most Creeyans – even among the nobility – aren't Guildsmyn."

* * * *

Galee smiled at Yolany from across her black-lacquered, parlor table. The firefly had finally succumbed to Galee's blandishments, and accepted her invitation to visit privately. "I am so glad you came to visit me." She poured wine into glasses and handed one to Yolany.

"It was hard to get away..." Yolany began, holding the delicate glass by the stem with her fingers pressed along the edges of the side in a nervous manner.

"I understand completely. The Fae are very possessive..."

"No, it's not that. Channadar doesn't like you."

Galee sighed heavily. "I hesitate to tell you this. I don't wish to get into another fight with Channadar. I suppose he is a good mon in his way..."

"Tell me what?" Yolany leaned closer, her expression as eager as a hungry gossip. "I've always wondered and I'll never tell anyone..."

"The real reason Channadar banned me? The reason he hates me?" Tears welled up in Galee's eyes, and she put on a tragic face.

"Please, Galee." Yolany put a comforting hand on Galee's shoulder. "You've been good to me."

Galee nodded slowly. "Channadar ... wanted me. He knows my reputation ... I am free with my favors, but I am picky."

"You have every right to be."

"I refused him. He was not content to remain on his holdings ... he had to come here after me. You have no idea what happens when he catches me alone. I am terrified of him, but there is nothing I can do."

Yolany's eyes widened. "I'm sorry. I am so very sorry."

"Thank you. You understand that this must not come out... I would be as humiliated as if I were a prostitute crying rape."

"Of course. Channadar is a tyrant. He treats Juna shamefully. His own brother."

"I understand and I sympathize. If I can think of any ways to bring your sweet Juna into his own proper status, I will."

Yolany's eyes glittered suddenly. "Oh, Galee, if you only could."

"Tell me, is there somewhere Channadar goes to be alone?"

* * * *

Yahni did not stop to change from his uniform when he got off shift, but went straight on to Terrys' apartments. Terrys glowed with happiness when she let him in. Relief and joy surged through Yahni at seeing Belyla sitting on Terrys' couch in a delicate blue dress that was one of his favorites. She rose when he entered.

"Oh Gods, Belyla!" Yahni crossed the room in three quick strides, took her in his arms, and held her tightly. "I was so afraid for you. I was so worried. I love you, Belyla."

"I love you, Yahni," Belyla said, her eyes large and uncertain.

Yahni sensed sadness in her as he kissed her. "Let's go riding."

"Not in this ... but I have something else." Belyla ran upstairs and changed quickly into a soft blue dress with a split skirt.

Yahni hugged Terrys briefly. "Thank god, you found her."

Terrys smiled. "I didn't find her, she came back. I told you she would not stay away. She loves you."

Yahni took Belyla out through a postern gate and onto the mountainside where he knew the wildflowers were blooming in abundance. He wanted a lovely place to show her the letters. They could leave for Shaurone on a moment's notice.

For a while they simply rode. She seemed too quiet all the way; as if something were troubling her and he could get nothing from her. It dismayed him to see her like that. Yahni sensed so much sadness in her that he wished she would explain it. Something bad had happened to her, but he knew he would have to wait until she felt comfortable enough to tell him. He suspected that her father had caught her packing.

Finally they found a spot they liked and dismounted. They gathered flowers and he got her to smiling, stealing kisses while she struggled to braid them together, giggling. Gradually she began to seem more like herself. When Belyla had had enough of that she shoved him backwards playfully and opened his shirt, rubbing her hands over him, avoiding the godmark, which she usually stroked. He was so overjoyed to have her back that he failed to notice it. She unbuckled his sword belt and tossed his blades aside as she opened his pants. Yahni fumbled with the fastenings on her bodice, becoming intent on the all the little hooks and eyes along one side, so he did not notice the sudden expression of intense sadness that entered Belyla's face again. Her fangs flashed in the bright sun and she sank them into his upper arm.

Pain, weakness, confusion. He tried to twist and push her off, pull loose from her, succeeding only at ripping his arm worse as her fangs were deep sunk. In a wild twist of thought, he wondered why she had not gone for his throat and a quick kill. "Belyla! Belyla, please!"

A rising sense of panic gripped him as she fed. He should have hit or kicked her. Yet his love was a stonewall of inhibitions blocking his ability to react, despite the monstrousness of what she was doing. For a moment he was trapped between terror and love, between action and reaction. Then all he wanted to do was get her loose. He caught her hair, twisting her head and tearing his arm still more as he tried to free himself. His blood ran warm down his bicep. She shoved him back with the strength of the undead, pinning him. Her sucking came hard and frantic, taking his blood in long desperate pulls. The swift blood loss overcame him, and Yahni fainted, not expecting to wake.

* * * *

Galee sent for Bryndel on the afternoon following Talons' collapse in the Great Hall at dinner. She stopped writing and closed her journal when he came in to snap at him. "I warned you," Galee said. "You should have kept giving her the medicine. The bi-kyndi is a delicate thing. Having it blocked has made her fragile. The Temple of Ishla warned me that it might. It makes the pregnancy more difficult."

"I never dreamed..." Bryndel said lamely. He felt helpless and confused, wondering how trying to do something right could go so wrong.

"Exactly. And what did the Patriarch say about the medicine?"

Bryndel sighed, ducking his head. "He said he was not familiar with some of the ingredients, but he did not think it would hurt her."

"This will teach you to listen to me. I am, after all, the one who fetched it from the Ishlani temple." Galee looked severe. "The idiots don't want her to get it. You must simply put it in some wine and give it to her each and every day. Don't let them catch you. If you want her to get better, you'll do what I say and not listen to those who have no idea what they are talking about."

"I promise."

"Get out of here."

Galee watched him go. The drug was subtle indeed. A little of it did no harm at all. In fact, before the elder gods arrived, many of her people took it for its soothing effects. However, sustained over-dosing – like they were doing with Talons – weakened and finally killed. The children would not be harmed, because the kyndi would prevent the drug reaching them. She had twisted the formulation further, enhancing it with magic and other arcane substances. It disappeared into her body's chemistry, disguising itself as natural substances, lodging in the cells, nerves, any place it could find to hide and eat away at her. Sharani were marvelous creatures when it came to reproduction. It would take months to bring her down, but Galee had calculated it well: they would have the children's claim to the throne, but Talons would not be alive to interfere. Nor would the Grand Master. Bellocar, her liege-god, would have Creeya and the Guild. Then no realm in the entire world would be safe. The age of darkness would return. Eventually she would shatter the escarpment and free him. Then she would turn on him and take it all for herself.

Galee opened her journal again and began to write. They had found a Sharani bi-kyndi healing master who could, in a pinch, intervene to save the children if Talons began to die too soon. Solance, on the other hand, felt that a blade birth could be safely achieved, cutting the children from Talons' dying body, as early as late fall or early winter. She needed to subvert another healer, preferably two.

She looked up at a knock on her door. "Come in."

Yolany entered, bringing Tongari, another of Juna's four fireflies.

Galee closed her ledger. "I am so glad to see both of you. You have no idea how wondrous it is to finally have someone I can talk to."

* * * *

Yahni opened his eyes and stared out at the bright stars, like moonstones against black velvet. They were always brighter, it seemed to him, here in the mountains than down on the plateaus near the Iradrim borders where his father and Lord Uncle held their lands. He lay looking through the wide windows of the Swan Room, windows visible only from the inside looking out. He did not know how he could have gotten here until the sound of Belyla's weeping suggested it – that and the pain in his arm. She had settled him here half-seated like a rag doll amid the down-filled pillows and fluffy comforters where they had met so often to make love. He breathed in shuddering catches as if his lungs could not entirely work properly. Yahni could not yet find the strength to turn his head and look at her, but he could discern the sound of her rocking chair and the crackle of a fire in the little fireplace – he knew exactly where she was in the room. He crawled the fingers of his other hand across his body to his wounded arm and, as he did, brushed them against his sword belt – she had given him his blades back when she dressed him. Oddly, he felt no comfort in that. They had turned his bride. Their unborn child must have died instantly. His sorrow was a hollowness in the pit of his stomach. Then he clutched convulsively at the wound where he had torn himself trying to dislodge her.

"What have you done to me?" his words emerged in a struggling whisper, his heart, and soul feeling torn and betrayed – more torn than his body. Had she returned simply to feed upon him and, eventually, to kill him in the Passion-Dance in which the undead mistook appetite for love. Belyla had become one of those monsters he was honor bound to destroy ... and yet, he could not see her that way. Struggle as he could, Yahni could not bring himself to see Belyla as a monster.

Belyla came from the rocking chair, clutching a small swan-doll tightly to her chest that he had not seen before as she dropped to her knees by the bed. He turned his head to look at her and the movement was more a limp flopping than a controlled turning.

"Not what they wanted me to. Not all of it," she hastened to add, her eyes desperate, frightened. "They told me to kill my Guildsmon. I'm still hungry ... but I was afraid if I drank anymore you'd die."

He could see that if he took too long to answer, to reassure her she would take it as rejection and that would be a disaster, but he always had trouble sorting things out quickly. Yahni was thorough, not fast. From the way his arm felt, she must have tied the wound up with a bit of her petticoat before dressing him again. "Take it easy. Take it easy. Just talk to me. Then they don't know who I am?"

"No." Belyla chewed her lip intermittently as she spoke, struggling not to cry. "The master turned me several days ago. We were seen together, Yahni, and he was angry... They never saw your face, only your uniform. He raped me. Killed the baby ... killed me."

Yahni closed that out. He thought of the letters in his pocket with their promise of a place to go with her – a sanctuary now denied by what Belyla had become. "You can't turn me, Belyla. I'm godmarked and I have no intention of repudiating it and it cannot be forced. I'd rather die."

"I would never ask that, Yahni. I love you. But I had to make them think... I had to go back, smelling of your blood. If I did not kill you, I was to at least take your mind. I did neither. Your mind is your own." Belyla's eyes filled and she clutched the doll tighter.

"What lineage?"

"Lemyari. The one who stands first is Lemyari."

"Who are they?" Yahni began to feel dizzy again, tired and weak, he closed his eyes and fell back against the pillows.

"I can't tell you. I can't tell you!" Belyla started to become hysterical, but seeing his eyes close, one hand released the doll to clutch at him instead. "Don't die! Don't let me have killed you! I love you, Yahni."

"I love you, Belyla." His voice had gone very soft, as if speaking from a distance and his head rolled back into the depths of the pillows. "If the Guild discovers what you are, they'll destroy you. If your people discover who I am, they will kill me. If you make a kill, Hadjys will part us forever."

Belyla gave a despairing scream and crumpled sobbing. Yahni lay in silence for a long time, too exhausted to do anything else. Finally he found the strength to force words out between breaths again. "Belyla, go to my rooms. Not the Guild rooms. They will not let you in. The apartments I share with Maya. The wardrobe by the windows. In the bottom is a chest with pouches. Bring the pouches. The amphereon should get me on my feet enough to show up for my shift." Developing a dependency on amphereon was an ugly thought, but missing shifts would make Queiggy suspicious. "I believe it might be wise for you to disappear and live here in the swan-room. Where did you find the doll?"

"I've been exploring. There's an abandoned star room on the seventh spindle."

"You've found Alysijn's gryphon chamber? The swanspire?" Once that would have thrilled him, but now it only deepened his sorrow, which seemed to be all he was capable of feeling.

"Is that what it is? It's bigger on the inside than on the outside."

"Then that's what it is. Now go on. Fetch the pouches."

She rose to go and he called her back. "Wait." He lifted his uninjured arm to her and she came, pressing herself against him. She began to cry and he wept with her.

* * * *

Edouina, Jysy, and Arruth had taken turns sitting with Talons through the night. Bryndel came early in the morning so that they could get breakfast. He closed the intervening door, ostensibly so that the two students sitting in the parlor would not disturb Talons with their talking. He immediately poured a glass of wine and put the medicine in it. Then he supported her while she drank it. Solance – the healer Edouina periodically chased off for his recurring remarks about Sharani sexual and reproductive habits – had prescribed a glass of wine in the morning and evening to both increase her appetite and help her rest. Talons slept more and, yet, appeared less rested for all of it.

"You've got to get better," he told her. "You've got to. I love you."

"I know," Talons said, closed her eyes, and slid back into the warm darkness of sleep.

Bryndel heard some clatter in the outer room and opened the door, sticking his head out. Cass was cleaning – she'd banished the students to the corridor so she could sweep. Bryndel relaxed when he saw her; like everyone else who knew her, Cass made him feel safe and comfortable. He trusted her.

"Do it quietly, she's sleeping," he admonished her gently, trying not to be offensive. Edouina had warned him about it, and Bryndel was trying hard to mend his manners.

"Certainly, Master Bryndel. I've brought fresh blankets and sheets. I'll leave them on the couch and come back later to change them when she's awake."

"Thank you, Cass."

* * * *

Channadar slipped through the palace that night, wearing comfortable old silks, pants and tunic. His fans were tucked in his belt. He found the gryphon lamp, a flower with a gryphon on it. It was the only one like it in this annex to the Northeast Wing. The other lamps lining the wall were formed of simple cloisonné flowers. He turned the lamp and the stairs opened. Channadar smiled at that. He slipped inside and turned the gear that set the lamp back as he had found it, closing the door to the stairs behind him.

The gryphonspire of Alysijnin was his favorite place to be alone. He climbed the stairs quickly and emerged into the muted light of the chamber.

He thought of Leeza. Sweet, dear, spunky Leeza who shared his bed each night. If only he dared reveal the truth about their relationship instead of hiding her beneath Tiderider's arms. But his enemy had sworn to slay his lovers – should he take any – and his children, should he have any. And, her reach was far indeed. She had hired the Dark Assassin who murdered his father and left his body hanging from a sa'necari-style draining pole with his throat severed.

The circular central room of the gryphonspire contained a large bed on one side, and a grouping of chairs and a couch around a table in the middle. Most of the light entered through the skylights, but it also had four large windows. None of that could be seen from the outside. The chambers where the gryphons slept when Alysijnin dwelled in this place appeared only to a magical command that Channadar had not yet been able to discover.

Channadar pulled a cloth from his pocket and spread it before him as he settled cross-legged on the floor. Then he took out a pouch of stones. Each stone bore a symbol in the Fae language. He had decided to do this Reading in a place less shielded than his star room. He invoked the patrons of his people, Willodarus, God the Woodlands, and Davera, God of Earth. Finally he turned to Kalirion, Lord of the Sun, healing and prophecy. Then he threw a handful on the cloth.

"So much death..." he whispered to himself, looking at the runes on the stones, his fingers hovering over first one grouping and then another. "Is that one I? Please don't let any of these be Leeza."

The lord of Hellsguard shivered in a prescient chill.

* * * *

Yahni arrived at the desk and found Jajinga sitting there. Osterbridge lounged on a bench. They both looked surprised to see him.

"We thought you'd be away from here by now, married mon," Jajinga joked seeing Yahni set his small pack beside the desk.

Yahni avoided their eyes. "There are still some matters I have to resolve."

"Such as?" Osterbridge asked.

"I'm not at leave to discuss them..."

"They assigned you?" Osterbridge looked astonished.

Yahni shrugged, and then to confuse matters, gave a tiny nod. He disliked

misleading his friends, but he had no idea what his situation with Belyla might entail and he was desperate to protect her. Changed or not, she was still his wife and one true love. He hoped to find a refuge for them both in the records or books from the library. There were too many things to think about. There had to be a way to protect her that would not compromise the lives of others. Or compromise his honor more than it had been when he realized he could not harm her.

"What about your lady wife?" Jajinga asked.

"I've got her well hidden," Yahni said. "Never fear."

"That's a relief," Jajinga said.

* * * *

Bryndel filled his tray from the counter with food and drink and then stood looking about for a place to sit. The student-dining hall was crowded at midday. People from the palace and library were welcome to eat here. Occasionally a noble or three could be found here, dining with their protégés. Bryndel spied a spot at the end of a long table near some students he knew casually. He set his tray down and sat. The students stared at him in silent affront, picked their trays up, and moved. Bryndel's face burned, embarrassment and anger racing through him. He jumped to his feet and followed them.

"Why are you leaving?" he demanded, feeling the snub like a sharp prick of thorns along his neck and arms.

The four students paused, giving him more of their cold, silent stare.

Bryndel faltered. "What did I do?"

Still they said nothing.

"Do you know who I am? I'm Bryndel Wrathscar. My father will get you thrown out of the school."

The students started moving again. Bryndel followed. This time when he caught up with them, he grabbed the nearest one, a girl who looked to be about fifteen.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

The girl simply stared at his hand on her shoulder.

"Let her go, Bryndel."

Bryndel spun with a hot look and saw Edouina standing behind him. "Edouina!"

Edouina bent and kissed him: she stood nearly six inches taller than Bryndel. "Forget about them, honey." She looped her arm through his, leading him away.

"I left my tray over there," he said and saw that it was gone. "Why are they doing this?"

Edouina heard the frustrated, hurt catch in his voice. She had discovered early that much of Bryndel's most obnoxious manners and attitude appeared to originate out of raging insecurities. "There are a lot of rumors going around. All of them ugly. Some are about me, but most of them are about you. Especially about how you were treating Talons before I got here."

Bryndel's heart sank. "I guess I'm not hungry."

"Let's go into the city. I know a friendly tavern on the south side with decent fare."

"Who's with Talons?"

"Several good people. You needn't worry about her."

* * * *

Day by day, with every night spent in Belyla's arms, Yahni's strength faded. The crispness left his stride. The brightness dulled from his eyes, until they became leaden. Shadows appeared, and deepened beneath them. His features became drawn. He tried to stay away from everyone who knew him well. But it was not always possible to avoid them entirely.

That day he had gone back to his old rooms to gather a few more of his things and move them to the swan room. He shoved books and the last of his cache of medicinals into a knapsack and slung it over his shoulder. As he started to leave he came face to face with his twin.

Maya's expression went startled and then concerned as she touched her brother's face. "You look so tired, Yahni. There are dark circles under your eyes. Aren't you getting enough sleep?"

Yahni caught her hand, taking it away from him. "As much as I can, Maya. Since the up drawbridge was called, Queiggy's had a lot of work for me and I've taken the nightshift at the desk."

"That's hard."

Yahni nodded and kissed Maya on the cheek. "Yes, it is. I need to go." He left her staring after him, and knew that he would never dare to go back, no matter what he needed. He could not risk another encounter with her. He reached the Great Central Hall, heading for the southeast wing where he would meet Belyla near the entrance to

the swan room. A young woman detached herself from her friends and went to him. Yahni's stomach clenched up at the sight of Terrys. This was turning into an evening of unwanted encounters.

Terrys touched his face much as Maya had, tracing the dark circles beneath his eyes. "Yahni? Have you seen a healer?"

"It's just overwork, Terrys," he assured her. "Nothing a few days sleep won't mend."

"I hardly ever see you. It makes me worry."

"I'm very busy." He put her hands aside. "I need to go. We'll talk later."

Yahni found Belyla waiting with a hungry look in her eye. He caught her hand, shivering at the thought of what she would soon be doing to him. He wanted it and feared it. The taste of ecstasy that went beyond sex ... he rarely had the energy for sex any more, which disappointed Belyla. He opened the secret panel and they fled upstairs to their sanctuary. Belyla undressed him as they climbed. She stroked his body fondly, running her fingers along the scars she had left in her feedings while carefully avoiding the tendriled godmark on his chest. The godmark burned her fingers whenever she accidentally touched it. Yahni stumbled on the last step and almost fell. Belyla caught him, half carrying him to the bed. She removed the rest of his clothes, his blades, and stared at his nakedness. She teased his cock, which failed to react.

"I'm too tired, Belyla," Yahni apologized.

"At least you're here. We're together."

"I love you, Belyla. Always and forever."

"And I you, Yahni." She bit the large vein crossing his chest. It was an awkward place, but his limbs had become so heavily scarred it worried her. She feared to take from his neck, remembering the shared ecstasy of Galee's feeding that first night.

Yahni moaned softly, writhing beneath her as she fed. He had begun to want it, even knowing that it was his death coming for him – that was why they called it the Dance of Passion. Although Belyla did not intend it to, her own intense pleasure as she fed flooded into Yahni, causing him to crave both the pain and the ecstasy. His hands pressed her face more deeply into his body, and he held her until consciousness fled.

* * * *

"Why should Sharani have all the pie? There are large sections of Waejontor they have never laid claim to, never moved into. Easy pickings," Wrathscar said, his

voice rising. He sat at a table with three nobles, jabbing his finger into the wood.

Derryl, Leslie, and Maya happened to be passing through the West Hall and Derryl immediately veered aside with an impish grin and headed for Wrathscar's table. His ladies followed.

"No reason we should be confined to the boundaries originally set," Lord Naren said. He was a thin mon, angular and light complexioned.

"Except that Hadjys set those boundaries," Derryl said, smiling as he leaned over Lord Lemyk's shoulder, intruding mischievously. "He never told us to go out and conquer, now did he?"

"No one invited you into this conversation," Naren growled.

"Oh, am I being rude?" Derryl asked, pouting, moving to rest on his elbows so that he was stretched between them down the middle of the long table with his chin propped on his knuckles.

Leslie nodded at Maya to follow her example, seized her husband by the hem of his tunic and his belt. Then his wife and his mistress hauled him off the table.

Derryl gave the irritated lords a bright wave and waltzed off.

"Is he always like this?" Maya whispered to Leslie.

"Always. Derryl wanted to be Guild, but when his brothers perished he ended up with the titles and lands instead, so he's settled for being the outrageous voice of conscience, getting into fights and brawls as a kind of game. You'll learn to enjoy it."

As they left the hall they passed Lord Westli, Commander of the Guard, with Philomea on his arm. The mon looked tired, but happy. Philomea beamed at everyone.

Maya fell silent as they walked. She spent most of her time living in Derryl's apartments with he and Leslie. So that was where they went. By the time they reached them, Maya's silence had become noticeable to all of them. She settled on a chair, looking at her hands.

"What's wrong?" Leslie asked. "Our little fun back there didn't offend you? It never has before."

Maya shook her head, her mouth opening slightly as she reached for words that did not want to come. "It's my brother. I finally saw him again after all these weeks and ... and he looks sick. But he says he isn't."

Derryl tensed, spun on his heels, and dragged a chair close to her. "Describe it."

When she finished, Derryl shot a sharp look at Leslie. "The vampire is back. It isn't just rumor. I must see Yahni for myself before I act. Confirm it with my own eyes."

"They keep playing down the rumors about the heir," Leslie cautioned.

"That's why I need to get a look at Yahni."

* * * *

The Black Lady Tavern's main room was done all in dark wood, stained still darker by a careful artisan, and polished heavily so that it gleamed where the light touched it. A spoked wheel served as a chandelier and all the tables had brass lamps turned low. Bryndel liked it immediately, thinking it looked like the kind of place where illicit lovers would choose to meet. He had little experience with the city; Galee and his father always kept him on a very short leash – he had almost no experience at anything and covered it up with a large helping of braggadocio. That was changing. Edouina liked him, reassuring Bryndel enough to let his facades down in her presence. Edouina had set herself on a course of showing him a different side of life, a side that was far more comfortable and without rules than the court, seducing his mind as well as his body.

Edouina scanned the room surreptitiously, spotting several people from the palace who she knew were regulars. "See the man and the woman over there?"

Bryndel started to turn and she caught him. "No, don't look. Just use the corners of your eyes."

Bryndel did so and an excited grin spread over his face. "Lord Derryl, and that's not his wife he's kissing. But *that's* his wife coming up behind them." He expected to witness an incredible row. "What is she doing?"

Lord Derryl's wife slid into the booth and started seriously kissing his mistress.

Bryndel's eyes saucered.

"They've been playing at being a Sharani triad for weeks now. So I guess all the rumors can't be bad. Though if this keeps up, I expect that half the Creeyan nobility will develop a fetish for Sharani. Shall we give them something to talk about?"

"Like what?" Bryndel's face glowed with excitement.

"A little public, feel-me-up kissing. Like you're the hottest thing since hell, honey." Edouina gave him a slow, sensual smile, intending to secretly set another of her subtle sways in the pleasure centers of his body. She was fighting something or someone – possibly the vampire – for control of Bryndel.

"Yes."

* * * *

"Osterbridge?" Yahni called out to his friend guarding the desk into the Guild wing. "Would you mind trading shifts with me for a few weeks?"

"Sounds fine to me," Osterbridge said automatically. Ceejorn Osterbridge liked the idea of being back on days.

Yahni dropped his books on the desk, keeping his head lowered so that Osterbridge could not get a good look at his eyes. "Then let's start tonight."

Osterbridge frowned, eyeing Yahni closely. "You sure, Kjarten? Are you all right?"

"Just too much party, and not enough rest. Figure taking the late shift will be quieter, let me do my reading here instead of on my own time."

"Smart thing that." Osterbridge replied, gathering his things. "You'll clear it with Queiggy?"

"Absolutely. I'll leave him a note. He always agrees." Yahni grinned as he dropped into the chair Osterbridge vacated. He opened the first book. They were written in an obscure dialect of Sharani and were all about vampires.

He did not know how much longer he could hide his condition. People were starting to notice and his dependency on amphereon was growing. Tomorrow he would try dabbing small amounts of make-up under his eyes to cover the shadows and the bruised look they were getting. Lies. His life, which he had once based upon truth, was now hidden behind lies.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHO IS NOT THE ENEMY?

Yahni carried the books home to the swan room, and sat them on the table. He found the room empty and wondered where Belyla was. Instead of worrying, he tried to read. His eyes tired easily, blurring the words into tiny blots on the pages. Yahni needed to find them a refuge before he became any weaker. He had finally discovered several small obscure references to vampires who lived in strange symbiosis with those they fed upon, there were rumors of the Ymraudes and of a Lemyari cult – a single sentence – called the Borealysyn, and a tiny, possibly now extinct group of sa'necari called the Dark Brothers of the Light all of whom did not kill from appetite. However, there was too little detail to give him a clue about finding them. The librarian had made a comment about how ill he looked and now he felt nervous about going back.

Cool hands caressed his neck, surprising him. Weeks ago a surprise like that would have had him going for his blades. He no longer had the energy to fuel his responses.

"Yahhhhhni!"

He saw that her eyes were red with hunger. "Belyla, where have you been?"

"Exploring the spires."

Yahni wished she would not go out, worrying that her hunger would become too great and she would kill someone. Kill just one out of appetite and– "Be careful."

"I am." She opened his shirt and dragged him to the floor with her. Yahni swallowed back a pain noise as her fangs entered his shoulder. She still avoided his neck. He blacked out as she continued to feed hungrily. She was taking too much, too frequently.

* * * *

Jajinga saw Terrys sitting in the Great Central Hall watching Channadar and the Fae. He squatted beside the couch, draped his arms across the back, and leaned close to her. "What's with Yahni? He never comes to practice. I never see Belyla either."

Terrys started and smiled a greeting when she recognized him. She sobered quickly. "I don't think he's well. I ran into him yesterday and he looked terrible. I haven't seen Belyla in weeks."

"Moping?"

"No." Terrys shook her head with a distressed expression. "I always know when Yahni's moping. This isn't it."

Jajinga's expression brooked no refusal. "Come and talk to Queiggy."

Terrys allowed him to drag her from the chair and draw her along by the hand. They stopped at the edge of the Guild Wing and Jajinga motioned Queiggy to allow them to enter. The wing master considered a moment and then nodded, giving Jajinga a subtle hand signal to bring Terrys forward.

"Something is wrong with Yahni," Jajinga said quickly. "Find us a secure place to talk and hear what we both have to tell you."

Queiggy touched each of them and then gestured them to follow. He took them to his cellar and sat them down, filling two mugs of beer, one for each of the men, and a glass with wine for Terrys. "So tell me."

They did and when they finished, Queiggy was thoughtful. "I'll arrange to arrive early and have a look at Yahni myself tomorrow."

* * * *

Yahni's skin had taken on the waxy, grayish-yellow quality of illness. So long as Belyla fed on him alone, they could not force her to make a kill. From everything he had found so far in the library, until she made that first kill she would not be too far gone in darkness for her soul to be saved. Sometimes she would become frantic and beg him to put an end to her; yet he could not bring himself to do that. Her feeding was slowly killing him. So this was no answer either. He could not keep this up. He should never have begun this. He should have trusted someone, but they would destroy Belyla. What had been done to her was not her fault. Yahni kept trying to sort it all out, but the weaker he grew the harder it became to think.

"Yahni?" Queiggy asked, finding him leaning in a corner of the second floor records room with his eyes closed. "You look ill, have you seen a healer?" The yuwenghau studied his assistant closely, his head tilting first this way and then that, like a tree swaying in the breeze.

Yahni felt uneasy under Queiggy's scrutiny. "Yes, of course. Said I should take some time off."

"Take it." Queiggy nodded, and watched Yahni leave. He stroked a small black cat nestled at his feet. Twizzle rose, padding after Yahni. Then Queiggy walked up stairs to his desk where he sent another young mon to find Yukiah.

* * * *

Queiggy lived in a converted storage room with a single narrow series of tiny, many-paned rectangular windows at the top along a single side that only rats and agile cats could have gotten through – and these days there were an incredible number of cats coming and going through his windows. He knew they were all catkins, having met their shaman at the only meeting he had attended with Eshraf in the temple. He liked the somewhat dank space because it felt like having his roots in the earth.

He heard that special knock that indicated Yukiah, lit the lamp, and turned it up. "Come in."

Queiggy indicated that Yukiah should help himself to the ale in the cask, another privilege of rank, money, and magic. Yukiah filled them both a tankard before joining the yuwenghau at his table.

The armsmaster studied Queiggy's face with concern while waiting for him to speak and observing his obvious reticence. "Have we lost someone?"

"We're losing one. I have placed Yahni on leave. I want you to set watchers on him. He knows everyone. I have no idea who to use." Queiggy sighed heavily and his shoulders slumped. "A Passion-Dance has begun. I doubt he'll last more than another couple of weeks. I've been too caught up to notice."

"Yahni?"

"The vampire is killing him. My instincts say it's Belyla Wrathscar. When he's gone, she'll take another member of his family, because the similarity of their blood makes her feel loved."

"Obsession of the newborn?"

Queiggy nodded.

Yukiah stood up and Queiggy touched his arm to stop his leaving.

"Yahni became involved with her before she turned. I love Yahni. He's a good lad. But killing Belyla will save only Yahni. We want the one who turned Belyla."

"I'll speak to Eshraf."

"Thank you. Now that I can no longer leave the wing—" He had woven his gifts through the wing and could not maintain this degree of deep warding without remaining there. Queiggy had, in effect, become the wing.

"I understand." *Age makes changes in a man*, Yukiah thought bitterly. Thirty years ago, when they fought this beast the first time, he would never have sacrificed a comrade. He had trained Yahni, and now he was expected to stand back and watch the young man die – the same way Yukiah's brothers had died, the way Yukiah himself had nearly died.

His hand went to the burn scar on his neck where at twelve he had cauterized a vampire's bite wound as the creature tried to call him to it, and broken its hold over him. He had half a mind to find Yahni and pound sense into him or drag him to the temple; another part of him wanted to stake Belyla Wrathscar; another wanted to burn Wrathscar's manor to the ground and be done with it, but the repercussions would probably be felt across the continent and Yukiah was too deep within the teachings to go off like a hot-headed sixteen year old. *Time does change a man*. Instead he carried Queiggy's request and news to Eshraf. How could he tell Maya that they had sacrificed her brother? Yukiah didn't want to be the one to tell her when the time came, but he would – he always took the hardest parts for himself, it was his responsibility.

* * * *

Belyla met Yahni in the deepest recesses of the gardens and began to nuzzle him

hungrily. He held her tightly, trembling from chronic exhaustion and anticipation.

"Queiggy knows. They're following me." Yahni could not see anyone in the garden, yet he sensed them watching, never dreaming that the dozens of cats hidden among the plants were Queiggy's spies.

Belyla panicked, snatched him up, and carried him over the walls into the forest, running for a time. Once it became full dark, she returned to the swan tower, settling him again into bed. She could tell how much weaker he had grown as he lay there, his face turned away from hers. Belyla hated it when he did this and Yahni did so more and more.

"You cannot simply keep me here. You're killing me. Queiggy could see it. This is the Dance, Belyla. It always ends in death."

"I'm just taking a little ... I'm so cold. You're the only one who makes me warm." Her eyes filled as she curled next to him. She had gotten another bottle of pig's blood from the butcher's, trying to take less from him – she was struggling hard. Some of Galee's sa'necari kept nibari, and Yahni had explained about them, but Belyla was frightened to feed where it might be discovered, just as she was terrified to try and take from random humans for fear of making an accidental kill. She had trusted herself not to take too much from Yahni because she loved him – yet she was.

Yahni stroked her hair. "Once you make a kill from appetite," he said, almost as if he read those terrible thoughts, "My god will part us forever."

Belyla whimpered and fled.

Yahni let her go. She would never tell him who had turned her. If anything she had become a far more timid vampire than she had been a young mon. Soon this Passion-Dance would end in his death, and his god would damn her soul for it. Yahni could not bear the thought of that; nor could he bring himself to kill her. He lay, looking into the mirrored ceiling reflecting the candles and he could see the deeply shadowed, bruised appearance to his face, and understood what Queiggy had seen. The Guildsmon was almost too weak to shift his body and draw the blade at his hip, but he managed. Yahni kept them sharp. His life would not be tallied against Belyla's soul. This decision, at least, was his. He slit the first wrist, then placed the blade in that hand, and started to slice the other wrist.

Belyla screamed. Yahni had not heard her returning. She was on him like a tiger, tearing the blade from his hand, the others from his belt, throwing them all to the far side of the room with incredible strength, every inch the enraged, desperate vampire.

"No! I'll make it better." She bound the wounds with a pillowcase, but now she no longer trusted him and tied his wrists and ankles to the bedposts.

"Belyla! Let me explain."

She pushed off him, backing away. The blood on his wrists called to her, and she did not trust herself anymore than she trusted him.

"I refuse to be your first kill, Belyla."

"Yahni, I'll make it better." She fled again, closing the door behind her.

The brief struggle had exhausted what little strength Yahni had and he slept. He woke to the sound of Belyla half-leading, half-dragging someone into the room. For the briefest of instants he hoped it meant she had decided to trust someone he had suggested to her – like Maya. His hopes were dashed when he saw Solance. Yahni wondered if Belyla knew about Solance or if she merely trusted him.

Solance drew a chair to the side of the bed to have a better look at the captive Guildsmon, turning Yahni's head toward him. "So this is your Guildsmon, Belyla. You have made a dangerous choice so early in the game. Better to have picked a nobody to entangle yourself with. This is Lord Taurlys Kjarten's favorite nephew."

Solance's eyes were ice as he touched Yahni's wrist to Read him, his head tilted as he considered his findings. "The Master of Blood has arrived with many gifts and solutions to problems like these. Male Sharani are notoriously unstable." Solance opened his bag, taking out a bottle and three small glasses, which he filled. He pressed the bottle into Yahni's hand to get his prints and auric signature, then shoved it into the Guildsmon's pocket.

"What are you doing?" Belyla asked, suspiciously.

"I'm making it better, just like you asked." Solance patted her hand. "This is a new variant cocktail based on Sanguine Rose that's popular on the streets – however it's recently being blamed for a rash of deaths from overdoses and suicides among certain classes. A few Sharani were among those." Solance got the first dose into Yahni with great skill and swiftness, made easy by the Guildsmon's weakened state. "I'll put it down to suicide." He reached for the next dose.

Belyla's eyes went wild. She threw Solance into a wall and sprang on top of him. He struggled vainly to get free, kicking and screaming in panic, his eyes wide and dilated like a frightened animal.

"Monster!" Belyla screamed in his face. "I trusted you!" She gripped a handful of his hair, twisted his head around, and sank her fangs into his neck. Solance's struggles slowed and then stilled. Suddenly she could hear Yahni's words echoing in her mind – *if you make a kill, Hadjys will part us forever*. Belyla lifted her bloody face from Solance's throat, leaving him alive. She wiped her face on his robe and rose, returning to the bed. Yahni's eyes had closed and he lay too still.

Belyla used Yahni's knife to cut him free, wrapped him in blankets, and laid him over her shoulder before going out the window. "Yahni, my husband... Please. Please don't be dead." She climbed to the first star-room on the end of the wing and then simply leaped to the next. The night was bright and clear. Something inside Belyla broke and shattered as she moved.

She reached the topmost star-room, leaped from there to one of the spire towers, and then to an onion dome where she scrabbled for a moment trying to both gain purchase on the tiled surface and to hold onto Yahni, who started to slip from her arm. Belyla kicked off her shoes, remembering how the Black Swan Alysinjin had kicked off her shoes and flicked out her cape of feathers and changed. Belyla could not change, but she felt as if she were the Black Swan, gazing across the intricate maze of the seven wings of Ishladrim palace and the rest of the compound. Belyla accepted that it was too late to go looking for help outside Creeya, but she had taken herself a totem, the Black Swan, and she would try, in her own timid way to live up to it – a secret mutineer until she could find a way to act. Then she would get them all: Galee, her father, all of them. Belyla slid around the edge of the dome, reaching for the latch on the top of the needle spire and opened it. She dropped through the trap door, landing lightly with her burden.

She laid Yahni on the Alysinjin's bed, her fingers trailing along his throat to find that he still breathed and she covered him up.

"I see the swans have found the spire as have I," said a soft voice that had lost all trace of its usual playfulness, going enigmatic in tone.

Belyla turned with a hiss, baring her fangs, to face Channadar, who lounged on Alysinjin's couch.

Channadar regarded her carefully, his head and shoulders swaying slowly, tilting first this way and then bowing to tilt the other, his fans still closed. "Now I know which swan is black and which is white."

"What are you doing here?"

"Have you come to finish the Dance?" Channadar held her eyes carefully as he rose in a languid circling movement toward the nearest window, tiny step dancing. "I doubt Alysinjin's spirit would appreciate your killing him in her bed."

Belyla collapsed, her face in her hands, giving way to sobbing. "I asked them to help him, but they poisoned him instead."

Channadar paused, regarding her with interest. "Have you fed?"

Belyla lowered her hands, her face flushing with a mix of shame and triumph. "On another. The one that hurt him."

"Have you killed?" His face tilted until it nearly rested on his shoulder as he waited for her answer.

"No. I've been Dancing Yahni ... I've tried so hard not to." Her sobbing worsened, and shame lingered in her face. "I try so hard ... yet ... yet I cannot control my needs."

"Poor, sad swan. Give him to me. I will save him, Belyla, but you must move away from him. You cannot trust your instincts and neither can I."

Belyla could feel the half-Faery lord's magic stirring as he spread first one fan and then the other. She left Yahni's side, moving to the door to the outer stair, the one that went into the interior of the palace by the main route, which she had not found earlier.

Channadar's slanted eyes narrowed to slits and his lips spread with quiet pleasure at her willingness to yield her mate to him. He took her place beside Yahni. The Fae-lord snapped one golden fan closed and quickly ran it along Yahni's body, finding the bottle, which he tucked into his pouch. "He's badly hurt, but my mother can heal him."

"The Master of Blood is here. He made that stuff."

Channadar's eyes widened and he straightened. "The Master of Blood? He's here?"

"That's what Solance said."

"We must be away from here, Yahni and I. Resist them. Do not make that first kill. If you can find evidence of what they are doing, toss it through my window. Or pass it to my folk. Find a way to get it to me. Perhaps my mother can think of a way to help you, Black Swan."

"Don't you want their names?"

"I already know them, but I cannot prove it. And the Guild would kill you if you tried to go to them. You have Danced a Guildsmon." Channadar folded and tucked both fans into his sash, lifting Yahni.

The doors crashed inward and vampires swarmed into the spire.

Belyla screamed as she was tackled and borne down by sheer weight of numbers. They bit and tore at her.

Channadar felt dark magic rise to his left and had barely time to let Yahni fall back to the bed as he snatched his fans out to counter it. The sa'necari was strong. Clearly Galee knew he was here, why else send a sa'necari?

Channadar's little smile, half-sneer, half-amused, his usual mask had returned to his face, but his heart was grim. There was no way that he could take Yahni with him and get out alive. There were simply too many of them. The golden fans flashed, trailing white birds and flashing eagles, as he turned the death magics back in the sa'necari's face. The necromancer shrieked, staggering into the vampire beside him.

Channadar kept his back to the wall, striking with the magic and then with the slicing edge of the fans. The elegant gold gilding concealed the kenda'ryl beneath, folded and beaten a thousand times with magic sealed into every layer, pounded into the fiber of the metal itself. When the magic came into play with the unfolding of the fan, the metal plates sealed into a solid whole, stronger and sharper than steel. As one struck, the other came to guard.

The Lemyari fought as myn, rather than as monsters, although with monstrous strength and speed, using swords and knives. Lesser bloods moved among them, rushing him like hungry wolves, all claws, and teeth. A web of black burning death spun out to bind him to the wall that kept the blades and claws from his back, but now he had two sides to defend as well as his front, for he neared the windows, which were his only escape. A flashing trail of magic flamed away the web, yet a single strand caught his slender ankle, and the Fae twisted, falling. He turned it into a roll as he cut himself free and felt the razor sharpness of a blade open his arm from his shoulder halfway to his elbow. A fan disemboweled the Lemyari, spilling the gray filth across the Fae; and Channadar burned him, rising through the gore to dive out the window. He had barely time to wrap himself in the magic to slow his tumble to the slanting rooftops, snapping out of the fall and skittering along it in his soft shoes. Four chimneys rose at the end and then a jump to another set of roofs that would take him in the direction of the third spire, the top of the Guild Wing. That was his best chance. He could hear them coming after him. His feet slipped and caught, slipped and caught on the tiles. With a small spring, he leaped among the chimneys, turning to face his pursuers. A Lemyari, his claws dripping venom, raked at the Fae. A fan flashed and the creature's hand sailed away.

Channadar laughed at him. "I think you will find that poor Channadar does not wish to die that way." Then his eyes narrowed at the shrieking vampire and raked him with the magic from his other fan, throwing him from the roof with a twisting lash of fire before leaping to the next roofs.

Channadar landed, slipped and slid down to jam his leg heavily into a chimney. He twisted and then cried out as a blade opened a long bloody slice along his shoulder from the top all the way down his back to his waist. Instinctively the Fae backhanded his attacker in the face with a fan, blinding the vampire. Channadar scrambled up, running agilely despite the way his leg pained with each step; knowing he would pay later for forcing his leg to function properly, refusing to favor it, by focusing past the pain, setting his awareness elsewhere. The creatures were fast. He reached the end of these roofs and jumped again, somersaulting down to the next level and springing out of the fall with a twist to turn and face the way he had come.

More of them! They seemed to be coming in endless numbers. *Either Galee or the Master of Blood must surely be desperate to put an end to this meddling, suspicious Fae-lord*, he thought wryly. If he could get down a little lower he would reach the levels of the star rooms and living quarters, far from the less occupied places and forgotten chambers of this curious labyrinth called Ishladrim Castle.

There were lights on in the topmost star-room of the Guild Wing, which meant a conference was in progress. A tall elm grew close, shading it. Channadar's injured leg gave and he stumbled as three rushed him. "Do not hunt the Fae," he snarled, "for the Fae will hunt you." He turned a sword with one fan and cut that one's throat, nearly severing its head – if it did not die, at least it could no longer fight, for it fell from the roof. The second one scored him across the ribs and Channadar's kenda'ryl fan shattered its breastbone to take its heart in reply. The Fae-lord faced the third one, watching him calmly, fans ready.

Three cats came round a chimney, led by a fourth, a fluffy pearl gray male. The others, two orange tabbies and a calico considered a moment as if speaking in some silent inner voice between them, and then leaped upon the Lemyari as one, going for his face and back. Channadar snapped a fan closed and, using it like a dagger, thrust it through the Lemyari's heart. The creature died, falling from the roof. The four catkins jumped at the last minute, and Lo'Ah sprang to Channadar's side.

<Flee! More come. >

"My thanks. Visit, if I survive." Channadar leaped for the elm, using his good leg to shove off, snapping his fans shut, and thrusting them through his sash. He caught a branch and the tree swayed precariously, smashing him against the building painfully and tearing his wounds further. The injured arm and shoulder threatened to fail him. Then he managed to grab hold of another branch and move lower. This one cracked, twisting. The Fae-lord had barely time to throw his arms in front of his face and draw his legs up before he was thrown through a window of the star-room into the Guild Wing.

Everyone in the room sprang up as glass splintered and the Fae tumbled, bleeding, to lie at Yukiah's feet – the armsmaster sat at Queiggy's left with Leonè at to the Wing Master's right.

Channadar gave Yukiah that small irrepressible smile he always had in the Great Central Hall, one hand clutching at his shoulder with blood oozing through his fingers; and the other his ribs; his eyes betraying the tiniest hint of irony as he said, "I know I am not supposed to be here, but let me assure you, it was unavoidable." Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fainted.

The room filled swiftly with Guildsmyn at the sound of the breakage. Aramyn led them, gesturing for them to spread out, sending two to the windows to see if anyone else appeared ready to follow Channadar into the room through it.

Yukiah gathered and straightened the crumpled lord, feeling the warm wetness of Channadar's blood on his fingers. The armsmaster raised his hand to show the others. "That's a sword wound, someone fetch Sha." A Guildsmon spun on his heel and went. Then Yukiah became aware of how wet his lap was becoming, turned Channadar onto his side, and found that long tear. "Shitting Damnation, hand me something to staunch this with or Sha's not going to get here in time." Clean handkerchiefs started appearing, but it quickly became evident that it would not be enough and Leonè simply pulled off his shirt, passing it to Yukiah. The Fae looked severely battered. Yukiah drew his blade and cut away Channadar's shirt and tunic.

"Shiiiiit... Someone sliced him up bad."

* * * *

"I'm worried," Leeza murmured to Tiderider, sitting in the parlor to their apartments, which were a single point of their star room. She drew her shawl tighter, shivering at the touch of something she could not fathom, and stared out the window. The night was so still, and yet she could almost feel movement beyond her hearing.

"About what?" Tiderider had a small smile, turning toward her.

"Channadar," she said softly. "He's never been gone this long. It's full dark."

"You worry constantly..." Tiderider's tone was bantering, but his eyes were flint hard chips in his golden face.

"Please, Tiderider, go find him. Even if I'm being silly ... please?" Leeza disliked playing the female, but they would not allow her to be anything else. The majority of Creeyan women kept to traditional roles. Leeza had tried to be something else before meeting Channadar. She had managed to be counted among the yeomynry of Hellsguard, although she had never been good enough to qualify for Guild training. She had tried for the Guild as a child, but lacked some indefinable quality that would get her in.

"I agree with Leeza," Chucomei said. "Go find him."

Tiderider nodded and left, signaling two to follow him. The three Chosen went up to the swanspire, finding the lower door open a fraction – a fraction so tiny that only a Fae's eyes would have noticed the shift in the seams along the hidden door. They went up, each with a folded fan in their hands. When they had reached the final flight of stairs, Tiderider's nostrils flared at a betraying scent: fresh blood. He signed to the others, fear for his lord sent a rush of energy through him as he stepped into the gryphon chamber of Alysijnin. The instant he crossed the threshold, he snapped his fan open and swept light through the room.

Furniture lay broken and strewn about, splattered with ichors and gobs of undead, swiftly rotting flesh. Tiderider moved cautiously through it, seeing blood on the bed

and a splash on the floor and wall between the bed and the nearest window. He touched it, bringing his fingers to his nose to sniff and his chest tightened. "Channadar."

Then Tiderider went out the window, trailing his lord through the magic.

* * * *

Queiggy looked up, startled when the three Faes dropped through the shattered window with their fans spread. They landed lightly on their feet and spun to face him. Tiderider saw the splotches of blood on the carpet and his eyes hardened. "My Lord... what have you done with him?"

"Sha's got him," Yukiah answered first. "Came flying through the window, wounded, chased by Hady's knows what." They had been sitting there waiting to hear from Sha about Channadar's condition. "He hasn't regained consciousness since he fainted in my arms..."

"What happened?" Tiderider asked.

Yukiah rubbed the burn scar on his neck. "Someone, or something, cut him up bad. I'm not willing to send anyone up onto the roofs before full daylight."

"Do you know who attacked Channadar?" Tiderider snapped his fans closed, shoved them into his sash, and settled onto a chair. The other Chosen came to stand behind him. "He is good with his weapons... His attackers must have been exceedingly dangerous."

Yukiah's eyes searched Tiderider's tall form, and saw no weapons, only those golden fans he and the others danced with. "He wore no weapons when he crashed through the window, just those fans."

Tiderider thought for a moment, wondering how far he could trust these myn. Only those who had actually seen the Faery folk fight realized those fans were not merely an affectation of their culture. The Guild had not seen them fight. He drew his fan, flicked it open, and sliced three rungs apart on the nearest chair, the metal passing through as if the wood were made of cloth. Yukiah jumped, but Queiggy only nodded. "My Lord is good with his weapons." Tiderider repeated.

"Kenda'ryl, gold gilt," Queiggy quietly answered Yukiah's look. "Stone, forest and earth runed. They are handed down, cross-gender, father to daughter, mother to son."

Tiderider lifted an eyebrow. "You know much about our people."

"This is not to become known," Queiggy said and as a gesture of trust he extended his hands, letting his fingers turn twiggy and long. He smiled at the startled look on

Tiderider's face. "I am Queig, son of Teakamon."

Tiderider favored Queig with a small, knowing smile, flicked his fan closed and thrust it through his belt. "Holy One."

Queiggy rolled his eyes. "Enough of that! Tell him what we know, Yukiah."

"We know almost nothing ... at least until the healers finish with him and he wakes ... conscious enough to answer questions."

"Then we will wait here," Tiderider stated arrogantly.

Yukiah glanced at Queiggy, who nodded his permission.

* * * *

Sha carried word to Yukiah and the others that the healers and surgeons had done what they could for Channadar. She did not blink when she saw Tiderider and his companions. "We're finished. We've moved him to a bed in the Guild Infirmary."

"I want to see him now," Tiderider said, rising from the table before Yukiah could even push his own chair back. The Golden Fae halted in front of Sha.

"He's resting," Sha replied, propping her hands on her hips. "He hasn't been fully conscious yet. The two ugliest slashes crossed at the top, making it a single long gash from inside his elbow over his shoulder and down to his hip. They laid him open to the bone in back and front. The shoulder blade is cracked. He was slashed across his upper ribs."

"We must see him. One of us must stay with him at all times." Tiderider's voice, soft as velvet and hard as steel, matched the fathomless expression in his golden eyes.

"No one is going to get him here, Tiderider," Sha said.

Tiderider ignored her statement. "How soon can we take him back?"

"I prefer you did not," Sha said with a touch of irritation.

Da'Shanagara and Starsilent rose from the table, coming to stand behind their captain. Yukiah joined them, followed by Queiggy. It was well known that Sha could be extremely obstinate concerning her patients, but Tiderider and the Fae looked prepared to give her a stiff resistance.

"How soon?" Tiderider asked again quietly, as if she had not spoken a single word.

Sha sighed. "Tomorrow I will consider letting you take him from here. But I wish to

speak with his personal physician and whoever will be sitting with him. I don't want him moving about more than can be avoided."

Tiderider nodded at that. "Then I will send for Durav and my fireflies. Chucomei and Leeza will sit with him." Tiderider drew a fan and flicked it at Starsilent, who nodded and went out through the broken window. "I will see my lord now."

Sha sighed and, from the look in her eyes, she was silently cursing the stubbornness of the First of Thirteen. "You only and quietly."

Tiderider gave her a small bow of his shoulders in acquiescence, following her out. Sha led him to the modest room to which the healers had moved Channadar when the surgeons finished with him. Channadar lay half on his side, half on his stomach with pillows beneath his chest and abdomen, the sheet and coverlet folded back to his slender waist and his injured arm draped around the pillow nearest his face. Dawn light, entering through a window, gilded his black hair with blue highlights and the two copper patches with gold. Tiderider stepped to Channadar's side, regarding his unconscious lord with a fond devotion and a hard edge of protectiveness.

"We always knew they would discover that chamber eventually." He touched Channadar's wealth of black hair. *Forgive me, my lord and friend.*

Sha gestured for him to leave and once outside, turned to him, frowning her question before she asked it. "I thought Leeza belonged to you."

"She does." Tiderider eyed Sha closely, wondering where this had come from. For a firefly, Leeza danced well. She would never have betrayed her connection to Channadar to the casual observer, especially a human.

"Then why, the few times he came half-conscious, did he mutter her name?"

"I have no idea."

* * * *

Leeza managed to maintain a serene front until she found herself alone with only Tiderider and the still form of her lover. Then she bent over Channadar, pressing her face against his cheek and hair. "Channadar, beloved." Her voice caught, tears escaped from her eyes.

Tiderider brought her a chair and withdrew to the far side of the room.

Leeza became aware of the chair, drew it as close as she could and sat down. She took his hand, rubbing her thumb along each finger. The firefly wore Channadar's crystal, having switched them the minute the door closed. "Channadar."

The wounded Fae lord's breathing changed subtly and his eyes opened, a

half-glazed expression in their depths as if it was all that he could manage to simply open them, much less focus his gaze. "Leeeeeza?" He breathed her name.

"I'm here."

He smiled with the right side of his mouth, closing his hand around her fingers.

"Belovèd."

She kissed him.

* * * *

Sha arrived the next morning with two other Guild healers who were permanently assigned to the wing to recheck Channadar's wounds and change the bandages. As she turned him gently, Channadar roused again, one eye more open than the other. "Send for Queiggy," he told her.

She started to protest, but Tiderider took the matter out of her hands with a flick of a fan at Da'Shanagara who departed swiftly. The Fae were making themselves at home in the wing to Queiggy's dismay. The Wing Master arrived still buttoning his shirt. By then the healers had gotten Lord Channadar settled again.

"Queiggy, come close," Channadar said.

The Wing Master leaned his head down frowning. "Yes?"

"Belyla. They turned her. She was yielding Yahni to me in the Swan Spire when we were attacked. I fear they will have slain Yahni and destroyed her. She was defying them to save him."

"Tragic. They will pay. Did you recognize any of them?"

"No. They knew I was there. They must be stalking me, knew I like to meditate in the spire."

"Why do you say that?"

"They brought sa'necari. Magic against magic. I thought I was the only one who remembered how to get into the spire."

"So they chased you across the rooftops and the spires?"

"Yes. Nasty."

I have told you before, Galee, Channadar thought grimly. And now you must learn – especially since you have brought the Master of Blood into this place – you do

not hunt the Fae, for the Fae will then hunt you. Because we laugh and dance does not mean we do not bite. You will pay for this day's deeds. We will find your creatures' holes and slay them – but the one I want most is the Master of Blood.

* * * *

"I would prefer, Queiggy," Channadar told the Wing Master as Tiderider and Juna moved him onto a litter under the supervision of his personal physician and Sha with Leeza and Chucomei hovering at the edges. "That this did not become known. That this attack upon my person be as if it never happened."

Channadar had resorted to some of his mother's strongest drugs and potions to have these past few conversations and consultations, feeling driven to them. Too much was at risk. He had given Queiggy a great deal of trust. The son of Teakamon had learned to shield his gifts and conceal his nature with such skill that until he extended himself with the up drawbridge, he had even masked himself from Channadar's keen senses – and even then it took landing wounded at his feet before Channadar saw him for what he was.

"I'll see to it. Just hope you know what you're doing."

"I do. As son and heir to Meileilyki, I have resources you cannot guess at, old tree."

"I guess I can't at that." Queiggy had never, in his wildest imaginings, dreamed that Channadar was the son of the Faery queen.

They were bundling him off to his chambers while the palace slept so that no one would see.

"People are going to wonder where you are while you heal," Sha pointed out.

"I'll be holding private court in my star rooms. Invitation only and invitations will go out. I play the game well."

"You came here to play a game, Lord Channadar?"

"Oh yes, Sweet Sha," he smiled his languid smile that said everything and nothing at all. "We came to dance with the enemy."

"The enemy?"

"Let us say, rather, that I am beginning to know who is not my enemy."

CHAPTER NINE

SACRIFICE

Thirst awakened Yahni with its desperate need. He woke sick in an unfamiliar room with no memory of how he had gotten here. His mouth and throat felt incredibly dry and his stomach cramped. He ached throughout his body, with a burning sensation in his joints. A cool, late evening breeze blew across his sweat-drenched face, sending him shivers of the body to match those of his mind. He smelled the light honey scent of fine beeswax candles. Gradually his eyes focused and cleared so that he could discern the room more clearly in the candlelight. The walls were hung with softly colored pastoral scenes of swans on lakes. The curtains fluttering in the breeze were Belyla's favorite shade of pastel blue. The blue of the velvet bed curtains matched those on the windows.

Yahni pushed at the bed with his palms, managed to lift himself a few inches and then fell back exhausted. He heard someone moving in the shadows beyond the candlelight. "Where am I?" His parched lips cracked open as he whispered and tiny beads of blood welled up.

Belyla emerged into the light, her head tilted at a sad angle, her lips parted. "My bedroom in my father's house." Belyla answered, her voice soft with fear and uncertainty. "We're prisoners."

Yahni's thirst grew still more desperate. "Water."

Belyla went to a table, poured cool water from a pitcher into a glass and brought it to him. She helped Yahni sit and drink it. It felt good going down and the cramping eased. It gradually became easier for him to speak. The knowledge that they were Agasthenez Wrathscar's prisoners struck Yahni like stone fists of despair and futility. He tried to tell himself that it was only the voice of his body, of his exhaustion, that if Belyla would let him rest without feeding he would get past those feelings. But he knew that would never happen. Belyla's cravings were too powerful for her to control.

"Does he know what you are?"

A small sob emerged from Belyla's throat. "He turned me."

"Oh, gods." Yahni had known Wrathscar was evil and suspected him of many things he could not prove, but this went beyond it all into sheerest nightmare.

Belyla sat the glass on the nightstand. "He's been raping my sisters and me since we were small children. Then when she turned him, he turned us."

Yahni understood now Belyla's strange words in calling herself 'used' that night in the gardens. His hand closed on Belyla's. "Why didn't you tell me? The Guild would have stopped him."

"I was afraid. We are all afraid of him. He killed our mother. I saw it. I always

believed he would kill me also." Belyla hesitated, and then added, "And I, at least, was ashamed. I was afraid you would not want me."

"How could I not want you? I love you, for Hadjys' Sake. You're my wife."

Belyla voice dropped lower, hovering between despair and anger. "I'm only allowed in the garden with a guard to watch me."

Perhaps now, with hope gone, she would finally answer his other question. "Who turned your father?"

Belyla hesitated again, for an instant, showing that old habits died hard. "Gylorean Galee. She is the mother of the blood."

His breath caught in his chest and his response in his throat. *Oh, gods, the Guild is betrayed. No wonder she did not go to the Guild.*

* * * *

Bryndel sat beneath a broad pine tree in the middle of the quad in the late afternoon, watching the students moving about the grounds in small chattering groups. Summer solstice was two weeks away and everyone was full of plans for how they would spend it. It was a time for sweethearts and lovers, poems and songs, midnight trysts in hidden places beneath the moon and long walks together. His secret dream, from the moment he had first noticed girls, had always been to have Talons as his sweetheart and share summer solstice with her. Now she carried his children and they would wed in the fall, but there would be no solstice for them. The medicine was not helping – if anything, she was actually worse. She was too weak and ill to even sit with him in the gardens.

He had treated her hatefully for the first two months of their engagement and found no solace in the fact that she did not remember the rapes. Bryndel sighed unhappily, recriminations running rampant in his mind. He thought about those first six weeks after the bi-kyndi was bound. Galee had insisted he ride her at every opportunity, no matter how tired she looked – to swell her belly as quickly as possible so that the Grand Master could not renege on the marriage agreement. At least that was what she told him. Now he wondered if there had been another reason. Was there another purpose to it? He shifted uneasily, moving nearer to the trees.

"What are you thinking about Bryndel?"

"Galee." He had not heard her approach until she spoke.

She squatted in front of him. "What are you thinking about? You've had such an odd look on your face the whole time I've been watching you."

Bryndel shuddered, dropping his eyes. "Daydreaming."

"They must have been very unpleasant daydreams." Galee tilted his face up with a single long finger beneath his chin. "Thinking about Talons, perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you in bed with her? Hmnn?"

He twisted away from her. "Don't you ever think about anything else?"

"Yes, I do. Blood. I think about blood all the time," she purred.

Bryndel paled. "Get away from me, Galee." He kicked at the ground, trying to push himself farther from her, but only managed to slam his back against the tree.

"Or what? You'll tell your father? You don't notice much, do you? I turned him weeks ago."

Bryndel's eyes went wide. "No!"

"Ask him. And, Bryndel, do you know what most newborns like your father usually do?"

Bryndel shook his head.

"They eat their young. He's already turned your sisters. I, alone, stand between you and your father's new appetites. I, alone, can keep you safe. Belyla is Dancing her Guildsmon. You will obey me, won't you, Bryndel?"

Bryndel nodded vigorously. His stomach soured, seizing up. Every single time he had the slightest bit of joy, Galee managed to crush it out – or his father did. Those brief glances of Belyla and her Guildsmon months ago – she had seemed so happy.

"Good boy." Galee rose and walked away.

Bryndel watched her go out of sight, and bolted to his feet, rushing heedlessly back to his chambers in the west wing. He barred the door and threw himself down on his bed, crying *Belyla*. Were they responsible for what was happening to Talons also? When he asked himself that question, a sharp pain came in his head and he doubled over, clutching at himself. The thought slipped away from him, disappearing beneath the pressure of bonds he had not known were there and he would not remember later.

* * * *

Channadar leaned heavily on Tiderider, as the trueblood eased him into his chair and Blue Lily moved a footstool to rest his injured leg upon. His anger simmered in stiff,

still fury in full measure to his pain and weakness. Only his Thirteen and a handful of his inner circle were ever allowed into his incredibly well shielded study where he now sat. Juna, his brother, often complained about the choices of this circle, since some like Leeza and Chucomei were fireflies. All of promiscuous Juna's fireflies had been excluded by Channadar's express order despite his brother's frequent arguments for their inclusion. Tiderider was the only trueblood among his thirteen guardian companions; the others were half-bloods like Channadar himself, who had gathered at his court in Creeya when he had inherited his human sire's lands and titles.

A draped mirror, tall, wide, and silver, stood opposite the wall. Da'Shanagara stepped to the mirror, reaching for the pull cords to unveil it. Channadar shook his head. He loosened the belt of his robe, unfastened it, and dropped it on the floor. Tiderider helped his lord out of the robe so that he sat bare-chested in his trousers, his bloodstained bandages speaking in mute-testimony to what had happened. *Anger. Anger. Anger.* The physician had wanted to soak these off; Channadar had refused – *not yet.*

It was well known that Channadar's mother – whom none in Creeya had known by her true name or suspected her nature until he told Queiggy – sent him gifts from Faewin. She had returned to Faewin after his father's death, and ruled there. No one ever saw her messengers come or go. He nodded to Da'Shanagara and the Fae revealed the mirror. It glittered like black ice at midnight. A swirl of stars appeared on the surface and then silver and more silver still until it cleared completely.

A mon, copper haired and young of face, sat upon cushions before her own mirror with an array of gifts on trays and her own Thirteen companions at her back. She smiled to see them, and then the state of her son registered, and Meileilyki came to her feet in one smooth snap of wrath. "Who has done this?"

Channadar rose, Tiderider supporting him, as he limped closer to the mirror. "The Master of Blood is here."

Meileilyki's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Think you, he knows you are mine?"

"I cannot say. Yet, I see his hand in this. I was in the swanspire. Only those in this room know I go there. Sa'necari were sent after me. Lemyari and other such. I thought I was the only one who remembered the old paths."

"Is Juna hareming again?" Meileilyki's voice turned stiff.

"Mother..." Juna protested, his tone petulant.

"If word leaks of what is spoken here, I know where to look, Juna," Meileilyki said, her voice like ice. "It leaks into your summerflies' ears and out their lips." She deliberately used the derogatory term, which made him wince. "I remind you, I have other sons. Channadar is my eldest and my heir. The heir you will never be if harm

comes to him because of your summerdancer ways."

"Yes, My Lady Mother. Your Will Be Done." Juna bowed to her. They called him Laughing Juna, because he was the first to laugh, but he had no laughter then. Though he might complain about the unfairness at times, in one thing he never wavered, he loved his brother – Channadar was the light of his life who always understood him.

"It will take time, but I need my twelve truebloods gathered, My Lady," Tiderider said. "Sooner or later, they will come for him here."

"It will be done. I will summon a second warband as well. Now tell me the tale. All of it. Then I will send the presents through the mirror."

When all had been said and gifts exchanged, Juna helped Tiderider get his brother to bed again. Then Juna sat for a time in unhappy silence. Channadar, already feeling the drugs for pain the physician had given him, caught his brother's hand.

"Our mother is stern. But not unfair."

Juna nodded, but did not look at him.

"I keep so much from you, deny you so much, because I must be wise for both of us. That way you can just be happy, laughing Juna. No cares, all fun." Channadar thumped him. "Go away. I'm tired."

Juna grinned. "I'll chase some summerflies."

* * * *

Yahni sought refuge in his prayers, and the prayers kept the nightmares from his dreams. They had taken everything from him, even the rings from his fingers, and left him only his clothing. He waited for death, certain that his god would take his soul to a better place. Mostly he slept, since even moving about Belyla's room tired him. A few times she had walked him into the upstairs parlor, leaning heavily upon her. But he asked her not to. In his dreams, he was home with his family, safe, warm, and loved. His greatest worry was that it would be Belyla who killed him.

He lay on Belyla's bed, eyes closed, trying to recapture that sensation of home, that corner of his mind where the nightmares could not go. Cool fingers caressed Yahni's cheek, turning his face. He looked into Philomea's blue eyes, her fangs were fully down as she considered him. The deadly beauty of her face sickened him. The hollow core of desolation had carried him beyond fear, but not revulsion.

"Not so pretty now," she said, pulling at the matted strings of his hair. She ran a finger along the hollows of his cheeks. His bones stood out strongly in his wasted face. Nearly all the beauty was gone, but he still drew her. "I never told them your

name."

"What do you want?" He fought for the breath to speak. It seemed as if it should be so easy to die, to just close his eyes, and allow it to happen. Yet he continued to wake each day in this place.

"You." She licked his face, going lower with her tongue until she licked along his neck. Philomea lifted her head, tonguing her fangs. "Belyla has never taken from your neck. How strange. A virgin throat."

Then he saw his chance to prevent his death from damning Belyla's soul. "End it ... for me," Yahni murmured.

"If that is what you want." She began to lick him again.

"It is... Better you, than Belyla." His body rebelled at her touch, but he had not enough strength to move. Nor did he wish to. He would lie there and let her do it.

Philomea paused an instant, her brow furrowing. "You love her that much?"

"Yes."

"So be it." She slid her fangs into the artery with unexpected gentleness. Philomea was far more skilled than Belyla, having already taken many lives. Yet there still was pain and he cried out as darkness claimed him.

Belyla heard him from the parlor, and rushed into the room. "Stop it! Don't kill him!" She dared not simply rip her sister off Yahni, lest the artery remain open and he bleed to death before she could stop it. "If he dies, I'll kill you."

Philomea blinked, but finished her feeding before lifting her head from Yahni's neck. "He tastes marvelous."

"Stay away from him. He's my ... my lover." She had almost said husband, but feared that would get back to her father who would then simply put Yahni out of his misery like a sick animal.

"He's dying, Belyla. What matters it if he dies sooner than later?" Philomea walked around her sister, studying her. "He asked me to end it. Had you not arrived, I would have."

Belyla stared in horror at Yahni's blood on her sister's lips. Then she went to him. He stared glassily and unaware, but his chest still moved. "It matters to me. I love him. Stay away from him."

"Then you should treat him better. There are other places to feed."

"I'm not allowed off the grounds."

"There is that. Come with me." Philomea led Belyla to the cellars, which had been turned into dungeons. The cells were clean and comfortable, with beds and tables. The myn there looked glassy eyed as if drugged or spelled. "These belong to Galee's sa'necari who are currently lodging with us. They are for the rites, and they will die in the rites with a sa'necari's rod in their flesh-holes and a blade in their bodies."

Belyla shivered. "You mean they have sex with them while they kill them?"

"Exactly. You're not as stupid as you look. That's called mortgiefan, the death-gift. Their souls shatter and the sa'necari drinks that as well as their blood and terror."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Philomea smiled, taking down a ring of keys. "Because we are allowed to use them so long as we don't kill them." She unlocked a cell and went in. "Lie down," she told the young female in the cell. The mon removed her garment and obeyed. "Come here, Belyla, and feed."

Belyla took the mon's wrist as her fangs came to full extension.

"You're afraid of the throat, aren't you?"

"Yes." Belyla did not understand Philomea's helping her.

"You don't need to bite precisely. Your fangs are sharper than well-honed blades. Simply press them gently against the skin and they will slide in."

Philomea produced a handkerchief and wiped Belyla's mouth when she finished. "There, that was easy."

Belyla gave her a look of gratitude. "Why are you doing this?"

Philomea sighed. "Because, when I first saw Yahni, I fell in love with him."

"Then help us escape."

"No. No, that's too dangerous. The Guild would come after all of us then. Besides, I like the power we are offered by Galee. I love myself more than I love anyone." Philomea led her sister out, locked the cell, and hung the keys up. "The three of us are more like father is, while you and Bryndel are more like mother was."

* * * *

Leeza watched the way Channadar lay upon the pillows, careful not to turn wrong. His silver eyes had that odd glaze to them that told her the pain was returning. He

wore just his pants and his bandages. It was a very warm day, and he said his shirt made him itch and pulled at the bandages. "It hurts you?"

Channadar frowned at her. "It is nothing I cannot deal with."

"That is not what I asked," she said as gently as she could, sensing she was somehow walking on his pride.

Channadar shrugged, and the look in his eyes betrayed him, telling her the movement had made his shoulder hurt worse. "You must not worry. Just love me."

"How can I love you and not worry?" Leeza demanded with a flash of anger, tears coming in her eyes. "Don't close me out, Channadar."

"I do not want you to worry. I would not be protecting you, if I allowed you to worry."

"I don't need to be protected! I did fine on my own before I met you. I was a yeomon!" She turned away from him.

"Leeza..." He tried to smile in amusement, and it faded from his face as he clutched at his arm. "I am sorry. You do not understand..."

"And what if we made a child? What would you do then?"

"I would hide you both under Tiderider's arms."

"That's what I feared. I'm a whore. Bought and paid for." Leeza fled the room.

Channadar stared after her, feeling confused.

* * * *

Wrathscar knocked on Galee's door. When there was no answer, he drew a key from his pocket and put it into the lock. A cunning smile spread across his face. Galee had never changed the lock after the days of their sexual liaison, when it was the talk of the court. She probably never expected him to disobey her, and return without her permission. Wrathscar had tired of the way she ruled everything, the way she kept him restrained. He squirmed beneath the foot she kept placing on his neck to keep him in line. Having taken dominion, she ignored him as beneath her notice, frequently palming him off on Meilurk for these hunts instead of hunting with him herself.

He opened the door and closed it behind him, replacing the key in his pocket. Crossing the outer chamber, he ran his fingers along the lacquered furniture in his line of travel. This would teach her to ignore him over a stupid book. Wrathscar went into her study, pulled the journal off the shelf, slipped it into his shirt and then

left immediately, being careful to lock the apartment again. Then he went to his rooms down the corridor.

* * * *

Osterbridge sat on the edge of a chair in Terrys' outer parlor, ignoring the wine glass in his hands, his gaze skimming the top to touch the floor and trace the patterns on the carpet. Jajinga's willingness to break the news to Terrys, instead of leaving it to him, had taken one of the stones from his stomach that had begun to lodge there. He would have done it if Jajinga had insisted, but he had not.

Jajinga sat beside Terrys on the couch in her parlor, sipping wine. "Yahni's gone," Jajinga said. "I kept thinking he would come back, but Queiggy's promoted a new mon to Yahni's position. He's doubled the guards at the doors, main and postern." Normally the Guild promoted from within a group, people who had worked closely with a lost mon so that they already knew the job and what had already been done. That should have been either Jajinga or Osterbridge. This time they had not.

"Well, we've known they intended to runaway together." Terrys flicked her skirts to the sides better while she searched their eyes.

"Then why did they put it off for over a month?" Jajinga questioned.

"They were still keeping the marriage secret," Osterbridge interjected. "I agree with Jajinga. Something is wrong. Yahni implied that he'd been given an assignment."

Terrys swallowed, looking distressed. "I really don't want to believe that something has happened to them."

"They couldn't run away," Jajinga said, pressing his palms on the table and leaving prints in the cool shine. "Yahni's sick. Belyla's pregnant. A pregnant woman and a sick man? How far could they get?"

"Not far at all," Terrys admitted. "I know you've come for a favor."

Osterbridge nodded. "We want you to help us find Yahni and Belyla. Call it a gut instinct, Terrys. But I think Queiggy and Yukiah know. Or suspect. I don't believe they would give an assignment to a sick mon."

"It's possible the assignment made him sick," Jajinga said and wished he hadn't.

Terrys turned pale. "Are you suggesting someone poisoned Yahni?"

"No. Only that they're not talking to us. We've asked them, Terrys."

Terrys shifted uneasily. "I'm the only friend Belyla has. Have you spoken to Yahni's other friends?"

Jajinga nodded. "The ones we trusted not to carry it back to Queiggy. We must find them."

"I'll help."

* * * *

Galee went to the shelf in her study to take down her journal and make some more notes. She blinked, checked the next shelf, and then the next. Anger roared up inside her and she shrieked, throwing books in all directions. It was gone.

"Wrathscar!"

She swept out of the apartments in a rage, heading for Wrathscar's suites. Then she saw someone standing in the door talking and drew back to listen. Terrys. Galee remembered that Yahni had three close friends, Terrys, Jajinga, and Ceejorn Osterbridge. Could they have been working together? Was that why Terrys was standing at Wrathscar's door?

* * * *

Terrys knocked on the door to the Wrathscar apartments on the West Wing. She smoothed her skirts in slow movements to calm herself as she waited for a response and sucked in a long steady breath. What if only Yahni was missing, while Belyla was simply being held by her father? The implications of that possibility slid through her with distress. The door opened, and she found herself staring at Philomea. The blonde mon was dressed for riding in a powder blue split skirt, and stood tapping her leg with a leather crop.

Philomea's eyes hardened when she saw Terrys. "What do you want, Terrys?"

"To speak with Belyla. I'm planning a party."

"I'll tell her you were here."

"Then you know where she is?"

"She's my sister."

"Are you going to invite me in?"

"No. I don't have time to bother with you. Lord Westli is waiting for me and he becomes impatient." Philomea closed the door in her face.

Terrys was surprised with the sting of that rejection, since she and Philomea always quarreled. Previously, Philomea would observe some formal etiquette, yet not this

time. Terrys wondered if that meant Lord Wrathscar was home: he did not like visitors. She pondered the information she had managed to gain from Philomea. Apparently they did know where Belyla was and that meant she had to be at the mansion. But then, where was Yahni? Could it be that Wrathscar had discovered Yahni's connection to his daughter? And if so, was Yahni still alive? No. She did not want to go there. Yahni had to be safe. He had to be. She had to talk to Jajinga and Osterbridge.

* * * *

Osterbridge knew that his plans were dishonorable, but after listening to Terrys, he felt he had no other choice. He went down into the records chamber and found a secluded alcove the next level beneath the one where Queiggy had been attacked months ago. He waited in the yawning stillness until he was certain that everyone who worked there had departed and only then did he light a candle to see with. His footsteps echoed loudly in the silence as he climbed the stairs to the room where they kept the files on active and currently deployed Guildsmyn. There he drew out a crystal keyed to the door and opened it by running the crystal along the edge. Osterbridge had stolen the key earlier that day and would have to replace it before morning.

He felt a small thrust of guilt, as if he were betraying the Guild itself, yet his love for Yahni – a rare thing that happens when two young myn bond strongly in childhood and grow up together was as intense as that formed on the field of battle itself – made him put it aside. Osterbridge closed the door behind him, found more candles on the wooden tables and cabinets, which he lit until the room was fully illumined in their gathered light.

The first cabinets he opened were the actives. Osterbridge went through file after file after file, backwards and forwards in case they had been filed out of order, looking for Yahni's records. He did not find them. Then he went to the cabinet of deployed myn and units since Yahni had implied to them that he had been given an assignment. There too Osterbridge found nothing. Tension had started to build in him by the time he went to the last set. There he found a slip of paper saying the file had been sealed and removed. He did not like that and, with a tightening of his stomach, he went to a narrow drawer in a desk. He dug through it, hoping for anything and found the most recent status list on Guildsmyn inside Havensword and Ishladrim Castle. He went down the lists until he found Yahni's name and saw scribbled beside it "missing, believed dead."

He couldn't breathe and his heart felt shoved into his throat by his clenching chest muscles. "No! No, no, no." Then he mastered himself, wondering softly, "Why haven't they told anyone? Why seal the records?" *What are they basing this on? What do they know that we don't?*

Queiggy, alone, had the key to the sealed records room. Osterbridge knew he would

never get it. His thoughts turned instead to Belyla. That was the only direction left to them.

* * * *

Belyla got Yahni up and dressed, her father had insisted upon having him present at a formal dinner. He was weaker than usual the day after she had drunk from him, and Belyla suspected that Philomea had visited him also. Yahni never told her, although she asked him each time she found him like this. She suspected that her father intended to display Yahni to his guests like a trophy. Belyla had avoided going down and visiting with them before dinner.

Yahni sat on the bed, his head leaning against the headboard, eyes closed. Belyla had wedged pillows around Yahni to support him while she dressed herself.

"What is taking so long?" Philomea demanded from the door. "Father wants Yahni at the table before the others enter. So they cannot help but see him."

Belyla's breath caught in her chest and then she released it and sucked in another. "Grab some pillows and I'll get him down there. He'll need them."

Yahni raised his head. "Philomea ... this is wrong."

Philomea's lips parted and she licked them, allowing her eyes to widen a bit as she came toward them. "Whatever gives my father more power is right." She inclined her head, smiling. "Right and justice are a matter of one's point of view. Nothing more."

"Get the pillows," Belyla said, refusing to be drawn into this. She lifted Yahni, dragged one arm across her neck, and walked him down the long corridor to the formal dining hall. She could simply have carried him, but that worsened his despair whenever she did so. Belyla wondered briefly if he was encouraging Philomea behind her back, possibly out of his desire to die by someone else's hands than her own.

"You will be certain that he does not speak to the guests," Philomea called out before gathering the pillows. "He is to be seen, not heard."

A large wing chair had been placed beside Belyla's seat at the table on her request and she settled Yahni there. Philomea arrived. Together they made Yahni comfortable with pillows to each side, and pushed his chair up to the table. He could barely hold his head up; it canted to the side of the chair. Belyla sat beside him.

Philomea stroked his head, drawing a glare from Belyla. "Philomea, tell father, I have him here."

Her sister's answering smile was perfunctory, and she left.

Belyla fought back tears as she watched her father and his guests enter. Wrathscar sat at the head of the table and Galee took the place of honor at his right hand. He alternated his daughters among the male guests along the left and Galee's folk among the ladies on the right. Yahni sat between Galee and Belyla in case anything should go awry with what Belyla more and more suspected was going to be a demonstration of Wrathscar's hold over everyone.

Lord Naren, a wispy northern lord with a seat upon the council, sat beside Elomina. Next came Lord Westli, commander of the guard, seated beside Philomea. Lord Lemyk, another from the council, was partnered with Darguarite for the meal. Milady and Lord Ambrose came also, seating themselves near the end with Zarliche Blood. Finally there was a scattering of lower nobles, captains, and commanders among the sa'necari and Lemyari surrounding Zarliche.

Westli studied Yahni extensively, clearly trying to remember his face, which was ghastly to look at. Then he cried out in astonishment, "Yahni Kjarten!"

"Yes, indeed," Wrathscar said, his lip curving back in contempt and hate. "He was sleeping with my daughter, possibly spying upon us. I punished both of them."

Bryndel winced, refusing to meet his father's eyes or those of any present.

Servants filled all the glasses with wine, red and white according to preference. Servants brought the food out on steaming platters and the guests filled their plates. Belyla's sisters put small portions upon theirs and sat moving the food around – when they were not ignoring it completely – to cover the fact they were not eating.

"People have begun to wonder where Yahni is," Westli informed Wrathscar. "He's a dangerous one to keep alive. What if someone found him here? You need to kill him, and dump his body in the sewers."

"He will not live much longer, Westli. Look at him," Wrathscar responded.

"What is this?" Lord Naren asked, pushing at some very white meat on his plate that he had just taken a bite of. It was extremely sweet.

"My favorite," Zarliche said with relish. "Long pig."

Lord Naren looked ready to vomit and Wrathscar's daughters shoved their plates away in distaste, using the information in their pretense of humanity to reject their food.

"Is he ill or poisoned?" Lord Naren asked when he recovered.

"Neither." Wrathscar replied.

The cross talk continued as Wrathscar deflected their questions concerning Yahni,

saying only, "He is my example to you of what will happen should you decide to go back on our agreements. I will demonstrate when we draw nearer the end of the meal."

Belyla struggled throughout to get food into Yahni, mostly soft stuff that he could simply swallow because he was too tired to chew. She desperately wanted to take him and flee, but felt certain she would never get far. The terror of their capture in the swanspire still lingered.

Finally her father said, "Belyla, show them what is wrong with Yahni."

Belyla winced and opened Yahni's shirt so they could see the scars. A grasp ran around the table among the humans. She turned his head so they could see Philomea's marks on his neck.

"Now, Belyla, demonstrate how he got them."

Belyla began to cry, letting her fangs descend to full extension. She took Yahni's wrist and fed.

Wrathscar leaned back in his chair, his expression triumphant. "My daughter was turned as a punishment. She was carrying Yahni's child. She disobeyed me when I told her not to associate with Guildsmyn. Anyone who thinks to double cross me should learn from Belyla. My fanged associates will not hesitate to kill you in a very ugly fashion. Or perhaps you could become revenants. Those bent to my will. I have a thousand ways to strike at those who break faith with me, and I will see that you experience the most agonizing death imaginable first. Do I make myself clear?"

Zarliche chuckled softly at the humans' discomfort. "You're in over your heads, gentlemyn," he said. "Sink or swim. The only way to swim is to do what the mon says."

"On the other hand," Wrathscar continued. "I can also reward you in ways others can only dream. Furthermore, it is time my daughters wed, and there are some present who are very deserving of them."

Westli glanced at Philomea who smiled at him.

* * * *

As the day waned, Osterbridge waited for Jajinga on the end of the practice field in the corner when they had once worked out with Yahni. The emptiness gnawed at him. Too many years of fine memories and good companionship lay in this place. Now they were banished by the shadow of that single slip of paper telling him that Yahni was, most likely, dead. When he was about to give up, Jajinga arrived, and sat down beside him.

"What is so important we had to meet here?"

Osterbridge shook his head, his eyes grim. "Guild thinks Yahni's dead. His file has been sealed, but I found a notation on the actives list. It said 'missing, believed dead.' They've given up on him. Guild doesn't give up without good reason."

Jajinga dragged Osterbridge into a brief embrace of comfort. When it ended, Jajinga's grim face held a stubborn edge. "We need more. We can't just let it go."

"You mustn't tell Terrys."

"I won't, Ceejorn. But what can you do to find out more?"

"I don't know. There is no way that I would ever be able to get the key to the sealed records room. Queiggy still refuses to talk to me about it. So does Yukiah."

"There must be something we can do. If we knew whether he was alive or not, where or what he was doing. Then we could either rescue or avenge him."

Osterbridge sighed. "I will keep trying. But he's been gone over a month now."

"Terrys. Terrys is stronger than you think. We should tell her."

* * * *

Yahni lay in Belyla's bed; his eyes tracing the quilting on the lining of the canopy, listening to Wrathscar and Galee have their third screaming match in as many days over "the book."

The argument ended, and Yahni heard several sets of heels clicking on the oaken floors, drawing nearer the room. He turned his head toward the door. Galee, her face flushed with anger, shoved Bryndel and Belyla in ahead of her.

Bryndel tried not to meet Yahni's eyes, brushing across them, then flinching away like a trapped animal with the same kind of panic that Yahni frequently saw in Belyla's.

"Both of you continue to disobey me," Galee growled, stalking past them to seize Yahni by the collar. She dragged the Guildsmon from Belyla's bed. Yahni staggered in her grip, tried to rise, and she shoved him roughly to the floor. Yahni's hips struck first and then his back. He lay looking up at the ceiling, unable to move.

Belyla clutched at Bryndel for support, but he twisted away from her, a look of sheerest horror on his face at what she had become.

"Where are you feeding, Belyla?" Galee demanded. "I told you to kill your Guildsmon. His death is taking too long."

Belyla began to cry. Galee seized the girl, thrusting her down on top of Yahni. "Watch Bryndel, and know the price of disobedience. Belyla!" Galee knelt, tangling her fingers in Belyla's hair, pressing her face into Yahni's neck. "Philomea tells that you have not yet fed from the throat, Belyla. That is where the blood runs freshest, fastest. Feed, Belyla!"

Belyla's fangs ripped into the artery. Yahni screamed and the last thing he saw was Bryndel vomiting on the carpet.

Galee is right, Belyla thought. *The blood is best there*. Yahni's blood tasted so rich and strong as it flooded Belyla's mouth, filling her with pleasure so intense she forgot everything. She had never taken him in the favored vein before, and the power of this feeding swept her humanity away. Yahni's breathing became stertorous, his eyes rolling up in his head as Belyla continued to worry him, his body convulsing beneath her.

"Stop iiiitt!" Bryndel shrieked, his stomach twisting as he gasped and shuddered in horror. "You're killing him!"

"Let her finish," Galee said, inclining her head interestedly. "It is long past time for Kjarten to have died."

But Bryndel's heaving words had reached Belyla, calling her back to self-awareness, and she released Yahni with her cheeks flushed, her lips and chin dribbling his blood. Belyla paled, drawing farther away from Yahni whose body continued to tremble and jerk in small convulsions. "What do I do?" she whispered desperately.

"Put your own blood on it to close it. Lick it. Then amphereon or enlokieyn," Bryndel supplied from his meager Guild training, what little he had learned before they found him unfit and tossed him out. "Take him to my room."

A swipe of her tongue closed the wound. Belyla wept, lifting her husband up, and sidling from Galee, eyes wide. Galee laughed at her. "The lesson has been taught. There are places I can toss his body where it will never be found once the Dance ends. Don't make it a long one, Belyla, I am tired of watching," Galee called after the retreating girl. "If you don't do it soon, I will."

"I hate you, Galee!" Bryndel cursed, backing away from her. Then he spun, fleeing after his kit in the other room to try and save Yahni.

* * * *

Osterbridge leaned forward in his chair, eyes downcast and focused on his folded hands. The more dead ends they found in their search for Yahni, the more he felt as if a wound were opening in his heart. Terrys sat upon her couch with Jajinga beside her and the low table separating her from Osterbridge. The morning sun shone bright

through the windows. He glanced at her from time to time, barely lifting his head as he worked hard at avoiding eye contact. Yet he could tell that Terrys had already read their expressions and knew that something very serious had happened.

Jajinga caught the tiny lifting of his head, and nodded at him to begin.

Osterbridge gave a troubled sigh. "Guild has sealed Yahni's records. They think he's dead."

Terrys' face went pale and then crumpled up with grief. "He can't be."

"Terrys." Jajinga covered her hands with his. "They would not do that without good cause to believe it's true. Otherwise they would have made an open case of the records. If Wrathscar found out about him, then he's probably dead."

Tears started silently down Terrys' face. They had all known the risk in Yahni's love for Belyla. The sense of invincibility had gone out of them. They had been unable to protect the young couple. Terrys squared her shoulders and sat straighter as she told them what she had discerned from her meeting with Philomea.

"That seals it. Wrathscar discovered them," Jajinga said.

"I'm sorry, Terrys. I'm really sorry." Osterbridge's face had gone hard to hide his emotions. "If we could at least recover his body or rescue Belyla."

Silence held until Jajinga broke it. "Then we should check out the mansion."

"You'll never get in. It's too well guarded. I've been there," Terrys said.

Silence again.

Osterbridge looked thoughtful. "We could at least have a look around the edges, from the outside. Tell us where it's located."

"I refuse to believe he's dead, Ceejorn. Wrathscar must have him." Terrys insisted, twisting her handkerchief. "I refuse to believe it."

* * * *

Belyla curled against Yahni, as she so often did, her eyes wet from crying. "There must be a way to get them, Yahni. To pay them."

Yahni now knew who all the players were, but what good did it do him? He would never reach the Guild alive; it was hardly likely he could get off the grounds. The most he could hope to do was hand the book to someone. The Guild would then know what had happened. And they would have the evidence.

Once he took the book, he could count his remaining life in minutes; each would count. No need to live long enough to speak: merely to pass the book. Yahni began to find the strength to rise out of the mire of hopelessness. He could not manage it alone, yet the Guild would stake Belyla and be done with it.

Her choice to make. Better for her to perish now while her soul remained pure.

They could hear Galee and Wrathscar's voices echoing down the hall.

"I will have the book in three days, Galee," Wrathscar shouted. "Four at the most. I've sent for it. You didn't think I'd keep it in the city, now did you?"

"No, you would not be that stupid."

Yahni looked up at Belyla as the arguing died down between Galee and Wrathscar. He strained to hear their words, but they had stopped talking. "Belyla, how badly do you want to get them? Desperately enough to perish?"

She clutched him tightly, saying in a hushed voice, "Yes."

* * * *

Tiderider kissed Leeza chastely on her forehead.

"Go now, and do not be seen."

Leeza slipped from the bed and then quietly from the room to the connecting chamber. Tiderider's room stood immediately to the right of Channadar's. She checked that it was clear and slipped into the lord's private suite. Normally he would have been waiting for her in the outer room. Instead she knew she would find him lying in bed. His eyes opened as she entered, those strange silver eyes that always drew her, that enigmatic smile that had taken her so long to learn to read.

"Channadar, I love you." She moved carefully onto the bed, curling her legs beneath her, removing Tiderider's crystal, and replacing it with his, which she took from her pocket.

He touched her cheek lightly. "I know. When the beast is slain, I will no longer need to hide my treasure beneath Tiderider's arms." Not even Juna and his mother knew about Leeza. Only Tiderider and Chucomei. It was especially crucial to keep her hidden from Galee.

Channadar had discovered Galee's agents poking around in his holdings and then Galee herself, digging at the edges of the Escarpment as if looking for a way to breach the walls or climb them. His Thirteen Chosen had killed her agents, hunting them in secret through the forests and mountains of Hellsguard. He and Galee had words after he found her digging. She tried to insinuate spies in his court, his towns,

villages, and cities. He found them all. He banned her from his holdings, causing a political incident of immense proportions – only Patriarch Eshraf's intervention saved him – and finally he invited himself to court with his Chosen and stayed there for three years, and was still there, watching her.

Her namesake, the original Gylorean Galee, was, according to legend, responsible for the kinstrike that caused Willodarus to drive Channadar's ancestors from the Sacred Realm of Imralon and then from the entire continent of Sealandia on which it lay. An inauspicious name, to say the least. She had the ears and the slanted eyes, but she was unlike any sylvan Channadar had ever seen and his mother agreed. The woman was no more Nordrei than Channadar was an orc. And she had threatened him in a language she thought he would not know, saying that there would be no heirs of his body, no mates for him – that she would make them die. He was a mon of two worlds. In taking on his father's lands and titles, he swore to abide by the laws of Creeya. Yet he was also of the Faery folk and their ways were far different. Tiderider would simply have hunted Galee after she made that threat. But Channadar had learned the rules of the game, the subtleties. He needed to prove her guilt while fighting her plots. So he hid Leeza, while keeping her close because he could not bear to be parted from her.

"Promise me, Leeza, if I should die, you will let Tiderider take you to Faewin."

Leeza did not argue. She could never be anything but strong for him. "I promise." She prayed that he would decide to at least reveal her to his mother. This sounded like it, but if she pressed him, he would retreat. So she did not. Leeza wondered if the others noticed the way he favored his arm still, as if he had to force it to work. *Oh, surely they do!* It had been over a month and yet he was not whole. He tired easily and all of it worried her. "Be careful."

"I try. But the game must be played, Leeza. For both our sakes. And the stakes are much higher than you realize."

"You are all that I care about, Channadar. All that is important to me."

He touched her lips. "Do not say that. Hellsguard not only stands against the enemy, we shelter the branch clan, which is hidden within it. Do you understand now? If the enemy knew of our relationship they might try to use you to force that knowledge from me. I know where they are hidden, how to reach them. This goes beyond my love for you or yours for me."

Leeza nodded. Whenever Channadar explained his motives it always made sense that he concealed their relationship. But once away from him, away from this room, her heart's voice spoke louder than her head's and sometimes she wanted to flee from him, because there was a growing sense of pain and frustration in equal proportion to the joy. "Yes, I understand."

Channadar stroked her face again, his eyes fond. "Good. When this is done, I will

marry you."

Leeza's face brightened, her body filling with joy and her head with a dizzy rush of emotion. "Truly?"

"I would not say it otherwise. I did not intend to fall in love, believing it to be too dangerous. Yet I could not help myself. Yes. I want to marry you, if you are willing."

"Yes. Yes, that is my fondest wish."

"Then you must be patient. The game will not last much longer."

"I will be patient. I promise."

* * * *

"Well, well, Bryndel," Galee purred, gratingly. "I was beginning to think you were not coming." She lounged on the couch near the outer door into her chambers, wearing a filmy nightgown that left nothing to his imagination. He resented her whorish displays.

"What do you want this time, Galee," Bryndel growled with irritation, closing the door behind him. Galee had kept him terrified throughout his childhood when his infrequent defiance had taken the form of tantrums. She still deliberately frightened him sometimes. He had a feeling this would be one of those, which made him nervous, and in turn made him cross. No matter how hard he tried to ignore her summons, he always found himself answering, as if she were reeling him in like a struggling fish on a line.

"Not much." She rose and circled him, her head tilted to one side, her fangs showing as her lips parted. She tongued her lips, as if tasting something.

Bryndel felt uneasy watching her. "You said it was urgent."

"It is. I want you to increase the dosage."

Bryndel let go a long, shuddering breath. "I don't think that would be wise."

Galee snarled. "It is not for you to think."

Bryndel dropped his gaze, trying not to look at her, knowing her ability to seize his mind. She caught his face, forcing it up. He closed his eyes.

"Open them or die. Your father won't miss you. He might even marry Talons in your place and you know how he likes to break his women."

Bryndel opened them. Galee's eyes locked on his in a flash, rushing into his mind.

Bryndel collapsed against her. She lowered him to the ground.

"Bryndel, don't make me do this again. Don't make me set a link in your mind. You saw how I could call Talons from her bed when I wished to feed on her. I can and will do the same thing to you. No one cares enough about you to break my links the way they did for Talons. No one loves you, Bryndel."

Bryndel shook his head, tears starting from his eyes as fear of her turned him into a little boy. "I won't disobey."

"That is better. You will double the dosage for the next three days. Then you will go back to the original dosage plus half again. It will stay at that level. They are doing something with herbs that's blunting the drug. I want a sample of that infusion."

Galee pulled Bryndel's pants down and spread his legs. "You will not remember coming here, nor anything we did or said, but you will remember my orders and carry them out." She pressed her face close to his thick, black hair, her fangs lengthened still more. She broke the skin and began to feed. Bryndel blacked out.

* * * *

The silent mutiny progressed through a chain of conferences carried out with religious devotion and dedication, simply by allowing information to be passed no higher than the Guild Wing. The exceptions to this were the up drawbridge which Queiggy had called, allowing the military branch to withdraw its members, those who wished to, into the Wing, and refuse to come out, on the grounds they wished to pray – an act that could be construed as defiance of authority. Meetings with the temple continued between the branches that served the Book, currently under the de facto control of Queiggy, and Patriarch Eshraf and Yukiah who controlled the training as armsmaster. Yukiah reported to Queiggy.

Yukiah and Queiggy spent each evening playing chess and, each Willoday, the last day of the week, the armsmaster brought him the reports that previously would have gone to Mohanja and Hanadi. Leonè had already provided the ones that he used to bring Galee earlier that same day. The Grand Master's lieutenants now had only empty titles. Once Queiggy had gone through the reports, he would decide what was safe to pass on and those reports only would go to the top, just enough to cover what they were doing. Some things would be altered, to become disinformation. The Guild would be protected.

As the armsmaster sat down, laying the reports on Queiggy's desk, the yuwenghau knew the news had to be bad. "Yahni?"

"It's been weeks since the swanspire. There's nothing at all on Yahni or Belyla. We must assume they killed him. I'm putting word out to stake Belyla on sight, before she starts Dancing the rest of his family."

"I agree. It was a gamble, Yukiah. We lost it. Ask Eshraf to pray for him."

"Already have. I spoke to him first."

"With the geis in place, they will not have been able to break into his mind. The vampire will not know what we are doing here."

"Eshraf is convinced they'll show their hands. We'll force them."

"We walk the blade of the knife and trust in our god."

* * * *

Alora sat at the small table with Jysy and Arruth; shuffling cards for another round of the new game she was teaching them. She started to deal and then paused.

"Talons is usually up by now," she frowned. "Check on her, Jysy. She should have some lunch whether she wants it or not."

"Don't peek at my cards," Jysy admonished them as she left the table.

Arruth giggled and reached for them. Alora slapped her hand.

Jysy pushed the door open to the bedroom. "Talons? It's getting late and you still haven't eaten." She sat down beside Talons, shaking her gently. "Talons? Talons?"

Talons' head rolled limply to one side and Jysy screamed.

"What is it?" Alora demanded, charging in. Jysy stood with her back against the wall, having retreated as far from the unmoving assassin as possible. She had her arms pressed tightly against her stomach and was half-folded across them in distress.

"I think she's dead," Jysy whimpered.

Alora felt for a pulse and found it. "She alive, Jysy, calm down. Get the healer." She noticed tiny flecks of blood around Talons' nostrils. Arsenic poisoning? Alora shook her head, knowing that arsenic did not affect Sharani. Could something else similarly affect Sharani? Alora shook her head, knowing that arsenic did not affect Sharani. Could something else similarly affect Sharani? Although Jimi already checked, she wanted to talk to a Guildsmon herself, but she was not certain which one.

* * * *

Solance emerged from Talons' room after replacing the empty vial and glass in his satchel. He now wore a bright scarf, no matter how hot the summer day, that matched his sash. It looked like simply a new and odd affectation, but Solance was

considered odd to begin with and so no one ever mentioned it. "I don't know what's wrong with her," Solance said, shaking his head. "I don't find evidence of this so-called drug you say your mage found in her system."

"Then make a guess," Edouina sounded cross and impatient. Once more Solance had managed to be the only healer on call.

"It's this unnatural pregnancy. Sharani bodies don't work like normal people. It's a miracle you people can reproduce at all. Stealing children from other women's wombs—"

"Get out," she snarled. Then louder, stamping her foot for emphasis, "Get the Hell out!"

Solance fled.

Alora looked up from her book. She was curled into a corner of the couch. "Don't be too hard on him. There are all kinds of rumors going around about unnatural Sharani sexual and reproductive habits. One guy is saying you people steal men's seed right out of their bodies by kissing them – on the ear – and that they're sterile afterward. You sort of collect it all and save it. There is the one claiming that you don't use males at all to reproduce, because you have both sets of organs and just cleverly disguise them."

Edouina groaned.

* * * *

Edouina and Dynarien sat up all night with Talons. She roused twice in drifting consciousness, not recognizing either of them, and then away again.

"What's this doing to the children?" Edouina asked him.

"Nothing yet. I invoked the kweigeyl to suppress only those aspects of the bi-kyndi that responded to touch. It's still preventing the drug from reaching the babies."

"I suppose that's something to be grateful for." Edouina leaned back in Dynarien's arms, her head resting against his shoulder. Dynarien felt wonderfully solid and strong. He kissed Edouina's lips lightly. "If I wasn't so tired and worried, honey, I'd make something of that," she drawled.

On the second and third day, Talons had more episodes of unconsciousness, but after that things appeared to level off.

* * * *

"There! There's your bloody book!" Wrathscar shouted, slamming it onto the table.

"Now, dance with me, as you promised. As you used to."

"Very well," Galee sounded petulant, stalking from the room with him in tow, as Yahni and Belyla watched discreetly around the edges of the door facing of the guest hall. Yahni had a bit more strength, for they had been anticipating the book's arrival and Belyla had resisted feeding from him for days, although it made her ache with need and desire. Philomea had not returned from the castle once Yahni refused to conceal her secret visits from Belyla.

"Why doesn't she just kill him?" Wrathscar demanded.

"She's Passion-Dancing," Galee observed, smiling with unusual appreciation. "I must admit she does it well, with far more skill than I expected. Savoring him like fine wine, to be sipped, rather than gulped greedily."

"Like a nibari."

"Somewhat, except that she is killing him by taking too much and too often and he does not have the nibari stamina. When she finally stops his heart, she will be very sad, then she will console herself with another of his family and another until there will be no Kjartens left alive."

Wrathscar smiled. "No more of the bloody Kjartens to annoy me will suit fine."

They entered the next room, leaving the book behind.

"Now, Belyla, let's get the book." Yahni pushed from his chair, faltered and then steadied. Belyla waited for him. They stole into her father's study, and Yahni took the book off the shelf, slipping it inside his shirt as he heard Galee and Wrathscar, still arguing loudly, coming up from the basement, and hurried back to the sitting room where he had left Belyla.

"Let's go."

"The gardens?"

"And into the trees." Yahni kissed her quickly and started walking along the hallway, which was dotted with tables, couches, and chairs. "The way you went up the walls to the tower."

Belyla gripped his arm, careful to keep her claws sheathed. She had never used the venom, but she knew it was there; she knew it could kill. Did using it count as the kind of kill that would cost her soul? Even if it were in self-defense? Could she bring herself to kill? If it meant defending Yahni? They came to the middle of the hallway where the landing of the stairs interrupted it without seeing anyone. Then they heard Galee's shriek of rage, followed by Wrathscar's roar.

Belyla quailed. "They know."

Galee stepped into the hall, lifted a table, and threw it. The table struck them, hurling them beyond the landing. Belyla came to her feet first, dragging Yahni up, crying in terror. Galee swept down the hallway, seized Belyla, ripping her away from Yahni, and cast the girl into her father's arms. Wrathscar imprisoned Belyla in his grasp, forcing her to watch as Galee continued to pursue Yahni. Yahni stumbled again, twisting and staggering into a wall. Galee stalked after him, throwing furniture each time he tried to straighten and run again until he fell. Belyla sobbed. Galee stood over him, glaring deeply. She seized his face, forced it up, and sank her mind into his, capturing it securely.

"Belyla, mark me, you will be punished." Galee snarled, "You were told to take his mind, not simply feed upon him."

"I love him."

Wrathscar laughed and released her. "The only love you'll get is what I give you between your legs, slut."

"I have a lesson to teach both of you. Yahni is a truehearted, godmarked Guildsmon. Therefore he will not rise. So you must sit and watch him die." Galee ripped his shirt open and took the book out. "Each time I catch you doing something like this, Belyla, I will repeat the lesson. Your next meal will be a kill. No more nibble games."

Galee lifted Yahni to his feet, "Go into the sitting room, and wait for us with Belyla. Do not speak."

"The only mon who teaches Belyla is me, Galee," Wrathscar growled.

Yahni did as he was bid, Belyla following him in tears. Belyla sat down at the table beside him, stroking his hair, patting his hand, and getting no response. She felt unable to think. The moment her father touched her, the strength had gone out of her. She felt numb, weak. She looked into Yahni's eyes, those lovely eyes that were now so empty.

"What do I do?" Impulsively she pushed into his mind, awkwardly, uncertainly, knowing she could not free him, but wanting to touch him somehow before Galee killed him. She found something odd that filled her with thoughts of trees and green growing things. It eased her fear a bit, calmed her and, for the first time since they were taken, she thought of the Black Swan as more than a name, as a presence.

Galee returned with her arms loaded down with several items and arrayed them before Yahni: a glass, a brown bottle like the one Solance had brought to the swan room, pen, paper and ink – and the book. She cupped his chin, touching his mind again. "You're geised, by someone with tree-gift. We've two yuwenghau, it seems.

The Master of Blood will kill them both. What were you supposed to do?"

"Protect the records, return the book."

Galee laughed. "You've come looking for the book I burnt, and found my journal instead. Well, since you belong to Mohanja, and are wearing this silly geis – not to mention the fact that Belyla had the poor sense to take a Kjarten, we'll handle it like this." She poured him a glass of the drug. "Drink. Master of Blood brewed this one special. A single dose was not enough to kill you last time. This one is stronger."

Yahni obeyed and Belyla began to cry again.

"Now write. Say you have betrayed the Guild, your god, and your vows by coupling with vampires. Once dead, they should not be able to tell the difference."

Yahni wrote and she poured him another glass. "Drink."

"What are you doing, Galee?" Wrathscar came in, his face still stormy.

"Repairing the damage your daughter has done. When they find his corpse in front of the temple tomorrow whatever he may have told them will have lost its credibility, especially since he's chosen a woman's death over a man's." She filled the glass a third time. Yahni drank. Galee blew on the paper to dry it, folded it up, and placed it in his pocket. As she saw him start to sag, she released him to feel it more fully.

Yahni clawed at the table, trying to both remain upright and clutch at his chest and stomach at the same time. His chair listed backwards and then to the side, toppling over and spilling him onto the floor. Belyla screamed.

"Enjoying yourself?" Galee asked.

"I hate you!" Belyla screamed.

"Hate is fine. So long as you learn obedience. Before the night is out, I will have taught you. You will sit here and watch him die. You will not touch him."

"The only one teaching my daughters is me," Wrathscar growled, grabbing Galee and shoving her out of the room.

"Then I will teach you, as well."

Belyla wept harder as she disobeyed to drag her husband into her arms. She closed out the sounds of her father and Galee having another of their frequent fights. They'd never fought like this before she turned him. "I don't want to be a monster."

"Love. You." His words emerged soft, struggling to escape, to be heard.

It had been a long time since she had dreamed of being the Black Swan in her cloak of black feathers and silver armor, with her flight of blue gryphons in service to Willodarus and the woodland divines. Black Swan and White Swan. Channadar had called her the Black Swan and Yahni the White. She did not even know if the Faery lord still lived. He had tried to help them. What would the Black Swan do? She would shake out her cloak of feathers and leap from the window. She would carry the dying White Swan from this place and pass the book to her blues so that the word could reach the right ears even if it meant her life. Belyla could almost hear Channadar's voice singing. She could remember the swans coming from his fans that first day he actually spoke to her when she was with Yahni that evening in the gardens. Then she was not afraid anymore, merely angry and desperate.

Belyla snatched the book off the table, lifted Yahni into her arms, and remembered the paper in his pockets. He was not dying with a lie in his pockets. She pulled it out and threw it away. They went out the second story window as only a vampire could, the way she had gone out of the swan window and up to the spire. She still could not think clearly, but anger and grief was gradually burning a hole through her fear and terror.

People were dismounting in the courtyard. There was no way to be subtle about it, so she simply walked into their midst, knocked several down and grabbed a horse. Belyla was frightened badly and shaking, but she was trying hard to act like a ferocious vampire, or at least her idea of how one would act.

Galee had more resources than Belyla dreamed, and they had not gone four blocks in the deepening twilight before they found their way barred by a dozen lesser bloods. Belyla reined hard, forced away from the direction of the castle and back into the city. She clutched Yahni tightly, panic growing again as they cut her off repeatedly no matter which way she turned. "Which way, Yahni? Which way?" But he could not answer.

She lost all sense of direction, finding herself in a part of the city she had never been before, a place of taverns and shops. Myn grabbed the reins of her tiring horse, jerking the beast roughly. The hands seizing her were strong, stronger than she was and she screamed as they pulled her off. Yahni fell from her arms and the book skittered from her grasp, sliding along the gutters and then into the sewers.

Struggling with Belyla and figuring the Guildsmon to be too far gone to escape, they ignored him. Yahni lay in the wet filth, staring up at the sign on the tavern, trying in his pain and weakness to remember why it looked familiar: The Black Lady Tavern. He caught the edge of the windowsill, dragging himself up. That was when they noticed him. He managed the two steps to the door, walking the wall with his palms flat for support, turned the knob, and staggered inside.

* * * *

Maya had been talking for an hour about the complexities of Sharani relationships and how there simply were not enough words in common or any other language except Sharani to encompass it. Tomorrow they would make a formal announcement of their triading, a more conventional Sharani arrangement – if anything Sharani could be called conventional – than that of her parents. Her uncle, father, and six mothers had already given them a small private party earlier that day to introduce Derryl and Leslie to the delightful insanity of Sharani pod marriages as well as to the five of her sixteen sibs who could be gathered on short notice. Her only disappointment was that no one could find Yahni.

"So you see, we say our daddies, meaning both of them, speaking in emotional terms and that confuses people. Because Sharani will often chose a different bloodline to produce a child, rather than their mate, so then you say sire to be specific, but you still say daddy and it's daddy who counts, not sire. And then, oh my look at all the ma'arams. You just have a single word. Mother. Ma'aramlasah or 'lasah is a specific word, and it's cold, but speaking directly to her, you say ma'aram. Which is warm. But in a pod, they are all your ma'arams. But your ma'aram proper is your bloodmother where the initial conception process began."

"You're trying to confuse me, love," Derryl grinned.

They had escaped to The Black Lady Tavern owned by Derryl's friend Tuhk, and sat in a booth in the innermost recesses far from the doors, the women cuddling Derryl between them contently, letting the last of a fine day wind down before heading back to his house with its pleasant grounds. They overnighted at the palace as little as possible, and this was to be no exception.

The door slammed open and then closed, forcing their attention to the front of the tavern as a fight erupted. One man had his hips against the wall, wedged into a corner near a long table that had been overturned. He appeared drunk, possibly sick, or injured, one arm pressed across his middle. Black, stringy hair hung in long mats around his face and slumping shoulders as he spouted accusations of treason in slurring tones and something about the "heir," "poison" and "Galee's catamite, Wrathscar," then the three soldiers in Wrathscar's colors grabbed him. Lord Derryl was out of his seat in a flash, sword drawn. "Stay here, Leslie, far back," he admonished his wife. She moved to the farthest corner of the booth. Maya followed him closely.

"Be safe, my darlings," Leslie called after them, flicking her burgundy scarf in their direction for luck.

"Hell shitting damnation, turn and fight." Lord Derryl raked the blade across their shoulders. It was not in him to strike from behind. They jumped and spun on him.

Maya laughed; she loved seeing him like this as much as Leslie did. She stepped to the side to go after the third. Maya could not see their victim's face clearly with his

dark hair all down in it, and what she could see was so terribly drawn and haggard as to be unrecognizable, yet he seemed familiar. The third had more wit than the others. He grabbed the drunk, driving his blade deep into the boy's side, jerking it free. Maya cried in outrage and ripped the soldier across the legs, hamstringing him to bring him down and then across the throat as he stumbled. She wiped her blade, sheathed it, and dragged the young man clear. As she turned him, brushing his hair back, her eyes went wide with grief and horror. "Yahni."

Leslie came to her side and the two men got him to the booth. She drew a scarf from her pocket, futilely pressing it to the heavily bleeding wound in his side "It's your brother!" Then the tavern master appeared, lifted him up, and carried him into the backroom.

Maya noticed an odd mottling and twisting of the flesh along his neck, brushing his hair back further to see it: a track of rough scars ran along both sides. "No, Yahni! Oh, Gods, no..." Maya opened his torn shirt further, ripping it, and only when she found the material resisting her did she pull it off completely as she saw more and more scars from Belya's feedings. The scars covered his arms, neck, and upper body until there was almost no patch of unblemished skin left. She glanced at his pants with a sick feeling that, were she to remove them, she would find still more of those hateful marks.

"Yahni..."

* * * *

Yahni staggered into the tavern, grabbing at the tables and chairs to keep his feet, and overturning several. He reached the opposite side of the room, put his back against the wall, and managed to turn as he heard soldiers behind him.

"There he is! Get him," said a soldier.

Yahni glanced at them, unable to straighten because of the pain and dizziness. He decided to die with every word of defiance on his lips that he could force through them. The young Guildsman knew they had taken Belya, and felt certain she would pay the same price that he did. "Traitors ... traitors! Poisoning the heir..." His words slurred. "Damn Wrathscar!"

The three soldiers in the umber and pine of Lord Wrathscar's household drew their blades. "Silence him, quickly," said the one who appeared to be in charge.

They reached for him and two men arrived behind them, shouting for the soldiers to turn and fight. Yahni stared through the matted strings of his hair at them, recognizing – in a dulled miasma of anguish – Derryl and Maya. Two soldiers turned to face them and, for an instant, Yahni felt hope that he would be able to pass on his message before dying. The third caught hold of him, sliding his blade into Yahni's ribs before being forced to turn at bay by the Guildsman's sister. Yahni barely felt

the blade go in, only the searing burn of its being drawn out of him for another strike.

He collapsed on his knees, his back sliding along the wall and his head tilting to the side as darkness took him. The next thing he became aware of was laying on a table in a back room of Tuhk's Black Lady Tavern with Maya looking down at him.

"Maya..." Yahni's eyes opened, glassy and dilated by the drugs, a bit too moist and glistening. His hand closed on hers. "Hold me ... I'm so cold."

Maya slid her arm under his shoulders, lifted him up, and rested him against her body like a child. Yahni smiled then, a sweet, simple child-like smile. He had believed that he would greet his death with fortitude, been prepared for it since the night Belyla bit him; and yet when the moment arrived he felt this overwhelming isolation and abandonment. Only his sister's arms made it better. He felt grateful that he was not dying alone and, at the same time, regretted that it had to be Maya who found him. The young Guildsmon could see the grief in his womb-twin's eyes. "Overdose ... street drug." Yahni struggled for each word. "Creature took me ... made me drink it ... made me write note ... wanted to call it ... suicide."

Maya leaned close, smelling his mouth. "Fire poppy and death lotus base. Oh, Yahni!" Her voice cracked. Wrathscar sent the soldiers after him because they were afraid he might talk before the drugs could kill him.

Leslie's sweet face filled with sorrow and her eyes with tears. "Maya, I'm sorry." She moved to the other side and grasped Yahni's hand in both of hers.

"Listen ... tell them ... vampire ... poisoning the heir..." Yahni's body stiffened, tightened in shuddering convulsion. After a few minutes it eased and he was able to speak again. "Wrathscar ... wants her dead ... in childbirth..."

Maya shuddered: Sharani rarely died that way.

"The book. I had it... I was trying to leave... Spare Belyla ... she helped me escape."

"Where's the book?"

"Dropped it. Street somewhere. Tell them. Please tell them. Galee and Wrathscar. Evidence in ... the book. Tell them."

"Tell who?" Maya asked, urgently. "Tell who?" But it was too late. Yahni's eyes stared sightlessly past her shoulder. Twisted up by pain and poison he had left only an implication and not a statement of the most important fact of all, that Wrathscar and Galee were the vampires, not merely conspirators.

Maya sat in numb silence, unable to think, unable to cry, hearing Leslie weeping softly for both of them. She lowered Yahni to the table and slid her arm around her

mate's shoulder. Their triad had come to their favorite tavern to celebrate Leslie's pregnancy. Maya had passed Derryl's child to Leslie just last night. Derryl and Leslie had been married ten years and resigned themselves to a childless existence. A year ago Leslie gotten it into her head that Derryl, since he was not getting any younger, needed an heir, even if one had to be gotten on the wrong side of the blankets. So she pressured him into taking a mistress. He had always had an admiration for Guild women. Although Leslie was not Guild and neither was Maya, they were both Guild daughters. Derryl knew almost nothing about Sharani, having written most of it off to imagination and rumor until Maya began explaining it to them both.

One of the taverner's sons came to check on them, bringing a blanket and they covered Yahni. Neither of them could bear to look at him, wondering how long he had lain in his captor's grasp before he had escaped to die here. Derryl joined them a short time later.

"Tuhk tells me the lad died," Derryl said. "My darlings are taking this very hard, did you know him?"

Maya's voice came as if from a great distance in her detachment. "It's Yahni. Wrathscar and the vampire murdered him over a book."

"The hell, you say!" Derryl flicked back the blanket, his expression turning stormy.

"Not an hour ago we're sitting here joking about Yahni this and Yahni that – and – and all the while they're killing him." Leslie choked.

Derryl's face darkened. "Damn the Wrathscars. A book, you say?" He stepped quickly into the hallway. "Tuhk!"

The Taverner appeared, drying his hands on his apron. "Lord?"

"Find me a book that's been lost on the streets, dropped in the gutters most likely, maybe fallen into the sewers, I'll recognize it when I see it. It's a magic book, dangerous. So don't open it or try to read it. Get all the little gutter rats looking. A bag of gold for finding it. Make certain Wrathscar doesn't find out. That's what this altercation was about. This mon belonged to me. He was Maya's brother. I'll owe you a favor besides."

"Tut. I am already in your debt, good lord."

"You are a fine friend. Have my carriage sent round to the back. It will not do for Wrathscar to know I'm here. Have you something I can wrap his body in?"

Tuhk nodded. "And I have a meat mon who will see that not a piece of those soldiers remains to tell Wrathscar what became of them."

Derryl chuckled darkly, not entirely able to mask the twisting in his voice. "And who

does he sell the meat to?"

"Lord Wrathscar of course."

* * * *

"What are we going to tell the Guild?" Maya asked as the carriage rolled slowly up the mountain toward Ishladrim Castle. She wanted to tell her family, to go crying to her fathers, but first she was a daughter of the Guild. She knew her duty. They had ridden most of the winding way in silence. She had rarely seen Derryl so quiet. He had grown close to Yahni these last few months. He had no family, other than Leslie and herself. The vampire had claimed them all nearly thirty years ago during the first rampage.

"To begin with I'm going to initially tell them that I found his body in a alley." Derryl's eyes hardened as he spoke, reaching for each word with care. "You see, not only do we have Wrathscar and Galee, but also we have a creature, this mysterious creature that poisoned him. You do not make a Guildsmon by fiat. And then you have Belyla, who he seems to think is at risk from both Wrathscar and the Guild." *The Dance of Passion, Yahni? Did they snare you while you were searching for the book? And then, perhaps did your little lady turn on Wrathscar and try to carry you free? I wonder. If so, they've probably killed her.*

"A lot of Guildsmyn agree with you," Leslie said.

"I'm certain of that, but I want to be careful that no word of what he said reaches Galee. So first I need to find out which unit he was working with. Ask around, my darlings, discreetly. As daughters of the Guild, you have contacts that I have not."

* * * *

Terrys hesitated before her door at the knock. She no longer opened her door without knowing who it might be on the other side. Terror and a growing sense of helplessness had become her companions. Shadows underlined her eyes. Although the day was late, she had not dressed as she had moved listlessly through the apartment unable to find the strength to leave it. "Who is it?"

"Jajinga. Osterbridge is with me."

Terrys opened the door and nearly fell into his arms with relief. Then she saw the look on both myn's faces and knew before they said the words, her heart quailing.

"Sit down, Terrys. It's bad news." Osterbridge told her.

"Yahni?" She went pale.

Jajinga nodded. "They found his body ... in an alley. We suspect Belyla is dead

also."

A long, keening cry of anguish broke from her lips as she crumpled. Jajinga caught her and carried her to the couch. She shoved away from him and twisted up in a corner. Osterbridge came and knelt beside her, stroking her head and murmuring words of comfort that were meant as much for himself as for her.

CHAPTER TEN

MOHANJA'S DECISION

"My carriage nearly rolled over his body in the alley," Derryl explained. He sat alone with the Grand Master and his two lieutenants, Galee and Mohanja Raam, in the Grand Master's study. Half the morning had been lost in the senseless repetition of Galee's questions, sitting here, going round and round, and Derryl was losing his patience. He saw how high the sun had risen, its bright golden glow flooding through the northeast windows.

"And you were alone?" Galee asked suspiciously.

Her question forced his attention back again. "I've told you, my ladies were with me, my coachmon, driver, two outriders," he said, a trace of weary irritation at the edge of his voice. "Hardly alone. My ladies are grief stricken. They have not ceased weeping since we turned him over and found he was Maya's brother. My private healer sedated them. They are with Maya's family now at the temple keeping vigil over his body."

"He was dead when you found him?"

"Quite. I've said that."

"Galee," Mohanja spoke, having grown tired of her endless obsessive probing, "Lord Derryl has told us all that he knows and he is an honorable mon. Let it be. My Lord and Master, call this meeting ended."

Takhalme nodded slowly. "I am tired and this has been going over old ground. Thank you, Lord Derryl, for your service to us. I will see that you are rewarded. Carry my words to the Kjartens that I share in their sorrow at the loss of a fine young mon."

"You are kind, Grand Master, as always."

Mohanja aided his master to rise, helping him from the room.

"If he lived long enough to speak and you have not told me—" Galee hissed.

"Never fear, Galee, I am a loyal mon." Derryl gave her a stunning smile, a courtly bow, and swept from the room. The smile left his face as he stepped into the corridor, heading for the apartments he still retained in the palace for those occasions when he must, of necessity, remain late for council meetings. He prayed they would become rarer, yet feared it would prove the opposite. The last vampire war, as he and his close friends referred to it, had lasted close to ten years. It had not been a continuous thing, so much as a series of skirmishes that worsened and waned and worsened until it finally ended. He had been twelve or thirteen when he became conscious of what was going on, but that did not mean that was when it started. He needed to know exactly when it started, and not trust to childhood memories. He would have to ask Eshraf. He knew when it ended. By his reckoning both Galee and Wrathscar were old enough to be the vampire. Galee did not age. She claimed to be sylvan and had the pointed ears to prove it. He needed to find a pretext to have a talk with that Willodarian mage of Eshraf's. He would know if she were sylvan or had sylvan blood. So would Channadar, but the Fae had always been cagey about that when he'd asked. They would have to eliminate all the long-lived bloodlines. Like the Sharani. There was a lot of Sharani blood in Havensword and not just the purebloods like Maya's family. There was Fae blood in Lord Channadar's family and yuwenghau four generations back in Lord Torrylimon's.

Creeya was an amalgamation of races and bloodlines that Hadjys had gathered together by Reading their hearts when he decided to found this realm as the backbone of his worship. Their language was built of the fragments of a thousand tongues. Their spirit and devotion had been forged like a sword to bring justice to those who would not otherwise get it. Yet here in their midst was injustice of the worst sort. Derryl had dreamed of being Guild and, as a youngest son, he would have been allowed that dream. Only his dream had died with his brothers.

He became the coffer, rather than a sword among swords, during Yukiah's fight. Although he saw far more of the action than his comrades would have liked and had the scars to prove it. If there were a way to bring vengeance for Yahni, he would bring it. Derryl walked faster through the corridor.

* * * *

Mohanja had watched Galee's eyes as Lord Derryl passed her. If glances were daggers, she had just murdered Lord Derryl. That did not befit one who wielded the power of the Guild. Derryl had done nothing to her. She had no right to intrude on his mistress and wife's grief. *She is not Guild. My master Takhalme made her Guild by fiat, but only our god can make a Guildsmon. What could have possessed him? It is almost a blasphemy.*

When Mohanja had gotten the Grand Master settled into bed, he stood and stared at the withered mon who had made a servant of his lieutenant. A shiver ran up the big mon's spine. For the last year, as the Grand Master had grown more and more withered and tired, he trusted fewer and fewer people. He allowed no one save

Mohanja into the bedchamber. Mohanja put him to bed at night and got him up in the morning. More and more of Mohanja's responsibilities were being given over to Queiggy as the Grand Master clung to Mohanja for everything. Only when Galee brought her personal servants up to help the Grand Master bathe and dress did he let the big mon go and then it was with reluctance.

He needed to speak with Queiggy; his second had called an up drawbridge and refused to leave the wing. The mon had magic of some sort. Mohanja had a special sensitivity to it. If Queiggy believed that Galee or the Grand Master had sent him to spy, the mon would refuse to answer his questions or twist things to protect the Guild from him in line with the teachings. He could order him to comply and then Queiggy could chose to mutiny. Queiggy had technically sealed off the wing, but not yet closed the doors. The death of Yahni could tip the scales in either direction. *If only the boy had lived long enough to name his killers!* Mohanja had a gut instinct it would have ripped the Guild apart. He headed down toward the Guild Wing, stopping off at his own chambers for a large envelope. He had to at least try to speak with Queiggy, and he hoped that these papers would help.

* * * *

This is all twisting the knife in our hearts further, Maya thought as she gazed at her brother's body in its open casket. The priests had tried to hide some of the signs of the torment in which he died by applying make-up to his face. Yahni lay in state before the altar in a private chapel within the temple, his body had been wrapped in linen by the priests to conceal the terrible wounds and scars before clothing him in his dress uniform with the hilt of a sword clasped in his hands. His ma'aram and 'lasah had requested a full Guild funeral with all honors and Mohanja had granted it, despite the somewhat questionable circumstances of his death. Galee had thrown a fit, citing Solance's report, which claimed the young mon had died of a deliberate overdose of street-drugs, that Yahni had clearly been an addict, and involved with vampires for the enjoyment of the sensations. All three healers had agreed upon the evidence of prolonged amphereon dependency, but nothing more. They refused to agree that the scar on his left wrist, even though it matched with the type of blade Yahni had been known to carry, was evidence of a previous suicide attempt. So Mohanja had overruled Galee in this since she had no jurisdiction over members of his units. Yahni would have his full Guild Military Funeral and Burial with all Honors. Maya felt that she was in Mohanja's debt for the comfort this gave her family.

Maya held her father, Lord Oakwithe, who wept uncontrollably against her shoulder. Everyone could see that he was completely broken by his only son's death. She glanced around the room, half listening to all the conversations.

Mikkal looked strained. "Just over a month ago, he and Belyla came to me, asking that I marry them secretly. I did so. She was carrying his child. They intended to run away as soon as word came from relatives in Shaurone who were willing to receive them. They were very much in love. In two days I will be burying him." He had

revealed the fact of the marriage to those present in the understanding that it would not be repeated outside the chapel.

"I believe that Belyla is dead as well," Jajinga told the old priest. "We simply have not found her body yet. We may never find it."

"Tragic ... so tragic ... so young," Mikkal said, a soft undercurrent of outrage lining his words. "I want the monsters caught."

They would be temporarily interring Yahni in the old crypts on their mansion grounds in Havensword before taking him home after the heir's wedding.

Terrys, sitting on a pew, suddenly rose and threw herself across the casket, screaming, and weeping, her fingernails digging into the wood, her face pressed to his cold flesh. "Yahni! You can't be dead. You can't! I never stopped loving you. I should have told you. Yahni ...Yahni." Then she sank to her knees, her arms trailing across the wooden box. Osterbridge went to her, lifted her up, and guided her to a more private corner to comfort her.

Maya felt grateful for that. These displays only made it harder on her father.

"Wrathscar killed him," Lord Taurlys said, his voice full of vehemence and anger. "He found Belyla and Yahni together and he killed my nephew. I'm certain of it."

"You cannot prove it, Lord Taurlys," said a Guildsmon.

Maya did not know that one. Her brother had had far more friends than she realized. He had been well liked and well thought of in the Guild. She felt grateful for the way they all rallied around her family.

"I don't need to prove it, I know it!" Lord Taurlys remained adamant.

Maya felt a headache coming on. Word had been sent out to their far-flung clan to gather in Havensword and bring vengeance for Yahni. She had a feeling they were going after Lord Wrathscar. Maya felt she held the key to it all, but was not certain. If only Yahni had lived long enough to tell her all of it! She shifted her weeping father into the arms of one of her mothers. She swallowed. "I need to find Derryl."

Cleatè nodded. "I understand. They should be done questioning him by now."

"Do you, also, think Wrathscar did it?" she asked on impulse.

"Yes."

Maya rose and Leslie, who sat beside her, stood with her.

* * * *

Derryl reached his apartments to change before going on to the temple and offering what small comfort he could to Maya's grieving family. He found Leslie and Maya waiting anxiously for him in the parlor. Both looked tired, red-eyed from weeping, but Maya looked positively haggard. They were telling the same story to Lord Taurlys Kjarten's clan that they had told the Guild. Maya hated lying to her family, but they dared not risk the truth reaching the wrong people.

"How did it go?" Leslie asked, grabbing at him. He kissed her and dragged Maya into the embrace. They clung to him for a long time. Derryl could feel Maya trembling, the way she fought so hard not to break down again, to stop giving way to tears.

He brought them to the couch and sat down with them to either side. "I'm certain that Galee was involved. She threatened me and seemed desperate to know if he had said anything. How is your family handling this, Maya?"

"They're torn up. Papa Oakwithe has collapsed. Yahni was his only son." Maya sucked in a deep, shaking breath, her eyes filling again. "I can't believe Yahni's gone. Papa keeps crying." Her face crumpled.

Leslie started toward her, but Derryl waved her back. He knelt in front of Maya, gripping her shoulders firmly with a little shake. "Listen to me, Maya. You're my Iron Lady. You must be strong. First we must discover how much of what Yahni told us about the heir is true. Can you do that? Yahni deserves his vengeance."

Maya mastered herself, nodding. "Yes. Yes, Derryl."

"Good. Do either of you know the name of that healer Wrathscar used who is now employed in the palace compound?"

"Solance," Maya said.

"One of you find an excuse to get him over here and pump him for rumors concerning the heir. But be careful. Don't swallow anything."

Maya clutched at him as he started to rise. "Derryl, can we call the child Yahni?"

Derryl glanced at Leslie, who nodded, and he said, "Yes. Your brother was a good mon, regardless of what others might say. I'll be proud to name our son Yahni."

"Thank you." Maya's eyes filled again and Leslie wrapped her arms around her.

"Dear, darling Maya. We love you." Leslie said.

* * * *

Galee raged back and forth in her apartments, yelling at her Lemyari, moving restlessly from one room to the next and then returning to her study where her dark servants waited. They were the same four who had sat with Talons that afternoon in the garden drinking poisoned wine.

"There have been too many mistakes. First Wrathscar's chit of a daughter started seeing that Guildsmon. This cannot keep happening! You are supposed to be keeping an eye on my doxies. You should have recognized Yahn Kjarten!"

"Galee, we tried to keep watch on all of them. Belyla was hard to keep track of. There would need to have been an entire cadre of us to watch all of this," said Meilurk. "And that would cause suspicion. Too many new faces. Later when more of the lords arrive..."

"Shut up! How could you not know when Wrathscar turned all four of his little chicks in a single night."

Meilurk's eyes narrowed. "He's going rogue, Galee. You should have expected it. You know he's been sleeping with his daughters since they were children. Philomea was pregnant by him again when he turned her."

Galee returned to her seat, fingering her new ledger. "One of you fetch the Master of Blood." She flicked her fingers at the Lemyari closest to the door. He rose and left. "Were all of his daughters' pregnancies that Solance aborted, his?"

"Yes, Galee," Meilurk told her. "I've seen Solance's papers. You didn't tell me to, but I checked Solance out anyway."

"Then you're right. I should have expected it." She began to calm down and think more clearly. "But you should have told me."

"Perhaps. But we did not know you intended to turn Wrathscar until the day you did it. Had you confided in us, we would have argued against it."

"I will confide in you more, Meilurk. One of you fetch Solance. I want to bring some matters to a close."

Another Lemyari left.

"Where is the book?"

"We did not find it, Galee. I personally dragged Belyla from her horse. Kjarten collapsed in the gutter."

"But he didn't stay in the gutter. You should have made certain of him then."

Meilurk cursed. "Belyla was a handful, Galee. There was only so much we could

do. When I saw him pull himself up and stagger into that tavern I sent soldiers after him. You should never have allowed Belyla to Dance Kjarten for that long."

"It amused me," Galee said, her voice going faint as she reflected. Could Kjarten have dropped it somewhere? Did Derryl have it? And, if he did have it did the mon live long enough to tell Derryl where to take it? There were too many loose battle spells going off. Someone could get hit. Perhaps she should destroy Wrathscar and make a meat-puppet of Bryndel. Perhaps she was being too cautious, too subtle. Yet, her heavy-handed tactics of thirty years ago had proved disastrous. And where was the branch clan? She did not need them riding in here with whatever resources they might have to challenge her right to rule as regent for Talons' children.

The book. The book! She had to get the book back. Only a yuwenghau – and only a precious few of them – would have the lore to read it. One of the Nine could read the book. Hadjys! He and his Shadonmi could read the book and so could some of the souls he held prisoner in his nine hells. If the book found its way to Eshraf, then it would find its way to Hadjys, himself. She was not ready to fight him yet.

"Meilurk, I want Derryl watched."

* * * *

Bryndel cloaked himself to conceal his face as he entered the temple. It felt strange here. When he first entered he felt as if he was swimming through thickening air and there was a lingering acrid smell, which he did not recognize as the magical wardings. Bryndel had this brief feeling of panic, wondering if his god now perceived him as an enemy ...*My God*. Bryndel had not thought of Hadjys in that way in years. Yet now he found himself thinking, in his fear and suffering of Hadjys as his god. Perhaps Hadjys was rejecting him for not trying to save Yahni... Then the feelings of guilt and shame came hard on the heels of the other and he felt frightened and dirty. He could have saved Yahni if only he had been able to get past his terror of Galee and his father. His heart pounded with irrational fear and in his devastation he began to pray. "Hadjys, help me. I must say good-bye to Yahni and ask his spirit's forgiveness." Abruptly the wardings released him and he could walk normally. He had not been in the temple since his mother died. He walked along the east ambulatory until a priest stopped him.

"What are you here for?"

"Yahni Kjarten."

"Ahhh. Poor young mon. I'll show you where they have laid him. Most of his family has gone to their beds. A few still sit with his body. Perhaps you should have come earlier."

"I couldn't. I just want to say good-bye. He was a friend."

The priest nodded and led Bryndel to a private chapel. They found three of Yahni's mothers still kneeling, deep in prayer, while an old mon dozed fitfully on a pew, his chin resting on his chest. Bryndel guessed that might be Yahni's father. There were others in the shadows. He slipped around to the casket with the folds of his hood around his face.

Bryndel stared down at Yahni. The young mon appeared to be at peace, sleeping with his sword in his folded hands. "Forgive me, Yahni. Forgive me for being a coward. Forgive me for letting you die." He murmured very softly, private words for the dead. "They are telling me that Belyla killed you. I don't believe it. I will never believe it. My sister loved you. Forgive me. Please forgive me."

He heard someone come up to him and strong hands turned him around. Osterbridge looked into his eyes with barely controlled savage rage. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Saying good-bye to a friend."

"A friend your father killed. If you had any balls, you'd bear witness to the Guild of what he did. But you don't have any. Yahni was never your friend. Nor were you his. Yahni's friends would have died for him. Now get out of here."

Osterbridge released Bryndel with a shove and he fled. Bryndel found his way, half-stumbling and weeping into the garden. He found a spot beneath a tree with bushes blocking people's view should they come upon him. Although it was night, Bryndel still feared discovery. He knelt, his shoulders bent and shaking and, for the second time since his mother's death, he began to pray.

* * * *

Tiderider closed the door as he entered Channadar's room. His lord was sitting with Leeza and Chucomei. Channadar halted in mid-story and looked closely at his captain. "What is it?"

"I have put this off all day, knowing how worn you still are from your wounds..." Tiderider dropped to one knee in front of his lord. "My lord," he began, reaching for formality with his tone and choice of words. "They found Yahni Kjarten's body. I should have spoken sooner, but I was concerned for your health. I did not want you returning to the game before you were strong enough. Then I rethought myself. It is not my decision to make."

A wave of sorrow rose up within Channadar like a rough ocean at high tide, crashing against the stones of his restraint. His voice was tight as he asked, "How did he die? Tell me all of it." When he had listened, Channadar flicked a fan at Leeza and Chucomei. "Leave me."

Leeza's eyes widened. She caught his arm. "You need me. Don't make me go."

Channadar gave her an expressionless look, saying in a stony voice, "Leave."

Leeza burst into tears and ran out. Chucomei went after her.

Tiderider's eyes narrowed at Leeza's display. "That one will never be Fae. She's too full of uncontrolled emotion even for a good firefly."

"What Leeza is or is not, is none of your affair," Channadar said sternly. The commander of his Chosen accepted the rebuke with a bow of his head and shoulders. "What is this about Yahni being an addict? He wasn't. I touched him and I would know. My fingers saw him clearly."

"Solance."

Channadar sucked in a tight breath. "Rise and sit, faithful Tiderider. My heart is heavy and it makes me short." He dug the fingers of his good hand into his damaged arm. The arm hurt whenever he moved it and his use of it was limited, although he concealed that by artifice and spell. His anger simmered.

Tiderider sat. "Solance belongs to Wrathscar and Wrathscar, whether he knows it or not, belongs to Galee."

"Someone should kill Solance. They should skin him and tack his bloody hide to Wrathscar's bedroom door."

"Command it and it will be done."

"I will wait and see if the Guild finally moves first. If it does not, then we will. Endgame nears."

The smile crossing Tiderider's face lit his eyes as well as his lips. "How long will we wait?"

"Not long. My father's murderer has finally come to visit his mistress. For now, assemble the Chosen and ready a sedan chair for me. I wish to visit Yahni's body."

"It is late."

"The temple never sleeps."

* * * *

Mohanja found the heavy steel doors to the Guild Wing sealed shut. No one responded to his knock. His only other choice to get into the Wing meant leaving the palace entirely, go around to a postern door, and knock there. Mohanja went to the postern door. A unit of Guildsmyn in full plate greeted him when the door opened in

response to his naming himself. Queiggy was taking no chances. Mohanja did not like the implications.

"Have you come as friend or as foe, Mohanja?" asked a rough-edged voice and a visor lifted.

Mohanja felt a thrust of tension as he recognized the battered, scarred face of Leonè with its close-trimmed ginger beard like a crust of sand. He stood second to Galee. "And where do you stand, Leonè?"

"I stand for the Wing against the blasphemy of fiat, my life be forfeit to god if I have chosen wrong."

Mohanja sucked in a breath. This was indeed a silent mutiny in progress as he had begun to suspect. He needed to walk very carefully. "I will give no orders while I am here. I only wish to speak with Queiggy about Yahni."

"I hear they found his body."

"His sister, Lord Derryl, and Lady Leslie found his body."

"That is a heart-heavy thing."

"It is. Now, may I speak to Queiggy?"

"We'll escort you."

Leonè announced him, and the big mon soon found himself seated beside Queiggy, however Leonè and the four other guards, all Guildsmyn, made no motion to go. "You may speak in their presence, Mohanja." Queiggy told him and he knew then who was truly Master of the Wing.

"Yahni—"

"Yes, we know." Queiggy interrupted him querulously. "A copy of the records should have been sent down. Those Guildsmyn who are still working were refused copies."

"I have them." Mohanja was not accustomed to getting that tone of voice from Queiggy, but chose to ignore it. He pulled the papers out, sliding the envelope across the table to Queiggy, who lifted an eyebrow.

Leonè moved to the table, and sat down as Queiggy drew out first three thick bound statements, each from an examining healer acting as coroner consultant, tied together in a bundle, and then a fourth one. Queiggy set the fourth aside, opened the bundle, and took one off the top, passing the other two to Leonè.

"Why four?" Queiggy asked.

"Because one of those three is Solance. Galee insisted. The Master never says her nay." Mohanja stared at his hands while the other myn read, waiting patiently for their reactions.

Mohanja and Queiggy looked up at a sharp hiss of angry breath, and the scratchy crumpling of paper. "Don't tear it!" Queiggy said sharply, realizing that Leonè must have gotten Solance's report.

"It's lies. All lies. He could not possibly have come up with these conclusions based on the Reading of the boy's dead body." Leonè shook with anger as he released the pages. "Yahni Kjarten was murdered. This was not a suicide, accidental or otherwise."

"And that is truth," Mohanja replied, placing a hand on Leonè's shoulder and saying nothing when the man flinched – clearly they had placed Mohanja with Galee's camp over the last months and that troubled the big mon, for it should never have been so – and he pointed at the fourth paper. "Read that one. Solance's report is why I secretly had a fourth one done. It's a refutation. Look to the signature." Mohanja flicked it back to the last page.

Leonè gave him a sharp glance. "Eshraf!"

"A sad business and the Holy Father already over burdened. Make copies if you wish. Do not let the originals out of your hands. Be wise, as I know you will. I must return before I am missed."

"Wait," Queiggy said. "Is it true he never spoke?"

"Derryl says Yahni was already cold and stiff when they turned him over. They found him a few blocks from the Black Lady Tavern."

Mohanja caught the look passing between Queiggy and Leonè, which made him wonder what they knew that he did not. He chose to ignore it. Either they would tell him when they came to trust him again or he would find a less suspicious time to ask. So he took his leave while they sat and read.

* * * *

Leeza cried into her pillows, in a mix of anger and humiliation. Every time Channadar closed her out, or the others did – she had caught them referring to her as a summerfly – she felt dirty. He always said that he was protecting her, but she felt like a whore, bought, and paid for with his jewels, gold, and a life at court. He rarely spoke to her except when she slipped into his bed at night. He never put her on his arm like the others did their fireflies. At the very least he should have allowed her to stand at his side. She had trained with his yeomynry before encountering him

on that muddy street three years ago. True her training had been down and dirty, crude fighting methods more suited to a brawl than a duel or a battle, but she had always been scrappy. Obsessively so since it was her rebellion against her mother.

Her mother had always been hanging on one mon's arm or another, getting them to buy her drinks and trinkets, flitting from mon to mon with an intense fickleness that Leeza suspected concealed a hatred of people in general. Man or woman, her mother played up to them all and then spoke badly of them behind their backs. Leeza dreaded finding a single piece of her mother in herself. Yet, just when she thought she had won free of all the games to stand on her own, here she was sleeping in Channadar's bed and hanging on Tiderider's arm. She hated herself for it. Sometimes she hated all of them for making her live her mother's life. And yet she loved Channadar, the intensely sensual and powerful lord of Hellsguard. She felt conflicted and so she cried harder.

"I am not my mother. I am not my mother."

* * * *

"Lord Channadar!" the priest exclaimed when he opened the temple doors to let them in. Eshraf had begun ordering them locked at night as well as guarded. They entered, the Chosen spreading around the chair, which was carried by two strong servants.

"I have come to pay my respects to Yahni Kjarten's body and pray for his spirit."

"It is in the chapel in the back. The Patriarch wished to give them privacy."

"That is understood. Lead us."

The priest walked quickly along the ambulatory. Tiderider and Da'Shanagara took point behind the priest; Starsilent, Juniperarrow, Tigerturtle, and Jangflower walked beside the sedan chair, while Rheeshaen and BitingOtter brought up the rear.

They lowered the chair by the door to the chapel and the servants sat on the floor beside it. Then Tiderider entered first with Da'Shanagara following. They checked out the chapel quickly and motioned that it was safe to enter. If the priest wondered at all this security, he did not ask. Starsilent helped his lord from the chair. Channadar walked slowly inside, working hard at concealing the fact that he hurt from the jostling of the chair on their journey down two flights of stairs and across to the temple. He went to the casket and looked at Yahni's face. "Forgive me, White Swan, for failing you. I tried, but I was overmatched and barely escaped with my life."

Channadar felt deeply saddened by the loss of the young mon who had come so often to watch and listen to his magic stories. Neither Yahni, nor Belyla, deserved what had been done to them.

"Lord Channadar..."

Channadar turned to face Lord Oakwithe Kjarten. "Your son shall have vengeance, thus speak the Fae."

Tears filled Oakwithe's eyes and his wife, Cleatè, came to take him in her arms. She was a large, strong mon, taller than Channadar. "Thank you."

"You may count on me and mine. I lay my honor and my fortune at the feet of your cause. Call upon me for anything."

"Then we may call you ally?"

Channadar's fathomless smile came upon his lips. "I have always been your ally, though I have never spoken the words before. By the Dancing Fans of Death, I swear to help you bring vengeance."

"Then we are in your debt and will return the favor by Aroana's Sword and Shield, by Hadjys' blade and book."

Channadar embraced Lord Oakwithe to seal the promise.

* * * *

Dynarien always made his rounds of the temple in the early morning hours, taking care of whatever little odd jobs the priests found for him during the time when Talons would either be sleeping or occupied with Bryndel's demands. That morning he was thinking about Yahni. That morning, like yesterday, it seemed like everyone was thinking about or talking about the unfortunate young Guildsmon. So the yuwenghau walked along the interior ambulatory to the small private chapel in the rear where Yahni's body lay and his family mourned. According to Eshraf the young mon had been Passion-Danced over a prolonged period, but that was not what killed him.

The doors to the chapel stood before him almost before Dynarien realized it and he went in, pausing only to sweep his eyes over the mourners and flick his hair back. He rarely set off on a campaign without his sister along, although he did seem to be doing that more and more over the past few years. Dynarien wondered at that. He hoped it was not a bad omen. Then he spotted Maya. Yahni's twin was very beautiful. Dynarien sighed unhappily. If he had not promised to mend his ways after falling in love with Talons and by extension with Edouina, he would have carried off Maya in a flash.

Maya was the reason he was here. Yahni's vampire-lover was still loose and the logical thing for her to do would be to obsess on the closest blood to Yahni's in her newborn hunger: which would be Maya's. She would want to Dance Maya as she

had Yahni. Eshraf had asked Dynarien to be discreet in how he handled this matter. So he made his way along the pews until he reached Maya, who sat with a lovely mon slightly older than herself.

"Are you Maya Kjarten?" Dynarien asked.

"Yes, I am. Do I know you?" She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes and cheeks still wet.

"I am Dynarien Briarrose, mage to the temple and an assistant to Patriarch Eshraf. I wondered if I might have a private word with you."

Maya looked uncertain, glanced at Leslie and saw her lover nod. "All right. Where do you wish to talk?"

"We can use the priest's office next door, leave the door cracked a tiny bit, and have a priest stand outside to be certain I don't outrage your honor."

Leslie laughed softly, covering her mouth with her hands, as it was a very inappropriate noise under the circumstances. Clearly this mage did not know much about Sharani women.

Maya almost smiled then for the first time in days and followed Dynarien out. Dynarien signed a priest to come with them.

It was a very small office, two chairs, and a desk, mainly for counseling people in need. Dynarien indicated that Maya should sit and then pulled the other chair close.

"This is very, very important," Dynarien whispered softly, so softly she had to lean close to hear him. He touched her face lightly. She started to draw back. "You are very beautiful." Maya started to scream, thinking he meant something else entirely.

Dynarien blinked in confusion and covered her mouth with his hand. "Shhh. Since I don't know you very well, I have to do this the hard way. But I promised Eshraf I'd protect you."

Eshraf had put so many conditions on this that Dynarien felt bewildered and almost completely stymied. The Patriarch wanted Maya completely warded, yet since the vampire would recognize yuwenghau wards, Eshraf wanted to be certain that no one, not even Maya would know who had warded her or when it had happened lest it slip out. So he had to do it fast.

Dynarien brushed his lips along Maya's face, letting the fullness of his gifts sweep through her – something he had once tried with Talons when they first met and nearly gotten himself gutted by her. Maya felt this power like a surge of longing stronger than anything she had ever experienced before and she faltered. Dynarien took advantage of that and kissed her. His divine kiss plunged through the last of her

barriers and had he wished to take her to his bed she would have gone willingly as so many others had over the centuries. Instead he swiftly and expertly placed his wards and protections throughout her mind and energy centers. Maya, already worn down by the stress of the past days and taken unawares by what he was doing, fainted. Dynarien caught her.

"Someone help me," he called out. "She's fainted!"

The priest came instantly and soon summoned others who arrived, followed closely by Leslie and Cleatè. Dynarien left them, rounded a corner, and Jumped out of the temple.

It was Leslie who noticed that Maya had her hand clenched tightly around something. Leslie niggled at Maya's tightly closed fingers, scratching lightly across the end where she could see what looked like something blue poking out. "What have you got, Maya?"

"I don't know." Maya answered, unfolding her hand, and blinking dazedly with returning consciousness. She held a handful of blue rose petals.

The fragrance of roses swept across them so strongly that it made Leslie's head ache and she closed her eyes a moment. When she could finally open them again, she studied the petals, turning them over in her own hand. "Blue. I do not believe there are any roses of this color in the entire city. I know there certainly are none in the castle. Where did you find them?"

"I don't know..." Maya's voice had a disturbed, puzzled lostness with a trace of fear. "I was picking them in my dream..."

* * * *

Maya sent for Solance on the grounds that they wanted a second opinion on the success of Leslie's pregnancy from him, since he was caring for the heir and Talons was Sharani. She had frequently caught sight of Solance over the years, walking about the palace with his mincing stride and arrogant analysis of whatever topic caught his ear and fancy. He always claimed honors he did not own, expertise he had not acquired, and then had to find an excuse when someone called him on it.

Arrogant little prick, thought Maya as she let him in and then a shiver ran up her spine. Solance had changed his way of dressing since the last time she saw him. He wore a scarf tied around his neck that matched his sash. Maya wondered suddenly if Solance was responsible for the drugs they murdered her brother with. If she pulled that scarf away, would she find a feeding scar? It was his report that labeled poor Yahni a suicide and would have denied him an honorable burial. Maya's body tightened with tension, outrage shoved her grief partially aside.

"Hello, Solance. It is so good that you could come." Maya smiled sweetly. She

remembered a bit of doggerel verse from her childhood, repeating it silently in her mind as she said other things with her tongue:

Come into my parlor sweet,

And have a cup of tea

I'll chain your feet with lengths of steel

Which feel so velvety.

"I'm so sorry about your brother," Solance told her. He touched her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed her fingers. It was so totally un-Solance like that it startled Maya and she drew her hand back quickly. She had always heard that he did not like touching Sharani, which was something they intended to put to the test.

"I'm certain you know what my findings were in this case. Sharani males are notoriously unstable. Not like their women. I had to be honest about my findings. Being included on a coroner's jury is a grave matter."

Maya stiffened. "I did not ask you here to talk about my brother. So please refrain." Her eyes kept going to the scarf around his neck, wanting to jerk it off him to see what was beneath it.

"Then what?" His tone turned suspicious, more like his usual self.

In love's embrace we both shall wheel

And then your heart I'll part in twain

You'll scarcely feel the kiss of steel,

The lovely sudden pain

"Derryl, Leslie, and I are having a baby. I passed it to her. I'm not bi-kyndi. We know you are caring for the heir. So I thought with all your substantial knowledge you would be the appropriate one to examine Leslie and myself."

Solance brightened, preening himself. "Yes. I am the most knowledgeable healer in Havensword concerning Sharani reproduction. There is nothing I do not know about it."

"Leslie," Maya called. "Leslie, would you please come here. Solance has arrived."

And crimson spreads a dear, sweet stain,

As 'tween your ribs my blade does steal

You'll leave my parlor ne'er again.

Leslie emerged from the upstairs bedroom and stood a moment at the top of the stairs. She wore a clinging robe of shimmering green fabric edged with golden Lyrian lace. It left nothing to the imagination. Maya could see the effect on Solance: he looked suddenly hungry for Leslie. She glided down the stairs like a cloud brushing a high peak before settling in the valley.

"Where do you want us?" Maya asked.

"Together on the couch," Solance responded, jerking his gaze from Leslie. "Side by side and I'll pull a chair around for myself."

Maya gave him a lovely, half-sad smile and sat down beside Leslie who had reached the couch first. As Maya settled herself, the loosely tied belt came undone and her robe slipped half off her shoulder, revealing the cleft of her breasts. Solance stared.

"Well, are we going to begin?" Maya asked.

"Yes ... yes, of course." Solance took Maya's wrist first because she sat closest to him. "Individually first, and then together for comparison."

Maya leaned forward so that her robe hung open still further. "I hear the heir is ill. It isn't contagious, is it? I mean, after all, I'm Sharani and Leslie is carrying a Sharani child. I would not want to expose us to something dangerous."

"You have absolutely nothing to worry about," Solance replied. "You are in no danger at all."

"As you know, of course, we're fairly disease resistant, very few hereditary defects." Maya leaned closer to him.

Solance looked down her robe, discovering that half of one nipple was now revealed. It broke his train of thought and he lost his Reading, forcing him to start over. "It's the bi-kyndi," Solance answered. "That's the problem."

"Whose problem is the bi-kyndi?" Leslie asked with wide-eyed innocence. "I've been hearing some extremely frightening rumors." She leaned closer to watch and brushed Solance's knee with her own.

"The heir's problem. She's bi-kyndi. If you've heard the rumors, then you probably know what is going on." Solance finished with Maya. "You are completely healthy, Lady Maya." He took Leslie's wrist and they could see how hard he worked to focus.

"But they are all so contradictory!" Maya interrupted his train of thought again the

moment his eyes betrayed his inner focus and slid her foot across his sandal.
"You're the expert. Tell us what to believe."

Solance gasped like a landed fish and let go of Leslie. "Having the bi-kyndi bound has made the heir fragile. Her illness results from the binding. You are in no danger of catching it, Lady Maya. Nor is Lady Leslie. Neither of you are bi-kyndi."

"Surely there is a cure?" Maya moved forward until just the tiniest edge of her rump remained on the couch and now her knees touched Solance's. "Surely for you, for one as knowledgeable about my people as yourself, you could find one."

"It does not exist," Solance said firmly, squirming a bit as he watched Maya's robe part along her legs, exposing the sweet curves to his view.

"But that would mean she's dying."

Solance looked ready to explode. Leslie closed in on him by moving to the floor to sit at his feet. Solance began to tremble. "Yes. And she's going mad as well. It's sad. It's very sad. Your women are far more delicate than most people realize."

Leslie brushed her shoulder against his knee and Solance jumped. Clearly he was unused to women making advances toward him, especially noblewomen. "You know so much ... it must be very hard. Perhaps I should suggest to Derryl that he steal you from Wrathscar and the palace. Would you like to be my personal physician, Solance?"

"Yes ... yes, I would." He ran his eyes over Leslie's body. Maya moved to the floor and slightly to the side of him. She sat with one leg up and drawn in, the other folded beneath it, which caused the lower half of her robe to come completely open. Solance could see the thick thatch between her legs. They could see his arousal tent his robe. He began to prattle nervously, pouring forth everything he could think of about Sharani and their twisted genetics and reproduction.

Solance laid his hand on Leslie's knee, stroking the smooth skin, slowly, tentatively working down her thigh. That was when Maya knew they had him. "I am amazed at your knowledge, Solance. How long do you think the heir will survive this illness?"

"Six months ... probably less. It's a very serious illness ... complications."

Leslie burst into tears. Maya decided it was time to put an end to the game. She sprang to her feet, grabbed Solance's arm and twisted it tightly behind his back.

"What are you doing?" Solance cried out in panic.

"Lecher! Gutter-screwing cockwhore!" Maya shoved him toward the door.

"But ... but..." He twisted in her grip and she seized him by the collar as well, using

her knee on his butt.

"Guards!" Maya yelled as she propelled him out the door and sent him tumbling down the corridor. "He's molesting Lady Leslie! Someone help us! Rapist!"

Solance paled and fled.

Maya went up to her room and dressed quickly while Leslie watched. "I want that mon dead. He knows nothing whatsoever about my people. But he does know drugs. I think he killed Yahni. Or helped kill him. And I believe he's helping Wrathscar poison the heir."

"I do also. Where are you going?"

Maya buckled her sword on. "Leslie, I'm going to the Guild Wing and talk my way into it. There must be someone who will listen to me about the book and the other things my brother told us. If I wait too long I'll start to forget some of it. And I want to tell them about Solance."

"I understand. Be careful Maya. I'll wait for Derryl and tell him what we learned."

"Keep the doors locked and the bar down." Then Maya left.

* * * *

Maya stared into the Great Central Hall with its maze of arches, forested with columns, and filled out with couches, chairs, and tables in little clusters as a casual meeting place for the aristocracy and other inhabitants of the palace. The stairs to the Cloverleaf below were in the very center with a half-moon rail around it; while the path to the Guild Wing lay at precise diagonal to the West Wing from which Maya had emerged. The place was filled to capacity with people. She hesitated for a moment like a deer about to step into the sunlit open of a meadow, knowing that she would expose herself to any predators who might be lurking. Wrathscar's colors sprinkled through the crowd, umber and pine. Maya realized she was shaking as her hand settled on her sword, and she had to remind herself that she was a daughter of the Guild to pluck up the courage to step into the hall. Once in, though, she was fine. Wrathscar had murdered Yahni. She focused on that as a talisman, gathering her anger. Some of those soldiers and others could easily be watching for her – or, Hadjys forbid, other members of her family if they thought she might have told them something. She started walking, trying to keep the crowds between herself and each small group of myn in Wrathscar colors, hunching her head and shoulders a bit, feeling that rather than making herself inconspicuous she was actually making herself more conspicuous. She should have waited for Derryl.

"Lady Maya!" One of them hailed her and her stomach clenched. "My lord wishes to speak to you."

She ignored him and kept moving only to see two more coming from the other direction. Maya broke into a run as they cut across her path. She glanced frantically for someone she knew, someone Derryl counted a friend or someone whom her family could call on. Strong hands closed suddenly on her arm and a deep male voice growled in her ear, "Don't make a scene, and nothing will happen to you."

"Like hell!" Maya spotted a familiar face; Lord Channadar was turning in her direction to see what was occurring. He had several of his retainers with him, laughing at some pleasantries. "Take your bloody hands off my breasts! What do you think I am, a common slut?" Maya broke loose with the tremendous and always astonishing, to those unfamiliar with the Sharani, strength of her race. "Lord Channadar! Help me, please!"

Channadar's head lifted toward her, instantly alert, signing his guard – those he called his Thirteen Chosen – in her direction with a flick of a fan. The tall one, Tiderider, reached her so quickly that she scarcely had time to blink before his arm was around her shoulders and a strangely menacing golden fan had snapped open in the direction of the nearest Wrathscar soldiers. The Wrathscar myn hesitated and discreetly fell back, melting once more into the crowd. Channadar extended his arm to her when she reached him, the long sleeves nearly brushing the floor as he took her into the shelter of his own arms, leading her to a couch.

"Maya, why are you alone?" his voice had that lilting, singsong of east Creeya and the sweet tenor notes of the Fae like his mother. He had sharply slanted silver eyes, golden skin, and black hair with streaks of copper. While some people called Sharani exotics, she could look at him forever, for Channadar and the Fae were the true exotics at the court of the Grand Master – beautiful beyond imagining. And they knew it. "We have heard of your loss and my heart breaks with your grief, sweet lady."

"Thank you, my lord. You are kind. Derryl had matters to attend to and I thought only to reach the Guild Wing to speak to some of my brother's friends."

"Ah. Yet it seems it is no longer safe for a lady to travel alone, even within the halls of the palace itself. The Brown and Pine think they own it already."

Maya's eyes filled. "Yahni—"

Channadar gestured with his fan from one of his ladies to Maya. The auburn-haired young mon quickly knelt beside her, producing a clean silk handkerchief to dab Maya's eyes and comfort her. "My mother has foreseen that the Children of the Risen Dead shall rise and bring death out of life for the monsters, but only if our faith in our god and our courage proves strong enough."

"Children of the Risen Dead? What are they, Channadar?"

"No one knows. I cannot risk a drawn sword quarrel with Wrathscar." Channadar

gave her one of his little smiles, adding, "*Yet*. He does not want, I hope, to make too public a confrontation. While they send for his bloody lordship I will buy you some time. Give me three strands of your hair. You blame him for Yahni, yes?"

"Yes." Maya separated the hairs, yanked them free, and placed the long, black strands in Channadar's hands. He deftly and swiftly tied them into the form of a mon.

"This hair will burn away to nothing in five minutes once I place it upon the couch. During that time it will appear to be you sitting there with us. Now, get up and run."

Maya ran, but she could not help glancing once back over her shoulder and shivered to see herself sitting on the couch apparently having a conversation with Lord Channadar. Then her stomach clenched up again. The half-Faery lord had been right: the soldiers had sent for Lord Wrathscar and the mon was heading for Channadar. The image disappeared in a puff of smoke and Wrathscar bellowed. Channadar's audience laughed as he began another small trick, ignoring Wrathscar. Channadar loved an audience for his small magics and pretended the illusion had been simply another of them, an entertainment. He had given her the secret of how he made Lady Montani disappear that afternoon Maya first glimpsed her brother with Belyla.

The steel doors to the Guild Wing stood open, allowing Guildsmyn to pass through on their way to various chores around the compound and the city below. Maya saw Queiggy at his desk and headed for him.

He shook his head at her, scowling sternly. "I can't let you in. It's an up drawbridge."

"Queiggy, you must let me at least speak to someone. It's very, very important."

"I'm sorry about your brother, but I just can't, child."

Maya heard the jingle of spurs and armor, looked over her shoulder and saw two myn moving toward her in Wrathscar livery. She sucked in a deep breath, remembering what her old armsmaster had always said about calm, keeping that still inner core and balance that allowed one to choose. "Queiggy, those myn are here to capture or kill me." She kept her voice even, totally without emotion or inflection, and very, very low so that it would not carry to the myn coming after her. "Yahni was alive when we found him."

"We were told he was already dead," Queiggy matched her tone.

"That's what we wanted Galee to think. We believe she killed him."

A determined light kindled in Queiggy's eyes. "Run past me, child, but don't resist arrest when it comes. Up drawbridge. You'll be washing dishes for a few days."

Maya bolted and the soldiers, seeing that, went for her.

"Intruder!" Queiggy jumped up. "Catch her and lock her in the kitchens." As the soldiers reached the desk, Queiggy stepped into the path. "But not you. You are not allowed in the Guild Wing."

"Get out of our way, old mon. Lord Wrathscar wishes to speak with that Sharani slut."

"Lord Wrathscar has no authority here."

"I'll show you authority, old mon." The soldier drew his blade.

* * * *

"Hello, Terrys," the soft silky voice turned the young mon from her grieving in the garden to which she had retreated.

Terrys sat upon the vine-draped bench in the gathering darkness where once she had trysted with Yahni. She knew he had gone there with Belyla also. She was waiting for Jajinga, yet part of her kept expecting Yahni to appear the way he once had. Even seeing him laying in his casket, it was hard for her mind to accept it, to know he was gone. "Philomea. Go away."

"I don't want to," Philomea said, settling next to Terrys and smoothing her skirts. "You were my sister's best friend. And Yahni's."

"Yahni..." Tears welled again to Terrys' eyes. She wished Philomea would leave. If she were not waiting for Jajinga, she would leave herself.

"You loved him? Even after you broke up? Yet you introduced him to my sister."

"I wanted him to be happy ... he was happy." Terrys regarded Philomea cautiously, wondering where this was going.

"I wanted him. But he loved Belyla. Who could have imagined such a handsome mon would become seriously interested in homely Belyla?"

Terrys' mouth tightened into a line. "He was too good for you. Yahni always saw the soul in people. He was kind and gentle..."

Philomea slid her arm around Terrys. Terrys tensed, pushing at her, but Philomea's arms were like iron, as strong as a man's. "Hold me," Philomea told her. "I grieve also."

Terrys raised her face to Philomea's to protest and fell away into those blue eyes.

Philomea sank her fangs into Terrys' throat, carrying her backwards into the little ivy cave behind the bench.

Terrys died where once she had made love to Yahni.

* * * *

Maya ran hard, turning the first corner and came face to face with six Guildsmyn, all armored. It was startling to see Guildsmyn in armor. She held her empty hands wide to her sides so they could see that she was not going for her sword. The first one tilted his visor up.

"Maya? You're our intruder?"

"Yukiah?" She threw herself at him. "There are two Wrathscar soldiers chasing me. Queiggy's holding them off. He told me to run past."

Yukiah gestured with his head for the myn to go on ahead. "Maya, sit on that bench and wait for us." Then he ran on.

* * * *

Takhalme leaned tiredly on his chair in the council chambers. Galee had persuaded him to gather only the injured parties together and it seemed a good suggestion, since Wrathscar's tirades alone were tiring enough, let alone Yukiah's and now adding Derryl's and Lord Taurlys Kjarten de Mistdale's into the mix. It seemed that these days everyone was angry with someone. All the Grand Master wished to do was to sleep and dream, sleep and dream. Solance tended to his every wish in that direction, bringing him larger and larger quantities of fire poppy, pollendine, and other strange drugs whose names he had never heard before. Solance had told him that the drugs were not just for the dying, but also for the dreamer; that they would show him gods and forgotten lands, forgotten wisdom. The visions were strange and lovely beyond imagining. He never wished to leave them. And now he had been dragged from his bed in the early hours of the night by Mohanja insisting so forcefully and persuasively that these matters demanded his immediate personal attention.

"I cannot understand why you are making such an issue out of a simple brawl," Wrathscar screamed. His face was flushed to the point of being florid. He had fed well earlier.

Mohanja watched him, noticing a small black cat near his chair at the same time that Galee did. For some reason her moving toward Twizzle gave him a shiver and he reached him first, snatching the small creature into his arms and cradling him. For an instant Galee's and his cheeks almost touched.

"Too many cats in the palace," she murmured. "We should wring some of their necks."

"I start hearing of dead cats, Galee, we'll start seeing some duels in the training grounds," he whispered back while their faces were still close.

"Over cats?"

"Over any provocation I choose." Mohanja's eyes locked onto hers with fathomless serenity.

"They forced their way into the Guild wing and drew sword on a desk clerk. An old mon. They had no right to be in the wing in the first place," Yukiah shouted at Wrathscar. Queiggy had requested that the armsmaster make his case, since he still refused to leave the wing. The yuwenghau had woven his tree gifts through the wing to keep out all the lesser bloods and other creatures that Galee had used to infiltrate it. As a result of that he could not leave.

"They were only trying to speak with a mon who had no more reason than they did to be in the wing."

"They were trying to drag my niece, my grieving niece, off to your quarters against her wishes! I am sick of your ugly high-handedness!" protested Lord Taurlys.

"I only wished to offer her my condolences."

"Then you should have come to the temple like the others or to our house."

"More reason than your soldiers did." Yukiah snapped. "She begged the clerk's protection. Maya was terrified."

They seemed to be coming at Wrathscar from every direction. It still ate at him the way the entire Great Central Hall had erupted in laughter at the joke Lord Channadar had played on him with the illusion of Maya. People were still laughing. His own daughter had betrayed him with Yahni, running off with the book, which still had not been found. "And a Guild clerk gives a common whore protection?"

"That's enough of that!" Derryl shouted, "Maya is a fine lady. She's Lord Oakwithe's daughter."

"So she's a noble whore."

Derryl lunged out of his chair, but Yukiah clamped onto his shoulder. Lord Taurlys had risen also, stopped only by Yukiah's extended hand.

"Maya is a daughter of the Guild. She has a right to our protection," Yukiah's voice was all steel. "I pity the heir, marrying into the family ruled by a mon like you."

Takhalme's hands tightened on his chair. Silence settled for several heartbeats,

allowing Mohanja's gaze to slide across each face and to think. If civil war broke out, the tenets of their faith demanded that the Guild defend the Grand Master or withdraw into the temple to pray for their realm; that Guildsmyn did not make war upon Guildsmyn. But what if what he was seeing here was the plotting of agents of the Hellgod? Then it was the Guild's duty to take out those agents. How did he separate the two? It was clear from his last conversation with Queiggy that his people had lost their faith and trust in him. How did he restore that?

Wrathscar's tone lowered to a sullen softness. "I only wished to speak with her. I intended her no harm. You had no right to interfere."

Galee abruptly growled. "I can order you to allow his people into the wing."

"No, Galee, you cannot." Mohanja's steady, serene voice cut through the room for the first time. "The wing is my domain. Each of the three lieutenants holds absolute sway over their realms, separation of power, equal votes in counsel. The wing, records, history, wisdom, and development are mine. Training is Hanadi's. I hold hers in trust by her wishes. Deployment is yours; however, those who are on leave are entrusted to me; the reserves are mine and can only be activated by a two-thirds vote. These are the safeguards. You were made Guild by fiat and have clearly not studied the charters. Or at least not in depth. There are a series of checks and balances."

"Checks and balances?"

"Hanadi, the Grand Master, and I have let you slide for years so long as you did not make any mistakes. But you have just stepped on my toes."

Mohanja Raam, a man of few words, had spoken more than they had ever heard him speak at one time. Everyone turned, trying to fathom those indecipherable eyes of liquid chocolate. "My Master, I suggest that we all return to our apartments and consider these things before they spiral out of hand. Lord Wrathscar should no longer seek to harass the young lady during her time of grief. He should keep his people out of my domain." Mohanja went to Maya, going to one knee before her like a gracious knight and took her hand, pressing his lips to the back. "Gentle lady, I grant you a special dispensation to take refuge from pursuing villains in my domain at any time. I am very sorry about your brother. Very, very sorry that you should have had to suffer further affronts. Be assured that I will do everything to catch these people."

Maya blinked and then blushed, her eyes filling again. If Mohanja had finally been moved to action, then perhaps Yahni had not entirely died in vain. Derryl and her uncle came to her side as Mohanja moved on to take the Grand Master to his rooms.

Wrathscar stormed from the chamber, followed swiftly by Galee.

* * * *

"Terrys?" Jajinga searched the little alcoves of the farthest reaches of the garden. Night was falling and he had been delayed with Yahni's family. She had promised to meet him there to talk about Yahni. They were going to grieve together. He found the ivy-veiled bench and sat down upon it. His boots squished in a small spot of mud pooling around the base of the bench. It seemed an odd color. He dipped his finger in it and brought it up to his nose. It smelled like blood and his heart caught. He leaned over the bench and, dimly seen in the fading light, he saw the edge of the dress Terrys had worn that morning.

"Terrys? Terrys!" Jajinga climbed into the little cave. He pulled a box of lucifers from his pocket and struck one. Adrenaline slammed through him with horror. He had been standing in Terrys' blood. Her body lay with its throat torn out.

"I see you found her." Philomea regarded him dispassionately from the bench.

He had neither seen nor heard her arrive. She blocked his way out. Jajinga scrambled backwards, drawing his knives since he had no room to reach for his sword. His back struck the tree and his knee the boulder to his left as he tried to find some space to fight in.

"You killed her?"

"Of course. She was delicious. So was Yahni." Philomea smiled broadly, flashing her fangs. "My family isn't stupid. You're another member of the little group investigating our father."

"I don't know anything about that. Yahni, Terrys, and I were just friends."

"Tell me something I can believe." Philomea pivoted on the bench, putting her legs on Jajinga's side. "Guildsmyn always work in groups when the game is this dangerous. Did Yahni report to you? Or did you both report to someone else? Queiggy, perhaps? Or Yukiah?"

"We didn't report to anyone, bitch. Yahni fell in love with your sister. That was all. He married her. They were running away together." Was Philomea the one who killed Yahni? And now she had murdered Terrys as well?

"Yahni Kjarten ... married my ugly sister? The handsomest male in Ishladrim Castle? You're lying." Philomea's face flushed the color of blood and her eyes went scarlet.

"By my god, Hadjys, in full view of the Dark Judge, Yahni and Belyla married. Mikkal performed the ceremony." Jajinga searched the small ivy cave as he spoke to her, seeking a way out. If he could go up and over the boulder quick enough that would put him in the open with room to fight her. "Belyla was more beautiful than you will ever be."

Philomea screamed. Jajinga leaped up, flinging himself onto the rock and rolled, tearing the ivy curtain. His shirt ripped and a long scratch was opened along his back. He kept going, came to the end, and fell to earth, gaining his feet quickly. Wrathscar's two younger daughters had been waiting for him in case he tried this. They had thought of everything. Jajinga crouched, waiting for them. He had not been good enough to become one of the Chosen Thirteen no matter how hard he trained. The light dwindled away to nothing, until all he could see was their eyes. He leaped high, slashing, felt his knife strike home, heard one of the daughters scream. The Guildsmon landed running. More eyes in the dark. Jajinga cursed. *Why the hell aren't the bloody lamps lit? Where is the guard?*

Jajinga blundered into a bush and fell, twisting. More eyes. How many were out there? He staggered to his feet. An impossibly strong hand grabbed his wrist and shoved his own blade into his chest. Jajinga screamed, but no one answered and then they were all over him.

* * * *

Mohanja climbed to the top of the Tower of the Winds, the highest tower of the Palace of the Grand Master, clutching his cloak tightly around him as the gales tore at him. The winds never stilled up here, ceaselessly moving, sweeping off the peaks high above the snow line.

"Hanadi, you are away barely five months and already the realm is pulling itself apart. I fear there may not be anything left for you to return to when your journey year ends next spring. I need to find you." Then the big black mon threw back his head and bellowed like a bull. "HANAAAADDDDDIIIII!
HAAAAANNNAAAAADDDDDIIIII!"

He called her name into the winds, losing himself in the call until he could call no more. Then out in the deepening night, far off and coming closer came a howling. Not the howling of wolves, but the odd ululation of the shadow hounds. Mohanja found that hope rose within him and he had wind and voice to call again, but this time he matched the ululations so that he sounded as if a hound stood on the tower. The calls answered him back, changed in tone and timber. Yes, they were out there, but there were two? Three? There was a pack of shadow hounds beyond the walls and some of them within the walls. Was this what she did? Did she run with the wild packs?

Mohanja gave one last ululation and then raced down the stairs, certain that when the time was right, she or Brundarad would show themselves. Somehow he would find the ways to fight Galee for control of the Guild and the city. Something was wrong with his master and he had to assume the worse, but he also had to move very carefully until he knew whom he could trust. Yahni's death proved that.

* * * *

The three children beat idly at clusters of debris and trash that had collected in a deep hollow in the rutted alley. Three days of rain had washed a great many things down the twisting lanes of Havensword. Most of the children in the neighborhood had given up all thought of the magic book, except for Kamal. Every day he dragged his two younger brothers out to check again, even if it meant digging through the same piles of trash over and over. Kamal felt certain that the book waited for him, and him alone, to find it. It was like a taste in his mouth that he could not release. He would find the book and his mother would be so pleased that he had proven himself a man by winning the gold that would lift them from poverty. They had even ventured into the sewers, but strange monsters were down there and they did not do it again – for they had heard the ghost of Yahni's lover crying in the darkness. That had been the most terrifying thing of all.

Yet he could not rid himself of the intense feeling that the book and the bag of gold waited just for him. The feeling grew especially intense that day as it started to get dark, so Kamal decided to make one last sweep of the alleys. The full moon lent them plenty of light as they drew near to the Black Lady Tavern, jabbing at the litter with their sticks. Kamal carried a broken broom handle he had found months past and liked to pretend it was a fighting staff or sometimes a pole arm. There were several narrow rectangles slanting into the sewers, one not a yard from him and the other a block in front of him. He heard the scrabbling sound that could have meant rats and turned to glance as three dirty, bedraggled cats came from the sewers with a huge book in their teeth, working together to get it up and out. They struggled with the heavy, awkward thing. Children are always more accepting of miracles and magic than adults, and Kamal was no exception. So when he saw the cats, he naturally knew that they would recognize his worth and bring it to him.

"The book! They've brought us the book!" Kamal shouted to his brothers.

The three startled catkin nearly lost the book, looking up in surprise as the three scruffy children descended on them. They hesitated for a moment and that gave Kamal a chance to grab the black bachelor male leading the others. He began to stroke the catkin. "What good cats!"

Twizzle tensed in Kamal's arms. Uncertainty showed in every line of his body at being handled by children who appeared ready to steal the book from him. If he did not achieve something of importance, or better yet heroism, how could he expect to acquire mates? He was very tired of being a bachelor male.

"Monsters!" shouted Shareef, his littlest brother, pointing to the further sewer hole. All looked, boys and cats, as several Ylesgaire, lesser bloods, crawled out onto the rutted paving of the alley.

"Save the book! Save the cats!"

The catkins, who had been about to unleash a sharp-clawed assault to get free of

the children, instantly reconsidered as the boys scooped them up, and raced toward the back kitchen door of the tavern.

Kamal, book under one arm and Twizzle under the other, kicked frantically on Tuhk's door. "Tuhk, anon! Tuhk, anon! For my lord and liege!"

The door was flung open as Tuhk snatched them all inside. "You found it?"

Kamal nodded, dropping Twizzle carefully before extending the book to the tavern master. "Lesser bloods in pursuit."

"We're warded against them. What's this? Cats?" Tuhk squatted to have a look at what the children had brought him. He scratched around Twizzle's ears, gaining a satisfying purr from the small cat.

"They brought us the book. They should be rewarded," Kamal said, knowing that a good leader always remembered his allies.

"We have plenty of fine meat scraps. I served a side of fine venison today." Tuhk extended his hands to Kamal for the book and the boy gave it to him.

The tavern master opened it to the first page. The writing was smeared, but enough of the words remained that he could see the writing was strange, like nothing he had ever seen before, confirming that this was not Creeyan.

Kamal felt a whisper of concern as he asked, "This is the book? I have earned my gold?"

"Yes. This is the book. You have earned your gold, Kamal. But do not brag about it."

"Why not? I have done a great thing."

"Because you do not want Lord Derryl's enemies to come looking for you and yours."

Kamal nodded thoughtfully, pulling at the edge of his mouth as he had seen adults do. "It is the game. We play it."

Tuhk gripped his shoulder in approval. "You learn well, Kamal. Lord Derryl and his allies, especially the Patriarch, will be most grateful. You will have your gold and your name will be known to those who need to know it. Those who can reward you in other ways."

Kamal grinned. "Names open doors."

Tuhk gave his shoulder another squeeze and a shake. "Smart boy."

* * * *

Maya came downstairs when she heard horses in the yard. Derryl was supposed to be at court all day, but she hoped it meant he was returning early. She left Leslie napping, between morning sickness and a general lassitude over the loss of Yahni, her mate needed the extra rest. Maya wore a long black robe similar to what the mages wore, comfortable and loose, simply sashed. She had no energy for anything else now that Yahni's funeral was over and there seemed nothing more that she could contribute toward bringing vengeance for her twin. The only thing she did any more was mourn.

She found Derryl in the entry hall, a bright oak paneled room with dark crossbeams, and a couch on one side. He stood slapping his gloves against his leg in an agitated manner. When he saw her, Derryl stopped and crossed quickly to take her into the library where he sat her down in a soft chair. Maya's heart raced with alarm, reading the distress in his manner and the troubled light in his eyes. He dropped to one knee in front of her, gripping her arms.

"Maya, I know what I'm about to say will be hard, but you must promise to be strong."

She went suddenly numb. "Who died?"

"The reason that Terrys and Jajinga did not attend Yahni's funeral."

Maya felt her emotions going a little more dulled and distanced by the pain. "They're dead?"

"Yes. Their bodies were found this morning. Behind a bench veiled in ivy. The smell of rot... They were poised like lovers. The murderer has a sense of irony. He or she likes to play with people. You and Leslie are going to stay away from Ishladrim Castle. You'll stay at my Havensword mansion and travel nowhere without guards."

"I am not afraid of them."

"Darling, listen to me. It's happening all over again. Just like it did thirty years ago. You weren't even born yet. You don't know what it was like, what you're up against. You can't fight them, Maya."

"And you can?" she questioned dully.

"Yes. My friends and I. The Guild. We can fight them. We remember."

"Marry me now." She clutched at him, bending forward in the chair to wrap her arms around him, pressing her face into his neck to mask the tears that rose in a

frantic need to deny the scent of death she smelled all around them. "Tonight. Give me my triad."

"There would be no splendor. I wanted to give you a marriage celebration that would be spoken of for generations."

"I don't want that any longer, Derryl. Life is too fragile."

"Tonight then, I'll ask Eshraf immediately." He kissed her. "But I will throw you a party when all this is over."

* * * *

"He'll do everything to catch them, will he?" Wrathscar roared, pacing the room.

He had been going on like this for days. They were all getting tired of listening to it. Galee and her inner circle of Lemyari and sa'necari were beginning to worry that Wrathscar would provoke an incident that would be difficult, if not impossible, to deal with or cover up.

"Sit down," Galee hissed angrily, rising from her desk. "You are complicating matters faster than I can straighten them out. Have you gone rogue? You were never this insane before I turned you." She caught him by the throat and, at her nod, Meilurk and the other Lemyari rose to catch his arms. "You will leave the Kjartens alone. I will take care of them. Or rather, Belyla will, once I've gotten her hungry enough. The Master of Blood has taken her in hand. Derryl is my problem. Mohanja is my problem. All I want you to do is feed, fuck your women, and keep your bloody mouth shut. We are no longer partners. I am your mother in blood and you are a newborn; until you have aged into wisdom, which at the rate you are going, may not be for centuries, you will remain a newborn and subject to my will. If it were not for my constant watching you would already have been discovered and staked. So you will obey or I will withdraw my protection and let the humans discover what you are and you will have only your own stupidity to blame for it. Had I not sent my people to snatch Belyla and Yahni, how long do you imagine it would have been before the Guild tracked her back to you?"

"But then how are you going to cover turning her against the Kjartens?"

"You reported her missing."

"Channadar knows."

"Channadar might know. If so, he has not spoken or the Guild would be invading your home. And Channadar can die."

"And he is also your problem?"

"Do what I told you and nothing more."

"Agreed." Wrathscar shook the hands off. He walked from the apartments.

"Follow him," Galee ordered crisply. One of the Lemyari gave her a short bow and set after Wrathscar. "He is becoming the bane of my existence, Meilurk. When the wedding is over, stake him."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HUNT

Galee led Lord Wrathscar through the narrow streets of the Poor Quarter, past decrepit two-story houses pressed side to side like rows of dingy ghosts. In this place people disappeared and no one thought anything of it. These were the principle feeding grounds for her growing cadres of undead. She no longer neglected him. She could not afford to. Wrathscar became increasingly unstable unless his needs were kept satisfied. She and her oldest, strongest get constantly remained at his side or nearby. It was becoming dangerous to let him out of their sight. She needed him for a few months yet – at least until after the wedding; then, if he could not be brought to heel, she would destroy him as a rogue. That disappointed Galee; she rarely misjudged a turning and had expected better of this one.

A young mon in a shabby brown tunic and overdress with two children in tow walked ahead of them. She struggled to keep the tired and fussy little ones moving quickly, while nervously scanning the growing darkness.

"Shall we, my lord?" Galee asked, watching him closely from the corners of her eyes.

"There are three of them. One could get away." He sounded rational, but Galee caught the edge of hunger curling beneath it like smoke in the basement when a building first catches fire and the flames begin to lick upwards to consume it.

"No. I shall take both children at once. You take the mon." She slipped her arm into Lord Wrathscar's and walked briskly up to them. The woman heard them coming and glanced over her shoulder. That slowed her pace for an instant. She started to lift the smaller boy – not more than three years old – to her hip. Galee darted forward, grabbing the children by the napes of their necks, dragging them from their mother's grasp. The mon tried to hold onto them, a frightened sob emerging from her throat, for she saw their fangs glint in the light thrown from a window's parted curtain. Lord Wrathscar lunged, his hands imprisoning her arms as he took her to earth. She struggled, screaming. Her only answers were shutters quickly closing, stealing their windows' isolated light, bars dropping into place, and people's prayers shivering into the night. Wrathscar nuzzled her throat, and then sank his fangs into

the favored vein. The woman stilled.

"No, not here. Not on the street," Galee said, lifting the strangely silent children up and carrying them toward an alley. *What in Hell's name could possess him to simply start feeding on the street?* "It's too exposed. The guard could come by."

Wrathscar raised his head, considered her words, and threw the mon across his shoulders in a hunter's carry to follow her. Acute hunger tended to cloud both his judgment and ability to reason at times, like all newborns; eventually that would change, as his undead body adjusted to its new demands and needs. Wrathscar and Meilurk, alone among the undead of the city, were of her immediate blood. The other Lemyari were several generations removed from her. The rest of the vampires were the get of the lesser lineages – whose founders had fled the fall of Hoon's valley or others who had migrated to her from Waejontor over the decades. The sa'necari – necromancers who were the living embodiment of the undead – had worked hand-in-hand with her for years. Favors were owed in both directions. And then there was Zarliche, the Master of Blood, selling his wares and services. She had brought together an impressive army.

Lord Wrathscar sat down in the dirt, cradling the woman like a lover as he returned to his meal, slurping and sucking noisily.

Galee settled the children on her lap. "Pretty, pretty, pretty," she murmured, opening the smallest boy's shirt, stroking him. She nuzzled him briefly, and then delicately broke the skin on his throat and drank quietly.

* * * *

Arruth became increasingly withdrawn as the summer deepened. She was always snapping at Bryndel, attacking him in a listless fashion. The pair's escapades had ceased entirely. Jysy rarely managed to get Arruth to leave Talons' rooms even to eat, and the youngster had started sleeping in various parts of the apartment, wherever she could hide – especially the pantry. Edouina had finally had housekeeping throw a mattress in there for Arruth. Edouina stopped Alora and Jysy's attempts to force her to sleep in her own rooms. When Dynarien noticed, he decided that the pair could use some fresh air. They packed a picnic lunch, and found a nice place on the grounds to spread a blanket.

Arruth sat very close to Dynarien, her fingers creeping up to him, and then withdrawing without touching him in uneasy patterns as if she desperately wanted to cling to him like a child with a parent. Her gaze slid around the quad again and again as she nibbled at her sandwich. She never took her eyes off the grounds, appearing nervous and on edge, watchful of something or someone.

Dynarien observed all this and told her. "Relax, you're with me."

Arruth glared at him. "I shouldn't have left her."

"Talons is fine, Arruth. Edouina and Alora are with her."

Arruth's glare darkened. "He'll start sticking it in again, you just watch him."

Jysy stared, shocked speechless.

"Arruth!" Dynarien snapped. "Your obsession with Talons' sex life is not only inappropriate, it's none of your business." Dynarien's tone was so severe it startled Jysy, but did not seem to faze Arruth.

"Well, well, who have we here?" A silky voice interrupted Dynarien's lecture. "Jysy and Arruth, I do believe. And who is your handsome friend, hmmnn?"

They all looked up to see Galee standing beside them.

Jysy made the introductions. "Dynarien, this is Gylorean Galee, first lieutenant to the Grand Master. Master Galee, this is Mage Dynarien Briarrose. He's a friend of Talons."

"Where are you from?" Dynarien asked, taking stock of her vaguely sylvan appearance. She did not quite match any of them and Dynarien knew all of his father's peoples well.

"I'm of Nordrei lineage," Galee said. "My mother's people came from Galeador, do you know of it?"

"Yes, I do," he said, eyeing her closely. The cloying sweetness of her voice made him wince inwardly. It sounded off key somehow, putting him on edge. She did not look like the same Galee who had shared his sire's bed – and yet? Some auric resemblance, possibly? It set him on guard, alert.

"Then you must know how I got my name, it's a shortened version of Galeadorian."

"Some of them do shorten their names," Dynarien admitted, thoughtfully. He disliked her immediately, and tried to figure out exactly why.

"You wouldn't happen to be the mage I've heard so much about?"

"I am a mage, if that's what you're asking. I work for the Patriarch."

Galee smiled. "Well, I must be going. There are so many diplomatic issues to be worked out before the wedding in a few months. An heir's marriage is always so frustratingly political, and the Grand Master has asked me to make all the arrangements."

They watched her go in silence and the conversation did not start up again for a

long while. Dynarien did not know what she might be, but he knew with certainty that she was not Nordrei.

* * * *

Father Karakin, seated before the Patriarch, wore humble robes of unrelieved black. He was a simple, uncomplicated mon, content to care for his parishioners and the little gardens around his church. He twisted his hands nervously as he spoke. He had come to the High Temple that morning, demanding to be taken directly to the Patriarch, rather than going through the usual channels. His bravado had started to fail him as soon as he found himself actually addressing the mon. "Your Holiness, people in the Poor Quarter are vanishing. Five and six a week. It's rough where I preach, but not like this."

"Have any bodies been found?" the Patriarch asked, his voice kind, for he could see the priest was afraid and he suspected it was not entirely because of where he sat.

"No, Holy Father. They disappear without a trace, taking nothing with them. Most recently a woman and her two small sons." He went on to list the disappearances plaguing his parish.

The Patriarch listened with growing apprehension. He had seen the wounds on Talons' thighs, breasts, and arms. There had been no further wounds since Dynarien warded her chambers. And then there was Yahni – bitten over much of his body – the attack on Channadar, and the murders of Terrys and Jajinga. Sometimes Eshraf wondered whether they were winning or losing this war. How much should he tell him? The people would panic, which could turn to rioting and many innocents would be injured by it: especially the children and the elderly.

"Have you spoken with the guard?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. They increased the patrols, but no one has found anything."

Eshraf considered that. Perhaps this was the opportunity they had been waiting for to strike back at their enemies. "Karakin, I suspect, but I can't yet prove this, you understand. Vampires."

"Vampires? In Creeya?" Karakin had suspected that the answer, when it came, would be ugly, but this went beyond his worst fears.

"What I tell you now is in the strictest confidence. A young paladin, marked by Hadjys himself, received midnight visits that left distinctive wounds on her body. Her chamber was warded and the visits ceased." And Yahni killed by one of them – he could not get the image of Yahni's body out of his mind. Terrys and Jajinga's bodies had been bad; but they had been nothing compared to Yahni, who had clearly been tortured over a prolonged period by the monsters.

"There is no way to ward an entire quarter." Karakin sounded bleak.

"You must find their resting places. I will send you such help as I may. It will be strange help. I will send you cats and dogs two days from now at dawn. Do you have any one with mind-speech?"

"I am such a one as are two of my congregation, Holy Father, but how are cats and dogs going to help me against vampires?"

"Vampires, like every thing in creation, leave scent trails. The morning after tomorrow the cats and dogs will be waiting on your doorstep. These are magical creatures with the power of mind-speech. Have your hunting party warded against fascination, and waiting for these creatures I am sending you. If I can, I will also send a godmarked paladin of Hadjys with them." He did not say Guildsmon, because he was uncertain whether with the up drawbridge that he could get one. By then Eshraf was remembering thirty years ago, and how many things had been achieved before the Guild entered the fray.

"Thank you, Your Holiness, thank you."

The Patriarch dismissed him, and then pulled the bell cord, summoning his assistant.

Mikkal was a gray-haired mon, blade thin with a hawkish face. He had been a solicitor of the court, pleading other people's cases and causes before judges and the Grand Master before entering the priesthood following his wife's death. She had been Guild, a member of Jon Dawn's legion, and perished in the Great War.

"Have my knights gather secretly before the high altar at eventide as well as Dynarien and tell him to bring me some cats. You will want to make us a small feast as the youngsters will be missing their supper to attend."

* * * *

Philomea and her sisters wandered the Great Central Hall and the Cloverleaf restlessly. Galee sternly ordered them to feed only in the Poor Quarter after Terrys and Jajinga's badly decomposed bodies had been found in the gardens by a pair of lovers who also knew of the ivy cave. Philomea wanted stronger blood than the pathetic inhabitants of the Poor Quarter could provide her with, she was growing in power and appetite. But she showed no signs of the rogue beyond that single act of vengeance, and her only regret was that she had not yet gotten Osterbridge. Another palace kill would have Galee screaming. Philomea was careful and her sisters listened to her. None of them wanted to end up like Belyla. So she had not yet pressed herself to take Osterbridge, instead she waited for an opportunity to follow him into Havensword where she could take him in an alley, and no one would be able to say which vampire had done for him. She had discovered that she liked the taste of death in her mouth.

She paused in the Great Central Hall to watch Channadar quietly weave one of his stories. He seemed tired, his movements half a beat off as if he hurt. Philomea wondered at that. Her eyes strayed to Leeza who sat within the circle of Tiderider's arms, her head on his chest, watching Channadar with hungry eyes half concealed. Philomea suspected that Leeza craved Channadar despite her relationship to Tiderider. After a while, she wandered on.

"Philomea?"

She turned her head to see Lord Westli. "Hello, Lord Westli," she said in a softly suggestive voice. Now, there was stronger blood. His warmth drew her, as did his looks. Lord Westli was her father's age. He was a raw-boned man, this commander of the guard, and he attracted her. His hair was an off-color blond, almost caramel, and sun-streaked by many hours spent practicing in the yards. There were clefts under his cheekbones, and he had a strong jaw line with a blunt chin. She knew he was a terror to his officers and a perfect gentleman with the ladies, if somewhat loud at times when in a good-humor. Philomea wanted him. He was no Yahni Kjarten, in terms of good looks, but he was very fine and might have rivaled Yahni when he was younger. She was still incredulous and a bit outraged over learning that Yahni had actually married her sister. But she had not told anyone. She missed Yahni. She had managed to steal several meals from his veins whenever her sister was in the gardens. How fine he had tasted!

"Should you be out here alone?" Lord Westli asked, offering her his arm, which she accepted, slipping hers through his.

"Are you offering to squire me around?" Westli belonged to her father and Galee: he was forbidden meat. Lord Westli had handled the revelations at her father's dinner party well, though it had been staged so as to conceal the fact that she and her two younger sisters were vampires like Belyla. It had appeared as if they had merely been too appalled by the show to eat. Westli was large and strong. Philomea was hungry. She remembered how Belyla had Danced Yahni and wondered what it would be like to Dance Lord Westli.

"If you wish it, yes."

"I do, Lord Westli. Especially with you. I wish to see the Cloverleaf. I want to purchase a particularly fine bottle of wine."

"Then let us go."

They made a day of it, shopping and sipping wine at the cafes. When evening came, Westli started to walk her home and she stopped him with a kiss.

"Let us go to your apartments," she suggested.

Westli's eyes brightened at his luck. "I have wanted you for years, Philomea."

She gave him a sensuous smile, pressing herself against him. "Then let's go where you can have me."

Westli sucked in a sharp breath and pressed his hand into the juncture of her legs.

Philomea's expression turned languid and feline. "You know what I want in there..."

"Yes, I think I do."

"Then let's go to your apartments."

He had the main apartments in the guardsmyn's wing, the only star room there. Philomea had never been here before. The main room was very plain, like the mon himself, no paintings or wall hangings, sturdy furniture. Westli immediately went into the pantry after glasses and a bottle of wine he had chilling while Philomea made herself comfortable.

"Does anyone live here with you?" she called out to him. "Servants?"

"No," he replied.

"Good." Philomea unfastened the hooks on her bodice, folding it down to the waist and then shed her breastband. Naked to the waist, she settled on the divan with her arms stretched along it.

Westli stopped in the doorway, and stared with the bottle in one hand and the glasses in the other. "Philomea..." He hurriedly set the bottle and the glasses down on an end table. Then he knelt in front of her, breathing hard with eagerness, and cupped her breasts, kissing them.

"You are a fine woman," Westli said, pausing to look into her eyes. "It is far past time you married." He nuzzled her breasts, stroking the inside of her thighs while she unfastened his clothing.

"I would accept your suit. So would my father." Philomea kissed along the exposed back of his neck and began to lick him, while wiggling free of her skirts.

"Then I will talk to him." He shrugged out of his tunic and opened his pants, then knelt again and ran his hands up and down her fine young body.

Philomea almost laughed, clearly Westli could not believe his good fortune: A fifty four year old mon was about to find himself inside a twenty four year old woman.

"Should we do this in the bed?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes."

She had already ascertained where the bedroom was and left a trail of garments in her wake. Lord Westli followed her, his eyes bright with anticipation, as she walked into his bedroom. The bed was as large and sturdy as the old soldier himself, with deep green, old-fashioned heavy bed curtains. Philomea lay down, showing her young body to perfection to him, posing, and displaying herself.

Westli was as large and hard as her father got. He settled his bulk between her legs and covered her with his body. She arched her back to press against him.

Philomea's nostrils flared. She could smell his arousal, taste his eagerness. Warm. Warm. He was so warm. So full of delicious blood. She wrapped her legs around him, taking him deeply inside her. She caught his hair, pulling his face to hers to kiss him. Then she licked his neck again in long strokes of her tongue. "Do it hard. Be fierce," she murmured. Philomea had learned to like it that way from her coupling with her father.

He did so and she moaned, liking the pain.

"It makes this Passion-Dance so fine," she whispered.

"What?" He paused in his thrusts.

She bit him.

* * * *

Talons forced herself to leave the bedroom. Dynarien had brought her more freshly cut orchids from Imralon. Vases of them filled the room to overflowing: on the end tables, the long low table before the couch, and centered on the small dining table. She liked the deep purple ones best, but also the white ones with purple spots and the dark burgundy red. Dynarien tried hard to make her smile each day, but he never so much as tried to kiss her. Talons missed his little games, which surprised her. He had been such an annoyance at first, hiding under her blankets and the mound of pillows to steal a kiss. She would spot him immediately and soundly kick him. But he had been good-natured about her rejections. And then one day she discovered that she wanted him.

She sat down at the little table with Alora and another of the knights, a youth named Sirikit. Alora beamed when she saw Talons up. It had been over a week since the heir had found the energy to join them there.

Talons resented her steadily worsening weakness, the constant aching, and dizziness. They were all working hard to protect her from the vampire, to provide for her needs, and generally be there for her in what was beginning to look like a serious illness and not just a pregnancy. Yet, she resented having to depend on them. She

had always been independent, making her own rules and living by them. She made her first kill at eleven, a pedophile who was raping and murdering little girls. She had been a full agent of Hadjys at fourteen, the youngest ever. She had traveled the Merezian continent on her red gryphon, Little Bit, carrying out the Grand Master's orders. Yet now she was trapped and confined to these few rooms. She had never been sick before. She felt lost and helpless – new feelings, which she hated and resisted. As her health failed, her emotions became harder to control, more on the surface, and some days there were fits of uncontrollable weeping. Talons seemed less and less like herself, as if she were becoming someone she did not know, someone she did not like, someone she could not respect.

Talons reached for the tray of pastries, her hands shaking so badly she had to use both of them just to snag one and get it to her mouth. She bit into it, forcing herself to chew and swallow. The maple pastry was one of her favorites, yet she could not taste it. Her mouth seemed to have lost its ability to discern what she put into it. The effort of just eating soon had her breathing hard. She got halfway done and threw it across the room, angry tears sliding down her face.

Alora came, wrapping her arms around Talons and holding her.

"What's happening to me?" Talons whispered. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

"I don't know. Even Dynarien is mystified." The young knight tried to school the worry from her voice.

"I'm going back to bed."

Alora helped her rise. Talons leaned heavily upon her. Alora got her settled again, covering her with the light blanket. Soon she slept.

It was late that night that Talons first heard the voice. Normally she kept several pillows between her head and the wall, but that night they had shifted and her ear ended up pressed against the wall so that the sound vibrated up through the stone.

"Yahhhnnnniiii! Ohhhh, gohhddsss! Yahhhnnnniiii!" Then a long, long sobbing. Talons bolted upright, grabbing at Edouina.

Edouina came instantly awake with a blade in her hands. "What is it?"

"Someone screaming Yahni."

"So you've heard it too now." Edouina sheathed the blade on her forearm. Her voice flat and emotionless.

"Who is it?"

"They say it's the ghost of Belyla Wrathscar. Bryndel's sister. I asked him not to tell

you since you've been so ill. She and Yahni Kjarten were lovers. She disappeared the same day he died. There are rumors she helped him escape, but they caught her. Two free-rover catkins saw her pulled off a horse. She had Yahni in her arms. Yahni staggered into a tavern with three myn following him. Those catkins had not been watching for Yahni so they did not mark the myn's colors and could not identify them afterward. The information trickled in weeks later."

"Poor Bryndel. I knew Yahni a little. He was a quiet sort."

"Belyla was the only sister Bryndel was close to. He hasn't been the same since. I don't know if you've noticed it. But I have."

"All the sadder."

"Shall I give you a back rub or get you something to help you sleep?"

"Tea. Maybe some leftovers?"

"*Lady*hears a ghost and it makes her hungry?" Edouina teased, deliberately using the most diminutive form of the title she could remember.

"Babies are making me hungry."

* * * *

Lord Wrathscar and Galee sat in the large chairs in the back of Wrathscar's study while Bryndel paced in front of them. Philomea lurked unnoticed in her usual spot near the top of the stairs crouching hidden by the balustrade.

"I don't understand why you sent for me," Bryndel fumed. Galee's continued harassment had begun to take a toll of him. His rumpled clothes looked slept in. He no longer shaved his face or combed his hair. Dark, purple shadows lay beneath his haunted eyes. His studied grace had become a heavy plod.

"I hear that you're not spending as much time in her rooms as you were," Galee purred. "Does that mean she's not getting her medicine?"

"She isn't well. This is turning into a very difficult pregnancy. Possibly because of what you spiked the medicine with, Galee," he growled. Images of Belyla and Yahni darted through his thoughts, making it hard to think, making him suspicious and desperate to stand his ground.

"Oh, is that what they're saying? Poor, little thing, she can't stand to have Bryndel touch her anymore because she's pregnant?" Galee taunted him. "Can't you see? She never wanted you in the first place. She just let you swell her belly to insure the alliance. She has you by the short hairs and you know it."

"It's not that way, Galee. She really loves me." Bryndel averted his eyes, frightened that Galee would reach for his mind, and tried to sound certain, rather than peevishly defiant. And failed. *Belyla. Belyla. Galee, please don't hurt Talons.* His head began to ache and throb.

"I don't think so. I think Talons and Edouina have you wrapped around their little fingers. You'll believe anything they tell you. They're probably planning on killing you as soon as the children are born."

"They wouldn't do that, Galee!"

"Don't be a fool, Bryndel!" Lord Wrathscar snapped. "That is exactly what they are planning. You've got to take them in hand."

"And," Galee added, "you must start slipping her the medicine again. I know for a fact that you've stopped doing so."

"It's hurting her."

"That's what it's supposed to do."

Bryndel stared. "You mean you really are poisoning her? But I thought—" *He saw Belyla worrying Yahni on the floor... Yahni's dead face lying in his casket in the temple.*

"It isn't poison," Galee said. "It's just to keep her so weak she won't survive the childbirth."

"No. I won't do it." He felt cold and frightened. He did not want to lose Talons. This was not fair. They had not told him they planned to kill her. *Yahni's face again ... only now it changed and it was Talons' face.* His stomach heaved, but nothing came out.

"Yes," Galee rose from the chair. "Talons will die. The Grand Master will waste away from grief. Then you will sit upon the throne as regent for the children." Galee slipped her arm around Bryndel, looking deeply into his eyes. She snared his mind. "Now, go and make certain Talons gets the medicine. While you are there, you must also make certain they understand that you rule. Not them. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Galee, I'll take care of it." Bryndel left.

* * * *

As soon as the door closed behind Bryndel, Galee turned to Lord Wrathscar. "Edouina's power is strong. I have to fight her hard for control of your son. It's getting more and more difficult for me to get the drugs into Talons without Bryndel's assistance. We need to make some alternate plans that Bryndel doesn't know about."

"Does he ever remember when you tell him what you are doing to her?"

"No. He genuinely cares for her. He would try to break free. He already does. He cannot succeed. I am in too deeply. When he suspects what I am doing, his mind shies away from it. When this deed is done, his own shame will keep him silent. He will have her blood on his hands."

"I need to feed."

"I'd like to feed on that damned interfering yuwenghau," she snarled, remembering Dynarien. Yes. He stank of divinity; and, although she was uncertain of his lineage, there was something familiar about him, as if they had met before. He was passing himself off as a mere mage – how interesting. No wonder he had beaten and humiliated Ambrose last spring. That all made sense now. The only thing that remained was to decide how to kill him.

* * * *

Philomea suspected more and more with each passing day that her appetites were like her father's, that she was too much like her father and she feared the rogue state – seeing it in him was too much like seeing madness. She would feed, and within hours of smelling all this warm humanity she would be hungry again. Fear of what she was becoming crept along the pathways of her mind, but especially fear of what Galee might do if she caught the slightest suggestion that Philomea might be a rogue.

Maya walked past her on Derryl's arm. Philomea could smell her blood, which was so deliciously similar to Yahni's it made her throat ache with desire for it. She wanted to Dance Maya the way Belyla had Danced Yahni. Philomea wanted to kiss her, hold her, and taste her; feel Maya's warm flesh writhing beneath her as her fangs split the soft skin. Maya was as beautiful as Yahni. She was already Dancing Westli, but his blood was stale beer to what Yahni's had been, what Maya's must be. *Oh, sweet, beloved wine of life, you are the one I want.*

Philomea began to discreetly follow them, keeping to the side and back with several people between them.

* * * *

Derryl brushed his lips through Maya's hair with a small laugh and whispered softly, "When I finish telling you this, you are to laugh as if at a joke, then I am going to grab your hand and we will run for the garden with all speed."

Maya flashed him a bright smile. "My lord."

"We are being followed."

"By who?"

"Philomea Wrathscar. And she's trying to prevent us noticing it. Let's go."

Maya laughed loudly, and then grabbed Derryl's hand herself, dragging him toward the gardens. "Come on you silly thing! We can't keep them all waiting!"

Then they ran, leaving Philomea in the Great Central Hall.

When they got outside, Derryl's myn saw them and rose from the benches to join them, but Derryl shook his head and moved a little farther while still remaining in their sight. He sank to a bench with Maya in his arms and it was then she began to cry. "Why won't they leave me alone?" She sobbed. "Why? Why won't they leave me alone?"

"I don't know, darling. I don't know."

"Haven't they done enough to me?"

* * * *

Ceejorn Osterbridge sat upon a bench in the temple gardens, working his fingers along a string of prayer beads one of the priests had given him the day after Terrys and Jajinga's bodies had been discovered. His closest friends were all dead. He had attended their funerals in a growing daze. He felt alone, desolate, and haunted by the feelings of abandonment that only death created – they were all gone and they had left him behind. Osterbridge finished the first sequence of prayers and lifted the runes to kiss them before continuing to the next set. They had left him behind to live, and he was not certain that he wished to. People were kind to him. The Kjartens had insisted that he feel free to visit them, since he had been Yahni's friend. So had Lord Derryl Tormuth. All of Yahni and Jajinga's friends, acquaintances to Osterbridge, had said the same. Osterbridge had no family, he was an orphan. The Guild took in a lot of those. Yahni, Jajinga, and Terrys had been the closest thing to family he had and he had bonded with them very strongly – strongly enough that Queiggy had put him on bereavement leave for two weeks to deal with their loss, give him some time to grieve.

The priests had become accustomed to finding him in the gardens or the small private chapels of prayer within the temple itself. At first they had tried to comfort him and, finally seeing that he wanted to be left alone with his memories, they began to let him be.

A small black cat curled up under the bench; Osterbridge had not noticed him yet. Evening and a waxing moon painted the gardens in the colors of twilight, shadow, and shade. Everything had the visual sharpness of color that came before a storm or at certain times of shifting light. A soft hum of noise made Osterbridge look up and he saw a group of young people, Guild students most likely, enter the gardens with

some priests. There were over a dozen of them. A girl broke off from the others, heading in his direction. She was a rawhide whip of a youth, a dark brunette who moved with an easy grace that came of long hours spent at the training fields.

"Alora! Come on," said a heavy-set youth.

"No, go on if you can't wait, Tulik. I see Twizzle, and I'm going to bring him along for luck." She came toward Osterbridge's bench and a young man carrying a bolas on his belt followed her.

Tulik shrugged, and continued on into the temple. Alora knelt beside Osterbridge and reached around his feet. Osterbridge shifted his feet away, bending forward to see what she was after.

"Excuse me," Alora told him. "But I'm trying to get the cat."

Osterbridge scooped Twizzle up and placed him in Alora's arms. He tweaked Twizzle's tail. "It looks like it's been broken at least once," Osterbridge observed, touching the odd kinks in the half-length of tail.

"It has. You'd think with such a short tail it would not get stepped on by clumsy humans. But it has."

"Poor little guy."

"Are you a Guildsmon?" She nodded at his clothing; he was out of uniform, but still wore black.

"Yes. I'm on leave. Bereavement leave."

"Ahhh. I'm sorry. We need a Guildsmon." She turned to the youth behind her. "Don't we, Jimi?"

"Eshraf says we do," Jimi agreed.

"For what?" Osterbridge had never heard students speak so casually of the Patriarch, and it piqued his interest. If there was a conspiracy in here someplace, he hoped it was a good one.

"We're going vampire hunting tomorrow," Jimi said, taking his measure carefully.

Osterbridge, working in records and research knew almost as much history as Yahni had, and he suddenly realized what was happening. "Count me in. What do you want me to do?"

"Come with us for the briefing." Alora rubbed her face against Twizzle's fur.

Jimi nodded, offering Osterbridge his hand, which the older Guildsmon accepted with a firm handshake. "Come on. Eshraf is waiting."

"I'm coming." Osterbridge stood. Of his friends, he had been the least. But perhaps he could be enough for these youngsters. Compared to these raw kids, he was an old mon being all of twenty-six. He had more experience than they did. More importantly, they were offering him a chance to strike back at the creatures that had murdered his friends, his adopted family. Osterbridge felt himself stirring to life again. He tucked the prayer beads into his belt, found a little snap strap, and fastened them in place.

* * * *

The Patriarch pulled a book from the shelf, feeling behind it for the switch. The bookcase slid back, revealing a narrow stair. He went down to a pleasant room with a single narrow window at the top level with the ground. A mattress with quilts thrown loosely over it sat in the far corner. A female shadow hound played with her pups on the mattress while the male stretched out in the middle of the floor. Eshraf watched for a moment before interrupting them.

They were awe-inspiring creatures. Most thought of the shadow hounds as animals; Eshraf knew the truth. They were sapients. And more than that. Hanadi and Brundarad had trusted him with their secret. Hanadi was smaller than Brundarad, who rose to face Eshraf, ears pricked forward. He 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 his long hanging ears. A long blunt muzzle extended from his squarish head. Two emerald eyes gleamed with intelligence. They had odd, double-handed forepaws: the dog-like primary paw, broad, blunt and strong capable of carrying the creature along swiftly as a horse or leaping deer; the secondary paw, three toed, diverging like a huge thumb, with retractable poison claws.

Normally, when the seventh year arrived and the change came over Hanadi Majios, she and Brundarad withdrew from Creeya to the Willodarian Monastery of St. Tarmus, where Hanadi would bear her pups. This time, scenting trouble, they had secretly guested with Patriarch Eshraf for the year that Hanadi could not resume her human form.

The Patriarch squatted beside Brundarad, scratching around his ears and horns. "Brundarad, Hanadi, my friends, I need a favor. You remained here because you were worried about Talons. What I am about to ask is not directly related to Talons, but perhaps indirectly so."

<Ask . > Brundarad sent.

Hanadi studied him intently as he spoke.

"Vampires. One of them was feeding on Talons. Dynarien warded and shielded her chambers and it stopped. But it's come to my attention that these same creatures are feeding on my people in the poor quarter."

Hanadi hissed. *<Women and children, no doubt. >*

"Mainly, yes."

<You want us to track them. >

"Yes, if Hanadi is willing."

<Dynarien must ward and shield this chamber first. I know you have warded it already, but I will feel better if Dynarien does this. Two priests must sit with the pups until we return. > Hanadi sent.

"Done."

* * * *

Sirikit, a slender dark youth, answered the knock at Talons' door. She was the only one there, since the knights had gone to the temple along with Dynarien, and Edouina was off on some errand of her own. Sirikit had no sooner cracked the door than Bryndel shoved past her. She caught the door as it whipped suddenly back in her face.

"What's the matter with you?" Sirikit demanded. "You almost hit me."

"Who's in with Talons? Edouina?" Bryndel ignored her question. His face was flushed and his eyes bright with emotion.

"No one. Talons is sleeping. She's still not feeling well."

Bryndel spun and lashed out, taking Sirikit by surprise. His fist connected with her chin and she went down, stunned. He grabbed her, threw her out the door, and dropped the bar.

Two cats hissed at Bryndel from Talons' bed. He seized them by the scruff of the neck and threw them into a closet in the parlor, dropping the little latch to hold it closed. He got scratched for his efforts, but did not notice it.

"Bryndel?" Talons stirred sleepily.

He dropped on top of her, pinning her arms with his knees before she could move. He took the vial from his pocket, seized her hair, and twisted her head around. Then he pulled the stopper with his teeth and poured the contents into her mouth. She choked, tried to spit it out. He covered her mouth with his hand and hit her in the

face. She swallowed. Bryndel took his hand back.

"Why?" she asked softly as her body went numb.

"I'm teaching you who's the master here."

* * * *

Sirikit pounded on the door. "Bryndel. Talons. Let me in."

"Having problems, my dear?" a soft voice purred.

Sirikit turned. "Bryndel's acting strange. He threw me out and dropped the bar."

"Maybe he just wanted some privacy. I could use some myself."

Sirikit saw the fangs and tried to react, but she was not fast enough. Lord Wrathscar crushed her windpipe as he tore her throat out.

Galee, standing beside him, laughed. She knocked on the door. "Bryndel, bring her out so I can have a taste."

* * * *

Edouina found the door standing open. She entered cautiously, drawing her blades. The door to the bedroom stood ajar. She prodded it and stepped through, spinning in case someone lurked behind it. Then she saw Talons. Her discipline held and she checked the room, finding no one hiding there. She went back, closed the outer door, and dropped the bar. The two cats, hearing her, began yowling. She released them and they bounded into the bedroom. She sheathed her blades, returning to kneel beside Talons.

She brushed bloody strings of dark hair from her lover's bruised face. Judging from the amount of swelling, this had happened an hour or more ago. Talons' robes lay open and her bruised chest moved in shallow breathing. Fresh puncture wounds in her throat and breast showed the vampires had been feeding on her again. *Gods, and she was already so terribly weak!*

Her left arm rested near her head at an odd angle, clearly broken just above the elbow. Blood and male juices coated her loins and inner thighs. One single thing struck Edouina, making some jarring connections: they had been careful to strike her where it would not injure the children and the only ones with a vested interest in the children were the Wrathscars. The Wrathscars were leagued with the vampire and they were murdering Talons.

By the letter of the law, if Talons could name them, then Edouina could kill them both out of hand. "Talons honey. Talons, who did this?"

Talons opened her eyes, looking at Edouina in a glazed, unfocused manner. "I don't remember. Gods! I hurt ... so bad..." She slipped away again, her eyes closing.

"Dynarien, get the hell over here."

"Edouina? What – Hells, no! Talons." Dynarien sat down beside her, took her wrist, and Read her. He summoned his satchel from his home near Imralon and began working on her. "They broke her arm. They beat her." His voice had a strangled catch, as if he struggled to contain his outrage and grief. "They got more of the drug down her. If this keeps up she'll be so weak she'll never survive the—" Dynarien gave Edouina a stricken look and said slowly, his voice going soft and haunted. "The childbirth. She won't survive the childbirth. She has to marry him, because everyone thinks she's pregnant by him, as she was supposed to be if the original plan had been carried out successfully. She dies; Bryndel – or his father – becomes regent for the children, which puts them in control of the throne if Takhalme dies.

"This is a warning. They want us to know they can and will hurt her."

The ginger cat stood up, her form shimmering. "It was Bryndel. He threw Sirikit out, barred the door. Locked us in the closet. We heard her die, but don't know who did it. He carried Talons out to them. They were a male and a female."

"And we can't formally accuse Bryndel without compromising the catkin," Edouina said.

"If I killed them both – Wrathscar and Bryndel – we would still not get the mon behind them, the vampire. And it would probably start a civil war."

"You know it, honey. Now, why don't you hop out of here and fetch some healers. We can't hide this."

"I want to simply start killing them. Proof or no proof."

"Well, you mustn't. Now go."

* * * *

Bryndel huddled in his rooms, staring at his hands. He knew what he had done, yet could not understand it – had it been this way with Belyla and Yahni? He remembered how much in love his little sister had been with her Guildsmon, how happy they had seemed. It had been marvelous to see Belyla happy for the first time in her life. Could his sister have loved Yahni as much as he loved Talons and yet, owing to what Galee and his father had done to her, been driven to kill him against her will? They had told him that Belyla murdered Yahni. He refused to believe it.

When he came fully free of Galee's triggering, he had been appalled at the blood on

his hands and clothes: Talons' blood. He threw the clothing in the hearth, burned them. Then he washed himself – despite his efforts, his mind still saw the blood. He felt sickened and filthy.

Someone knocked on the door and he jumped.

"Bryndel, I want to talk to you," Edouina said, taking a low, stern tone with him.

"Go away."

"No. I'm not going away. I know you did it."

Bryndel let her in. She turned and dropped the bar. Bryndel backed away from her. "Don't hurt me."

"Why shouldn't I?" She saw the scratches on his arms, the terror in his eyes, the way he trembled like a leaf in a hard wind. It set off alarms and misgivings. Far more was going on than it had occurred to her walking over, and she determined to find it out.

Bryndel sank to his knees, weeping. "I didn't want to."

Edouina squatted, caught his chin, and kissed him. The bi-kyndi slithered through his pleasure centers, giving her a glimpse of his mind and body. Something felt wrong. He had been fine yesterday, but now there was what? A taint? She could force him to tell her, but the process would probably kill him or reduce him to a gibbering idiot for the rest of his life – especially if the vampire had placed either blocks or coercions in his mind.

"Bryndel, I believe you. Honey," she said more gently. "The vampire was in your mind."

"You're a mind reader?" Bryndel asked, wincing.

"No. But, I can move through the pleasure centers in your brain, and I sense when some one else has been there. Tell me who she is?" Edouina tried to sound gentle and encouraging. This was not the Bryndel she had taken to the taverns and entertainments, delighting in things and places new to him, playing at romantic conspiracies like a child running loose and free. She saw now that she had not even begun to reach him.

"I – can't. I can't! Edouina, please," Bryndel whimpered, retreating from her.

"Bryndel," she spoke his name softly, trying to be as reassuring as possible. "Bryndel, honey. I need to check for bites. Take your clothes off, sweetheart."

Bryndel shook so hard he could not manage the buttons. Edouina felt him flinch

when she touched him, trying to help him undress. She caught his shirt to keep him from fleeing and stroked his face in feather-soft touches, sending a warm reassurance through him. Bryndel calmed. He undressed himself, turning his face away as she checked him over.

"Oh, shit," Edouina cursed. There on his inner thigh, pressed along the black thatch, where they would be hard to notice unless one was looking for them, were three old scars and a fresh one. While they were clearly easy to miss, Edouina still felt angry with herself for not noticing them before. All of Bryndel's behavior patterns came together and made sense. The vampire owned him – whether he wanted it or not, whether he realized it or not. His mind was probably a spider's web of coercions. *Poor Bryndel. Poor, dangerous, tyrannized Bryndel. Sad little boy. Not even his mind is his own. His heart probably is. He clearly loves Talons. But they're making him the tool of her destruction. They're destroying him along with her and they probably don't care.*

Bryndel bent forward to see what she was looking at. His eyes widened, his face paled, and he went into a thrashing panic, screaming, "Get out of here! Get out of here."

Edouina retreated into the corridor, striding quickly back to her apartments. She had no idea what to do about Bryndel – he was as much a victim as Talons – but that did not make him any less dangerous for it. At least she knew what she was fighting for control of Bryndel, if not who. For the first time since she had achieved mastery of the bi-kyndi, she wondered if her gifts would prove strong enough.

* * * *

The Grand Master shivered in his blankets, covered in cold sweat. The mon had come to him in his dreams again, as she had been doing for months now. He could never remember her face, just her body, the touch of her lips bringing pain and pleasure. But he knew she was beautiful beyond all imagining. The dreams often left physical signs on his body that he hid from view, as she told him to. Takhalme pushed the sleeve of his night-robe up and gazed at the two tiny punctures in the bend of his elbow. She had marked him again as her own. He grew weaker and more ill after each of the visitations, yet he craved them like an addict without his next dose.

Tonight he had written letters, many letters under her directions while waiting for her kiss. Only after they had been sealed and placed in her pouch did she take him on the floor beneath his desk. Some would go east, far east where a thousand truehearted Guildsmyn would die and her agents replace them at the Grand Master's signed order. But some were for special ears in the palace.

* * * *

The Patriarch led the assembled knights and Osterbridge into the innermost reaches

of the High Temple, down corridors where only the priests traveled. They entered a chapel in the center, the heart of the temple. He ordered the knights to strip bare to the waist, male and female alike. They knelt, laying their weapons on the ground before them and prayed as he had instructed them. Osterbridge, who had gone through this rite himself at sixteen, withdrew to the side, knelt, and began to pray from his beads. The danger must be terrible indeed if the Patriarch was consecrating students who had not yet finished their studies.

Eshraf lit incense and candles before beginning to intone at the altar. Golden light filled the chamber. A core of light materialized upon the altar, shimmering and shifting through all the colors of sunrise. A mon formed in the core, stepping down. The Patriarch went to his knees, bowing low before him. Osterbridge pressed his forehead to the floor, continuing to pray.

The mon turned, touching the Patriarch on his shoulder. "Be at peace, justice will be done." Then he went to Osterbridge and touched his shoulder. "Stand. You will have vengeance for your friends."

Osterbridge obeyed, rising to his feet with tears running freely down his face.

The mon moved next to the nearest knight, placing his hand on the young mon's chest over his heart. Jimi heard his name called and looked up. The mon's eyes were the dancing colors of that core of light, without whites, iris, or pupil. Power surged. The place where his hand touched Jimi burned painfully, but Jimi bore it in silence. When the mon removed his hand the pain ended. He moved on, going to Jysy next.

"Are you certain, Jysy," the mon asked. "Although I affirmed Talons at fourteen, I did not mark her until she was nineteen. You will be the youngest I have ever marked."

Jysy straightened still more, throwing her shoulders back. She would not be fourteen until mid winter. "Yes. I am ready."

The mon pressed his hand between her breasts over her heart and she bore it stoically. When the mon had moved on, Jysy glanced at Jimi before looking down at herself.

Jimi looked at his chest and saw that the tendriled rune of Hadjys had been burned into his flesh over his heart, and realized that this was not a mon at all, but a manifestation of the god himself. A reverent glow spread through him and a feeling of being uplifted, a strengthening of purpose and commitment to a just cause. His heart sang with exultation.

Isen came next and Hadjys paused before her. "And so a sinjin has come to me at last. You must reveal yourself to your father eventually, child. Unlock the doors your mother closed so that he knows who he is and what he is."

"When the time is right, Holy One."

Then he marked her.

And so it was for each of the knights.

When Hadjys finished, he returned to Jimi. "One of your number is not here."

"Sirikit, lord," Jimi told him.

"Sirikit is dead. Vengeance is mine and you will claim it for me from those who murdered her."

"Yes, lord," Jimi said, tears starting in his eyes. The knights had suffered their first loss. Hadjys departed. Their exultation was swept away in sorrow. In silence, their eyes asked each other, "How?"

Jimi pulled his shirt on and took up his weapons. The others followed his example. Osterbridge came to stand at Jimi's shoulder.

"Jimi," Alora said. "Sirikit was watching Talons. We should get over there."

The words struck Jimi like a blow and all he could think was that Sirikit must have fallen in defense of Talons.

"Listen up!" Jimi pitched his voice to carry and the knights fell silent to listen. "Sirikit was guarding Talons. Osterbridge, Tulik, Alora, Jysy, come with me. The rest of you get some dinner and some sleep. We're going vampire hunting in the Poor Quarter tomorrow."

"But Sirikit!" One of the youths protested. Some of them clearly looked for vengeance and others for solace.

"Pay back is tomorrow," Jimi told them. "Get ready for it. Think like Guild."

As the four knights and the Patriarch left the temple, a messenger accosted them halfway across the quad. "Patriarch, you are called to the heir's rooms. The vampires got her. She is alive, but badly injured. The healer wants you to Read her immediately."

"We will go there directly," the Patriarch told him, turning to Jimi. "You did well back there."

Osterbridge put his hand on the youth's shoulder. "You were born to command. Lead and I follow. The knights are yours. I am not in this to take them away from you."

Jimi felt both startled and encouraged to hear that from a Guildsmon. "I thank you all, now let us get to it."

When they arrived at Talons' rooms, they found that Dynarien had managed to exclude the treacherous Solance; so it was the trusted Sha who greeted the Patriarch, ushering him into the bedroom. "I did not want to clean her up until you could verify my suspicions." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I think the vampires had to have had a human accomplice. These rooms are too heavily warded for this to have taken place here. They could not have done this in the hallways because they would have been seen. I think they took her to another room."

"Where are you going with this?" Patriarch Eshraf interrupted. "What do you need me for?"

The healer sighed heavily. "I think the undead raped her. I want a second opinion. I also know that with undead it becomes steadily more difficult to make genetic identifications, but I want you to try. The more recently undead they are, the easier it is. I want to compare it to the one I think got Arruth."

"You still believe that one of the girl's rapists were undead?"

"I'm positive."

"If we take him alive, I'll hand Arruth the mace myself, Sha, and I am not a violent man."

* * * *

The palace was in an uproar; the nobles near panic, screaming for an end to the outrageous depredations – depredations that they had chosen to dismiss as empty rumor when it came from the Poor Quarter. The vampire or vampires who stalked the city streets had broken into the heir's rooms and not only fed on her, but beaten her severely. Takhalme ordered a guard posted in the corridor at Talons' door. Everyone who could now traveled with a bodyguard or armed servants in attendance. All myn who lived in the city and came to work in the compound were taken aside and interrogated as potential vampires. More and more the palace compound became an island.

* * * *

Solance checked the tempered glass container on the little burner and adjusted the heat beneath it to make it simmer. All over the tables in his bio-chemist laboratory concoctions steamed and boiled, making little roiling noises, hissing sounds of vapors rising through coiled tubes and then dripping into other containers as they cooled at the far end and congealed again into solids. He sniffed at some of them, checked the color on others, and added more ingredients to a few of them before returning to his desk, satisfied. He sat down and scooted the chair closer before

taking up his pen and beginning to make more notations in his stack of ledgers. He pulled a book from the tall, multi-colored stack, wrote for a time, and replaced it before taking another. The stack started to topple and he grabbed them, wrapping his arms hurriedly around them and breathed a sigh of relief when none of them ended up on the floor. He released them when he was certain they were not going to fall and began to write again. The end of the black scarf, tied tight around his neck, caught the drawer on his desk. Solance jerked at it, realized it would not easily come free and opened the drawer to get it loose.

Scarves had become very important to him. He owned several now and only took them off to bathe and then hurriedly tie them back. Solance even slept in them. The evening that he awakened in the swan room after Belyla bit him, Solance's fear of the creatures had grown immeasurably. He considered it natural to fear Galee and Lord Wrathscar, but Belyla had been so much nothing. Belyla was timid, easily overwhelmed by his manner, controllable – and yet she had bitten him, sucked the living blood from his veins. While Solance would never admit it, he knew his confidence had been shattered by the experience. *The least of the least and she bit me ... the very last one I ever expected.* Solance straightened the scarf carefully, precisely, nervously feeling along his neck to make certain the scar was covered while trying not to touch it. It sickened him to even think about its existence on his neck. At least Belyla could not get at him again. The Master of Blood had her firmly secured in the nethermost reaches of the caverns beneath the sewers.

"You're working late, Solance," said a soft feminine voice.

Solance flinched with a jump motion that sent his arm flailing out to connect with the stack of books. The books toppled with a crash. He pushed his chair back to stare at Elomina, the Wrathscar daughter just younger than Philomea. "I dropped the bar! How did you...?"

"You left the windows open." Elomina kicked the scattered journals from her path, staring at her feet with her head tilted like a child's. Her yellow hair hung past her waist and she wore a filmy silk sleeping dress. "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd visit."

Solance sucked air through his wide-open mouth, watching her. His chest tightened around his racing heart, sending an aching pain through him and then along his arm. He rose from the desk, backing away from her. His hand went to the scarf, fingering his neck. "Go away, Elomina. I'm forbidden meat."

"Are you?" She made a purring noise, deep in her throat. "Galee has three more bio-chemists in Havensword now and there's the Master of Blood. But you knew that. It was one of Zarliche's drugs you gave Yahni the day that Belyla bit you. That's why she bit you."

"Please, Elomina. Go away." Solance put his back to the only bit of open wall and

edged toward the door. Sweat broke out from every pore, soaking his robes, chilling swiftly in the night air.

"Is that scarf where she bit you?" Elomina's voice had a child-like quality as if she were asking about a skinned knee or a puppy.

Solance did not answer.

Elomina's nostrils flared, sniffing at the changing odors on the mon, and then she raised her face to show him how long and fine her fangs were. "I'm the only one of us who hasn't fully tested her new gifts. Although I did help Philomea kill Jajinga. I'm the one shoved his own blade through his chest."

Solance's hand dropped to the knob.

"If you run away, I'll kill you."

Solance stopped. His heart began to hammer erratically as Elomina closed the distance between them. Fear built to an unbearable level. He threw the door open and ran out into the hallway. There were three rooms on this floor and four on the bottom. It was a generous spire assigned to him through Wrathscar's influence. Solance fled to the stairs and ran, nearly tripping in his haste, to the lower floor. His chest hurt and his stomach soured. He glanced around the living room, trying to think, and finding his mind paralyzed with terror. The thoughts simply wouldn't come. Finally he headed for the main door to the twisting stair from the spire. He lifted the bar and then a heavy weight landed on his back, taking him to the floor.

Elomina flipped him over casually and sat on his chest, her knees on his arms and her hands tangled in his hair. "You cheated. You ran." She tore the scarf from his neck and stuffed it in his mouth. Solance whimpered. Elomina twisted his head to get the best angle and sank her fangs a little higher than Belyla's marks.

* * * *

Cass made up the beds, swept, and dusted. She finished by opening the window to let in fresh air. The aristocracy were arriving early with an eye toward the heir's wedding and whatever political leverage they could gain by being there. Every single suite of rooms would soon be occupied. Then she gathered her tools, put them on her cart, and started for the door. She enjoyed working in the west wing because it got the afternoon sun, which made her feel good. The lords and ladies who lived there half the year when they came to court were always nice to her. They talked to her like she was a real mon, not just a servant. A shadow passed over her and she yelped. "Oh, my lady, you startled me."

"I'm sorry, Cass," Galee said. "I didn't mean to. In fact, I was looking for you."

"I did the rooms all right, didn't I?" Cass swallowed hard. Galee was the only

resident of the west wing that made her nervous, and she could not understand why. Galee had never been anything but kind and generous to her.

"You clean Talons' rooms, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, poor thing. She's having such a hard time of it. Me, I got five kids and never a sick day with any of them."

"You know why she's having such a hard time?" Galee tilted Cass' face up with a finger under her chin. Their eyes met.

Cass shivered, but could not look away. "No."

"It's because they're not giving her the medicine. You want her to get better, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, lady, very much so." Cass wondered how she could have misjudged Galee – how she could ever have felt uncomfortable around such a lovely, wonderful mon.

"Will you give her the medicine?"

"Yes." Galee was the sweetest, nicest mon. So concerned about everyone. Cass would do anything to make her happy.

"Promise me you won't let anyone catch you doing it. Just slip it into some wine and see that she drinks it before you leave."

"I will. I promise."

Galee pressed the vial into Cass' hands. "Each day, when you clean my rooms, I'll give you another vial of it. It'll be our secret. You are a very good mon, Cass."

* * * *

Galee smiled thinly as Cass left to clean the next room. Everyone trusted Cass. Nearly everyone, including both Talons and Edouina, adored the woman. This would go well. The damage to Talons' was nearly complete and irreversible. Soon it would not matter whether they caught Cass or not.

And those letters, those wonderfully indiscreet letters to Lord Westli, Lord Commander of the City Guard, Patriarch Eshraf, and old Queiggy and his assistants of the Guild, ordering them to disregard all requests for assistance originating from the heir and her companions; suggesting all such requests originated from an unfortunate and very permanent side effect of having the bi-kyndi bound: the heir's growing madness. Solance had served that well with those tales concerning unnatural Sharani sexual practices, those claims of a drug no one could find in her system, and

other peculiar things. Many people had seen the way she held conversations with those cats as if they were people. Takhalme had written and signed the letters while begging her to bite him. A mage Reader would authenticate them. There would be no help for Talons or any of them – unless it came from the temple. Eshraf infuriated her, defying them all to aid the heir. Maybe she should kill a few priests. After all it would eventually reach Creeya that she was killing lots of priests along the east coast and many, many Guildsmyn; some were bound to escape and word would reach Creeya. She needed to kill them faster. They would not connect it to her, of course, any more than they would connect her to Cass.

* * * *

The hunt began at dawn. Seventeen of the knights accompanied Osterbridge, Brundarad, and Hanadi to the church. They all wore leather over chain mail to give the catkin, riding on their shoulders, more purchase. Lo'Ah had sent nearly his whole force with them. Twizzle rode on Osterbridge's shoulder, clinging to the leather straps of his Guild harness of weapons and a bandoleer of soft pouches. He stroked the little catkin – he knew what they were now. Eshraf's resources amazed him. Osterbridge wished he had known about all of this in time to save his friends. It made him sad. A chill anger overrode that sorrow, for he was determined to make the monsters pay.

Father Karakin waited for them before his temple. The small grounds were well cared for, walled in by thick, twelve-foot, old growth hedgerows. Twenty of his parishioners waited around him, armed with sticks and staves, carrying sacks of stakes to be driven through the vampires' hearts; and a crowd had gathered outside the hedgerows. The good priest had meant to keep this matter quiet, but word had leaked out despite his best efforts. Rage simmered beneath the stillness of the waiting crowds. Karakin had demanded the quiet. He did not want this to boil out of control, but too many had vanished loved ones.

The crowd opened a corridor for the knights to pass through and they noted Osterbridge's uniform with soft remarks that the Guild had come to their aid after all. The shadow hounds drew notice also and everyone wondered whom they belonged to.

"Father Karakin," Jimi said, nodding to him as he halted in front of the temple. "I want three groups, each goes to a different one of the houses of your lost people. If we cannot track from there, we'll regroup at the temple and take it street by street."

"Tell off your units, young sir." Karakin added, "And then I'll match them up with mine."

Jimi immediately signaled his companions. He took one unit; Alora and Osterbridge took the others. Then Karakin paired them with his parishioners.

* * * *

Osterbridge went to the house where the young mon with the two children had lived. It was a dingy brick structure, narrow and pressed wall to wall with houses to either side. The door was locked. Twizzle crept across his shoulders, recognizing what Osterbridge's intentions were going to be, and wanting a better perch. Osterbridge stepped back, and kicked the door solidly by the keyhole, splintering wood and causing the aging lock to pop.

"Twizzle, do your duty."

<I always know my duty. I'm a bachelor male. Maybe this time I'll get some status and attract some mates. >

Osterbridge smiled at the voice in his head, but his eyes were grim. "Go to it."

Twizzle jumped down and went sniffing into the house followed by Osterbridge and six knights, then the armed parishioners. A crowd waited outside. The inside of the home, although covered in dust, was neat and tidy. A glassed in cabinet suggested that this quarter had not always been poor. Mismatched plates, cups, and saucers filled it to capacity. Osterbridge walked on. He found himself thinking of Yahni. He had loved that mon; no one could have asked for a better brother, a closer friend.

The children's room opened to his left along a short hallway and their mother's to his right. He considered a moment and walked into the children's room. The mantel above the fireplace had small, carved wooden figures on it, the paint chipped with age, but two of them had clearly been painted in Guild colors. A family had lived here. Osterbridge could feel the lingering ghosts of their hopes and dreams rising up at him. A battered toy chest sat beneath the window. On impulse he opened it and nearly screamed. Inside lay a child, curled on its side, unbreathing, still. No. Not a child, a thing. Blood rimmed its lips and gilded the exposed fangs. A lesser blood. An Ylesgaire. Not like the things that killed his friends. No. Those had been royals, but this one was close enough. He settled his pack, took out the hammer and a stake. Osterbridge positioned the sharp spike of wood. "For Yahni!" He shouted and with one sure, powerful strike drove it through the sleeping creature's heart. Ichorous blood fountained around the stake and belched from the dead thing's mouth, splattering the Guildsmon. Osterbridge ignored it.

He rose, glancing around the room and called out to his companions. "I've killed one. There were two children here. Where's the other?"

"In the chimney," one of the knights shouted back. "Yimmer found him. I killed it." The young mon's voice sounded faintly ill.

"Good mon!" He met her as he left the room, recognizing her by the blood. Osterbridge clapped her shoulder. "Good work, Guildsmon."

She straightened at that, flicking a blood-dampened string of black hair back, and

holding his gaze for a moment with a pair of slanted East Creeyan eyes that reminded Osterbridge poignantly of Terrys. He shook it off.

"Thank you, sir," she replied. "I'm Twynin Twillys."

Osterbridge gave her a nod and went on.

<I've found the mother, > Twizzle sent. <Come to the bedroom. >

Osterbridge shoved through the knights who were crowding the hall and went into the mother's room. Twizzle crouched before a deep wardrobe, his tail lashing back and forth. Osterbridge opened it. The mother slept, half-hidden by clothing. She had been pretty in the worn way that sustained poverty tended to lend people. He drove a stake through her heart and then lifted the dead thing. He carried her out and threw her corpse on the pavement. "The bodies must be burned. The children were turned also. They've been staked."

A murmur of rage began as people ran to fetch faggots of wood.

<I've found another trail. Fresh. Very fresh. Lesser blood . > Twizzle sat in the street three houses down. Osterbridge wondered briefly how the little cat could move so fast.

"I'm coming, Twizzle. Guildsmyn, this way!"

Twizzle skidded to a halt, back arched and hissing. *<Jimi's found them! Two warehouses! They're going inside ! >*

Osterbridge felt a rush of alarm. "Tell them to get out! Tell them to wait in the sunlight for me! Damn it!" Osterbridge cursed and began to run as Twizzle bolted down the street.

* * * *

Jysy kept close to Jimi as they walked. They had found nothing in the house where two young brothers and an older sister had lived. The catkin riding Jimi's shoulder was a ginger and black female called Whiskey Lips because she liked a nip now and then, and was known to creep onto tables to sneak sips from people's glasses. Hanadi had immediately picked up a trail from the house. It seemed that the lesser bloods sometimes liked to return to the places they had inhabited while living.

"You stay behind me, Jysy," Jimi told her.

"Like hell," Jysy replied in a very cool voice. "I've fought monsters and you haven't."

"I'd call the ramtras of the plains monsters and I've killed three." The ramtras were

eight-foot tall, flightless predatory birds.

"Hunting in a group doesn't count. Arruth and I dropped a noose around a stone troll's neck and jerked it off the floor."

"A stone troll?" Jimi asked, skeptically.

"Yup. Course, it knocked us silly afterwards. But it counts."

Jimi gave her a look of pure admiration that made Jysy feel warm all over, inside and out.

<Jimi , > Whiskey Lips sent. <*Hanadi has found them. You're not going to like it. There's an abandoned warehouse full of them on the west side. Hanadi says old cloth warehouses.* >

Jimi sucked in a sharp breath and Jysy saw him tense for a moment. He raised his hand, signaling a halt. Then he turned to face his unit, the parishioners, Father Karakin, and the trailing crowd. "Listen to me! Listen up, everyone."

The crowd quieted.

"What is it?" Jysy asked.

Jimi shook his head at her. "Our dog has found a warehouse with several dozen of them. Maybe more than that. The bodies will have to be burned once we stake them. So I want some of you vigilantes in the rear to fetch faggots and oil and fire. Lots of it. Meet us on the west end at the old cloth warehouses."

People started running back the way they had come, neighbors forming into packs in search of what Jimi required. They seemed to have decided that he was Guild and therefore in charge and to be listened to. Jimi signed his unit to follow and broke into a strong jog. He wondered how the other units were faring.

The warehouses flanked a stream that ran down from the mountain and passed under the walls of Havensword. A small bridge crossed the streams between two warehouses. The lower half of the two on Jimi's side were stone halfway up with an outer door that led into basements reached by a short set of steps beside another set that led into the main floor of the buildings. Barrels were stacked along the walls to either side with a coating of dirt suggesting they might have been abandoned for a long time. Jimi banged on one of the huge things with his hands and drew his fingers through the dirt. The top sounded hollow. But acting on an instinct, he squatted and banged lower. The wood there made a softer sound as if there were something inside. He drew a belt knife and slipped it under the top, prying it open. The wood creaked as the nails came out. Jimi realized his pulse was racing as he peered over the edge. For an instant his shadow kept the sunlight from the contents. His stomach seized up when he saw the body, but only for an instant as the dead face's eyes

snapped open. Claws reached for him and Jimi's reflexes took over. He kicked the barrel as he snapped back in a solid strike that splintered the wood. The lesser blood screamed as sunlight covered it through the opened lid and the holes in the barrel. Jimi drew his sword, keeping away from it as the bright sun consumed it. The creature smoked and screamed, it seemed to take forever before it ended. He turned to find that Jysy and the four other knights who were with him were making similar discoveries. Karakin's people began to pull at the doors.

"No!" Jimi shouted. "Let us go in first. All of you check the rest of the barrels."

Hanadi came out of the shadows and backed the priest's people off with soft growls until the knights could get the doors open.

<I think we should consult Osterbridge, not simply go inside, > Hanadi cautioned Jimi.

"We'll be careful," Jimi replied, scratching between Hanadi's ears to reassure the hound. The intelligence of the two hounds impressed Jimi, but he was not yet certain whether to classify them as people the way he did the catkin.

"Jimi, could one of these things have gotten hold of Arruth? Could that be why she's gotten so crazy?" Jysy asked.

"I don't know. I doubt she'll let anyone close enough to find out."

"And she isn't talking."

The interior was dark and thickly coated with dust. The windows had been painted over so that no light could get in. Jimi's eyes had trouble adjusting to the lack of light. Then Jysy knelt, dragged a faggot of wood with an oil soaked cloth on the end from her pack, and struck a lucifer to light the cloth. The flame licked up, throwing a dancing illumination across stacks of long crates. Whiskey Lips crouched beside her, growling softly, and Hanadi joined them.

"How many can there be?" Jimi hissed. He shoved the top of the first crate off, surprised to discover it was not fastened down, and a ghastly face looked vacantly up at him still in the throes of the deep slumber of the lesser bloods. He pulled a stake from his belt and hammered it through. Blood splattered him and his stomach roiled.

<Osterbridge says to get out and wait for him . > Hanadi sent.

By then more people had followed them inside and covers were coming off the crates. Most of the undead were dying without a sound, but now and then a scream would be heard from the filthy corpses.

<Those are the older ones. There may be some who can wake . > Hanadi's voice

became more insistent. *<Osterbridge is right. Get out . >*

Jimi began to open another crate. He had to get one more. The lid suddenly slammed in his face and he staggered back. The lesser blood was old and strong. It spun him around by one arm and twisted his head back by the hair as he went to his knees. Jimi pulled the long knife at his hip with his free hand, stabbing backwards. He felt it go home, but failed to free him since he could not pick his target. Only a heart strike or a broken neck would stop the thing. Abruptly it let him go, the body falling against him. Jimi pushed free and stood up to see Jysy withdrawing her blade from the dead thing's back. More loud screams were heard throughout the building and Jimi realized he had made a mistake.

"Out! Out! Everyone out!"

Whiskey Lips jumped onto Jimi's shoulders. The crates still blocked his view of the other two knights and those parishioners who had entered behind him. A few of Karakin's people who had followed with Jimi and Jysy were already going down beneath their attackers even as they turned to retreat.

"The windows, Jimi," Jysy said, her voice desperate. "Break the windows."

Jimi glanced up, wanting the biggest window possible as Hanadi and Jysy tried to keep the undead from him. He unlimbered a bolas and sighted a skylight. He was not certain that he could put it that far and with enough force to carry the weights through it. Then he decided. The bolas whirled three times and then went up. Glass shattered and he covered his face with his arm, ducking his head. Light filled the warehouse. The undead caught in the rays of glorious gold fell to the ground, their bodies smoking. Those not slain retreated into shadows. The knights and the parishioners fled from the building.

He looked about him. Several of Karakin's people were bleeding and sat with their frightened, angry eyes fixed upon the warehouse. One of the knights was missing. "Menalaiyes?"

"Still inside. They got him, Jimi," said a student, her eyes betraying utter horror.

"I'm going back," Jimi said. "Break all the windows."

Jysy picked up a rock from the street and threw it through a window. Soon everyone was breaking windows. They could hear the undead inside screaming. The light would force them back into their crates.

Jimi started into the building when a tall mon hailed him from the street and he came out. Osterbridge looked the battered vampire hunters over and scowled. "I told you to wait."

"I should have listened... We didn't all get out. Menalaiyes is still in there."

"Then I'll get him, and bring this thing down."

* * * *

"The manifestation called you a sinjin," Alora said as they neared the warehouses, moving close to her so that their words would not be overheard.

Isen nodded. "You know what that is?"

"I'm probably one of the few. Queiggy told me the story when I was little."

Isen considered that. "He knows many things."

"Then you are a descendant of Grand Master Chamche and Alysijnin?"

Isen stared at her. "Do you know what that makes me?"

"The branch clan."

Isen looked uneasy at that. "You must not tell anyone. Only the Patriarch knows."

"I swear that I will not. Yet, now I am worried that I should never have allowed you to come with us."

"It is fit that I fight."

"And your father is a prince?"

"Yes. Now let us speak no more of it." What Isen did not add was that her father was the last prince of the blood. The rest had been slain thirty years ago.

Brundarad emerged from the shadows of the tall building. *<You are ordered to wait. No one is to go inside until Osterbridge and Jimi arrive. There has been a death among you. >*

"Then we will wait," Alora responded grimly, her face hardening into a mask as she wondered which of her friends had died.

"I'm going to the other warehouses where Osterbridge is," Isen said, and took off running before Alora could stop her.

* * * *

Osterbridge kept to the sunlit portions of the warehouse, walking down a long aisle of crates, looking for the lost student. He turned a corner and saw the young man lying twisted, half in shadow and half out. A lesser blood had hold of one leg, sucking from there. Osterbridge came quietly up and brought his sword down hard

across the back of the vampire's neck before the lesser blood realized he was there. Only then did he squat and wipe his sword before sheathing it. He turned the student over. The youth was dead. The knights had suffered their second loss.

He rose with the youth's body draped across his shoulders, and carried him out. "I'm sorry, Jimi."

Jimi's eyes dropped. "I should have listened. I should have waited."

Osterbridge laid the dead student on the ground. His voice turned harsh, harsher than it had ever been before in his life as he said, "Yes. You should have." Then he pitched his voice, "From now on, everyone listens to me!"

Hanadi came to his side and stood growling at the rest.

"Alora's gone to the second warehouse," Jysy said.

"Same orders, Twizzle. Tell them not to go in. Tell them we already have a dead knight. Tell them I'll have them up on charges if they go in."

Then he turned and re-entered the warehouse. With this many undead, he would have to take some chances. The sunlight gave him a path. Vampires sat up in their crates and howled at him from those patches that had not come under the light. Osterbridge came to a spot where six feet of darkness separated him from the stairs to the basement. He needed to reach those stairs to start this. The creatures crept closer, observing the length of steel in his hands. Osterbridge opened one of his pouches and took a bottle out. It contained two chemicals separated by a fragile blown glass wall in the middle. He grinned at the feel of the glass in his hands. If they took him down, he would be taking them with him. Osterbridge had several more of them – Iradrim Fire. He dashed through the dark patch to the stair and hurled it into the stairwell. Instantly he threw himself rolling across the dark space. The basement exploded, tossing up chunks of flooring and belching flames. Osterbridge staggered to his feet, stumbling toward the exit. More and more flames came up. The vampires were shrieking. He had been right to assume there would be more in the basement. Claws caught his leg as he stepped into a pool of shadow. He drew his knife and plunged the runed blade through the thing's heart, stopping it with a twist. His leg hurt with each step and he was half-stumbling by the time he reached the door. Then he turned and pulled a second bottle from its padded wooden case in his bandoleer. The bottle flew high into the middle of the warehouse, turning end over end, the sunlight shimmering on the glass.

"Everyone down!" Osterbridge shouted and flung himself clear as the ground floor went up in flames.

"You're bleeding," a gentle voice said and soft hands pressed a folded cloth to his leg wound.

He looked into Isen's strange eyes that made him think of swans in flight as he sat up. "It's nothing. Forget it."

She ignored his comment, dipping another cloth into a bucket of water someone had brought and washed the blood from his face. He had not even noticed the shards and splinters that had torn through his clothing, cutting his body and face. Osterbridge did not know how young she was, but he felt certain that she was far too young for what he was feeling right then as she touched him.

"Aren't you supposed to be with Alora's group?"

"Yes. She sent me to bring you to the other warehouse."

"Then let's go." Osterbridge stood up. The leg responded to his weight with a sharp pain, but he was determined that no one would go in without him at their head.

One of Karakin's people came forward. "We will carry your lost one to the temple."

"You have my thanks." Osterbridge started walking. He had never expected to find himself in a leadership position with anyone. That was for people like Yahni and Jajinga. They would have helped these young people and these hapless folk they were trying to protect. But they were gone, and with the Guild pulling itself back because of the suspected betrayal at the top, there was only him. So he would try to make their spirits proud of him.

Isen kept pace with Osterbridge, striding along right beside him.

Osterbridge looked down at her as they walked, thinking she was about the prettiest little lady he had ever seen. "How old are you?"

Isen grinned, running her tongue over her lips. "Sixteen, going on seventeen."

Knowing she was of age, emboldened Osterbridge. "Would you like to have dinner and a drink with me at the Music Chamber when we're done with this?"

"Yes."

Dear Mother,

I think a silent mutiny has begun. None of the Guildsmyn were sent to investigate a rumor of vampires in the Poor Quarter. Instead the knights went. That's the students I told you about. A single Guildsmon led us. Two shadows hounds and several catkins went with us. We destroyed two warehouses filled with undead. It was both frightening and exciting.

Thank you for the coming of age presents. I especially like the blades you sent me. They will see a lot of work I think.

That Guildsmon, his name is Ceejorn Osterbridge. He's very handsome and valiant. He's been taking me to dinner and dances and other places. I think I'm in love with him.

Your daughter,

Isen

My Dearest Daughter,

I trust you to be more wise in love than I was. Choose a worthy mon, not a rich one. Do not allow your head to be turned, as mine was, to my shame, by baubles and witticisms. Judge a mon by his deeds, not his words. Had I chosen wisely, I would be with you and your father in Havensword, not in the wilderness with my regrets.

Your Mother,

Alysyn St. Jon Dulac

CHAPTER TWELVE

ACCUSED

Mohanja had gone to the Temple immediately upon learning about the discovery of the lesser bloods in the warehouses near the Poor Quarter, hoping that they had found something to link it to Yahni's death. What bothered him was that it had been on the west side, as opposed to the east side of the city where Derryl found Maya's brother. It also made an ache in his chest that here, in the most sacred heart of their faith, it had been students, citizens, and a handful of aging priests, guided by some oddly trained cats and a pair of large dogs who had gone up against warehouses full of undead. It should have been the Guild and the guard. He placed his foot upon the first step of the palace entrance when he remembered standing on the Tower of the Winds, shouting Hanadi's name and hearing the hounds howling back. Had he imagined it all? Had he imagined that single moment of hope? Could those dogs have been shadow hounds? Certainly some of the descriptions matched, but some of the descriptions – which were garbled in the way the unschooled eye, coming from many accounts, tended to become – did not. Eshraf sent them out, therefore Eshraf would know. Therefore, he would confront Eshraf and the sooner the better. If only Mohanja had not allowed himself to become the voice of Takhalme, parroting the Grand Master's words back at people as if he had believed them in those first days. That was what had cost him his people's trust. No matter how hard he worked to

win them back, to protect them, they refused to trust him. Mohanja started back to the temple. He had to convince Eshraf to tell him if the dogs were hounds.

The midnight hour had passed, and Mohanja knew he would be dragging the Patriarch from his bed, but a desperate urgency was upon the mon, and he could no more stop himself than take wings and fly. He heard footsteps in the regular patterns that suggested the usual movements of late night guards making their rounds. He started to ignore it and, as result, had only a heartbeat to react, when he realized they were rushing at him.

A tremulous light from some of the upper floors of the temple, scholars and priests working in the late hours, threw weak patches across the ground, strengthened here and there by the lamps along the walks. Most of the green lay in shadow, pools of dark beneath the trees and the sculptured bushes, the benches and tables. Six ran toward him down the path, wearing guardsmyn uniforms, their swords ready. What the hell did this mean? Treachery?

Well they would find him harder meat to chew than they had poor Yahni. They had fed on the young Guildsmon for weeks. Mohanja's lips curled so far back from his teeth that his gums showed, and he laughed at them. He whirled his heavy steel pike as if it were a lighter mon's stick, and then the nearest of the charging guardsmyn said something that so startled him he almost missed his strike.

"Our god demands your death, Guildsmon."

A cold chill raced over the big mon's body an instant before the axe head at the tip of the pike caught the guardsmon in the midsection, splitting his chain, spilling his entrails over the weapon, and carrying him into his fellows. Mohanja jerked back, freeing his weapon with several heavy shakes, retreating in careful, half-crouching steps toward the temple, seeing now the eyes among the trees reflected in the lamplight, dozens of them. Lesser bloods screamed their hunger. If he turned his back to them they would pull him down before he could reach the doors.

"Get him! Kill him. That's good, strong blood. You're hungry, aren't you?" shouted a voice from the trees.

Even through muffling cloth, the voice sounded familiar, a mon's voice, yet Mohanja could not be certain.

"The Master of Blood is here!" shouted one of the guardsmyn.

"He ordered the hunt. Don't you wish vengeance?" The Master of Blood demanded.

Hah! Had I ordered the hunt, we'd have found all your foul nests, Mohanja thought as he retreated three more long backwards strides while the voice whipped them up and then they came at him. The niceties of combat learned in youth generally disappeared in the hard scrabble of melee. The horde of lesser bloods

came at him in a rush while the five surviving guardsmyn held back as if they feared the creatures might find them food as well. Initially Mohanja counted for a dozen, striking with the spinning pike like a staff; yet while he struck to one side, the creatures would fasten with teeth and claws to his arms and legs from the other side. They sucked down his blood in greedy pulls. Mohanja screamed, whirling and throwing himself against the temple, breaking the creatures' necks, killing them with the impact. Lights were suddenly being lit throughout the building. The treacherous guardsmyn fled. The master of the lesser bloods called off his creatures as the temple doors opened and a troop of armed priests emerged led by a bishop who swiftly established a magically warded perimeter, while two priests began to examine Mohanja.

The Master of Blood cursed. Galee would be unhappy. Doubly unhappy. First that they had failed to kill Mohanja, who was becoming a thorn in her side, and secondly because Eshraf was obviously preparing for war – why else have a temple battle unit prepared and on call?

* * * *

Shaheeramaat had Mohanja propped up in the middle of his bed, and the normally calm, serenely controlled mon was aggravated and excited, angry energy flowing in all directions as the healer and three of his most trusted Guild comrades tried to get him cleaned up. A long tear in his right thigh ran nearly to his knee. The healer had had a devil's own time of it stitching the damned thing closed. He'd been bitten twenty times, though most had not gotten so much as a taste before perishing – else he'd be dead. Shaheeramaat had given him a crutch, telling him to keep his weight off that leg lest he cripple himself or reopen it, which would prove just as bad. The crutch made him feel a cripple already, which angered and irked him.

He feared to leave the Master to Galee's clutches, although he dared not yet say as much directly – imply and dance around the edges – so he begged Queiggy, by way of a message sent through Eshraf, to have someone stand in his place with the Master until he could go himself. Queiggy had sent Yukiah.

Who do I protect? Mohanja wondered.

"You will stay off that leg, Lord Mohanja?" Shaheeramaat asked one last time, dropping the last of the bloody rags into the basin. Last night had been make-do; today had been finished work.

"Lord?" Mohanja tried to frame a small teasing with his voice at her formality, but only ice remained in her expression and he let it go. "I promise nothing."

There came a knock, followed by Yukiah entering.

"Where is the Master? Why aren't you with him?" Mohanja demanded.

"He's coming here. Lord Channadar's bringing him in a little sedan chair. He became concerned when I showed up in your place and learned you were hurt."

Mohanja smiled, that small, small, private smile. That sounded like his old master, the one who had brought him into the Guild and raised him like a son. "How long will it take them to arrive?"

"They traverse the palace slowly. Everyone wishes to touch him, to talk to him. It has been months since anyone has seen him. He's ill."

"I know it."

Yukiah scowled. "Why haven't you spoken?"

"It is my duty to protect him, not to gossip about him."

"But all these rumors—"

"Did not come from me. I want people assigned to me. At least five."

"You have the guard," Yukiah said coldly.

"I don't want the fucking guard. I don't want the servants. I want Guild or priests or Guild students if you can verify them. But no more guards or servants in my apartments. None."

"Mohanja—"

"Do I have to command it and force this subtle mutiny of yours into the open? I'm allowing the game. I'm ignoring it for the time being. I also know you have at least one yuwenghau, possibly two. I want my chambers warded and myself. I don't want to end up doing the Passion-Dance like poor Yahní. And, if I were you, I would check all Guildsmyn in the wing for signs of it."

Silence settled.

Yukiah motioned for Shaheeramaat to close the intervening door. "What happened last night that you haven't told the others?"

"Six guardsmyn led the attack. I killed one. The one who said 'my god demands your death, Guildsmon.' Him I slew. Then one I did not see, whom they called the Master of Blood, sent his creatures in after me and the guardsmyn fell back as if afraid of these things."

"I'll stay here in your apartments until Yukiah can speak with Queiggy, but I believe when he hears this that you will have your myn," Sha said.

Yukiah nodded agreement and then they stepped out of the bedroom for a private word away from the mon who should have been giving them their orders.

Mohanja found himself speaking aloud into the silence as if to his god and his words ran swifter and swifter, taking on the clicking notes of his mother's people, the Guild side of his family. "It is a dangerous game I play and all because the Grand Master supports no one. What if Hanadi does not return next spring from her wanderyear? What if she already lies dead? Then how I have voted her proxy could come under question when a successor is named and I have only a single vote on that. I could be called traitor for my votes and executed. There would be no problem if the Grand Master would exercise his rank and responsibilities. But he barely functions and when he does, he drifts toward Galee, away from the principles of the Guild, as if she controlled his mind. Now I dance upon the edge of a knife and evil creatures attack me in the dark."

He fell silent then, thinking furiously. *If I protect him by concealing how badly he fails, physically, mentally, emotionally, then I betray the Guild and the heir. Where should my loyalties lie? Mohanja, you are in over your head, man, and nothing is simple any longer. If loyalty and honor begins with my god, then it is with my god that I must begin.*

Mohanja tried to push off from the bed only to feel first pain and then the tautness in the many stitches throughout his body, forcing him to think again about kneeling. "Forgive me, my lord and liege-god, grant me a dispensation to begin my prayers lying down as I fear I shall only make matters worse if I try to kneel."

A wave of warmth swept over him and Mohanja took that as a yes, beginning a formal prayer, rather than his initial rush of words.

* * * *

Bryndel sat for a long time outside his bathing room while servants filled his tub with hot water. He felt everything with an acute sensitivity, the softness of the chair against his arms and bare back, the cool breeze blowing in through the open windows. There was an unusual clarity to his musings despite the alcohol in his system and the dark hallways he walked in his memories. He was working his way to a decision with an unsheathed blade between his leg and the turn of the chair arm, and an open bottle of dragonsbreath, a dwarven whiskey more famed for its raw potency than its taste, lodged in the curve of his groin.

He would pray for a while, take another swallow from the bottle, and shove it back between his legs. He thought about his mother, who for all her faith in her god, had still been beaten to death by his father while he watched. He took another pull from the bottle, and thought about Yahn and Belya. Finally he thought about Talons. Shame, guilt, and an abiding sense of worthlessness overwhelmed him. He had failed them all. Perhaps if he had been stronger. If his faith in his god had been stronger ...

the gods acted through their believers, their paladins and priests, those whose faith and strength were enough to make them true vessels of the divine ... channels of power.

The servants interrupted Bryndel's musings, gathering in front of him. Their spokesman said, "Your bath is ready."

"Good. Now get out of here. I don't wish to be disturbed."

He watched them go. Then he picked up the bottle, took the blade from its hiding place, and walked into the bathing room. He set the bottle and the blade on the stand by the porcelain tub and took his pants off, dropping them on the floor. As an afterthought he closed the door and locked it. The room was pleasantly steamy. He slid into the soothing heat of the water.

"I am a coward. I have always been a coward. I am not going to be so any longer."

Bryndel moved the whiskey bottle and the dagger to the floor beside the bathtub. People said there was very little pain doing it this way. Bryndel never liked pain; he had never been good about taking his lumps on the practice field the way the rest did. If he had been a stronger man, none of this would be happening. Everyone would be better off without him. He was expendable. This was the right thing to do – maybe the first right thing he had ever done in his entire life. Galee would not be able to use him to hurt Talons or anyone else anymore. Having to stand and watch his father ride her had broken his heart. There could not be a wedding without a groom. They would have to leave Talons alone. He took another long pull from the bottle to bolster his courage, and used the dagger to open his wrists, dragging it halfway to his elbows. He watched his blood spread through water as he lowered his arms into the warmth, his mind feeling oddly detached and clear. Then he laid back and closed his eyes.

* * * *

Edouina built up a small fire in the little stove and put a pot of water on for tea. She was still rummaging in the cupboard for the canister of her favorite black tea when Alora rushed in, looking flushed and alarmed.

"Edouina! Bad news!" Alora gasped out, winded.

The tall Sharani Guildsman immediately closed the cabinet and turned to look at the youth. "The Grand Master?"

"No. Bryndel tried to kill himself. Lord Wrathscar is blaming it on you. He's saying you kept Bryndel from Talons' bed and he became distraught. He wants you banished from the palace and grounds entirely."

"So they can get at her more easily," Edouina said grimly. "I'm going to the

Patriarch, then I'm going to try and see Bryndel."

She strode past the soldiers at the door as if nothing were wrong, hoping they had not heard yet and clearly they had not since they made no moves to stop her, and walked quickly from the west wing. All the wings opened directly into the Great Central Hall, there were no secret ways that she knew of – though they were rumored to exist – so she went out into the forest of pillars rising in groin vaults and conchoidal arches, sidling along, trying to keep crowds of other folk between her and the searching soldiers, heading for the entrance to the Cloverleaf. A soldier spotted Edouina and shouted for her to halt. She did so and a group of them approached with loaded crossbows. They knew she was Guild and were taking no chances.

"Edouina Hornbow?"

"Yes." With every fiber of her being, she wanted to run. But if she did it would be taken as an admission of guilt and they would bring her down with something sharp and deadly in her back. They knew their business just as she knew hers.

"The Grand Master wants to see you," said their officer, a sergeant by his markings.

"Am I being arrested?"

"Not yet," the officer sneered. "But you will be. Everyone knows about your kind."

My kind. Edouina thought about all the hideous rumors that had been going around for months and her stomach tightened. Someone had set her up. She had a feeling it was either Wrathscar or Galee.

* * * *

Jimi found Dynarien and the Patriarch together in Dynarien's rooms in the temple dormitory. As a mage, Dynarien lived in a special section with a suite that included a parlor, a bedroom, and a workroom. They were modest, but comfortable quarters and Dynarien had decorated the rooms with many wondrous things from his magical cottage near Imralon.

The knight arrived breathing hard, clearly winded from running. His words came out in a gasping rush as he clutched a stitch in his side. "Holy Father, Dynarien, Bryndel tried to kill himself. Lord Wrathscar is blaming Edouina and the Grand Master has had her taken in hand."

Dynarien came close, his brow furrowing with concern and the fragrance of roses intensifying with his emotions. Jimi looked up at him as his words continued to rush out. "Holy Father, we're afraid they're going to order her killed as an aberration. The talk is getting ugly."

"No," Dynarien growled. "I won't allow it."

Eshraf motioned for Dynarien to be silent, taking control of the situation. "Slow down," the Patriarch told Jimi, gripping the youth's shoulders, his voice reassuringly stern and steady. "Take a deep breath."

Jimi did so.

"That's better. What did Bryndel do?"

"He slit his wrists. Servants found him."

"Is he in the infirmary or his rooms," the Patriarch asked, his tone of voice keeping the youth from saying more than necessary and costing them precious minutes.

"His rooms." Jimi began to steady, sounding calmer.

"Good. He should be accessible. Where are they holding Edouina?"

"I saw soldiers taking her to the council chambers. I followed and listened."

"Good mon. Dynarien, have you ever been to my assistant's offices?"

"Yes." The expression on the Rose Warrior's face suggested he still wished to simply go in and rip the council chambers and the councilors apart.

"Jump us there."

* * * *

"What is happening?" Mohanja demanded, hearing the buzz of voices from the parlor. He lay flat on his back with a pillow under the heel of his injured leg, propping the foot up. Light from the westering sun threw bright spears across the bedclothes and lit the edges of his tight cap of curls, bringing out the tiny first bits of premature gray in his black hair. If someone did not answer soon, he would try to get up on his own. He refused to allow himself to be invalidated.

Sha detached herself from her companions, poking her nose into the bedchamber, "Bryndel has tried to kill himself. Wrathscar claims Edouina magicked him. She's been taken in hand."

Edouina! He remembered the day she came to him for help and he sent her away. No wonder no one trusted him. "Damn it, woman, get in here and help me with this crutch! Get people down there to tell them I'm coming to have my say."

Shaheeramaat came in and put her shoulder under his arm, helping him to his feet. "Blaming Edouina is wrong."

"I know. Wrathscar is trying to isolate the heir. He's got most of the court intimidated or bought. I suspect most of the guard and the servants also. Maybe it's for the best I don't know what you and your little plotters are doing, Sha. Just keep enough eyes at my back that I don't end up dead. And a few to run messages between us."

Sha shook her head at the stream of words coming out of him. "We will, Mohanja."

"I need hard evidence before I can act."

Sha looked surprised and hopeful. "But you will act?"

"Yes, Sha. I will act." Mohanja snatched the crutch up and took some of his weight off her. Then he searched her face for what he wanted more than anything else in the world to find there and he kissed her.

* * * *

Dynarien and Eshraf appeared so suddenly in Mikkal's office, the assistant dropped his handful of papers, scattering them on the floor. He stooped to retrieve them.

"Mikkal, leave them," said Eshraf.

Mikkal straightened and abandoned the papers, sensing the urgency in Eshraf's manner. "What has happened?"

The Patriarch filled him in quickly. "Go to the council chambers, try to prevent their making a decision concerning Edouina until I get there. You are acting on my authority. If you cannot, place her under the temple's protection, and get her out of there."

Once placed under a temple's protection a mon was removed from secular jurisdiction and, in the case of sanctuary, a temple could not even give out information about their presence there without the protected mon's permission. It would be as if the mon no longer existed. People were known to seek sanctuary and then simply disappear as if the priests had magically removed them to a haven far away.

"At once," he started for the door. The Patriarch caught his arm. "This way. Dynarien?"

They Jumped to the west wing. Mikkal, with his usual presence of mind, took the Jump in stride and rushed away without another word.

"Where are we going?" Dynarien asked, as the Patriarch set off.

"To see Bryndel."

* * * *

Arruth curled up on the couch, staring listlessly at the opposite wall, muttering, "I wish he'd died. I wish he'd died."

She wanted to be back in her closet, but Alora had dragged her out. She felt exposed and uneasy as if Wrathscar could somehow see into the room as he had when she stayed with Jysy. He always seemed to find her whenever she stepped foot from Talons' rooms. Arruth suspected it was because only Talons' apartments had been shielded by Dynarien. She straightened the scarf around her neck and then fingered her necklace of ears. If only Wrathscar's ears were there, then she would be all right. Then she would be safe.

"I wish he'd died. I wish he'd died."

"That's not a nice thing to say," Alora told her, sitting next to her. She wrinkled her nose at the nasty odor rising from the youngster. "How long has it been since you've taken a bath?"

"I don't bathe." Arruth shivered at the thought of willingly taking her clothes off. She had not changed her clothes in a month and she slept in them. Only when he caught her did her clothes come off. Some of the knights had insisted she help them bring supplies up from the kitchen to restock the pantry a few days ago and Wrathscar had caught her again. He got in her mind. Arruth shivered harder, her body folding tighter in on itself.

"Why not?"

Arruth did not know what to answer, so she said the first thing that popped into her head. "I don't want Jysy to see me."

"Well, if that's all you're worried about, bathe here." Alora gestured at the private bath. "Talons won't mind. There's a lock on the inside."

"I don't want to."

"We're going to the trial and you are coming with us. Now bathe."

Arruth's face screwed up. "I don't want to go."

Alora looked furious. "Don't you care about Edouina? Besides, there's going to be a lot of us there, you'll be perfectly safe. I'm not going to take no for an answer. Bathe!"

A bath was drawn and Arruth locked herself in. Fresh clothes and towels were laid out on a chair. Arruth stared at the water for a long time. Taking her clothes off

meant she would have to look at herself. She did not want to do that, it made her stomach queasy. It meant feeling vulnerable and exposed, the way she did whenever Wrathscar caught her. But she knew Alora would be angry if she refused to bathe.

Arruth climbed out of her clothes and into the water with a minimum of looking down, but she could not manage entirely. The water stung her sore loins and the vampire wounds on her breasts and side. He was getting rougher with her. He'd torn her again between the legs, as had the two soldiers he had shared her with. He had stood over her, giving them pointers. "I hate him. I hate him. Some day I'll kill him."

* * * *

The moment of clarity had passed. Bryndel felt a little sick from the liquor and weak from blood loss. He lay with his arms atop the light cover, his wrists and arms bandaged to the elbow. A sense of failure and impotence gripped him in a fist of depression. The servants had returned after he dismissed them, knocked on the bathing room door; and when he did not answer, they broke the door open. Something in his manner had given his intentions away. He had done a proper job of it with the blade, but it had not been good enough. He could not even kill himself successfully. Everything Galee said about him was true. He was a total incompetent. His mother's frightened face passed through his mind along with a thousand times a thousand flickering images that swept through too swiftly to touch, much less to grasp and he tried to hold them and remember them. Yet he forgot them as quickly as they brushed his consciousness, leaving only a fleeting taste of emotion in their wake. Tears welled in his eyes and the man dissolved further into a boy. And the boy remembered how to pray as he had at his mother's knee. So Bryndel once more did the one thing Galee never expected him to do: he prayed.

"Bryndel?" the Patriarch called, moving a chair beside the bed and sitting down.

Bryndel looked up, he had not heard him come in. Shame and childish embarrassment flushed his face. Bryndel's eyes were dull and dispirited. "Go away."

"Bryndel, Edouina's in trouble." Again the stern, steady voice, assertive yet unaggressive. It was not a voice that Bryndel could run away from.

Bryndel looked at the Patriarch with a small flicker of life and concern, wondering if he had somehow prayed the mon to him. "Why?"

"Because your father is insisting she drove you to this, keeping you away from Talons." Eshraf laid his hand over Bryndel's in a comforting gesture. "Furthermore, he wants her destroyed as an aberration."

There was a quickening of breath before Bryndel spoke. "I love Edouina."

"As much as Talons?"

Bryndel's voice strengthened and a light entered his eyes. "Yes. I love them both."

More life, more concern, the Patriarch observed. *Yes, this is better.* "Then you must save Edouina."

"How? How can I do this? I can't even deal with—" he almost said Galee's name, but caught himself. "What can I do?"

"You can speak to the council on her behalf. Right now."

"Holy Father, I want to." Bryndel felt a resurgence of his old sense of helplessness, but with it a need to do something.

"I know you're too weak to walk, so I brought Dynarien to carry you. He's very strong." Eshraf patted Bryndel's hands.

Bryndel looked up at Dynarien. They had never been friends, yet now he had to trust him if he was to save Edouina. He searched the mage's face and saw the strength and compassion there. It moved Bryndel. No one had ever shown him compassion before. "Take me."

Although slender, Bryndel was no lightweight; so the ease with which Dynarien lifted him up and wrapped him in a blanket astonished him. He would never have imagined the mage could be so strong. Dynarien's aura enveloped Bryndel, shielding him. The young mon felt a sense of peace steal over him, of being protected like a child in the arms of a parent. But it was like a true and loving parent, not the kind he had known in his life. Not like his helpless, constantly weeping mother, nor like his raging abusive father. Bryndel let his head settle against Dynarien's shoulder and felt at ease.

* * * *

The base of the palace was built like a jutting five spined star, thrust into the mountain. A circular floor supporting the parts that actually showed had been laid atop it in a long flare of seven wings, five small sub-wing additions with dozens of spired towers and multiple staggered stories and onion domes in bright colors, and a whorled maze of other edifices that could only be reached by spans and bridges from the topmost towers and spires or flying creatures, had been endlessly added onto it over the centuries until no one alive – except possibly Queiggy – knew all of its secrets. The Council Chamber lay at the end of the wing that had sprouted between the northeast one and the east and was called simply Judgment Hall. The Guild held three seats, although with Hanadi away, one vote was absent. The other seats were hereditary and held by the old families of the Creeyan aristocracy. It was the place where laws were made, disputes between the aristocracy settled, decrees laid down, and other special circumstances dealt with.

Edouina could see Galee's subtle influences in the fact that the scenes of saints and heroes that once graced the walls had long ago been taken down in favor of

depictions of hunting, feasting, and seductions bordering on outright debauchery. She wondered if all the rooms frequented by the Grand Master had been changed like this.

The Grand Master's chair sat on a dais. Mohanja's messengers had forced a delay in the meeting's opening, infuriating Wrathscar and Galee further, who had hoped the mon would not show. Yet the black-skinned giant finally stood beside the Grand Master, leaning on his crutch, halberd in his other hand as always, his broad featured face serene and thoughtful, completely masking his pain. He wore a lionskin wrapped around his waist over his trousers. The heavy muscles of his huge chest and arms, bare and uncovered, looked capable of challenging even an ogre. He dared the room to look upon his wounds and bandages, knowing they drew every eye, so that when he at last spoke – and he intended to hold back for the moment when he could best drive his words like a sword blade into the heart of whatever argument Wrathscar and Galee planned to make – these symbols would lend heaviness to his words.

Two long rows of tables ran to either side of the room with ample space behind them for aides and servants to carry notes and other things without interfering with any speakers who might be addressing the council by standing between the tables.

Edouina stood between the two long rows of tables, close to the Grand Master's chair. The strips of leather binding her hands behind her cut into her wrists, making them throb and ache. She concentrated on her breathing to focus her awareness away from the discomfort, to find that inner calm to deal with her circumstances and stop her body's reactions. She had heard about the attack upon Mohanja, but seeing him made her wonder at the incredible strength of the mon that he could still be standing. Had he come to aid or harm? He had said nothing so far, merely listening closely with that impassive face of his, giving nothing of his thoughts away.

The councilors had been arguing for an hour, with only Lord Derryl taking her part. Lord Wrathscar paced back and forth between Edouina and the Grand Master. "This woman has deliberately driven my son to despair. She has kept him from the woman he loves, because she wants her for herself. She has twisted my son's mind, forcing the suicide attempt upon him with her wiles. She is Sharani. All of you are aware of the unnatural sexual practices of the Sharani. You are aware of the power they call the bi-kyndi, giving them the power and corruption of a succubus."

"I say we should destroy her," a councilor said.

Galee smiled. "They are a dangerous breed. A magically twisted mutation. They say Ishla created them. But I would suggest it was actually Bellocar, the Hellgod, who altered their genes. I have brought an expert to testify concerning their unnatural genes."

She nodded at a servant who brought Solance forward.

Ah, shit, Edouina thought. By the time he gets done, they'll probably decide to burn me. And every Sharani up here. That one is in Galee's pocket and always has been.

"Tell the Grand Master and these good lords," Galee addressed the healer, "what is the most common form in which the Sharani reproduce?"

"They generally suck men's seed out of their bodies through their ears, leaving their victims impotent and sterile. Then the dominant female summons a demonic phallus by way of the bi-kyndi to pass the stolen seed to her submissive mate."

The councilors reacted with a horrified buzz of comments passing between them.

Edouina's stomach twisted. She could easily have doomed thousands of her own people when she fried Bryndel's seed her first night home, possibly all the Sharani in Creeya. She had been angry at his callous treatment of Talons. That one act would be seen as proof that the rumors were true – that the Sharanis were some kind of horrible monsters. Galee was going to turn this into a demon-hunt. Then she would set the Guild on Shaurone itself. Edouina felt sickened. What had she done to her people?

"That is preposterous!" a new voice objected. The Patriarch's assistant strode in, his long black robes swishing. "And asinine as well. Tell me, little mon, just how many Sharani have you Read?"

Edouina was startled to see that the temple had involved itself. Who could possibly have persuaded the Patriarch to intervene in politics? She knew Eshraf was personally concerned about Talons, but to send Mikkal to her aid like this was something entirely outside that.

Solance – normally so sly – confronted by the sheer forceful directness of Mikkal's question and his disdain, looked uncomfortable. He had come against Mikkal before, when Solance had been merely a bio-alchemist of questionable reputation and Mikkal a barrister for the crown. "I've made a great study of the literature on the subject."

"I did not ask that. I asked you how many Sharani have you actually Read? Tell the truth, because I'll call every one of them in here if I have to." Mikkal waved a warning finger in the healer's face.

In a very tiny voice, the healer said, "Two."

"Which two?" Mikkal demanded, projecting his voice with sharp confidence and utter contempt.

"Maya and..." Solance squirmed.

"Yes? We're waiting." The implied threat deepened in the priest's voice.

Edouina realized she was no longer seeing Mikkal the kindly old priest, but Mikkal the barrister as he had been in his younger days while his wife had been alive. Mikkal was destroying Solance almost by the sheer power of his presence alone. And Solance was as terrified of Mikkal now as he had been long ago.

"The heir."

"So, you're accusing the heir of unnatural acts?"

"No, of course not." The healer's eyes slid around the room, looking for support that had melted away.

"Maya. Then you're accusing Lord Derryl's mistress of unnatural acts."

Lord Derryl, the only one of the lords who had not condemned Edouina, laughed loud and hard. "I should be so lucky! My wife and she both like it simple. It gets boring sometimes. But not too boring now that we're all sharing the same bed."

One of the other councilors laughed, followed by two more. Some of the soldiers laughed. Solance flushed, and before anyone could stop him, fled the room. Edouina could not believe her ears as Mikkal made a laughingstock of the little healer she disliked so much with such ease.

Mikkal's gaze swept the room, ending the cross talk and came to rest on Lord Derryl. "Lord Derryl, would you care to tell us why the healer Read Maya?"

"Certainly," he responded, grinning broadly. "We're having a baby. In the Sharani fashion. The child safely passed to my wife while I watched. We're holding a formal triading in the fall, a few weeks after the heirs' wedding. We had planned to announce it weeks ago. We held a private party with her family, and afterward retired to a small pub. However, by terrible misfortune that also proved to be the night we found Maya's brother's body on our way home." Derryl allowed that to sink in before continuing. "I guess today will do. We've already held a small private triading through Eshraf's kind offices. I'd like to point out one thing. You all know that my wife, who I dearly love, cannot conceive. We had resigned ourselves to a childless existence. My wife is now pregnant. We plan on having a large family, the three of us. And the Patriarch has assured us that the new child partakes of the genetic inheritance of all three of his parents. And I do mean, he. It's a boy."

Edouina allowed herself a small smile, remembering how she and Bryndel had seen them at the tavern. *So they weren't just playing at being Sharani after all.*

As congratulations were expressed around the room, Lord Wrathscar realized he was losing control of the situation. "I still claim undue influence!" He shouted.

The room quieted.

"At least, ban her from the palace. Spare my poor son."

"Don't, father," Bryndel protested, entering the room in Dynarien's arms with the Patriarch preceding him. His head lay weakly against the yuwenghau's shoulder, but his eyes were clear.

Galee tried to catch his eyes, but he was shielded by Dynarien's aura as the fragrance of roses filled the chamber. She dropped her head to conceal the snarl of rage she could not entirely suppress.

Then Bryndel said the unthinkable. "If I can't have Edouina, then I don't want Talons either. I'll repudiate the babies."

A roar engulfed the room and Lord Wrathscar stalked out, followed by Galee.

Mohanja Raam struck the floor several times with the steel butt of his halberd for silence. The room quieted.

"Release her," Takhalme ordered.

Edouina rushed to Bryndel as soon as her bonds were cut and they returned her weapons. "Oh, honey," she drawled. "You were magnificent."

"Really?" Bryndel's face brightened.

"Absolutely. And, honey, don't you ever do anything to hurt yourself again. It would break my heart."

* * * *

Alora and a large number of the knights lounged outside the Hall of Justice, waiting to hear the verdict concerning Edouina. Isen stood next to Ceejorn, who sat cross-legged on the floor. She played with his hair and he glanced up at her from time to time with a smitten expression. Jimi leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

A pair of large guardsmyn watched the crowd of students that had accompanied Alora, Isen, and Jimi, with conspicuous unease, as if expecting a riot should the verdict go against Edouina.

One of the guardsmyn jutted his chin at Osterbridge. "Hey, Guildsmon, you leading this pack of young wolves?"

"What if I am?"

"Be careful who you associate with. That's how people end up dead."

Osterbridge gave the guardsman an ingratiating smile. "Yup. You too."

Isen laughed.

The door opened and Solance fled past them with a sick expression on his face.

Jimi grinned. "I think Mikkal must have put a hot poker up his ass."

"You're pretty observant, aren't you," Osterbridge drawled.

Mirth rippled through the ranks of the students. A few minutes later, Wrathscar boiled out of the chamber raging, with Galee beside him, and his guards and a coterie of tame lords following closely. The students fell silent, averting their faces until he was well away from them.

Alora sucked in a breath. "I think we won."

Edouina emerged, with Dynarien walking behind her carrying Bryndel

Instantly, Alora embraced Edouina. "Edouina! Oh, Thank Hadjys!"

Edouina grinned broadly, rubbing her sore wrists. "It's Mikkal you ought to thank, you should have seen how he tore Solance apart. Ripped his little ass ten ways to Jarienday. And Bryndel..." Edouina leaned in and kissed Bryndel's forehead. "Bryndel's my hero."

Bryndel flushed as the female knights began to gather and fuss over him. Eshraf parted the young myn, and put his fingers to Bryndel's wrist to Read him. "I think our young hero should be put to bed. He needs to rest. Dynarien, if you will?"

Dynarien nodded and left with Bryndel.

"And we need to get back to the Temple," Eshraf said, bowing out with a smile. Then he and Mikkal walked away from the council chambers.

"I guess it's time we got back to Talons and let her know everything is all right, honey," Edouina said to Alora, starting down the corridor.

Alora fell into step beside her, looking around. "Where's Arruth?"

The knights, who had been awaiting the verdict, fell into step behind her, glancing in all directions as they walked.

"You brought her, honey?" Edouina asked, frowning.

"Yes. I thought it would be good for her. She shouldn't keep herself locked up like

she always does. And I made her take a bath." Alora felt suddenly worried.

Edouina lengthened her stride. "Maybe she went back to Talons' apartments. Who's there?"

"Just Jysy and the guards outside."

"That's not enough. Arruth's hiding from someone." Edouina's tone held a note of urgency.

Instantly, Alora had a bad feeling about it and her instincts, since Hadjys marked her, had grown sharp. "Edouina, how can you be certain? I thought it was just what had happened to her behind that tavern."

"Honey, when you've been in the business as long as I have you learn to know."

"Oh, gods!" Alora broke into a run and raced along the corridors, across the second floor balcony and through the West Wing until she reached the doors to Talons' rooms. She pounded on the door and Jysy opened them. "Have you seen Arruth?"

Jysy shook her head. "No. She hasn't come back."

Alora's face twisted up. It was getting late, although the light would hold for another hour or so considering it was still summer. She turned and discovered that Edouina and a handful of the others had overtaken her. "She isn't here. We must find her."

Edouina nodded. "I need to see Talons first. The rest of you get going. One of you fetch Yukiah. He can assemble far more searchers than you can."

"I'll fetch him," Tulik volunteered.

Alora frowned because she wanted Edouina to help immediately. Edouina passed her and went inside. Then Alora started the knights heading back out. Alora walked through the palace, out through the Great Central Hall and onto the quad. She remembered something about Arruth saying she always felt safe in the library. Isen followed her closely with Osterbridge at her side.

The bushes along the walkways were thick. Alora really did not like being out late on the quad after the attack on Mohanja, but it was not full dark yet and Mohanja had been assaulted after the midnight hour. Lesser bloods did not like even the smallest sliver of daylight. Near the south walk approaching the library from the north Alora glimpsed something fluttering in the breeze caught on the hedge and went to look. It was a bit of cloth. She pulled it loose and saw hanging on a tree a necklace of ears. Her heart seized up. She walked into the bushes, but did not touch the ears. It was Arruth's. Then she saw the bloody foot showing from beneath another hedgerow and screamed. Arms closed around her. Alora drew her blades,

whirled, and broke free, almost slashing Jimi before realizing it was him.

"You found her?" Jimi asked.

Alora swallowed and nodded, indicating the body with her chin. "Over there."

Jimi went, and dropped to his knees. He froze for a moment and then threw up in the hedgerows. When he mastered himself, he said, "Alora, find Yukiah. It's Arruth. She's dead."

Osterbridge and Isen had arrived with Jimi and stood just behind Alora. Isen closed her eyes against the sight of her butchered friend. Osterbridge gripped her shoulders in a silent attempt at comfort.

Isen glanced up at him. "I'll get Yukiah. I know where he is." Then she ran off.

"Wait for me," Osterbridge shouted, running after Isen. "I don't want you going alone."

* * * *

Galee watched the knights, led by Jimi with Arruth's body in their arms, cross the quad. She concealed herself within the shadows of a broad spruce. The vampire had come in search of Solance – her servants had seen him flee to the library – and then stopped to observe the knights. She clenched her fists in anger when she realized that Wrathscar must have murdered the girl in retaliation for Edouina's victory. Wrathscar was taking too many chances. Someone could have noticed him with Arruth. Galee kept warning him against acts of this nature and he kept ignoring her; Wrathscar was going deeper and deeper into the rogue state. It would not do to attract undue interest or suspicion. When they entered the palace, Galee moved on. She spied Solance emerging from the library. He must have sensed her because he retreated back inside. She would make an example to Wrathscar of Solance. Then she would bring in other healers. The Master of Blood could reproduce all of Solance's experiments and chemicals, magical and mundane. Solance had long ago become expendable.

Galee followed and lost sight of him for a moment. Solance had become more wary since the day Belyla bit him. She opened her awareness, sensing him among the farthest stacks of an obscure section. He hovered, pretending to scan the stacks. She glided noiselessly up behind him. "You failed me," she hissed, leaning close, her lips beside his ear. He jumped and turned. It was a cool night, yet sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Galee, please, I tried..." He whimpered softly.

Galee flexed her hand in front of his face, her fingers lengthened into claws, the secondary nails sliding from their sheaths. "I hate failure. I punish it," she purred.

"Galee."

She closed her hand and then extended her forefinger, stroking the tip of his nose with the long nail. "I forgive you," she said, gripping his shoulder with her other hand and dropping the first level with his chest.

"Thank you," he responded, starting to relax.

Galee shoved the nail into his chest between the third and fourth ribs, wrapping her arm around him, holding him closely like a lover, while her venom pumped into his heart. She covered his lips with hers and kissed him deeply so that he could not cry out. His eyes rolled up in his head and he sagged against her. She lowered him into a chair, settling him face down so that it looked as if he had fallen asleep reading. When she finally fought the yuwenghau she would see that he got all ten fingers.

* * * *

"Sha." Mohanja lay in bed with the stitched leg uncovered, disliking anything over it, wearing just his small clothes. "Get some raiders down to clear out Solance's offices, nab him too. I've a gut feeling he's going to end up dead. I meant to say something sooner, but I was hurting too bad to think. It's the way Galee was looking at him. Way Wrathscar was too."

Shaheeramaat nodded, stepped into the parlor, spoke to the Guildsmyn there, and came back. Then she dropped her dressing robe on the floor, climbing carefully onto the bed and nestled in the crook of his arm along his less badly wounded side.

* * * *

The knights gathered in the upstairs drawing room with Edouina, Dynarien, Osterbridge, and Yukiah because there were too many of them for the downstairs parlor. All wore somber faces, many of them streaked with tears. Arruth had been like a younger sister to all of them since her arrival last year.

On one of the sofas, Jysy huddled in Jimi's arms, muttering now and again in stunned grief, "They killed my sister."

"Dear my god," Edouina said suddenly, lifting her tear-streaked face from her arms, which were folded on the central table, to look across at Dynarien and Alora. "We did have a witness to what happened to Talons, one who was too afraid to say she knew."

"What are you talking about, Edouina?" Alora frowned.

"I'm almost certain that Arruth must have been hiding in the pantry like she always did. I'm so used to dismissing it from my mind that I never thought of it before."

That's why I had the mattress thrown down in there. It's been her refuge for months. She must have been so terrified. I'm going to kill them. So help me, Lord Hadjys, My Liege, I'm going to kill them. He killed her because the Grand Master spared my life. But also so that we would never know who he is."

Osterbridge sat on the couch with Isen nestled against him and his arm around her shoulders. "We're in this together, Edouina," said Osterbridge. "It isn't just you and Dynarien. They murdered my closest friends, tortured Yahni."

Jimi nodded at that. "I still haven't heard from my family. Too much is going on for it not to be connected."

"Ceejorn is right," said Yukiah from a chair in the far corner. "We are in this together, Edouina. You have to trust us all. We stand together or we die separately." He cast his gaze around the room, making certain that he made eye contact with each and every mon there. "I don't want anyone doing anything rash or acting on their own initiative. I also don't want anyone traveling alone outside the temple and school buildings. Travel in pairs."

Everyone agreed.

* * * *

Sha had stayed late at her office, partly because she did not want to face anyone until she pulled herself together. The sight of a butchered child always affected her that way. What the monsters had done to Arruth with teeth and blades had left her sick at heart. Initially they had brought Arruth's body here for the coroner's reports, which was her responsibility, but she had had them move it to the Guild Wing. It would be Guild healers who did the autopsy, since Arruth had been a Guild student. Under normal circumstances, it would have been done here, but nothing was normal any longer and Sha wondered when and if it ever would be again.

She shoved her papers into the drawers and put the crossbow, which was sitting on a chair on the desktop. The second crossbow sat on a side table within easy reach. She still shivered when she thought about the warning written on her walls in blood.

"Enough," she muttered under her breath. "Mohanja's probably worrying because I haven't come home yet." At least he wasn't treating her like she was made of glass the way he had twenty years ago, which was part of what had driven her away from him. It felt good to be in his bed again after all these years, but she had no intention of telling him that. Yet.

Sha left her office and walked out into the outer chamber just as three guardsmyn entered. Two of them bearing a litter with a covered body on it. The hairs stood up on her arms. "What is this?"

"Librarians found him in the stacks when they started to close up."

Sha flicked the cover back from the corpse's face and gasped. "Solance."

"There's not a mark on him. Figure it was a heart attack or something."

Well, Mohanja would just have to wait.

"Come with me." Sha gestured and led the way to the post-mortem room, where she indicated they should place the body on the long metal table. It was an expensive, molded table since steel was one of the few things that did not soak up blood and other body fluids, which would otherwise have complicated her task. "One of you fetch my assistant and another healer, preferably Dorie if you know her."

"I do," one of the guardsmyn grinned.

Sha knew that Dorie had a taste for guardsmyn, and suspected he must have been one of her conquests.

"Rest of you get out and leave me alone with the body so I can work."

They obeyed and Sha opened a drawer, took out several green crystal cylinders, and set them beside the body. Then she went to another cabinet and came back with a golden preserving bottle such as the sa'necari had developed to keep blood fresh in. The Guild borrowed whatever technology they found that could be applied to their work. The crystals they used came from Faewin by way of Hellsguard, the table from Iradrim where the dwarves were experimenting with molding metal as well as working it. The first preserving bottles came from Waejontor, but the Guild mage workers had found ways to replicate them. This time a set of the blood and tissue samples would go directly to the Guild wing along with her findings. She took a set of fine tiny blades from a shelf and a white crystal to record to her general body analysis. The white crystal replicated the effects of the memory stones once worn by the lifemages who had been extinguished in a long campaign of genocide conducted by the sa'necari of Waejontor. She began stripping the clothing off Solance's corpse.

Dorie entered with Muirgheas, Sha's assistant. "Who died?" Dorie asked, not bothering to hide the concern in her voice, for she had known too many of the recently slain personally.

"Solance. Help me get his clothes off. I want samples taken of everything. Liver, kidneys, blood. Everything."

Muirgheas pulled Solance's boots off and then his pants. "Whooooeee," Muirgheas remarked with casual causticness. "He never had much to offer a woman, now did he? No wonder he never got any ladies without some coins in his hand." He flicked the corpse's shriveled cock.

"Muirgheas, just get him undressed. No commentary, please. None of us liked him. But he's dead and we need to find out why."

Sha's assistant yanked the scarf from Solance's neck, balled it up, and tossed it in a basket.

"Hadjys merciful!" Dorie exclaimed, turning the corpse's head for a better view of the scars. "He's been bitten at least three times here. One of them looks recent."

"Who else is here today?" Sha asked, feeling chilled.

"Just the three of us," Muirgheas supplied. "Newt is sick and Gyes is birthing babies at Lord Anghee's apartments."

"How many kids does that give Lord Anghee now?" Sha asked, putting on her coldest professional manner.

"Seven and no heir in sight."

"That's a shame," Dorie said, trying to sound light.

Finally the black robe and undergarments came off the corpse and everyone fell silent for several heartbeats. What immediately drew all their eyes was the black and green circle of necrosis around a tiny puncture wound with a spider web of red lines radiating from it in the middle of his chest. Next their eyes went to the feeding scars along his shoulders and arms, reminiscent of Yahni.

Sha broke the silence. "I want samples of everything. Open him up while I Read." She brought a chair over, settled herself with the white crystal in one hand and Solance's cold, clammy wrist in the other.

* * * *

Sha carefully packed her set of tissue samples and the crystaled report, which she would transcribe later, into two satchels and headed for the Guild wing while Dorie and Muirgheas finished up with Solance's corpse for the healers' records. Something had gone wrong between Solance and his co-conspirators. If they could prove a connection between Solance and Galee or Wrathscar or both then they could close the shop on all of them. She hoped fervently this could be done. If they could do this quickly enough perhaps they could save the heir. Sha walked briskly along, the skin prickling on her arms and neck, feeling the hair rise every time she had to pass close to a soldier in the Umber and Pine as if they were watching her. The Great Central Hall was filled with them and with others. She saw Channadar at his usual spot, telling his stories and caught the tiny nuances of pain in his movements. She wished he would not push himself so hard, but the Fae-lord was stubborn. The arm was half crippled and it would not take much to finish it off.

Channadar noticed her and smiled, flicking a fan at her to come, but she shook her head and walked past him. She had to reach the Guild Wing safely with the samples. Sha wished she had brought along one of the crossbows she kept at her desk, but that would have been too conspicuous.

The Guild Wing's doors stood open and Sha walked in. The clerk at the desk was an old geezer who had shown up a week ago. More and more of them had begun to simply arrive and report for duty without being called up, which Sha had not had time yet to inquire about so it seemed an odd and mysterious phenomena to her. She nodded to him. "I need to see Queiggy."

"He's in the second floor meeting room with Aramyn and Yukiah discussing the little girl."

"We've got another body."

The geezer nodded. "Go on up."

Sha had ordered Arruth's body stored in the Guild Wing until she could get to it today. She wondered suddenly if she should have done that with Solance's instead of simply going to it immediately in the Healer's post-mortem room out of habit. She remembered the words written in blood on her wall after the break in:

BACK OFF, SHA

After turning her samples into a Guild healer in the Wing to put away for her, she returned to the palace healers' center. The outer chamber seemed eerily silent ... too silent.

"Dorie? Muirgheas? Is anyone here?" She walked quickly to the post-mortem room and screamed. Solance's body was gone, replaced by Muirgheas' corpse. His head had been torn off and placed in the middle of his chest with his hands around it, except that his hands were no longer connected to his arms. Beyond the table in the shadows, Sha spied two forms. A faint whimper reached her. She kicked the table into them, dumping the pieces of Muirgheas' body across the figures and the floor. One mon rose with a growl while the other remained unmoving. A tensing of her arms with a small twist brought her stars from the armsheaths. Sha put a spiked star in the creature's eye, another in its throat, and a third in its chest. It still came on, but now she could see it clearer and retreated. She jerked her loose wrap-around blouse open, showing her breasts, and a weapons harness holding four stilettos. Sha drew two stilettos from the shoulder harness.

"Guild healer," the Lemyari spit, trying to keep its remaining eye on her as she moved. Dorie's blood coated the monster's mouth and lower face.

"Hellspawn," Sha growled, she felt sickened, but in control. She was Guild.

It charged her, claws out, the tips beading with the deadly venom. Sha retreated, kicking a chair into its path. If she could reach her office, the loaded crossbows would give her a better chance of killing it before it killed her.

The Lemyari plucked the stars from its body, stalking after her.

Sha had to glance around to avoid bumping into furniture while keeping her eyes on the Lemyari. She backed into the central room and it followed. The moment it emerged from the post-mortem room, Sha shifted her grip on the stilettos and threw, putting one of them into its chest, but missing the heart. It leaped toward her, then jerked and lay still upon the floor, a bolt precisely through its heart.

Aramyn stood by the door to her office with her crossbow in hand and the second one resting against his knee. "I heard the action and borrowed your bows. I hope you don't mind," he said mildly.

"Dorie, oh gods, she might still be alive." Sha ran back into the post-mortem room, trying not to vomit at the pieces of Muirgheas as she dropped to the floor and gathered Dorie up. The woman had been violated extensively and feed upon by more than one of the monsters.

Dorie's eyes opened. "They came in ... so fast, Sha ... so fast." Then Dorie went still and Sha began to cry.

Aramyn knelt beside her, slipped an arm around Sha. "I'm sorry. I came here following a hunch. But I didn't listen to it soon enough."

"We're running out of healers, Aramyn," Sha said when she could finally speak. "Except for in the Wing. They're killing all my friends. They know I'm looking for them. I'm not going to back down. I want you to know that. I'm not going to let them get away with this. I should have had Solance's corpse moved to the Guild Wing immediately. This wouldn't have happened."

"We're all looking for them, Sha. And we're going to catch them."

* * * *

Galee summoned her most highly placed allies to a meeting the morning after the murders in the healers' offices. She wanted to secure matters to her advantage before Sha could move to bring anyone in from the outside to fill the vacancies left by Dorie, Solance, and Muirgheas. Copies of her list of possibles lay on the center table at which her cat's paws sat. She curled up on her couch, watching them closely. "It is so tragic. We've lost four of the palace healers in less than three months."

"Most of the senior lords have personal physicians, My Lady," said Lord Naren. "I don't see it as a problem."

Galee observed his eyes, remembering the way he had taken Yahni Kjarten's condition at the dinner party at Wrathscar's manor, yet been shaken to learn that Zarliche was eating man-flesh across the table from him.

"Yes, I know. But with so many people arriving for the wedding..."

"There is that," Lord Westli commented.

Galee noticed the small bruise on Westli's neck that looked like the fading remnant of a human's love bite. Philomea had been skillful, and there would be no betraying scar, but she would still need to talk to her about this.

"I also have some recommendations," Lord Wrathscar said.

"As you see on those pages I have given you," Galee put in. "I always stay on top of these matters. The Grand Master depends on me so heavily. Sha usually objects to my choices. She's so fussy. But I think we have the votes to override her."

"Absolutely," Lord Naren agreed. "Present your choices and we will override Sha's wishes. We must keep the palace healers up to full strength. This is no time to be excessively picky. We all trust your judgment, Galee."

"Thank you, Lord Naren," Galee simpered. "You are too kind."

Elomina sat beside Lord Karishee, her hand on his knee. From time to time, Karishee flicked Elomina a glance, his eyes glazed with the kind of longing that Galee recognized as the early stages of a Passion-Dance.

Lord Cadmean kept rubbing a spot on his neck hidden by his heavy black hair, and Galee wondered if she would find a fang bruise there also. That one would have to be Dargaurite's doing, as she was currently sharing Cadmean's bed.

For all of the brutal stupidity their father had displayed since his turning, Wrathscar's daughters had swiftly become among her most skilled and discreet allies. Galee had wondered why they had brought Karishee and Cadmean, but now she knew: the two lords had just joined the ranks of her supporters in a rather permanent fashion. Maybe she would make the young women compete for the right to turn their lover after the heir's wedding.

Mother,

I know there are issues between you and father, and between you and returning to Havensword. But please, come. I am so frightened. You tell me that a sinjin is supposed to be fearless, but I can't be. Three of my friends are dead. I'm afraid for father. If it wasn't for Ceejorn, I'd be totally lost. Please, please, please, come.

Isen

My child,

I will move the riders and the Netherguard closer still, although it means crossing two holdings. Be strong. I'm trying. But you cannot know how hard it is for me to even move in that direction. I feel like there are shackles upon my feet even to think about it.

Your mother.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NIGHTMARES

Mohanja gradually took up more and more of his old duties watching over Takhalme as his leg mended and he could place more weight upon it. Sha scolded if she came home at night and discovered he had tired himself too much. She had moved in with him and it had been decades since they last lived together. *How odd* , he mused, *that I find even her scolding satisfying where once it would have driven me to distraction. I finally understand – it's an expression of her love and worry, her caring for me. She only scolds those she loves* . So, he had begun simply pulling her into his arms and kissing her. That shut her up every time.

He had gained wealth, power, position and honor – but all that it had brought him in the end was pain, suffering, loss and twenty years without Sha, having to watch her go about her duties each day without touching her. *By my god, I am not losing every thing I have pledged my life to without a fight* .

His leg pained him more that night and Sha had given him something to ease it enough to let him sleep. While he slept, his head shifted closer to the wall than usual, perhaps because of the drug allowing him greater movement, and he woke at the sound of the voice every one spoke of as the ghost come shivering up through the stones.

"Yaaahhhnnnniiii! Tell them, Yahni. Beware the Master of Blood. Yaaahhhnnnniiii!" Then a long wailing followed, finally breaking off into silence. Mohanja remembered the guardsmyn who had attacked him shouting to this creature called the "Master of Blood." A chill rushed over him, forcing him to rise. He rolled off the bed, trying not to wake Sha and limped from the bedroom. He lit a lamp in the study and went downstairs into the parlor where he sat at the table and waited for morning. *I am going to Queiggy first and Eshraf second; I need to discover more about this Master of Blood and they are the ones to ask* . As for the ghost of Belyla Wrathscar – that was no ghost he heard. She was chained up beneath the palace by her own kind. A trap hatching. But one who was also trying to warn them. *We will get them, Belyla, and may Hadjys have mercy on your soul.*

* * * *

Channadar listened from his couch in the Great Central Hall as Lord Wrathscar announced the betrothals of his three daughters from a platform that had been moved into the room earlier that day. Philomea was to wed Lord Westli, Knight-Commander of the City Guard; Elomina would marry Lord Karishee, whose lands bordered Channadar's own; and Darguarite was promised to Lord Cadmean, whose lands also bordered Hellsguard. It made the sly half-Fae uneasy.

Galee fussed over the young brides to be. Channadar wondered what she was saying. He snapped his golden fan closed. "Bring me some gossip, little fireflies," he said, smiling enigmatically and gesturing with the closed fan. They departed in a rush of silken skirts. The male fireflies remained behind with Channadar and the Thirteen Chosen. "Blue Lily," he said to the loveliest of his Chosen. "Keep an eye upon them."

Hama, Lily's firefly followed her.

Channadar felt suddenly lonely. If only he dared to have Leeza openly upon his arm instead of hidden beneath Tiderider's. He knew so little about her past, save that she had once been a member of his yeomynry. He had been traveling in disguise with his Thirteen Chosen, just another flashy Fae like so many from the enclave around his main city. He had gone out to look at the town they had stayed the night in. The previous day's rain had left the streets muddy and difficult to traverse. He had not noticed Leeza, had not really known when he bumped her, until she got up and tackled him. She straddled him with her hands tangled in his hair, shoving his face repeatedly into the mud and shouting, "Watch where you're going, you idiot!" They wrestled for what seemed like an hour, but was actually only a few minutes. When he finally stopped her by apologizing, he found himself smitten by a mud-coated fair-skinned face and heavy auburn hair.

Channadar watched Leeza moving among the lords and ladies congratulating Wrathscar and the young couples ... mostly young. Lord Westli was in his early fifties, but still quite hale, and this would be his third marriage. So Wrathscar was trading his daughters for allegiances at last. Channadar had begun to wonder if Wrathscar would ever let go of them.

He could not allow those marriages to take place. Wrathscar intended to hunt him by bringing those lands into his house. Were Juna not so suggestible and easily manipulated, Channadar would have arranged a match between him and one of Lord Kanishee's sisters. But he could not trust Juna to think for himself. Juna was a toy, a summerdancer. Perhaps his mother could find a suitable wife for Juna. Then those summerflies of his brother's could be sent away. He did not trust any of them.

Channadar felt unhappy that while he had family on his mother's side, he had only Juna on his Creeyan father's. There had at one time been three bastards, but by the

time he had tracked them down it was too late: his enemy had been thorough about eliminating all of Lord Ky's get. Which was what made him all the more cautious in hiding his relationship with Leeza.

The pain in his shoulder worsened and Channadar gestured with his fan to Starsilent.

"*The medicine*," he said quietly in Fae.

Starsilent gave a small bow of his head and shoulders, reaching into his pouch to produce a vial, which he passed to his lord. Channadar drank and leaned back on the couch to watch Leeza.

* * * *

"Congratulations on your engagement, Philomea," Leeza said, when she reached the head of the line that had formed at the dais.

Philomea gave Leeza a sensual, half-mocking smile. "Thank you, little Leeza. You should be so fortunate."

Leeza felt stung, her hand sliding into her pocket to clutch Channadar's crystal, which she was not allowed to wear openly. She had someone. Someone far better than Philomea's Lord Westli. Or did she? Philomea continued to smile at her, but now the look turned hungry.

"Move along!" someone said behind Leeza and she was shoved to the side and then shoved still further. She staggered, half stumbled, and then went nearly to her knees as she was shoved a third time. A strong hand closed on her arm, steadying her.

"Thank you."

She looked up, seeing first that she had somehow gotten to the rear of the dais out of sight of Channadar, and she turned to see who had helped her.

"Hello, little slut of the Fae." Lord Wrathscar sneered at her. "Are you ready for me now?"

Leeza felt an indescribable pain in her head as if a blade had been shoved between her eyes and she cried out. Her hand, which was still in her pocket, tightened around Channadar's crystal. The force of Channadar's love swept over her and the pain vanished.

Wrathscar frowned, shaking his head. Then a steady voice said from behind him, "Release my firefly or lose your hand."

"Tiderider!" Relief rushed through Leeza. Wrathscar let go of her and she fled to

the golden Fae, nestling in his arms as he flashed a deadly fan at the rogue lord.

"Does she open her legs to all of you? Or just you and Channadar?" Wrathscar sneered. Then he spun on his heel and stalked off.

"What happened, Leeza?" Tiderider murmured into her hair with his cheek on her head. "Channadar sensed your fright and sent me for you."

Leeza whispered back as they walked away together, her voice filled with uncertainty. "I don't know. I got jostled by the crowd. I thought Philomea was going to eat me... No. That was before I got jostled. Yes, I think that was when it happened. There was this pain in my head like someone was trying to get in or shoving a blade between my eyes and then Wrathscar grabbed me when I stumbled. But I had my hand in my pocket holding Channadar's crystal... And then you came..."

They reached the couch near the entrance to the Cloverleaf, and Tiderider settled Leeza beside Channadar. Her lord gave her one of his small smiles that said everything and nothing at all. "No more crowds for you."

"No more crowds? No more!" Leeza cried indignantly, forgetting the game entirely. "I'll suffocate! You cannot do this."

Tiderider, seeing that she was about to make a scene, took her into his arms and kissed her possessively to cover her outburst. She flailed at him for a moment, but the golden Fae was far stronger and more capable. The Chosen laughed and the handful of onlookers who were slowly returning from the gathering at the dais laughed also. Leeza, realizing it was fruitless to struggle, and that she was making a fool of herself quieted. "My love," Tiderider told her. "Better you are safe. My lord is wise."

No. No. No. I'm sick of dancing this game, Leeza thought angrily. I feel like a whore, bought and paid for.

Leeza often wondered where she had gotten that phrase, "a whore, bought and paid for." Then she remembered it in a rush. When she was little one of her mother's more brutal lovers had called her mother that every time they argued. Suddenly Leeza felt as if she were coated in mud and filth.

As soon as Tiderider's hold loosened, Leeza fled. Channadar's face betrayed surprise, hurt, and confusion for the flash of an instant before going masked again. His fan flashed and Da'Shanagara went off in her wake to guard her. "Silly firefly!" Channadar said with a languorous smile. "Perhaps you should get another, Tiderider. Perhaps one like Lady Montani."

He leaned forward and lightly swatted the plump matron on her bottom getting a startled flutter and then a girlish giggle from her. Montani would have liked that, but it

wasn't going to happen and they both knew it. Montani had been chasing the males among the Thirteen Chosen for three years and had not caught one yet.

* * * *

Bryndel and Edouina sat in the parlor at the table eating. Cass had chased them loudly out of Talons' bedroom while she cleaned, as she had done every morning for the past few weeks. When Cass finished, she would chase them back in while she cleaned the parlor. It had become a game, which Talons found entertaining to watch, although she remained too weak to participate. Cass simply cleaned around her. It was the only thing that got a smile out of any of them since Arruth's death.

Cass finished and left. Bryndel moved some mushrooms in a cheese sauce onto a plate and, armed with a fork, went to try coaxing Talons to eat a little more.

Talons turned her face away as he waved a forkful of mushrooms at her. "I'm too tired to eat."

"Just one bite?" His eyes pleaded with silent desperation. Finally Bryndel gave up and laid the fork on the edge of the plate.

"Too tired." Her eyes searched his face for a moment. "Bryndel, I'm so tired – I feel like I'm dying."

"Don't say that. You aren't."

"Are you sure, Bryndel? Are you really sure?" Talons' dark eyes searched his face again. She felt certain that everyone knew what was wrong with her, except herself and they were keeping it from her. Most days all the muscles of her body burned and hurt as if someone were shoving small blades into her flesh. It was all that she could do to keep from weeping; at the pain; at the despair enveloping her, at the helplessness. The adventures, victories, and excitement of long ago months seemed a fading dream of someone else's.

Bryndel stroked her hair and then pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly. His cheek pressed hers and she could feel his tears slide wetly between them. "I love you, Talons."

"I know..." *Dynarien! Dynarien, I love you.*

* * * *

Galee sat at the black lacquered table in her parlor, her journal open before her. She resented the fact that she had been forced to start a new one. Meilurk and his three companions stood behind her in Creeyan silks, dark rich shades that matched their natures, watching Wrathscar's daughters who shifted uncomfortably in their seats, waiting for Galee to finally tell them why she had summoned them. She laid the silver

pen aside and looked up at last when she felt she had made the young Lemyaris uneasy enough.

"I know that at least one of you has begun Dancing your betrothed. I suspect that all of you have. I have brought you here to warn and teach you. Dance them very slowly. While I found Belyla's Dance amusing at first, it became boring. Had I wanted Yahni to remain alive, as I do these three males, I would have shown her how to do it. Now I am going to teach and you are going to learn."

Smiles lit all their faces and an eagerness that pleased Galee shone in their expressions. If their father had been as cooperative, things might have been far better and she would not now be forced to heavy-handed measures. Measures like those had led to the Guild's discovery of many of her pawns thirty years ago. The nobility were still coming here for the wedding, but they were bringing large retinues of myn-at-arms to ensure their safety. That could complicate matters. The scales could tip in either direction. She had to move cautiously.

"Oh, Galee, we live to learn," Philomea simpered.

"You will answer directly to me. You will not consult with your father. If he objects, you will come to me or to Meilurk and we will deal with him."

Their faces flushed with pleasure and Galee smiled. They were tasting freedom from their father for the first time in their lives, and their gratitude toward her for giving it to them was extremely satisfying. Only Belyla had been a failure, but Zarliche was fixing that. He would break Belyla with his tortures or they would stake her.

"I will move you each into your own suites. Philomea, you must ensure that Westli understands that it is I who rules and not Wrathscar. Have you been fully into his mind yet?"

Philomea's eyes narrowed with sly, sensual delight. "Not fully. But I know how to do it."

"Have you set your first coercions? Sways or triggers?"

"No, but I am ready to learn."

"Good. Very good. Up to this point, I have subverted the guard a few at a time. Now I want all of them. Westli can give them to me. With the guard in my hands it will be time to kill a god."

Philomea shivered, her body writhing in her chair. "Yes. Can I taste his blood?"

"I will give you bottles of it."

"What about us?" Elomina demanded. "You killed Solance and now I have no one

to drink from."

"We will find you someone. Have you tasted your betrothed?"

Elomina flushed guiltily and Galee laughed. "But I was drinking mainly from Solance," Elomina protested.

"Darguarite?"

Darguarite squirmed in her chair. "Cadmean's blood is warm and rich."

Galee laughed again. "Then it is definitely time to teach you." She spread her hands and fluttered her fingers. "And, once the wedding is over and Creeya is ours, the one of you who has most pleased me will be given permission to turn her lover."

Sounds of delight rippled through the room.

* * * *

Osterbridge sat with Isen at a small corner café in the Cloverleaf. The owner's daughter had taken their order, but the food had not come yet. A brightly colored cloth covered the table, and Isen's fair skin seemed to glow against it as her arm stretched across it. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers.

This was his special place. The owner and his family knew him well. Yahni, Jajinga, and Terrys had come here with him often, all partnered with someone they were seeing at the time. They had been coming to this café for eight years. Ever since Yahni found it. Osterbridge had long wondered whether the ladies only went out with him because of Yahni, to bask in Yahni's light. It was the first time he could be certain it was purely for himself alone.

A wave of desolation washed over him as he thought about Yahni. It must have shown on his face, because Isen reached across the table with both of her hands and squeezed his fingers. "You're thinking about your friends?"

Osterbridge sucked in a breath and gave a slow nod. "Yes."

"You miss them terribly, I know."

"I was so lonely until I found you. I hardly wanted to go on living..." He gazed into her lovely eyes that always made him think of swans.

Isen pulled his hand to her side of the table and kissed each finger. "I feel as if I should comfort you better. I want to put my arms around you and hold you."

"I like it when you do that." Osterbridge smiled at her, pulling himself together, wanting to be all that he could be.

"It's wonderful being with you," Isen responded, her eyes dancing. "Being with you makes me happy, makes me feel safe."

"I'm glad then." He ran his gaze over her breasts, wondering what they would feel like in his hands. She was so much smaller than he was that Osterbridge felt certain he could cover each of her breasts in his large grasp.

The owner's daughter arrived, placing two platters in the middle of the table, two glasses, a bottle of white wine, and then set the plates and utensils around.

"Thanks, Karimah," Osterbridge said.

The dark girl smiled pleasantly. "If there is anything else you require, call me."

"We will."

The young man withdrew, leaving them alone at the table. Osterbridge served up the rabbit in plum sauce, the side of creamed mushrooms, and opened the bottle of wine. He poured for both of them, while Isen continued to beam at him.

"You'll like this," Osterbridge said. "It was one of Yahni's favorites ... and mine."

Isen took a sip of her wine. "You talk a lot about him. He must have been a very special friend."

"He was. You must have met him. Yahni sat the desk most afternoons. You couldn't miss his eyes. Those extraordinary eyes. His sister has them too."

Isen blinked, her fork pausing over the mushrooms on her plate. "Oh, yes. I remember his eyes."

Osterbridge wondered at the way she hesitated. Those students sixteen years or older, who had been confirmed by the temple, were allowed access to the Guild Wing. Isen had to have met Yahni. "So, do you have a room to yourself at the dorm? Or do you have a roommate?"

"One to myself. It's because I'm one of the special talents." She lowered her eyes and glanced at him between the lashes with a "come hither" smile.

The look she gave him made Osterbridge's loins tighten. He had been taking it slow with her, just a bit of kissing, hand holding, and cuddling. The very last thing he wanted to do was to make a mistake. Osterbridge remembered how easy it had been for him at seventeen to fall in and out of love – the age she was now. Yet, Isen seemed so mature for her age, so different from all the others. He wanted her, wanted to make love to her, wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life with Isen in his arms. Maybe this was the night to ask her, to hold her naked in his arms

while he cherished her body with his own.

He struggled with what to say next and fell silent for a time. They ate slowly, sipped wine, and talked late into the evening. Eventually the owner came out and gave them a look suggesting that he wanted them to leave so that the café could close.

Osterbridge dipped his shoulders at the man and stood up. "I ought to walk you back."

Isen slipped her hand into his. They took the underground route to the school. Few people were about and there were long stretches where it was just the two of them. Osterbridge paused, his hand went out and he tilted Isen's head up. His lips covered hers in a kiss. She trembled and he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close, pressing her body to his.

Isen's hand drifted to his loins, stroking his hardened spear through his pants. "I want you," she murmured. "Tonight. In my bed."

Her words sent a rising spiral of joy and eagerness through Osterbridge. He kissed her again, his tongue pressing past her lips, questing into her mouth for a response. Isen stiffened for an instant and then ran her tongue over his in a clumsy manner.

Osterbridge broke the kiss off. "You've never done that before?"

Isen shook her head. "No."

"You're seventeen? Someone told me you just had a birthday a month back."

Isen looked away from him.

He remembered her reaction to his question about Yahni earlier. "You never met Yahni, did you? What color were his eyes?"

Isen stared at the middle of Osterbridge's chest, her stance shifting uneasily. "Blue. Bright blue."

Osterbridge felt a surge of tension in his body. "Wrong. They were a deep blue-green like chrysocolla stones. No one who ever met him forgot that. Terrys was always bringing young girls to look at his eyes. Considering how pretty you are, she would have dragged you over to meet him at least once."

"I met him. How could I not? I'm seventeen."

"Are you lying to me? I'm going to ask around."

"I'm of age. I'm an adult," Isen responded stubbornly.

"Of age? Of age is fourteen. How old are you? Tell me the truth."

Isen's face screwed up. "I'm fourteen."

Osterbridge spun around, putting his back to her. "Gods, and I was going to seduce you."

"I want to make love to you," Isen said. "I'm taking the contraception herbs ... I've been taking them since the day after the warehouse. That's how long I've wanted you."

"And you're a virgin."

"Of course."

"Well that makes it even worse."

Tears welled up in Isen's eyes. "What do you mean worse?"

"I'm twenty-six years old, Isen. I'm too old for you."

"Why should all these things matter? She clutched at his dress tunic, trying to pull him closer, to make him look at her.

Osterbridge tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. "Because I'm in love you."

Isen released his tunic and stepped around in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Old enough to fight and die, old enough to love," Isen quoted the Sharani proverb at him that she had picked up from Jysy.

He grabbed her hand and strode off with her, practically dragging Isen along. "You're not Sharani, so don't quote that at me."

"Will I see you again? And I don't mean in a group." She stumbled, struggling to keep up with him as his hand on her arm kept throwing her off balance.

"I don't know, Isen. I just don't know if I can cope with this."

"I knew you'd act this way," Isen snarled suddenly. "That's why I lied to you."

"Well you were right. I'm going to drop you off at the dorm and leave."

"Why? I'm not a child."

Osterbridge stopped at the stairs to the dormitory and faced her with a pained expression. "Isen, I don't want to be a young girl's first love."

She threw an angry glare at him. "Why not?"

"Because myn your age fall in and out of love too easily. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to be hurt by you. I want permanence, not a casual fuck."

Isen bristled, her fingers curling into fists and she hit him in the chest. "I wasn't offering you that!"

"I didn't say you were." Osterbridge ran his hands through his hair, feeling deeply frustrated. "Your first sexual experience should be with someone your own age."

"I don't want someone my own age. The youths my age bore me to tears. I'm too mature for them. I want you."

Osterbridge shook his head back and forth for a moment. "Isen ... Isen. I don't think this would work. Have you any idea how many women I've had over the years?"

Isen lifted her head high, tilting it to an arrogant angle. "Five or six?"

"At least that. I might want things in bed that you couldn't cope with."

"If you're trying to frighten me, forget it. I've read all the naughty books." She gave him a cheeky smile.

Osterbridge grinned back at her. "You would."

"Besides, I wrote my mother about you. She has no problems with the difference in our ages."

Osterbridge exhaled heavily. "It isn't your mother I'm worried about. It's me."

"Are you still going to walk me to the Training Grounds tomorrow? I'll go alone if you don't."

He lifted an eyebrow at her. "You have me over a barrel, don't you?"

The cheeky smile came back as she said, "Yes."

"I'll be there."

Isen put her hand on his arm. "Will you hold my hand tomorrow?"

Osterbridge's face clouded over. "All I said was I'd walk you to class. That's it. I don't want to talk about it any more."

Then he turned his back on her and stalked off, his shoulders hunched.

* * * *

Bryndel spent most of each day with Talons: It was the only way to keep Lord Wrathscar from screaming about Edouina. Bryndel had, also, begun having sex with Talons again. He always apologized to Talons first. Then, because of the way her belly had swollen, Edouina would often help Talons onto her side and support her while Bryndel did what he had to do. Talons bore it in silence, as if she were made of wood, opening her legs, and turning her face away, which transformed it into a distasteful act that was little more than masturbation for Bryndel.

He had told Edouina that *they* would ask him about it and that *they* would know if he was lying. But he would not tell them who *they* were. Whenever Bryndel referred to them there was a palpable aura of terror about him. If they tried to force the knowledge from him, they would rip his mind apart and that could well set his father off, and have far reaching effects they were not willing to risk. So Edouina and Dynarien decided not to push it, not wanting to risk triggering another suicide attempt from him. It frustrated them.

A tentative kind of friendship slowly developed between Dynarien and Bryndel over the weeks following his attempted suicide. Dynarien accepted the fact that Bryndel had tried to take his own life rather than become the instrument of harm to Talons. But neither did he, nor Edouina, nor the knights leave Bryndel alone with her, knowing the vampire's coercions still resided within him. When Dynarien had tried to persuade him to let him remove the coercions, Bryndel had been seized with panic and fled. After that Dynarien gave up.

That morning in late summer, Edouina positioned Talons for Bryndel, propping her with pillows. Bryndel sat beside them on the bed, nude, hard, and ready. Edouina sucked in a deep breath. It had become very difficult to watch, knowing that Talons did not want him touching her, but refusal brought a backlash from Wrathscar, Galee, and the Grand Master.

"You'll be gentle with her?" Edouina asked Bryndel.

"Yes, of course I will."

"Talons, will you be okay if I leave?"

"Yes," Talons said in a small voice, with a whiff of sorrow that only Edouina caught.

"Then I have things to do. I'll come back later."

Edouina left the bedroom. She went to the cabinets in the parlor, intending to make tea, but reached for the bottle of Dragonsbreath instead. *Our attempt at a triad isn't very successful. It's all rather lame. We don't want him.*

Isen and Alora watched her from the sofa. Osterbridge had not been seen in several

days, and Edouina wondered what was up with him, since he and Isen had been all but inseparable for months. Now, she rarely saw them together.

The scent of roses filled the parlor and she turned, holding the bottle of whiskey in one hand and a small glass in the other. She saw Dynarien standing behind her.

"Don't go in," Edouina told him. "Bryndel's with her."

Dynarien's expression hardened and then saddened. "Talons," he sighed her name.

"If you want to talk, lets go to the study."

He gave a quick nod and followed Edouina, leaving Isen and Alora in the parlor. Dynarien settled into a large chair and folded his legs beneath him like an over-sized child. "She should have been mine, Edouina. We love each other. I wanted to marry her."

Edouina raised an eyebrow at that. "Honey, I thought you weren't the marrying kind."

"I told my sire I had finally fallen in love. That was more than a year ago. Before all of this... I wanted then to marry her. I didn't know about the untrained by-kyndi ... that she was afraid of hurting me. You can't kill me that way. Had she told me, I could have allayed her fears, and she would have been mine before Bryndel ever entered the situation. Those are my children."

Edouina moved to sit at his feet. "Surely you had some time together?"

Dynarien looked up and his face had tears streaming down it. "No. She only let me touch her once, and she made it a cold coupling. Said it was an act of vengeance on Bryndel, not an act of love."

"Then, honey, we've all had our acts of vengeance on Bryndel. I used the bi-kyndi to fry his seed the first night I returned. He'll never produce children."

"Does he know?"

Edouina shook her head. "No. And no one's going to tell him."

Dynarien sucked in a breath. "Knowing he's there ... knowing what they're doing ... it should be me in her bed. Not him."

"I agree. But it is far too late for that. We need to worry about trying to keep her alive. Then maybe the marriage can be set aside somehow."

"I want to take her to Imralon and have my sire look at her. Perhaps he could find a way to fight this poison. But Hadjys will not let me remove her from this realm for

even a moment. He fears I will not bring her back."

"Then we have to keep trying in other ways."

Dynarien went silent, regretting that he had let his feelings out. For months he had not brought up the subject of kissing or touching to Talons. He loved her, in a pure, simple fashion, and if she wanted him to touch her she would ask. The time for games had passed. He no longer, even jokingly, climbed under her blankets as he had done with frequency when he first met her. Sometimes he kissed her hair, held her hand, and less frequently she would find comfort in his holding her. But it never went beyond that. The merry rakehell had become neither.

"We must find the master vampire," Dynarien said finally. "It must be a royal. A Lemyari."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know. All the ones in the warehouses turned out to be lesser bloods."

"Something big is going on." Dynarien wrapped his legs across Edouina's waist, caressing her hair and she leaned back against him.

"Bigger than anyone suspects, I think." Edouina closed her eyes a moment, shivering. "I heard from Eshraf today ... Channadar doesn't want it known, so we can't talk to him about it."

"About what?"

"Channadar was attacked and wounded. Sa'necari, royals, and lesser bloods. Eshraf wouldn't give me the details. That's why Channadar's holding private court, invitation only, and only rarely goes to the Grand Central Hall."

Dynarien ran his tongue over his lips, and then chewed on the lower one. "Someone's building an army."

"Sounds like it, but we've got no proof. No one can find this army. Not even the catkin." Edouina turned in his grip and looked up into his eyes. "Do it with me, honey," she drawled sensuously. "It would make me feel so much better. Take my mind off everything."

"Where?"

Edouina smiled then, and her entire face brightened. "Here on the floor? In the guest bedroom?"

Dynarien lifted her in his arms, and carried her to the bedroom.

* * * *

Arruth's death had devastated Jysy. None of them, not even Dynarien, could persuade her to go visit her sisters, where they believed she could find solace. She had been excused from classes for the season, and everyone expected her to spend her free time with Talons and her friends being comforted. Instead she spent nearly every waking hour at the training grounds, working hard, and expressing her anger and grief by fighting and learning the arts of war from Yukiah. The knights walked her wherever she needed or wanted to go, fearing that Arruth's murderer would come after Jysy also.

Yukiah understood grief, having lost two brothers to a sa'necari when he was Jysy's age and three brothers and a sister to the vampires. He worked her hard, taking over as her sponsor, walking her to and from the various practice fields, predicting to all who would listen that he had another Talons coming up fast.

He sat at the benches watching Jysy work through an elaborate sword dance with a pair of short swords and caught a glimpse of a student settling near to him from the corner of his eyes. Yukiah knew who it would be. Isen had taken to following him around ever since the warehouse episode, and even more so since Arruth's death. He wondered at that. Perhaps she simply felt safer around him. It had happened before. He had also had students fall in love with him and behave in a similar fashion, but he always put a firm stop to that nonsense. It might be well to stop Isen also. Yet something about her drew him strangely, filling him with reluctance to chase her off. She reminded him strongly of another mon, especially her eyes. He knew very little about her.

He drew the locket from beneath his shirt and opened it. He stared for a brief moment at his wife's picture, thinking about how much he missed her, the way that her eyes always made him think of swans. Yukiah closed it and returned the locket to its hiding place against his skin.

"Hello, Isen. Aren't you finished for the day?"

"Yes, Master Yukiah."

"Then what are you doing here?"

Isen gave him a long smile and then dropped her head. "I just felt like it."

"I'd almost say you were stalking me," Yukiah kept his tone bantering.

Isen's head came up and she looked shocked. "Oh no, Master Yukiah. I would never do anything like that."

"Isen, there are better things for you to do with your free time. I know your village gives you a stipend. So you're not broke."

"I'm waiting for friends."

Yukiah nodded. She always had an excuse for being around him, but sometimes she showed up in the oddest places, like the inner recesses of the priests section of the temple grounds and the common room in the teachers annex to the Guild student wing. She was watching him. She had to be. "Isen, it seems every time I turn around, there you are."

Isen grinned, made an even sillier face, and said, "I'm protecting you."

Yukiah snorted and gave her a good-natured slap on the back. "Of course. I should have thought of it." What a strange thing to come out of her mouth. Perhaps it was time to hold a talk with these young knights of Eshraf's and explain just what they were up against. Three of them had already died and more would, if this proved to be anything like the last time.

"I haven't seen you with Osterbridge much lately."

Isen's expression turned unhappy. "He found out I'm only fourteen and he thinks he's too old for me."

"Ahhhh. Well, you're of age. He's a good mon. You want me to have a talk with him?"

Isen brightened. "Would you?"

"Sure." Yukiah tousled her hair.

"Thank you, Master Yukiah." She gave him a kiss on the cheek and scampered off.

Yukiah watched her go, and glancing beyond her, he saw Jimi, Alora, and Osterbridge coming toward her. Well, at least Isen wasn't walking around alone. Isen was a strange one, gifted and mature beyond her years. Yukiah decided that he would have that talk with Osterbridge, just as he had promised. They were good for each other. Osterbridge didn't seem so lonely and consumed by grief when he was with her. He would do what he could to convince Osterbridge that it was proper for him to be in love with Isen, to express his love for her. The same age difference existed between himself and his wife.

"Jynny, where are you now, when I miss you so terribly," he murmured softly to himself.

* * * *

"I want the other one," Lord Wrathscar told Galee, while they lay together in his large bed. He had drawn the bed curtains, closing out the midday sun. And it felt like a comfortable crypt. "The sister." His voice sounded hungry, almost starving. He

had begun to display more odd symptoms that troubled Galee. She had Meilurk and his companions watching Wrathscar's daughters for signs of it, but so far none of them showed the slightest symptoms.

Galee kept him well fed, but he had become finicky. She would destroy him once the legalities involving Talons were satisfied. Perhaps Bryndel would make a more successful turning. She had prepared him in a gradual fashion, and could control him. There was a far smaller chance of his going rogue as his father was obviously doing.

"They never leave her alone, Wrathscar. It's too dangerous," Galee responded. The Master of Blood had brought her several wagons of goods, which Brandrahoon had retrieved from her cache. Galee wished Brandrahoon had been more discreet and globed them; but Brandrahoon was jealous of his globes and refused to share. Nonetheless Galee was close to making her move against the yuwenghau, and would not allow Wrathscar to ruin it. She had the Master of Blood's services hired for a few more weeks and did not intend to waste those.

"More dangerous than taking the heir? I liked the taste of her too."

"There are other Sharani in the city. Take one of them." Galee frowned. Wrathscar's obsession with Arruth's bloodline, made him difficult to handle. It happened frequently with newborns. He had tried unsuccessfully to Dance Arruth as Belyla had Yahni. The girl had eluded him most of the time by taking refuge in Talons' shielded rooms where he could not reach her. Had their initial relationship been one of seduction rather than rape, he might have been able to place a bonding in her mind for the Dance while he was learning to use his powers. By the time he had mastered them enough to take her, she had learned to flee the moment his hold loosened. So it never became a true Dance. Now Yahni – that had been a lovely, long, slow Dance into death until Belyla betrayed them. *Perhaps after this is done, when my dance with the Grand Master is done – I will dance Mohanja, if I have not killed him first.*

"She has other sisters." Wrathscar made a moaning, hungry noise.

"They are in route to Rowanhart on the northwest coast. They may even be there all ready. They are out of your reach," she snapped, wondering if they had arrived yet. Galee had heard nothing in weeks. It was almost as if someone were counseling the Guild to withhold information from her. If that turned out to be true, someone would die.

Wrathscar thought about that. "Maybe in the fall, after the wedding, I could go to Rowanhart and get them."

"Forget them," Galee growled. "There are things for you to do here."

"I want the sister," he began again. "Or Leeza. Get me Leeza."

Galee snorted. *Rogue child of my blood, soon you will no longer be needed, and then I will eat you.*

"I'm hungry."

"I can have Meilurk take you on a hunt."

"I don't want to hunt," Wrathscar said petulantly. "I want the sister."

Galee straightened with a sigh and stroked his arm. "Be good and once we control the Guild, I'll have all the sisters rounded up for your pleasures."

Wrathscar settled on the edge of the bed with his fangs down. "Yes, we could do that."

"For now, will you be patient and go hunt with Meilurk?"

"Yes, I will. When I catch a mon, I'll pretend it's one of the sisters."

"Good idea. You do that. I have matters to attend to."

* * * *

Alora had moved from the student dorms into a suite on the west wing to become Jysy's roommate: they wanted both youths to make a fresh start in a different suite with fewer memories and they did not want them alone. Dynarien warded and shielded it as he had for Talons. She spent every free moment with Jysy or watching her at the training grounds. She blamed herself for Arruth's death. She had treated Arruth like a Creeyan woman, never suspecting how much more it took to damage a Sharani's psyche. There had been so many clues as to what was happening to the girl, yet she had dismissed them, insisting on taking Arruth with her when she went to hear the verdict on Edouina, thinking that all of Arruth's hiding and fears were excessive. She thought she was doing the same thing as Dynarien when the mage took the sisters on picnics or to the music chamber. Dynarien could have protected them and it had been hubris to think she could do the same.

Everyone seems less than happy lately, Alora thought, as she changed into her riding clothes for her equestrian class. Today she would be using a light lance to spear hoops while riding at a full gallop.

A familiar knock summoned her to the door, and she let Isen and Osterbridge in. They were dressed in their workout clothes and Isen had a silly grin on her face.

Osterbridge gave Isen a fond glance and then smirked. "Isen says she can knock me in the dirt. You want to watch?"

"I'd love to. But I have class. Did you come all this way just to invite me?"

Alora grinned widely. She knew how much Osterbridge had enjoyed working out with his slain friends, and she had suggested this approach to Isen when it looked like the two of them were breaking up. There were still some cracks in the relationship. They no longer sat cuddled up at the student meetings, but she had caught sight of a bit of handholding again.

"We were gathering an audience," Isen said, with a cheeky grin.

"I put in for a transfer, at Yukiah's suggestion," Osterbridge said. "When my leave's up, I'll be working for him."

"Then we'll be seeing a lot more of you, Ceejorn. That's good," Alora said.

"I'm glad you think so. You may not after a few weeks with me." Osterbridge scratched the back of his head, a rueful bemusement on his face. "Yukiah's not easy to disagree with. When he sets out to make his points, he certainly makes them."

"Come on." Isen grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door. "The others will be waiting."

"I'll walk with you as far as the Training Grounds," Alora said.

* * * *

Dynarien walked the gardens with Edouina as the shadows lengthened in the late afternoon. The days were cooling toward autumn and the evenings were becoming chill. Wanting to look more like a mage, he had begun to carry a staff on their walks. He had several that he had fetched from his cottage, and a special one he had borrowed without permission from his sister's hoards. The one he carried then he had illusioned slightly. While Dynarien did not believe anyone in the compound knew enough lore to recognize that staff, neither did he want to underestimate their undead opponent. Edouina had seen the staff in its full glory and been amazed by it. She could feel the power and energy coiled around it even though she was not a mage and had not the least leanings in that direction.

It was six feet of hard rock maple, its butt sheathed in nine inches of diamond that had been magically grown onto it and incised with Kalirioni runes. The entire length of it was intricately runed amid vines and leaves in jeweled inlays. The upper body, head, and wings of a pegasi topped it, so solidly done in heavy burnished kenda'ryl that you could strike with that end also. It was both a master's and a warrior's staff. He had no right to carry it and could only partially access its power. It was the staff of Isranon the Dawnhand, one of his half brothers. Dawnhand had been brutally murdered by one of their siblings who had gone over to the dark side. The murderer stole the staff and then Dynarien's sister, Dynanna, stole it back.

Edouina's eyes kept going to the staff, seeing it as it really was. "Honey, when you go for a staff, you really go for a staff."

Dynarien blushed. "I don't know what we might really be facing... I went for the strongest."

"What we are facing... We've had two weeks without an incident and that just makes me more nervous."

"It's only a matter of time, before the vampires get hungry enough to start breaking into homes," Dynarien remarked. "A sa'necari or a Lemyari can enter uninvited and once inside they can invite the lesser bloods."

The city and the palace compound were on edge. No one traveled alone any longer, not even Guildsmyn. Every business closed at dusk, including the taverns. Disappearances had dwindled. Yet that only left Dynarien feeling edgy. He felt as if he were sitting on a volcano ready to explode beneath him. He could almost taste the ashes in the air.

"Every where I go," Edouina muttered, "I'm knee-deep in cats and dogs. The dog-handlers were concerned that the vampires might try to strike at their dogs, so they're living inside now, even going to dinner with their guys. Making things worse, if the bloody dogs so much as curl their lips at someone, the poor slob's arrested and checked out by a priest."

Dynarien laughed. "If their cats don't like you, you can't get through the door."

The vampires in the city had moved their resting places and hunting grounds, so another hunt was planned. This time, the knights would not be involved. Once the danger had been proven, the guard and the Guildsmyn took over, using dogs and shifters – lycans mostly. There were several lycans serving within the Guild in Ishladrim castle under Queiggy in research. The Guild was one of the extremely few places willing to give lycans a high quality education, because of the very low literacy rate among the wolf clans. As a result, those that the Guild took in were extremely grateful, even those that did not make it beyond the non-guild level of training at the school, and they stayed on, working in whatever capacity they were allowed.

One interesting thing had come of the warehouse discovery and battle. Ever since the first hunt, the knights were now referred to as "those students with the wonderful, trained, vampire-sniffing cats." People who wanted their cats trained quickly besieged the knights with their pets. With a little secret help from Lo'Ah, they were managing to turn house pets into hunters and guardians. Then Dynarien played his last catkin-card, bringing in two prides of shivari – tiger-catkin – and turning them loose in the city. They looked like tiger-marked house pets, but changed into tigers when necessity demanded. There were no longer any stray cats in the city; suddenly every cat had a home.

* * * *

Mohanja eased his weight into the big chair at Queiggy's table, and then used his hands to bring his leg up on to the stool. He used his halberd to walk most days, since it hurt his pride less. But on bad days, when he had pushed the leg too far, only the crutch would do, so he tried not to over tire himself and set the leg off.

Queiggy tilted his head, leaning a little like a concerned wide-eyed child. "It will never be right?"

Mohanja shook his head. "Too deep. Bitten ligaments. If I could have stayed off it, maybe? But I've got people dying all around me. I have a list." He worked the many times folded papers from his pocket and gave them to Queiggy. "There are two copies of my list. Pass me one back."

Queiggy separated the sheets, handing one across the table to Mohanja. The mon had drawn the lists up under little headings and one of those was "Regency: find evidence against Takhalme" followed by three lines of possibilities. "Mohanja," Queiggy's voice went very small. "I'm not certain about this one. You are suggesting the Guild overthrow the Grand Master?"

"I am suggesting that if worst comes to worst, we should. That I should."

"The very tenets of our faith go against this."

"The tenets of our faith were not designed to cope with what we face. I am not going to hurt him. Merely remove him from power if nothing else can be done. I have loved the mon as if he were my own father. But you have seen the letters he sent, discrediting his own heir, his own dying heir. I refuse to see her children fall under the sway of the Wrathscars or Galee." Mohanja placed both his hands on the table, curling them slowly into fists as he fought with his inner demons.

"Furthermore, I do not believe he is in his right mind. There is a bottle that he sips from constantly in his rooms, like a sot with his liquor. Solance provided it. One of the new healers Galee brought in gets it for him now. I don't trust any of the palace healers except Sha. Takhalme has become an addict."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Pollendine and fire poppy and several other things. The color is off. So is the smell."

"Get me some?"

"Tonight. Now let's get on with the rest. Tell me again. Yahni said that Wrathscar was poisoning the heir. Yet the only mon who can find it in her body is the Willodarian. We need three healers for corroboration. We do not have that."

Queiggy considered a moment. "No, but we found the book several weeks ago that Belyla and Yahni took from Wrathscar. It was written in a language from before the Burning Age. One which I could read. Unfortunately, it was so badly damaged by the waters and filth of the sewers that I could not make out much of it. I could not identify the writer."

"You could read it?"

"Yes. And when I told you I had warded your chambers you took my word for it out of trust without asking how I had done so. You know that we have a yuwenghau, you said."

"I guessed it, from various little things." Mohanja's interest perked and he leaned closer to Queiggy.

"You are an intelligent mon, Mohanja. You must have been putting it together for years."

"Do I get to meet him? Will you trust me in that much?"

"You are looking at him." Queiggy extended his hand, allowing just his fingers to change to their twiggy state. "This is why I dare not leave the Wing. I have woven my tree gift throughout the Wing to prevent the undead and other evils from entering. Had I the power of my father Teakamon, I could ward the entire palace and force the evil ones from its precincts. Alas, that I do not. We have another yuwenghau aiding us. One more powerful than I and different, but only I can ward the Wing. I was here when the palace was built. I helped build it. I am the only one who knows the secret passages. They are magically keyed so knowing where they are is not enough."

"You can show these to me?"

"When I am ready, yes. Let's talk more." Queiggy dipped his pen, making some swift notations. "The book does establish that Lemyari exist. It is clearly a Lemyari journal. While we lost both the Guild and the healer records on the Lemyari victims, Sha was able to crystal a sample from Solance's body before it was stolen confirming that he was a Lemyari victim as well. And, of course, we have the remains of one dead Lemyari, courtesy of Aramyn."

"I believe the Master of Blood has currently taken up residence in Havensword."

"Why?" Queiggy paused in his notations, dripping ink on the paper in spreading splotch. He noticed and retired the pen hastily to the holder after cleaning it.

"Belyla Wrathscar is screaming about him."

"I had stopped listening to her. I will listen tonight. She is tragic, but no less

dangerous for it. I believe Galee intends to use her against the Kjartens."

"I have asked them to leave the palace and the city, return to their estates at Mistdale. They refuse. Instead they are gathering their clan into their mansion here."

"Waiting for a fight. Typical Sharani."

"I don't want more deaths than I can avoid."

"Do not underestimate them, Mohanja. You see a few soft males and a lot of hard women. You acknowledge the Guild in their ranks and then pass over it. Let me remind you that the Sharani are the Tinkerer's toys. They know far better than you or I how to deal with these creatures. They held against the Waejontori for four thousand years and beat them."

Mohanja rubbed the corners of his eyes. "It does not matter, I cannot stop them. I have no authority over Lord Kjarten." He had not missed Queiggy's reaction to the mon's name and asked again, "What is the Master of Blood?"

Queiggy looked into Mohanja's eyes as if seeking a way out of answering and sighed when he saw none. "What. That is exactly the question. No one knows. He takes many forms, many guises. Always passing for human, selling cursed items to innocents, spell components to practitioners of the dark arts, hellblades, and such. He collects things. He also makes them. It is said that Master Blood can create or smith items that can slay yuwenghau, placing the deathtree rune of the hellgods on them."

"Is such a thing possible?" Mohanja sounded disturbed; he did not want this creature coming after Queiggy.

"I'm afraid it is. He always leaves a string of slain yuwenghau in his wake. He's a dark assassin. One of the best. A mercenary. An expert in occult poisons. If he's here, it's because Galee intends for me and the other yuwenghau to die."

"Then the Guild must find him first."

Both myn went suddenly silent. A professional yuwenghau-slayer. Mohanja felt a tremor of concern ripple through him at the thought. Blood was after Queiggy. Mohanja covered the mon's thin hand with his huge one. "I will not allow him to reach you." Mohanja's eyes narrowed dangerously and a hard twist of unexpected bitterness came on his lips. Injured, and without full command of the Guild's three branches, there was a limit to what he could achieve. But he had to try. "I will not let him get you."

Queiggy studied his expression and shook his head. "Be careful, Mohanja. Be very careful." They sat for a few more minutes, and then Queiggy asked suddenly, "What would you do if a prince of the branch clan suddenly appeared to claim the throne?"

Would you support him?"

Mohanja leaned forward. "You mean the tales are true?"

"Answer my question first."

"I would support him. Assuming of course that Eshraf could verify his claim."

Queiggy's eyes went distant. "Now swear you will not speak of this without my permission."

"By the Book and the Blade, Queiggy, I swear it." Mohanja felt more hope rising within him.

"Yes, it exists. However, the last prince of the blood is in great danger, and I must try to protect him as well."

"Where is he? Who is he?"

Queiggy sighed. "I cannot tell you. Even he does not know. The information was taken from him so that he would not accidentally reveal himself. There are only two people who can release his memories."

Mohanja caught an edge in Queiggy's voice and suddenly he was certain that the prince was in Havensword, possibly even within the castle itself.

* * * *

Jysy dreamed of Arruth.

They sat together on the old bed they had shared in the rundown house at Armaten. Jysy found it hard to look at her, for Arruth's body was the way the knights had found it at the training grounds. One of her breasts had been bitten so many times that the skin on top of it had torn loose and flopped forward over the nipple. Her nose was shattered and some of her fingers and most of her toes were missing. Her loins and thighs were thickly coated with oozing male juices and blood. There were gaping wounds in her arms and legs.

"Talons told us no kissing," Arruth said, in a hollow voice as if her mind was not completely present, but coming from a troubling distance. "Creeya isn't Shaurone. But I didn't listen. One day, I kissed him. He started taking me all the time. Some times he had some of his soldiers do it, watched, and gave them pointers. He said he intended to see how long it took for the kyndi to break and my belly swell. I couldn't avoid him. I couldn't tell Talons because, after all, I broke the rules. Then that vampire turned him. I don't know who she is. He started feeding on me as well as shoving—" Arruth began to cry, an eerie wailing sound that raised the hairs on Jysy's neck. "Shoving his bloody fucking rod into me. He kept saying it

was all my fault because I kissed him first."

"Who is he, Arruth? Who is he?" Jysy demanded desperately, her eyes filling.

But Arruth only wailed.

Jysy woke with a scream. Alora lit the lamp, moved to Jysy's bed, and held her, rocking.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ARRESTED

Bryndel lifted the chimney from the lamp and lit it, turning the wick up. The day had been remarkably pleasant. He had taken Talons flowers and harassed a bowl of stew down her. Edouina had then gone to the Music Chamber with him for dinner. People were starting to talk to him again. On the way home, she had seduced him in the bushes near the library. He had never done it like that before, his heart racing with the fear of discovery. Bryndel felt replete and happy. He replaced the chimney and turned. His heart jumped into his throat. Galee sat on the window seat.

All his joy dissolved into terror. "Leave me alone, Galee, please. Please, I'm begging you, leave me alone. I can't take any more. I just can't."

"Poor, pathetic, little Bryndel. Oh, poor baby," she said, her voice oozing with mock sweetness and utter contempt.

Bryndel collapsed on the floor, pushing himself into a corner where he balled up, crying. He saw Yahni Kjarten's dead face as his body lay in state. He saw Belyla's expression when she took Yahni in the throat, worrying him like a dog with a rat. He wanted to scream.

Galee squatted in front of him, stroking his head. "I hope you're enjoying your dying bride-to-be. Get the most of her while you can, Bryndel."

"Do you enjoy tormenting me, Galee? Like you did with Belyla and Yahni? Is that what this is about?" Bryndel could not think.

"Maybe I should take you to visit your sister? Would you like to kiss Belyla? I'm very certain that Belyla would like to kiss you. She is getting very, very hungry. I have her locked in the caverns beneath the palace." Galee's fangs descended and she ran her tongue over them suggestively. "When's she hungry enough, I'll take her to visit Lord Kjarten's estates. It's true what they say of the obsession of the newborn. She'll simply love them to death. They will all taste like her beloved Yahni. The ghost of Belyla Wrathscar. What a lovely conceit."

"What do you want?" Bryndel could barely get the words out. His sphincters tightened, threatening to let go as he watched her tongue slipping along her fangs – he had never seen them look so large before. She kept licking her lips, which had curled back from her teeth: Bryndel could not take his eyes from them.

"Actually, a lot of people are looking a little too closely at your father right now. Some even wonder if he murdered that girl. It's just a short glance further to me. I've decided to give them something else to think about. To put them off the scent."

She seized Bryndel by the hair, twisting his head around to expose his throat. Then she turned his head back again with the dispassionate gaze of someone contemplating a meal.

Bryndel realized, in a sudden rush of knowledge, what she intended. "No. No." Warmth trickled down his leg as, no longer able to control his terror, he wet himself.

Galee jerked him backwards, pinning him effortlessly. She struck hard, driving her fangs savagely into his neck.

Bryndel screamed briefly and fainted.

* * * *

Mohanja leaned on his pike, feeling his leg start to throb, and trying to ignore it as he listened to Wrathscar shouting in the aisle between the two rows of councilors' tables before the dais. It had been just over a month since the last one of Wrathscar's episodes in the council chambers, and Mohanja had a bad feeling about this one. He glanced at the Grand Master and saw how tired the old man looked. Worse than ever. Whatever was wrong with him, the healers couldn't find it anymore than they could find what was wrong with the heir. Mohanja wished his master would allow that Willodarian mage to have a look at him, but Takhalme refused.

"I want those vampires found and I want them found now!" Lord Wrathscar paced back and forth, shaking his fists and raging. He was in rare form, having fed well and been properly prepared by Galee. "If the servants had not heard him scream and answered, my only son and heir would be dead."

A single chair sat empty: Lord Derryl was away, having ostensibly taken his wives hunting at a nearby lodge he owned; but Mohanja suspected he was actually trying to remove his loved ones to safety. Mohanja did not blame him, although he feared that he would find himself in dire straits without him. They had never needed Derryl more than now. If only Channadar had not lost his seat on the council three years ago because of that incident with Galee.

Takhalme nodded at Wrathscar. Mohanja thought the Grand Master looked old and tired, and noticed that his hair had long streaks of white that had not been there last summer. He worried, knowing that these scenes of Wrathscar's always left the

Grand Master impossibly weary, as if the lord's anger sucked the already waning life and energy from him. Takhalme had begun to make his decisions out of a simple desire to get matters over with and go back to his rooms, rather than to reach a good conclusion.

"As do I," the Grand Master said.

"Perhaps they don't want the wedding to take place, my lord," Galee said, her voice soft, suggestive, yet loud enough to be heard by all. "Perhaps, your son's suicide attempt a few months ago was a vampire's work. They get inside people's minds – make them do things they do not wish to do."

A shocked murmur ran around the chamber. The council was already jumping at noises in the night and starting at shadows on the lawns at midday. They were turning into huddling rabbits waiting to be eaten and fully expecting it to happen. None of them had any faith left in the ability of the Guild to protect them. The bodies of two Guildsmyn who had gone hunting for vampires had been found the next day nailed to the doors of the temple itself. Everything seemed to be falling apart. Everyone was frightened.

Galee soaked it up. The council could be stampeded now. They were ripe for taking. Her only disappointment was that she had not yet found a way for her pawns to break into the temple, desecrate the altar, and murder the Patriarch. That would come eventually. *And Channadar and Derryl. Let us not forget Channadar and Derryl*, she thought.

"I want that Hornbow woman and that foreign mage of hers taken in hand. I want them locked up and examined by the priests," Lord Wrathscar demanded.

Mohanja felt a thread of tension. He could see from the expression on Takhalme's face that his master thought this a far more reasonable demand than Wrathscar's previous one. After all, if they were innocent, the priests would release them. And it had been the priests who had come to Edouina's defense. Who could really object? They could send them to the temple and wash their hands of the whole business. And if they were vampires? Well, then life would quickly go back to normal and all would be well. Wrathscar would be satisfied and there would be no more of his screaming fits on the subject of Edouina and Dynarien that made everyone present cringe. Mohanja could see the reasoning in every line of his master's face. And it was wrong somehow. But where?

"Are there any objections?" Takhalme asked his councilors.

Mohanja could see that Takhalme hoped there would be none, that they could have it over with and he could rest. It was always so hard for his master to think when he felt this drained. When no one replied, Takhalme turned to Mohanja Raam. "Make it so. Have the captain of my guard arrest them."

That was when it came to him, and Mohanja knew where it was all wrong. But he had to obey. The Jedruan left to fetch the captain of the guard to see the order carried out. However, as soon as he left the guard, he signed to his shadows and found an alcove just off the second floor landing where they would not be seen. Aramyn, his nondescript face made even more prosaic by a bit of workingman stubble, and Hofkahn, a youth barely past his schooling, slipped in beside Mohanja.

"Aramyn, this went down too easily," Mohanja told them. "It makes me nervous. Go to the temple and make certain they arrived. If they did not, then go to Queiggy and see that they are found. Go together. I want no unprotected Guildsmyn. We've already had too many deaths."

"That leaves you unguarded," Aramyn said.

"I'll chance it. I'll return to the council chambers and remain there either until the session ends or someone comes to escort me to my apartments at which time I'll plead my leg pains me and depart."

"Your will, lord."

* * * *

Jysy answered the knock by opening the door without asking who was there first. There seemed to be little to fear with the guards stationed outside. The Captain of the Guard pushed in with six others, shoving the girl aside. Jysy half-staggered, regained her balance, and moved away from them. She pressed herself into a corner near the pantry door behind which her sister had once hidden.

"What is it?" Edouina looked up. She sat in a chair at the table with Talons, where she had been reading aloud to her. They had all been passing the book around, taking turns. Talons did not feel like participating, but she was enjoying listening to the others. It was one of those rare days when she felt like getting up. Some of the guards, crowding in behind the captain stared at Talons. Her haggard face definitely suggested her as a vampire's victim: she looked half dead.

Dynarien sat on the couch beside Alora, as they waited for their turn with the book.

"Edouina Hornbow? Mage Dynarien?" The captain asked. "We are here to arrest you both on a charge of vampirism. You are to be given into the custody of the High Temple, to be held for twenty-four hours or until the priests can establish your innocence or guilt."

"The temple this time. So be it." Edouina stood and turned around, putting her hands behind her back. They tied her.

"No," Talons protested, rising to her feet, anger lending her a momentary strength. "Don't take them. They haven't done anything. I order you to leave here immediately."

Let them go."

"It's all right, honey," Edouina drawled. "Eshraf will not let this get out of hand."

The captain shook his head at Talons. "The Grand Master's orders. You cannot countermand them."

Talons sank back onto her chair, a wave of dizziness making her head ache. Her eyes filled. "This is not right."

Alora moved to her side, holding her. "I know it isn't," she murmured in Talons' ear. "Eshraf won't let anything happen to them." Jysy had backed close to them and Alora whispered in her ear. "Get on to your classes, but tell Yukiah when you get there."

Jysy nodded and ran out alone for the first time in weeks.

The guards produced several long, braided leather strips dyed crimson, a livid-flesh purple, and coal black. Dynarien suspected it to be a kind of spellcord. He had not yet encountered a spellcord that could hold him, so he was not worried. Things that held mages did not work well on a yuwenghau like himself. He let them tie him.

The Captain parted with the guards in the hall, going back to other duties. Edouina wondered at that. The expression on his face suggested he was washing his hands of the matter. They marched them out of the palace, with ropes tied to their bonds and held in the hands of soldiers, crossbows leveled at their backs. Should they try to run or jerk the ropes from their captors' hands, they could catch a deadly bolt in their backs. Edouina had the strangest feeling that the guards were hoping they would try to flee. But that made no sense. Then instead of turning left toward the temple, they turned a hard right, heading into the dense undergrowth beside the training field where the Guildsmyn practiced stalking. She realized that her instincts had been right.

"They're going to kill us," Edouina hissed. "Do something."

Dynarien called power, only to feel it recoil back at him. He tried to reach for his sister and again felt the recoil. He tried to snap them and they would not break. "I can't," he said, his eyes desperate.

"Then we die."

* * * *

Philomea watched the guards march Dynarien and Edouina through the Great Central Hall, and smiled contently on Lord Westli's arm. She snuggled herself against him, laying her head on his shoulder so that she could look up into his eyes. Philomea whispered in his ear, "You did it, darling. They'll be soon be dead. I

should reward you. Show you how happy I am."

Westli shivered. Philomea could feel his reaction to her hunger. "My myn always obey orders. I hand picked them for this duty."

"Walk me about. I see Lord Anghee. We haven't congratulated him on his newest daughter."

Philomea pulled Westli toward the other end of the room, aiming so that she passed close to Channadar and his crowd. She had begun to dress like Galee in tightly cut bodices and plunging necklines that revealed the upper edges of her high breasts and the sweet cleft between them. Philomea liked the way it drew myn's eyes to her, male and female alike. Leeza no longer wandered the hall with the other fireflies. She was always sitting in one of the chairs near Tiderider or on the couch with Channadar. Philomea wondered at that. It was almost as if they had imprisoned her. Philomea had to pass very close to catch a whiff of her delicious scent. She could tell why her father wanted that one. Philomea wanted her too. There was a taste to the smell of her blood that called to her. She wanted to know what it was.

Yolany watched her come closer and smiled at her. Then flinched as Leeza noticed this and rose to bump her arm. Leeza was always doing that and it annoyed Philomea.

So Philomea continued on until they reached Lord Anhgee.

If only Leeza could be separated from the others, it would take but an instant to snatch her.

"Lord Anghee," Philomea said, politely smiling. "Congratulations on your daughter. I know it's coming late, but I've been so very busy."

Anhgee nodded. "I quite understand. She's a month old and people are already asking about dowry and offering their sons." He sighed heavily.

Philomea continued with her small talk for a while, watching Leeza from the corner of her eyes, feeling hungrier all the time and, when she saw there was little chance of the female leaving the others, she made her excuses and led Lord Westli toward the Guard Annex. "It is time for your reward, My Love."

Westli shivered.

* * * *

Bryndel lay staring at the ceiling, fingering the wound in his neck. A priest had cauterized it to stop the bleeding. Galee had deliberately left it oozing. Not enough to kill him, but enough to upset everyone. He felt weak, ill, and terrified. He was also ashamed. Galee and his father intended to use this as a pretext to murder his only

friends. His father had placed guards at his door. He could not get messages out or visitors in. Galee had found a new healer for him, but he didn't like the mon. He felt impotent and worthless. He could not think of any solution.

His mind formed thoughts slowly, spinning in a dizzy whorl of multi-colored images, which he suspected was caused by the strange medicine the healer had given him. *I want ... I want to be free. Death is freedom. It beckons, but I cannot reach it. I am tired... I am tired of being me. Hadjys, dark unforgiving judge, judge me harshly if you will. I will pay for my sins willingly. Only help me. Help my friends.*

Then sleep came and in his dreams Bryndel continued to pray without ceasing. *He saw himself lying nude in a dark corner, bound hand and foot before an altar with a dagger hanging from a fraying cord at his throat. A mon of flame came to stand beside him and listened to his prayers. Bryndel felt the power of the mon as a roaring in his mind and the terror of the blade as a clutching in his chest.*

"How badly do you wish to be free?"

"With all my heart and my soul," Bryndel replied.

"There is only a single mon in Ishladrim Castle who can free you. A single mon in all of Havensword."

"I want to be free, but I am frightened."

"As you should be. The bindings are in so deep that taking them out could kill you. Are you prepared to die for your freedom?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"And for your friends?"

"Yes."

"If you would truly be free, truly be one with the faith, then lay yourself on the Altar of Just Punishment and accept my blade freely into your chest."

The mon cut Bryndel's bonds, and the young mon stretched himself obediently on the altar on his back.

Bryndel shivered against the cold stone. "Do it."

Hadjys shoved the blade in a fraction. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," Bryndel said without wavering. "Send me to hell, if that will save them."

Hadjys drove the blade into Bryndel's chest hard.

Bryndel felt the life leaking from his body, and despite the searing pain, he smiled.

Hadjys pulled the blade out, and the pain vanished as if it had never been. "You are worthy. I will give you the keys to your own and their salvation. But you must unlock the doors and that will take courage such as you have shown me this time.

"Tell me what to do."

"Then pray to me. And I will save them. My paladin has been marked by my beloved Dynanna God of Cussedness and She is nearby."

Bryndel prayed.

He was still praying when he woke.

* * * *

Galee strode out of the palace heading for her rendezvous with her tame guards at the far end of the forested Stalking Grounds where no one would see her take custody of Edouina and Dynarien. Philomea's taking of Lord Westli, and presenting him to her as a gift was a marvelous move. If only Wrathscar was as cooperative as his daughters.

Lord Wrathscar came with her to see to the disposal of the Guildsmon and the yuwenghau. He had been impossible to refuse. He wanted the first taste of Dynarien's blood and Galee had promised it to him in exchange for a promise of good behavior before the council. He had behaved well and now he would have his reward. When they neared the general area of the various training grounds, he spied Jysy skirmishing with some of the other students in a complicated exercise.

"I want the sister," he said. Wrathscar turned aside and bolted toward the field where Jysy worked out before Galee could stop him.

"You Hell-forsaken idiot!" Galee ran after him, but his long swift stride quickly out-distanced her. By the time she caught up with him at the benches, he had already dispatched one of the students sitting there to call Jysy over. She snatched his arm and he shook her off. "You mustn't do this!" she hissed, not wishing to be loud enough to make a scene. She could see Yukiah at the farthest edge. He had not noticed them yet, but he would if either of them made any sudden movements to draw attention to their presence.

"I will have the sister."

The student returned with Jysy. The Sharani youth's eyes widened when she saw who waited for her there and she started to run, but Lord Wrathscar was too quick

for her. He touched her face, met her eyes, and snared her mind. Jysy placed her hand in Wrathscar's and walked away with him, rounding the hedgerow. Yukiah finished with the student pair he was working with and began to walk leisurely in Galee's direction, stopping from time to time with other pairs. He had not noticed Galee yet. The student who had fetched Jysy still stood in spell-shrouded silence before the vampire. Wrathscar had forgotten to release her.

Galee started to panic. If the Guild discovered what Wrathscar had become – and they would if he kept this up – they would know to come after her. It had been centuries since she had lost control of a situation to this degree. Wrathscar was turning all her best-laid plans into a disaster. Yukiah was Jysy's sponsor and he, being a survivor of the last rash of vampiric attacks by Galee's get, would know what to look for. She did not want Yukiah and his secret allies turning their attention in her direction. Yukiah was immune to her powers, thanks to the last yuwenghau to pit her strength against Galee's. Galee had slaughtered that one, but it had been a near thing. Yukiah was nearly to her end of the field. It would not be much longer before he saw her standing there.

Galee snared the student who had fetched Jysy, took her hand, and went off in pursuit of Wrathscar. She dared not leave this girl behind to tell searchers who it was that Jysy had left with. She lost sight of Wrathscar, but she knew where he was going: back to his own apartments where he had murdered Arruth. They crossed the quad swiftly, and plunged through the Great Hall, up the stairs and down the corridor of the West Wing.

She pounded on the door to Wrathscar's apartments, but he did not answer. Galee could hear Jysy crying. "Bellocar's blood," Galee snarled. "I hope he did not drop the damned bar." She dared not make much noise lest she draw the guards standing outside Talons' door further down the corridor. They would ignore many things, but the sound of splintering wood was not one of them. She broke the lock as quietly as possible, using her own and the student's bodies to muffle the sound, and forced the door in a controlled manner: Wrathscar had been too eager to get at the girl to bar it. She entered, dragging the hapless student behind her.

"Sit!" Galee ordered, releasing the student's hand.

The girl obeyed, blank-eyed, and staring at nothing as she settled on the edge of the couch. Galee turned and dropped the bar, hoping no one would notice the broken lock. Then she went into Wrathscar's bedroom.

Lord Wrathscar pinned the thirteen-year-old beneath his bulk, grunting loudly as he forced himself into her with savage thrusts that tore the delicate tissues inside her. Jysy whimpered in tiny animal noises of pain and distress, her small body flopping like an ill-used rag doll with his movements. Galee put her hand on his shoulder and he knocked her away. She grabbed him again and he hit her hard, slamming her into the wall before returning to his rutting. Galee struck hard and slid down to sit for a

moment cursing: at Wrathscar, at the situation, and at all the odd turns her plans had been forced to take by Yahni, and finally the yuwenghau. If she fought Wrathscar, the noise would bring guards from four suites down in front of the heir's chambers to investigate. Galee climbed to her feet, approaching Wrathscar warily.

"Don't kill her," Galee hissed at him. "You took enough chances with the first one."

"I want to make this one last," he said, riding Jysy harder. Blood pooled beneath her hips on the sheets. "I will not lose my temper this time."

Galee swore again: he was totally lost in his obsession. There could be no reasoning with him. She fetched the student from the antechamber. Galee saw that Wrathscar had fastened to Jysy's throat. The girl's face had an ashen quality to it. Wrathscar was taking too much blood. Jysy was dying. Galee shoved the student at him. "Take this one. There's more blood in her. That one's nearly empty."

Wrathscar lifted his bloody mouth, grabbed the student, and rolled off Jysy. Galee snatched Jysy and went out the window. It was growing dark. She hoped that when the guards had tired of waiting for her they had executed Edouina and Dynarien. She slunk through the shadows beneath the trees with Jysy slung over her shoulder, reached the outer edge of the library and threw Jysy into some bushes.

* * * *

Osterbridge sat on the benches, ostensibly to watch the older students work out, but actually he was watching Isen. On more than one occasion she had sent him sprawling in the dirt when he sparred with her, and on his recommendation, Yukiah had jumped her from fighting classes with the middle students to the advanced group. The switch did not even slow her down. Isen was well on her way to becoming one of their youngest graduates ever. Osterbridge suspected that Isen was trying to break Talons' record, which meant that she would have to graduate well before she turned sixteen. His growing admiration for the youth only deepened his love for her. For all of that, there was something about Isen that brought out his protective streak and that was where it all went wrong. He wanted to protect her from everything in the world, including his own desires; and yet his body reacted to her nearness with such intensity that it was all he could do to keep his hands off her.

When it got to be too much for him to handle, he went to Yukiah. The armsmaster thought they were a good match, and kept reassuring Osterbridge that there was nothing wrong with his feelings for Isen, going so far as to suggest that bedding her would be good for both of them. Yukiah believed that sex might actually ground Isen more firmly in her body, and make the trance state less likely to happen. The armsmaster, also, thought she was mature enough to handle a sexual relationship. So far, however, Osterbridge's conscience had limited him to holding hands and a few chaste kisses.

Isen finished her workout and came bouncing over to him, sweating and breathing

hard. She threw herself onto the bench and leaned against him. "So what do you think?"

"I think you're wonderful."

Isen reached back and flicked him on the nose. "I'm talking about my workout."

"You did real well, Isen. But that trance state you slide into could cause problems."

"That's what Yukiah says. I'll work on it. Can we walk back to the palace with Jimi and Jysy? I'd like to go to that end of the Cloverleaf."

"Were you thinking about that special little café?"

"Yes, I was. I see Jimi, but—" Her gaze swept across the grounds and she frowned suddenly.

Osterbridge tensed. He knew how her gifts worked. When she focused on something, she never missed anything. "What is it?"

"Jysy. There's Jimi and he's supposed to walk Jysy home like he always does. But Jysy's not on the field."

Osterbridge spotted Yukiah, and rose to his feet, grabbing Isen by the hand. "Come on, let's tell Yukiah."

Together they ran across the Training Grounds to Yukiah, who was working with a young pair.

"Yukiah, Jysy's missing."

The armsmaster stopped and turned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Isen. "I know every face on the field and none of them are Jysy."

"Where's Jimi? They were supposed to leave together." Yukiah pivoted and scanned for the young rogue.

"There." Osterbridge pointed Jimi out near the equestrian ring.

Concern flushed Yukiah's face and he rubbed the scar on his neck uneasily. He cupped his hands around his mouth to help his voice carry, and shouted, "Everyone! Come here! Assemble!"

Word passed swiftly through shouted commands to every corner of the Training Grounds, from the Stalking Grounds to the Equestrian Ring, and everything in between. The students and teachers gathered.

Once Yukiah had all of their attention, he shouted, "Jysy's missing."

The armsmaster told them off into small groups and dispersed them across the compound to search, just as he had the day they lost Arruth.

Osterbridge gripped Isen's hand tightly as they started off to look. "Stay with me. Don't you dare try to go off on your own, like you did that night we found Arruth."

Isen looked up at his worried face, solemn-eyed. "I promise."

They reached the steps of the library and Osterbridge stopped, gripping her shoulders. He stared into her face for several breaths. "If anything happened to you, Isen, I don't know how I'd live."

"I know." She squirmed slightly.

"You do anything rash, and I'll turn you over my knee and spank the holy hell out of you," he growled. Then he kissed her thoroughly, before continuing their search for Jysy.

* * * *

Her weakness humiliated Talons, but she could not stop crying. "They took them away, Cass. Just before you came. They spellcorded him so he could not escape."

"I know, I know," Cass said, patting Talons' hand. "Maybe it's for the best. I mean, if they are the vampires, then you're much safer now. And if they are not the vampires, well then, they'll release them tomorrow." Cass went to the dresser where she had left the bottle and glass. She mixed the medicine with the wine and carried it to Talons. "Drink this down and you'll feel better."

Talons drank it, handing her back the glass. "Is Alora out there?"

"Yes."

"Fetch her and then go."

Cass disappeared quickly. Talons struggled hard to think, her mind felt muddy as if each thought had sunk into a morass and become unreachable.

A voice whispered through Talons' mind so deeply she barely heard it. *<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >*

There had to be a way to help them. She had a gut feeling they would not live out the day and her instincts were rarely wrong. But she could not think. Her mind would not clear.

<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >

She looked down at her hands, at the fingerless black gloves she never removed except to bathe. It had been months since she summoned forth the silver-chased kenda'ryl rune claws from those gloves. Talons' felt tears run down her face. Even were she to summon them, she doubted her increasingly fragile body would be able to use them. A year ago she would simply have gone after them herself. And now?

<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >

Alora sat down beside her. "I don't know what to do." Alora was the only one left with Talons, which meant she could not leave to fetch the knights. Jimi was not due until late afternoon, when his classes finished. The youth felt helpless. She could only hope that Jysy had told Yukiah and that Yukiah would be able to do something.

Tears started down Talons' face again. Her robe had gotten twisted. She struggled to sit up and Alora helped her. Talons pulled at it, trying to get it straight so that it did not constrict her swollen belly. The children had seemed like a good thing at the time, a tool to use against Bryndel and his father. But Talons had never been a gamesmon and it looked like she was losing the gambit and all the people she loved with it.

<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >

She yanked angrily at the robe. She had not been out of her rooms in months. Swollen and sick, she had held on because of her two beloved champions and now they were gone. She took it out on the robe, tearing it at the neck in anger, ripping a huge piece away.

<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >

"Let me help." Alora lifted her a bit, freed the side of the robe, and, as she finished, noticed the little squiggly scar at the base of Talons' neck, revealed by the torn collar. "What's that mark on your neck?"

"The little question mark thing?" Talons forgot the robe for a moment.

"Yes."

"That's Dynanna's mark. Hadjys and she have a habit of marking each other's paladins. Dynarien says it a link and that Dynanna almost always answers."

<For the sake of His prayers, remember Her Mark. >

Dynanna had marked her first – as a prank in exchange for aiding her against the Gold Ravens, a rogue assassin's Guild operating out of the Rowanslea Mar'ajanate

of Shaurone. Jysy's oldest sister, Birdie was a priest of Dynanna; and when Takhalme quarantined Rowanslea, leaving Talons isolated and fighting the Golds alone, Birdie suggested turning to Dynanna for assistance. The mischievous deity answered and bit Talons, leaving that curious little mark. Dynarien had used that mark to call her back to consciousness after the stone troll nearly killed her so that he could get a healing elixir into her, which his sister had stolen from one of the elder gods. The mark had power.

"That's what Jysy and Arruth say – Arruth said that all the time." Alora had to catch herself, trying not to talk about Arruth as if she were alive, when she wasn't. Alora felt responsible for Arruth's death. *If I just hadn't forced her to come with me. I thought I knew best and I knew nothing at all.*

"She's Dynarien's sister." Talons' face lit suddenly. She pressed two fingers to the mark, calling out, desperately, knowing that emotion enhanced the summons, "Dynanna, Dynanna, Dynanna!"

Alora nearly fainted when three figures materialized in front of them. Dynanna, God of Cussedness, had an upturned pixie nose, high well-formed cheekbones with delicate hollows beneath, full lips that seemed to promise trouble, and an abundance of long red-gold hair. According to many priests of many gods, Dynanna's unpredictability and uninhibited impulsiveness made her potentially one of the most dangerous deities in their world, far beyond her stature as a very minor young god – a yuwenghau. The tales of the trouble she could get people into – and out of – where both legion and legend. She was, also, bulging with twins – by two different gods. Even her sexuality and fertility was a bit perverse. Whatever one might have expected in a deity – Dynanna was not.

She appeared with her two favorite paladins beside her: Pieface in his leather cap and goggles, pushed up on his head, with his deadly pie pans hanging at his side; Sugar Maple all in black with a pointed hat and a twig broom. They were both fair skinned, heavily freckled and had huge pointed ears. They were Badree Nym, the pariahs of the sylvan races, for although good-hearted and helpful, their magic tended to knock down buildings whenever they were unduly upset or seriously frightened in a random, but powerful, surge of undisciplined power. That did not happen as much with Pieface and Sugar Maple, which was why they were paladins.

"Whooooaaa! You're nearly as round as I am." Dynanna grinned. She sobered, looking closely at Talons, at the gauntness of her face, the dark smudges beneath her eyes. "You don't look so good."

"They're going to kill Dynarien," Talons said desperately.

"He hasn't called me," Dynanna said, flicking her hair back from her face and chewing on the edge of her lip in an off-hand way.

"He can't. Can you find him?"

"Yeah."

"Please, Dynanna, go get him. Now."

Dynanna shrugged. "H'okay." The three of them popped out.

Talons leaned against Alora. She felt nauseous and dizzy. Force of will and anger had kept her going long enough to call Dynanna; but now that the need was gone, weakness overwhelmed her. Darkness narrowed her vision to a tiny point of light in front of her eyes, and she fainted, her head falling onto Alora's shoulders.

* * * *

The guards had marched Edouina and Dynarien to the farthest corner of the Stalking Grounds. They bound them five points: their bound ankles tied to bound their wrists; and a third rope around their necks caught tight just beneath their chins to jerk their heads back with the end secured to their wrists and ankles so that they were on their knees with their spines bowed backwards and their throats exposed. They used the strange cord for all of the bindings on Dynarien. Then all but three withdrew a distance, settled down, and began to throw the bones. A mon of middle height emerged from the trees after watching for a time. He wore an open sided black coat with pockets over a nondescript brown tunic and baggy trousers tucked into polished boots. Two large satchels stuffed to capacity, their wide straps criss-crossing his chest, hung at his sides. He grinned and circled the captives, regarding them speculatively, and for a moment Edouina wondered if this were the mon they had been brought to face – their executioner.

Dynarien exerted all his considerable strength to try and break the spellcord and ropes now that the crossbows were no longer leveled at them. A guard saw this and kicked Dynarien in the stomach. His body reacted by trying to double over, but the ropes prevented it, pulling painfully at his arms and legs, the one around his neck tightened choking him. The guard hit him in the face, drew his belt knife, and used the pommel to strike him again and again. Another joined in. Together they kicked and hit him in an indiscriminate rain of heavy blows. Dynarien bore it in silence, refusing to cry out, which only made them angrier and more savage. The observer tapped one guard on the shoulder and shook his head.

"That's no proper way to treat a yuwenghau," the mon told him. "They're hard to damage."

The other two heard him and stopped hitting Dynarien, coming over to better hear Zarliche's words.

"Now you just listen to the old Master Blood here." He reached in his right satchel, taking out three black rods with crimson runes, passing them around. "You hit him with these and you'll get a better result. I'll add the price to your Mistress' bill. Hit her

with them too." He nodded at Edouina. "Shove one up the fun places, if you get my meaning." He winked and walked off.

Edouina felt sickened. Perhaps it would have been better to have tried to run and gotten a bolt in the back... No that would have been perceived as an admission of guilt, which would have made Talons more vulnerable by casting suspicion on all of her defenders, including the knights. *Talons, forgive me. I failed you. Remember I loved you.*

Dynarien's tormentors got a shuddering, gasping cry of anguish from him when the first runed rod struck and he convulsed. Edouina stiffened, fighting back a growing horror as she watched. Her insides went cold and her mind icy clear. The Rose Warrior, Twice-Born son to the Woodland God, struggled not to give vent to the pain they inflicted and she would not deny his courage by looking away. The myn laughed, discussing his reactions with a dispassionate eye between rounds of inflicting their blows; and when they bored with the game, descended on him with such an intense rain of those heavy strikes that they beat him unconscious. Then they turned on Edouina.

From the angle at which he lay, she could not tell if he still breathed. He was battered and bloody in what would have been a fatal beating for a human. Part of her wanted to weep at what they had done to him; but she would not give them the satisfaction of seeing it. *Hadjys*, she prayed, *Dear My Lord God, vengeance and justice send.*

"Can we ride her?" One asked.

Edouina smiled at him in a calculatedly sensuous invitation. "I'm a very good ride, soldier. You just try me." *And I'll fry your little mind*, she thought grimly.

"No. She might be bi-kyndi. You remember what happened to those two soldiers."

"The ones that raped the heir?"

"Yeah, those two."

Raped the heir? Edouina frowned. *Were they talking about Talons?*

What seemed like hours passed. The sun reached its height and beat down through the trees. There had been neither a move nor sound from Dynarien. A few flies, lingering late into the season, crawled his body and Edouina feared that he was dead. The guards started getting impatient and grumbling.

"We wait any longer, someone's going to come looking for us. They'll find we didn't take them to the temple. It's only going to work, if the whole thing happened fast. I mean who will believe it took us this many hours just to chase some escaping prisoners through the Stalking Grounds?"

"I'm tired of waiting," said the third guard, who appeared to be the leader. "Kill them."

The first guard seized Dynarien's hair and twisted his head back, putting a blade to the side of his throat to shove it in at the artery and rip it open.

* * * *

The Master of Blood left the Stalking Grounds and picked up his crew at the edges where they waited with their bags to make deliveries along the Cloverleaf, secure in the knowledge that the execution of one yuwenghau had begun. It was now time to find the other. He kept picking up tickles and prickles of power that led nowhere. This one was very active. Since Galee had given him a license, through a secret proxy, to sell his wares to the little shops about the compound, he would search through the Cloverleaf next. There was only a single yuwenghau, a peddler, who had ever bested him, Dyna. Some day he would encounter her again and that next time would be different. It stood to reason that this one could easily be a shopkeeper. Those minor divines liked to blend in, disappearing into the mix of humanity and sylvans unless forced to act.

They entered the Great Central Hall, heading for the stairs to the Cloverleaf beneath the palace. A large crowd of nobles and their ladies had dragged chairs and couches into a circle near the stairs while a mon in ornate silken robes gestured with a pair of golden fans, moving in a stately dance in the center. Now and again he would leap high and then pose for an instant. As the fans moved, they left trails of illusion in their wake, images of dream like birds with streaming tails of white clouds.

Master Zarliche Blood had to pass close to him to reach the stairs to the Cloverleaf and his whole body itched at the pure radiant magic of the Faery lord and his entourage. Sylvan and one of the worst kinds. Of all of Willodarus' people to encounter that one had to be the kind he most hated. Why the hell couldn't they stay on their damned island? Why the hell did he have to find one in Creeya? Master Blood almost turned around and left, but he had a job to do and he never failed at a job. So he walked on.

Channadar's eyes widened, his mouth opening slightly. He paused like a falcon, spreading his arms, his sleeves and fans fluttering a moment like wings in a sign to his Thirteen Chosen and they swept down the stairs behind Blood and his people.

"Master of Blood! You'll take no more lives here. Thus speak the Fae," shouted Channadar.

The audience of nobles and their various retainers, servants, and others who moved about the palace compound scattered as the Fae rushed abruptly down the stairwell to the Cloverleaf in pursuit of the odd merchant and his folk, completely at a loss to comprehend whether this was real or another of their endless games and displays –

except that to some it appeared oddly real.

Juna laughed, for there was no better place to lie in wait for their prey than in the intersection of all traffic – which was the reason they spent so much time in the Great Central Hall – and no better mon to hunt beside than his brother. So Juna rushed to be right behind him, managing to be second down the stairs with Tiderider immediately next. Channadar's standing orders were that Tiderider, leader of his Thirteen Chosen, be always second to him and Juna third when combat came, but Juna's game was to steal Tiderider's place. If anyone were going to stand at his brother's right hand in a fight it would be Juna – laughing Juna.

Leeza and Chucomei Who-Calls-the-Birds tried to keep the fireflies, servants, others of the entourage, and Juna's four summerflies – they no longer called them anything else, making no secret of their disdain and the others were picking up the habit – from following after the Chosen.

"If you loved him as much as I love Juna, you'd not be holding us back," Yolany spit at Leeza.

Leeza flinched. They meant Tiderider; but she was thinking Channadar, still weak from his wounding on the rooftops and hiding it well.

"Mage!" Tongari stamped her feet at Chucomei. "You could help them. The Master of Blood is deadly."

Leeza gasped and wavered. Yolany saw that and shoved her down. Although Leeza was back up in an instant, the entire herd in silken skirts had rushed past her to the stairwell. Now the watchers had decided it was but another show of the Fae and were laughing at her as Leeza pushed her way through. She kicked, stamped feet, jostled and shoved, pulling hair in an indiscriminant manner to get to the bottom of the stairs first, not even bothering to see whom she had damaged in the process. There would be a lot of angry women in their apartments that night. If anything happened to Channadar, then she would let the air out of these airy bitches. This firefly would become a hornet.

Tongari, Pelaui, Sysymi, and Yolany had reached the bottom first, talking excitedly about Juna and Channadar, gesturing oddly in a way that sent a shiver along Leeza's spine – although she could not say why. A flash of metal came just beyond them, not at them and not exactly from them, and Leeza screamed because she felt as if it were connected to them. Juna was not where he was supposed to be. He was never where he was supposed to be. He was competing with Tiderider again, and Channadar's back was unguarded.

"Channadar! Behind you!" Leeza screamed.

Channadar reacted by twisting out of the way. The first two missed him and the third brought him down.

The Cloverleaf filled with people, but Leeza barely noticed them. She had reached him, cradling him in her arms, careful of the blade protruding from his shoulder.

"Leeza... Leeza, it only hurts a little." Channadar touched her eyes, drawing his finger through the tears that had started. "Silly firefly cries at nothing," he struggled for his usual bantering tone.

"I'll pinch you," she responded, dispiritedly. Why did he always belittle her concern? She felt closed out by the game he danced.

"Cruel Leeza."

Shaheeramaat's hands closed on Leeza's. "I need to Read him. Let him have him."

Leeza glanced, saw Sha, and yielded Channadar reluctantly to the Guild healer. She saw the Guild cordoning off that part of the Cloverleaf. Black and gold uniforms were everywhere. The Chosen had returned; yet only Tiderider had been allowed to approach. Aramyn squatted beside them with Tiderider at his shoulder.

The Guildsmon had two blades in his hands, turning them over, examining them. "What did you see, Leeza? Tiderider tells me you shouted a warning. These are an assassin's weapons."

"I saw a flash of silver and yelled. I did not see a thrower. The summerflies were already down here. I went to Channadar and the rest came rushing down."

"Summerflies?" Aramyn glanced at Tiderider.

"Juna's women. A derogatory term."

"You're certain that none of Blood's myn could have gotten around behind you?"

"None." Tiderider took one of the blades from Aramyn. "May I keep this for a while?"

"Yes, but if you get any ideas, tell me. I've seen similar things, but nothing exactly like it."

Tiderider nodded.

The Golden Fae held his head tilted thoughtfully to one side. Three blades thrown or fired. Three wickedly sharp, barbed blades, small and deadly, easily concealed and only one had found its mark because Leeza screamed. The summerflies bore watching. Juna was a fool. Tiderider left Aramyn, approaching Juna and the other Chosen where the Guildsmyn were holding them at a distance from the healers and their lord while Aramyn spoke to them and Sha did her work. Juna looked sullen

with his summerflies pulling at him.

"Juna, your place..." Tiderider said, his voice steely in its chill softness. "Was at his back, not gaming for my place at his side. When you are mature enough to learn to dance the steps, I will teach them to you. From now on Da'Shanagara will stand as my second and not you. You are now last of all." Tiderider had never publicly reprimanded him before because Juna was Channadar's brother, but if shame could not cure him then only death would. Besides, his own twelve truebloods were coming and he would give over the training of these to another. He found a kind of grim amusement at the image of Juna trying to play these games on StealsThunder. That diminutive little Fae would have fed him his balls by now. Her temper was a thing of legend.

Tiderider returned to his lord, kneeling again beside him. "How fares my lord, Sha?" He touched his lord's shoulder. Leeza had calmed, held by Chucomei, who Sha had allowed in to comfort her. Channadar's eyes were closed and his breathing even.

"Not good. We should have a litter soon to get him to the Guild Wing. We need to cut the damned thing out of his shoulder. I gave him fire poppy and holadil, but it's going to be a mess. He was still weak to begin with. What possessed you to go after these creatures? You could have called for guards and Guild."

"There is a saying among my people. Do not hunt the Fae, for the Fae will hunt you. These are the same who came after my lord before and they will again. The Master of Blood escaped. We feared he would if we took time to call for you this time."

"He has a point there, Sha," Aramyn said mildly.

"Then seal off the entire Cloverleaf, Aramyn."

"Giving orders now, Sha?"

"Common sense." She snapped back at him.

Aramyn barked out orders. Guild had jurisdiction over the guard and he cleared the guard out as well as the civilians. After what had happened to Mohanja, he knew the guard had been infiltrated. "Tiderider, leave the rest to Sha. I want to have a talk with you about Juna."

Tiderider gave him a short bow of his shoulders, following him away from the others.

Aramyn's chestnut eyes held a chill clarity, reflecting his attention to details as he investigated, his thumbs caught in the edge of his sword belt. "I know little of Lord Ky's progeny, but are there any other legal siblings besides Juna and Channadar? Any bastards that could be legalized?"

"Just the two brothers. When Lord Ky died, Channadar searched and found none."

"Why?"

"We love family. He also wanted someone more stable than Juna around."

"So there is a problem with Juna?"

"Juna is Juna. A child forever."

"Doesn't Channadar have lands and titles of some kind in Faewin as well?"

"Some."

Aramyn sensed an increasingly guarded tone in Tiderider's voice. "I'd like to have more specifics on that."

"I cannot give them to you."

"Juna would get the Creeyan lands and titles. Would he also get the Fae lands?"

"Are you seeing stinging flies?"

"What?"

"Treachery. No. He would not get the Fae lands. Their mother has already said she would disinherit Juna if his stupidity caused Channadar's death. She has other children. Besides, Juna loves his brother."

"I don't know how politics work in Faewin, but in these outlands, it isn't always run by the lord who holds the titles, but by the ones who hold the lord in their hands. Juna seems like someone who would be damned easy to control or manipulate. I'd be wondering who might be pushing him around, pulling his strings. What really makes me nervous is that Channadar's holdings border the escarpment. And then there is the matter of the branch clan. I've heard rumors they've hidden themselves in Hellsguard."

"Branch clan? That is a myth. There is no branch clan."

Aramyn scratched his nose and looked at Tiderider again, but his face was totally unreadable.

* * * *

Channadar floated in the darkness. *Somehow he was both there and not there. A battle had been fought. His people, what was left of them, were gathered in a great hall, which had been transformed into makeshift quarters with sleeping*

pallets. There were bodies, shrouded bodies along one wall, and Guildsmyn kneeling to one side while four Chosen – the only ones left alive – stood before the mirror. The others are all slain? He turned again toward the bodies, counting. Too many bodies. The attackers had killed everyone. Then he drifted back to the mirror and saw that Leeza had survived. She clung to Tiderider, weeping. There was one more body, wrapped in his colors.

Meileilyki stared forth from the mirror; saw the body and rose, her face hardening.

"My Lady," Tiderider said. "Your son is slain. He died well."

I am dead. They killed me. It was indeed my death I read in the stones that day.

Then Channadar awoke in his bed, in his own chamber.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WRATH

"Get 'em," a female voice growled.

The guard, with his blade at Dynarien's throat, looked up. A silver disk flashed like pale lightning across the bit of open ground and struck the guard in the throat, taking his head off. The knife fell away from Dynarien. The headless body collapsed against the unmoving yuwenghau, blood gushing out to coat his chest and face.

A shout brought the other seven soldiers running toward the newcomers. The disk, lying on the ground, looked strangely like a pie pan. Edouina twisted around to see where it had come from. Two small people, who looked like children, stood beside an angry, very pregnant woman. The small female in black waved a twig broom at the soldiers, shouting something in a language that sounded vaguely sylvan to Edouina.

Trees reached out, grabbing the first pair of running myn. They screamed once, thrashing frantically and died with their throats crushed. The others drew back and hesitated, confronted by magic they could not fight, caught between their training, and their instinctual fear of the unknown. The pie pan vanished and flew again, accounting for a second guard. The third ran at Pieface. Edouina threw herself forward, tripping him and Dynanna kicked him in the head. He collapsed. Realizing that this was magic beyond their ken, the soldiers turned to run. Sugar Maple spoke once more. The grass beneath their feet grew suddenly higher than their heads, wrapping around them with the strength of steel bands.

Dynanna cut her brother free and awakened him through their link; her face twisted

in fury. She wanted to summon all her Badree Nym and knock the city down. "Why didn't you call to me?" she demanded, her voice hoarse.

"The spellcord..." he answered weakly. He did not have the strength to check himself, but suspected that ribs were cracked and possibly broken. "It's strange somehow... Blocked my powers ... and our link."

Sugar Maple leaned her broom on a tree and cut Edouina loose. "There. That's better, isn't it?"

The Hadjysheen sat up, rubbing her wrists. She heard Dynarien speaking to the mon and realized it was his sister. A rush of gratitude at his survival rushed through her. "Thanks," Edouina said, and then frowned. "What are you?"

"Who am I would be more polite," Sugar Maple admonished her. "I'm Sugar Maple of the Blue Dog Pass. I'm Badree Nym. So's my cousin, Pieface." She had incredibly large, soulful dark brown eyes and marmalade hair hanging to her waist with a habit of slipping over her face. She had a small perfect mouth with a thoughtful turn at the corners. Edouina thought she was beautiful.

Dynanna focused and called out, bringing another of her people to her; a craggy mountain mon in bearskins with a huge blue shaggy dog beside him.

"What chances, My Lady," he said, scanning the tableau.

"Bernard, can you get my brother up? He's hurt bad. I think I'm gonna have to kill somebody."

"It looks like you already have," he observed blandly.

* * * *

Dynanna stalked through the palace with Dynarien and Edouina in tow, followed by her paladins marching their captives along. People stared at the disturbing procession: a pregnant woman, followed by a bloody, beaten mon supported by a large male in animal skins with a dog walking at his side; four battered guards, their hands bound behind them with what looked like grass; and two children prodding them along. Guildsmyn, recognizing Edouina and Dynarien, faded back to watch what chanced. Guards reacted to the condition and circumstance of their fellows by trying to halt her. With a wave she dropped whole units of the guard and everyone else within range.

"Asses, asses, all fall down!" She chanted in a grim voice, anger magnifying her talents and powers. Soon nearly everyone in the great hall – guardsmyn, nobles, and servants, everyone who was caught by the sweep of the casting – lay groaning on the ground, clutching at their stomachs. Those who were not hit scattered, screaming. Guildsmyn gave her a polite smile and a bow. At her nod, some of them

fell in around her; others went after the Patriarch, fully cognizant that they had a very angry deity striding through the halls.

"I don't want to kill'em, I just want to stop 'em," she muttered, fuming. She slammed open the council chamber door and stalked in, glaring. "I'm Dynanna, God of Cussedness, and I'm pissed." She indicated her swollen belly and told them, "This kid belongs to Hadjys. He put it there. He's supposed to be your liege-god and yet you're harassing my brother who's a friend of his."

One of the councilors rose, "You're not a god!"

Dynanna glared at him, "Flux."

The councilor gasped and fled, leaving behind an extremely bad odor. All the others, except for the Grand Master, rose to their feet with a loud outcry. No guards answered. They stared at each other in a panicky fashion, dropping back to their seats rather than draw her attention and ire.

"Pieface, get in here. Take your hat off."

Pieface removed his hat, exposing his huge pointed-ears. There was no mistaking the fact that they were looking at a Badree Nym.

"Now, I can have him start knocking down the palace or you can listen to me."

"We will listen to you," Takhalme said.

"What is going on?" The Patriarch entered the room, spied Dynanna, and bowed low. "Holy One," he said. That finished the councilors. Eshraf's gaze went to Dynarien and his mouth hardened with anger even as his eyes softened with concern. Had it not been for the long red gold hair, the yuwenghau's battered face would have been unrecognizable. Changes desperately needed to take place, for even as the Patriarch rushed for these chambers he had heard rumor of a battle beneath the palace between Lord Channadar and an evil creature called the Master of Blood.

Dynanna favored him with a smile before rounding on the others again. "If I hear of anyone harassing my brother Dynarien or Edouina again, I'll come back. I'll curse this palace until nothing grows and no one can live here. I'll bring in a legion of Badree Nym and knock it all down."

She walked up to Takhalme, grabbed his arm, and pushed up his sleeve, revealing a long line of vampire scars. "I think you should take better care of this old vampire-bait you call a leader."

A collective gasp rose from the councilors.

Edouina blinked, wondering how Dynanna had guessed this.

"Interrogate my captives here. Maybe you'll find out who's behind all the shit." She turned to her brother. "You coming with us?"

"No," he said, his voice a hoarse, struggling whisper.

"Okay then." She snapped her fingers and disappeared, taking Pieface, Sugar Maple, Bernard, and Bluedog with her.

Dynarien, no longer supported by Bernard, sank to his knees, fighting to breathe. It had been centuries since mere humans had hurt him this bad. It made him angry. The Patriarch knelt beside him, Reading him, his expression hardening. The only weapons that could have injured him this terribly were weapons forged of hell. "Who did this?"

"They're ... dead."

Eshraf's gaze raked the councilors. "This is the Twice-Born son of Willodarus. The Rose Warrior. The Prince of Imralon. I will personally see whoever gave these myn their orders in the deepest hell of Hadjys as My God is my witness." He turned on one of the nobles, "Fetch my priests and healers quickly. If he perishes, Willodarus will curse this realm until nothing can live here."

Edouina cradled Dynarien's head and shoulders. "Hold on, honey. Just hold on. You'll be all right. I know you will."

"I'll try." Dynarien closed his eyes and slid into darkness. Edouina held him until the priests arrived. Two burly priests lifted him up between them, starting down the hallway. He roused as they moved him. Edouina walked beside them. They had just reached the great hall when Yukiah came up. The armmaster's eyes went deadly cold when he saw Dynarien's condition. He had come hoping for Dynarien's aid, thinking his mage-craft could help them find Jysy faster. Evidently their enemies had found him first.

"What's wrong?" Edouina asked him, sensing much in every angle of his body and face.

"Jysy's missing."

"Jysy..." Dynarien tried to stand on his own, pulling away from the priests only to stumble to his knees.

"I'm going to gather some more people to search," Yukiah said, leaving them.

Edouina knelt beside Dynarien, slipped her arms around him, and helped him rise.

"Help me get out there."

The priests shook their heads in a rueful fashion at Dynarien's stubbornness and followed them.

Eshraf turned then to the councilors. "There is fighting in the Cloverleaf, assassins attacked Lord Channadar and he is seriously wounded. Several sa'necari, vampires, and at least one demon were destroyed by his personal guard, the Chosen Thirteen."

"This meeting is ended! Everyone get out of here! Find that child!" Mohanja roared, scattering the assembled nobles and sending them flying from the Council Chamber as if for their lives. The room emptied. He sat cross-legged beside the Grand Master's throne, leaning on the great seat with his arms folded on its arm. Mohanja laid his head on his arms so weary in spirit that if he closed his eyes he suspected he would never wake and wondered for a moment if he even wanted to.

"I am tired, Mohanja," said the Grand Master. "I wish to go to my rooms and I need my medicine."

"Your drugs, my master, your drugs of dreaming. You are an addict." Mohanja met his eyes in a sharing of shame, the bluntness of his words cutting them both. "You will not return to your rooms, but go to the temple instead where you will be safe from the creature that has been Dancing you." *How long have you been Passion-Dancing, Takhalme? And with whom? Can you tell us or has the creature been tearing it from your mind?*

"And my medicine?"

"You will have your drugs." *Channadar, Edouina, Dynarien, Jysy, Yahni, Arruth, and my dear master. I've lost control of the Wing. The Guild no longer trusts me. I can't stop these monsters. And now my damned leg is hurting so bad I doubt I can get back to my apartments without the damned crutch and it's in the apartments. Ah, Sha. I should never have become an officer, much less third lieutenant to the Grand Master. I was not meant to be a lord. It wears a mon down.*

"Forgive me."

Mohanja glanced at the Grand Master and patted the old mon on the arm. "You have been a father to me. I love you. Therefore I will always forgive."

"I do not deserve it."

"Come here, old mon. I am hurting too bad to come to you."

"Your leg?"

"Yes."

Takhalme eased off his throne with the tentativeness of the aged, sat next to Mohanja and they held each other. That was how Eshraf and Aramyn found them when they returned hours later after the chaos finally settled down: Takhalme asleep and Mohanja thinking furiously.

* * * *

They filled the night with torches and more than four times as many searchers as when they had scoured the grounds for Arruth. The armsmaster found Jysy: alive. He pulled his shirt off and covered her nakedness with it. Her flesh was clammy and faintly blue. He had seen enough death to know she would not last much longer. His face tightened and a cold rage filled him. "I've found her!" Yukiah shouted, rising with her in his arms.

Isen had arrived with Osterbridge and they stood close beside him. Osterbridge slipped his arm around Isen's shoulders, hugging her protectively to his chest.

Dynarien and Edouina reached Yukiah. "Get her inside. I'll get help," Dynarien said.

"You can't help her. She's too far gone," Yukiah said, but Dynarien and Edouina had already vanished. He carried Jysy to her room and put her to bed. Then he knelt and held her hand, praying. Isen joined him and he felt comforted by her presence in a way he could not describe. More and more she reminded him of someone he once knew.

Osterbridge stood in the doorway, studying Isen's devout face as she prayed. He went in and knelt beside her.

Jimi arrived next with several of the knights. Soon the suite hummed with their prayers.

* * * *

Dynarien and Edouina appeared in Jysy's bedroom, bringing a scruffy looking mon of indeterminate age in brown sleeping robes. Yukiah stared at the newcomer. His face was lined and drawn with a sallow cast: he looked ill – long-term ill. The mon was dying. What the hell did Dynarien think this mon could do for Jysy?

"Whiskey," Josiah said. "Get me some whiskey."

The armsmaster produced a pocket flask, passing it to Josiah.

The mage took a long pull and felt his power flare. "Put your forearm against hers," Josiah ordered. The armsmaster obeyed and Josiah launched the spell. The blue tinge left Jysy's face. Josiah pushed Yukiah away. "Get me someone else. Lots of someones."

Yukiah's eyes widened in disbelief, his pulse quickening with hope. Maybe the yuwenghau knew what he was doing after all. Yukiah stepped into the sitting room, shouting. The knights queued up in a long line. Edouina and Yukiah got Dynarien onto Alora's bed and two healers descended on him, cleaning him up and binding his ribs. Dynarien matched the right blood types – he seemed to be holding his own so long as he did not have to stand – and Josiah, using the spell of Shared Life, made the transfers. They worked until dawn, finally pulling Jysy out of danger.

The armsmaster, who had not left Jysy's side all night, turned to Josiah, asking, "Whom do I thank for saving my protégé's life?"

Josiah gripped his offered hand. "Josiah Abelard."

Yukiah's mind and heart raced with a fresh rush of adrenaline. Despite the darkness and fear of the day and the night, there was also wonder for he had met two legends and seen two others: Josiah Abelard, the greatest mage-paladin of Kalirion, even sick and worn, it was something; Dynarien Willodarusson, the Rose Warrior had come to fight for them; Dynanna the God of Cussedness had knocked down half the palace guard; and two Badree Nym had sauntered through the palace. Yahni would have loved it. So much to write about, filling all those record books with the accounts of this and that.

* * * *

When Josiah had finished, and Jysy had been pulled completely out of danger, he turned to Dynarien and addressed him in an old language that he felt certain the Creeyan armsmaster, who was still kneeling beside his protégé's bed would not understand.

"Dynarien, we both know I don't have much time left. Someone needs to know my two key spells, so listen carefully while I give them to you." Then he taught Dynarien two spells: Shared Life and Revelation.

Dynarien listened closely, and despite his pain and exhaustion, memorized it.

The work of the night showed heavily on Josiah's face as he explained everything. "With Revelation, you must have a focus. You must identify one of the ringleaders or their principal associates. Otherwise, you end up with a dangerous kind of chaos. You need a focus. A strong focus. I don't think this Bryndel you spoke of can give you that. He's too full of coercions, sways, and triggers. All of which will affect the spell. The one thing I dread right now is telling Birdie about Arruth. She's a sweet kid and already over-burdened."

"I've heard that she's become a very strong priest."

"She has, my friend. But she's barely fourteen. The journey to Rowanhart wasn't easy on her. Nor on her family. She's taken on a lot of responsibility for someone as

young as she is."

"A lot of that is my fault." Dynarien looked away from Josiah.

The mage gave a dry chuckle. "You're always taking responsibility yourself these days. I wish your sister were as dependable."

Dynarien sighed heavily. "So do I. She's pregnant again."

"More little godlings to drive us poor mortals crazy?"

"Yes. I'll take you home."

Josiah shook his head. "I can do it myself. You look worse than I do." Then his form shimmered and vanished.

Dynarien stared at the spot where Josiah had been and slowly folded up on Alora's bed, the last of his strength suddenly draining out of him. Yukiah glanced back at the sound of the bed creaking and sprang to his feet in time to stop Dynarien from toppling onto the floor. The armsmaster shouldered Dynarien, walking him to the door.

"Edouina. Jimi. Can you get him back to the temple? I don't trust the palace healers, and he needs help."

Jimi and Edouina took Dynarien from Yukiah. By then the yuwenghau could no longer manage even part of his weight. It required both Jimi and Edouina carrying him to get Dynarien to the temple where he could rest. When he finally slept, Edouina told Jimi all that had transpired.

The young knight's face shone with a cold anger that matched Edouina's own.

"I will get the man who ordered this," Jimi said, an edge in his voice, his eyes narrowed and intense.

"Woman, Jimi," Edouina answered, her tone chill and emotionless, betraying only the slightest edge of her feelings. "The vampire is a woman."

"Are you certain? How can you know?"

Edouina considered for a moment. "I'm going to tell you something that only Talons knows – two others suspect I'm sure – but only she knows. I'm not just bi-kyndi, honey, I'm something my people call saer'kali bi-kyndi. It means I'm one of the secret masters. I can do things that others only dream of."

Jimi's eyes widened. "And that's how..."

"Yes. I found a taste of the vampire in Bryndel's pleasure centers about four weeks ago. Sometimes when they feed, they deliberately give their victims intense pleasure to take away the pain, makes the meal want to be eaten. It leaves a residue, a taste of them. That taste was decidedly female."

Jimi considered that. "At least I know who to watch and who not to." Then he glanced again at Dynarien. "I just thought he was a mage. How long have you known?"

"From the first. And, as for being a mage, that's what we all wanted you to think. It was safer that way. She killed the last yuwenghau to go up against her thirty years ago; one of Tala's hunters and they're good, very good. We did not want this vampire – and she's an extremely powerful one – getting his measure. It looks like she has."

* * * *

Channadar lay thinking bitter thoughts while Leeza slept beside him. The warmth of her comforted him. He played with the ends of her hair. The enemy had finally managed to cripple him, striking the same shoulder they had before. He had not told Leeza, not wishing to worry her, but Sha had said he would never use his left arm again. His magic was halved without the use of the heart arm. Tiderider was the only one who knew.

How can I protect her when I cannot even protect myself? It is the taste of ashes on my lips. I did not intend to fall in love. I came to beard the monster in its den. To find the hidden truths that would destroy her. And now the omens say I will die. What will become of you? Tiderider will protect you. Perhaps he will even take you for his own. That would be good. It would give my spirit comfort in the next world. How you did come down that stair! Most of the fireflies are so angry. You descended upon them like a hornet.

Channadar slipped his legs around, tilted himself forward into a sitting position, and rode out a wave of nausea and dizziness at the pain in parts of his shoulder – that, at least, was sensation. They had put a wool stocking over his arm, but it was still cold, like the chill of death. He could no longer feel his fingers. The arm lay in a sling inside his shirt with the shoulder tightly bound in place to hold the shattered bone together. The empty silken sleeve of his shirt hung like a broken wing, flopping at his side in mute reminder of his injury and helplessness.

Half the magic sundered.

His fear for Leeza rose up again in fresh waves, rising stronger with each passing moment. Juna would have his lands and titles. He would want Leeza if he knew of their connection. And Juna would hurt Leeza. Not because he was bad, but because he was irresponsible. Channadar had to make arrangements to see that Leeza was taken care of. Which meant he had to make some decisions.

And he needed to get rid of Juna's summerflies, find Juna a wife who would be good for Hellsguard and take care of the matters that Juna would allow to slide.

He sighed and slipped to his feet, padding out of the room, through his parlor and into the central hall. Channadar sat down at one of the tables, folded his good arm upon its smooth surface, and pressed his face into it. What was he to do about Leeza? Tiderider must have Leeza. No. Tiderider must take Leeza to his mother first ... and then ... Tiderider would be a fit mate for Leeza or perhaps another of his brothers. Channadar had three younger half brothers, all truebloods. Perhaps his mother would consent to a match between Leeza and one of them. They would appreciate her.

"Channadar, my lord and friend?"

Channadar raised his head at the sound of Tiderider's voice. "You always sense when I am troubled."

Tiderider gave a very tiny bowing of his head.

"We need to discuss Leeza."

"What is it about Leeza that concerns you?"

"For a long time I have wanted to marry her."

Tiderider frowned. "A trueblood would be more worthy of you."

Channadar waved his hand for silence. "I know your feelings concerning Leeza. I know that most of you consider her a summerfly, but you're wrong."

"As you wish." Tiderider bowed his head in acquiescence.

"I do wish. After all that has happened, I fear I may not survive this Dance of War. Therefore, I want you to know what I wish you to do, should I die."

Tiderider's head came up and he grabbed Channadar's hand. "My lord, the Chosen will not let you die. Better that we all perish, than you. Our lives are pledged to fall first."

"I don't question that. Only, if I should. I want you to take Leeza to my mother. I love her dearly. Swear to me that you'll do that."

"I swear by earth and wood."

"Juna will want her, once he knows she was mine. You must not let Juna have her. He would not treat her kindly. My soul would rest better if you took her for your

own, or matched her with my younger brothers."

"I will take her to Faewin, and if your brothers do not want her, I will take her for my own. You have my vow."

"That eases my heart." Channadar embraced Tiderider and sealed the vow. Leeza would not be abandoned by his death, but treated as a woman of his people – one who was not a warrior and required the care and protection of a male. Since she would never be a dragonfly like Blue Lily and Jangflower, at least she could become a butterfly and never want for anything.

* * * *

Galee met with the four summerflies in the swan room. Daylight glinted on her hair, making golden wings above her ears. She wore her burgundy red dress with a wealth of petticoats to make it flare around her hips and legs. The close fitting bodice revealed the ample curves of her breasts, making it plain that her charms outshone those of the summerflies.

"We failed," Yolany told her.

"And now everyone is treating Juna even worse than before," Tongari said.

"That is such a shame," Galee told them, settling herself on Alysinjin's swan bed. "Juna is such a kind mon to be treated so badly."

"The vampires frighten me," Sysymi said.

"I would like to help you," Galee replied. "But everyone listens to Channadar, even the Grand Master. I spoke to the Grand Master of all your fears and problems, but he simply refused to listen."

Pelaui's head dropped. "Then there is nothing to be done. Juna says he cannot live with the shame..."

"Of course there is something you can do," Galee reassured them. "I have brought you presents." She opened her bag, bringing forth four wrapped blades and handing them around. Then she brought forth other things that she did not immediately offer them, vials of dark liquid and rings and small boxes.

Yolany's eyes lit. "Oh, they're beautiful!" They looked decorative, enameled flower hilts, but when Yolany thumbed the blade it cut her. "Sharp."

"Yes," Galee said. "Now let me tell you what I think you should do to bring Juna to his rightful place."

"Yes, tell us," Yolany said.

"So long as Channadar is alive, Juna will suffer. Therefore, Channadar must die."

Yolany and the others shared an uncertain glance. "I don't know if I can do that."

Galee brushed aside her protestation. "Nonsense, you have already tried to kill him once."

Yolany frowned. "But to stick it in myself ... with my own hand..."

The others nodded.

Galee smiled at them. "As you say the blades are very sharp. It will take no strength of hand, only of will, to slip them into him. I know you have the will."

"Yes, we have," Yolany replied, a feral light coming into her eyes, which the others matched.

"Then I will tell you how and when, for you want him to die swiftly."

* * * *

Mohanja sat by Takhalme's bedside. They had moved him into the temple, a room warded by Dynarien. He slept deeply, totally exhausted by the revelations and the shock of Dynanna's confrontation. Mohanja himself was exhausted to the depths of his soul as he finally stood and walked out.

"You will keep him here, Eshraf? Where the vampire cannot reach him?"

"Yes. He is far too weak for anyone to try and remove any coercions that might be present. Even were Lord Dynarien not so badly hurt, I would be reluctant to ask him to try. Sha has done what she could. Takhalme cannot remember the vampire's face. He says she came always in a dream. He says she made him write letters and now I fear for our people in the east."

"I fear for our people here. We must not allow anyone to know how badly off he is. With Talons so ill, it could fall to the council to pick a regent for the Guild and Galee holds more influence than I. Hanadi. I need Hanadi."

"I am sorry. But she will not return until spring."

"What about the drugs?"

"It is similar to the street drugs they used to kill Yahni. He is so deeply addicted and so weak that trying to take them away from him – withdrawal would be fatal."

"I'll find him a source."

"You'd never manage it. However, I know a tavern owner who can."

"Thank you, Eshraf."

* * * *

Galee's eyes flashed with rage. "If you had not insisted on taking the sister, they would both be dead now."

That whole day's work had turned into a disaster. Takhalme had been moved into the temple out of her reach. No one would move openly against either Dynarien or Edouina, now that Dynanna had had her say. She had had to arrange for the captives to die tonight before they could tell anyone who had subverted them. That was a waste of her resources.

At least, she finally knew who and what Dynarien truly was, and why he seemed familiar that day when she encountered him on the quad with Jysy and Arruth. He was the Rose Warrior – called so because of the blue roses device on his armor and the fragrance that clung to him as a manifestation of his divinity. His features were just enough different that she had missed the similarities to his original body. Dynarien was prettier this time. In his first life he had been betrothed to Melorien Trosdottir, a favorite granddaughter of Willodarus, and was himself a grandson of that elder god. Melorien had been raped and murdered by Waejonan, called thereafter the "Accursed." Waejonan, who went on to found Waejontor, had been a secret protégé of Galee. It was because of that murder that Willodarus had discovered what Galee really was. Galee and Willodarus fought for seven days and seven nights: Galee lost. The God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures chained her to a rock in what would eventually become Hadjys' ninth hell. He sealed her in with demons that fed on the undead. She found a flaw in the seal and escaped.

Meanwhile, Dynarien and Tros pursued Waejonan across that world, overtaking him in the area that would become Waejontor. Waejonan, first of the sa'necari, the living embodiment of the undead, destroyed them both, committing an act of mortgiefan on Dynarien and shattering his soul – a rite of rape and murder – and absorbing many of them into himself to increase his powers. Waejonan had ridden Dynarien into death. It had been delicious to watch. Willodarus, arriving too late, gathered the surviving fragments of Dynarien's soul; and begetting a child on the god, Mariko, placed the pieces within her womb. The fragile soul fragments split, becoming two children instead of one: Dynarien and Dynanna, warrior brother and trickster sister. The only way that Galee could be absolutely certain of destroying him would be to attack them both in different places at the same instant. There must be no Jumping to each other's aid next time. That would require calling in those favors owed her by Brandrahoon, who had the ear of Prince Mephistis. She hated wasting favors. But then, perhaps, it would not be wasting anything: Mephistis needed a greater death to heal himself of deijanrael. Dynanna would do nicely for that.

At least with the other girl dead, Wrathscar would be manageable so long as she kept him well fed. It no longer mattered whether Cass continued to give Talons' the drug: the heir was already past saving. That, at least, was a victory – an incomplete one, for now all her plans rested on a single roll of the dice. That roll was still six weeks off.

She could still pay Channadar for costing her the services of the Master of Blood. That foolish Fae-born Creeyan lordling would pay for his interference and so would all his woodland clan. Her minions had managed to wound him twice, now she must move in for the kill.

And Derryl. Lord Derryl would pay for stealing her book. Yahni must have told him where the book was. Derryl must still have the book. It had not been put into play, yet she had not found it in the gutters or the sewers. One of her lesser bloods had seen a child running off with it. Derryl had friends all throughout the gutters of Havensword. He liked the smallfolk. Write him a letter. Bait a trap and call him home to Havensword. Call him home to die and perhaps catch Channadar in the same trap. Now that would be tasty. She had not eaten Faery meat in a long time. She would bottle Channadar's blood. Perhaps blend it with Derryl's for an interesting flavor? Yolany claimed she would handle Juna just fine when the time came. What a sweet suggestible little creature Yolany was and so greedy.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LAST PRINCE OF THE BLOOD

Derryl Tormuth's hunting lodge was a rambling wood and stone structure situated in a broad clearing that nestled in a valley three days ride down the mountain from Havensword. Over the years he had added a modest, yet reasonably defensible log palisade with a catwalk around it. He and his ladies had settled down for dinner in a large room with a huge hearth that warmed it well in the evenings. The broad ceiling beams were smoke stained and the light from the candles in the chandeliers danced across them, adding their small contribution to the staining in the beams.

He poured the wine himself for each of them in a casual manner, delighting in the appreciative expression in Leslie's face as Maya described their hunt that day. "You should have been there, Leslie," he said.

"I am quite content with my life, Derryl," she answered, folding her hands across her belly. "And with Maya's telling of it. There will be hunts later for me to join in."

Maya beamed at her, pausing in her story as a knock preceded the entrance of Derryl's master of birds. He carried several small slips in his hands taken from messenger birds that had recently arrived.

"Your pardon, My Lord," he said. "But you asked that should anything come, I was to bring it immediately."

Leslie and Maya watched closely, a stillness settling in their manner, as Derryl read the three tiny slips the master of birds placed in his hand. His fine lips tightened. "Have horses saddled, a guard of twenty. We ride for Havensword immediately."

"Derryl, you can't. It's not safe." Leslie protested, reaching for his hand.

Derryl shook his head at her. "I must. I cannot let them face this alone. Rogue guards took Dynarien and Edouina. The mon is badly injured. Jysy was assaulted by the vampire, and nearly died. Exactly like her sister. I must return to Havensword. Eshraf needs me."

"Then let us go with you." Maya begged, rising to her feet as he did.

"No. You will both remain here where you are safe. I brought you here to get you away from it, not to drag you back into it." Derryl's mouth set in a stubborn line and his jaw clenched.

Maya glanced at Leslie for support and she shook her head.

"At least promise that as soon as you reach the city you will send us word that you are there and safe," Maya insisted. "That much at least. Leslie needs that much peace of mind, Derryl. Deserves it."

Derryl relented a little. "So be it. That much. As soon as I have spoken to Eshraf, which should not be more than two or three days, then I will send word again." He gathered them both up and kissed them. "I will not worry you more than I am forced."

Then he swept out of the room before they could argue further.

* * * *

Yukiah started calling in favors as soon as Jysy finally opened her eyes the next morning. He had lost Arruth, but he damn well was not going to lose Jysy too. The armsmaster leaned forward in the chair. Sunlight glinted on his hair and brought out the lines around his eyes. He reflected on the concern and fondness he could not entirely conceal. His students were his children, since he had none, and Jysy seemed even more so.

"Hello, scamp," he said, tousling her black, curly hair. "Thought I'd lost you."

"What happened?" Jysy asked. "I hurt real bad."

"I was hoping you could tell me." He tried to keep his tone even, but he knew she

could read him, and he did not want to alarm her further.

"He got me, didn't he?" Jysy's voice shook and her eyes narrowed. Her hands tightened on the bright coverlet, pulling it to her chin in a twisted point.

Yukiah had insisted upon being the one to ask her questions, instead of Aramyn. "Yes, he did. Can you remember what he looked like?"

Jysy closed her eyes, trying hard. "No. Sophie told me someone wanted to talk to me. I followed her over. Then all I remember is being frightened."

"Okay. You rest." Yukiah tousled her hair again and started to stand, but Jysy caught his hand, clutching it.

"Don't leave me."

Seeing her like that ... reluctance to leave tugged at him, pulled at the muscles in his body like hands of desperation. He pushed it aside. "Jysy, Sha will stay right with you. I need to see some people. To make certain he can't get you again. There are going to be myn staying in your parlor at all times, just like they do with Talons."

Jysy released him, but her eyes followed him out. Yukiah paused for a moment with Sha in the doorway. "How is Channadar doing?" he asked quietly, rubbing the burn scar on his neck.

Sha groped for the right words in a way that alarmed Yukiah. "Paralysis. Permanent. He's lost what little feeling he had left in the hand and fingers, all of the arm. It's like ice."

Yukiah's mouth twisted into a savage grimace. "I'm going to pay them back, Sha," he growled low. "I can't hold back any longer. I'm going to pay them."

"Be careful, Yukiah."

"I will."

Yukiah closed the bedroom door behind him as he stepped into the sitting room. He took in the whole room at a glance, seeing a dozen knights, other students, and Osterbridge. "Jimi, we may have another missing student. See if you can find Sophie. She fetched Jysy for our vampire. Get a search going, if you have to. In groups. Stay in groups. Take at least one catkin with each group. Ceejorn, I would appreciate it if you would remain here in case that thing comes back."

"Sure thing, Yukiah. Isen and I will stay until some Guildsmyn can relieve us."

"I'll have Queiggy take care of that."

Yukiah left the west wing, pausing on the broad balcony above the great central hall. The hall seemed somber and empty without Lord Channadar's crowd. Many others were keeping to the small halls, out of the way meeting places. The court seemed spooked again and rightfully so. Yukiah strode quickly down the stairs, heading for the Guild Wing. Lord Wrathscar's oldest daughter, Philomea, came up to him near the stairs into the Cloverleaf. "Isn't it sad about the little girl?"

"Which one?" he asked, his voice controlled and emotionless.

"Why, the one they found dead near the library two nights ago."

Yukiah weighed the angles. In his experience, the guilty were the first to come forward. Did he let them think Jysy was dead? The vampires would figure it out eventually, but it would buy him some time to set things up. "Yes, it is."

The young mon looked deeply into his eyes and reached for his mind.

Yukiah felt the attempted intrusion and ignored it. Shit, they had not turned just Belyla, but this one also. Could they have turned all of them? And could they have set Belyla loose? He had not heard her in several nights.

Philomea drew away from him with a slight widening of her eyes to indicate that his shielded mind had confused and disturbed her. Yukiah gave her a polite dip of his head and moved on. He passed the doors to the Guild Wing. Porthramys, a seventy-year old Guild gaffer with a spiked cudgel and a temper to match if you pushed it, manned the desk. The silent mutiny was gaining recruits. By ones and twos and sometimes more, the retired Guildsmyn were appearing at the wing to take over all the non-combatant jobs, and they all had the same tale to tell: "*Our god has spoken to me in a dream and said report for duty. So I'm here.*"

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Your protégé was so promising."

"She still is, Porthy. We've got vampires in high places, very high places. Maybe all the way to the top." Porthy had been one of the adults aiding and abetting Yukiah's stalwarts thirty years ago when they were a rag-tag band of youngsters.

Porthy moved some papers about his desk. "Lord Wrathscar's daughter told me. But then it's all over the palace."

:She's one of them. Tried to reach me in the great hall . : Yukiah signed.

:High places indeed! No one who deals directly with the aristocracy will hear of it from me. Not Takhalme. Not Galee. None of them. Did you hear two Guildsmyn died last night? :

"No."

"They found them nailed to the temple doors with a spear through them."

"From which units?"

"Records. Two clerks. But, they were well trained so they did not die easily. I am certain they fought well. Queiggy will know their names." He opened a drawer, taking out a small square of parchment bearing the Rune of Hadjys done in crimson with crossed swords beneath it. He took a long thumbtack, as long as a nail, from another drawer and passed them both to Yukiah. "I imagine you'll be wanting to post this?"

Yukiah carried it across to the temple and fastened it on the main door, which was stained with the blood of two Guildsmyn. Then he picked up some bedding, a change of clothing and weapons, carrying them to Jysy's rooms. He would be staying in the parlor from here on. He could have had one of the upstairs bedrooms, but wanted to sleep across the threshold like a watchdog. No one and nothing was getting to Jysy. Jimi was waiting for him.

"We found Sophie. She's dead."

The Guildsmyn started arriving at dusk, in twos and threes.

* * * *

Lord Westli was tired. Having a woman so much younger than himself in his life was a very demanding situation. She liked to see and be seen. Her kisses were like fire and ice; and her legs were warm and welcoming as they wrapped around his back each night. She waited for him now.

Westli disrobed as he walked. The servants could clean up his discarded clothing tomorrow. He had clean ones in his wardrobe.

Philomea lay nude upon his bed like a dream waiting to be embraced. Her perfect legs lay wide apart, with the golden haired mound exposed to his lust. "My flesh hole awaits you. Thrust swiftly into it and prove your ardor."

He climbed onto the bed at the foot, sliding up between her legs, with his eager spear hard and ready. "Philomea, I worship you."

Westli cupped her breasts as he pushed inside her. She arched against him and wrapped her legs around his buttocks. Her fangs descended in readiness for what would come next. She always took the memories away, altered them with sways and triggers as Galee had taught her. He could not betray her; he could only want her.

The drapes rustled softly. A single figure slipped quietly to the bedside and paused to be certain they had not noticed him. Then a sword blade flashed in a sliver of moonlight. Westli stiffened as the blade passed through his body and into Philomea's heart. The Guildsmon gave the blade three savage twists to make certain

of his kills. "For Yahni. For Arruth. For Jajinga," Yukiah hissed under his breath with each turn he gave the blade and left it there to be found as a warning. It was not an avenging Guildsmon's weapon, but the kind the temple placed in the hands of a slain Guildsmon when they buried him.

When he had first entered, Yukiah had found Westli's diary, written in some kind of code, and shoved it inside his shirt. Once he returned, he would put the Guild's code-breakers to work on it. He went to the window and out, swarming down his rope. Then he freed his grappling hook by jiggling the rope. Yukiah unlocked the mechanism, folded the hook, and tucked it in his belt, winding the rope up. He wore full harness over his black leathers. The armsmaster had planned for everything he could imagine, loading his harness, belt, and arm sheaths with weapons and nasty surprises. He walked toward the spot where he was supposed to meet his partner for this night's work. The Guildsmon wasn't there. Yukiah noticed that the crickets had gone silent. He heard a soft rustle of leaves to his left and a squish of rain-moistened soil to his right. One of them might be his partner but not both of them, so he made a guess and was already pivoting away from the heavier one when he hissed her name, "Jarisse?"

"No. But she was delicious."

Because he had moved when he did, the blade caught him more to the right and missed his spine. His attacker jerked the spear from his back to stick him again. Yukiah twisted, stumbling as he forced himself to come about and face them. "Ambrose ... and Milady. I should have known."

Ambrose gave him a curt nod, licking his spear point clean with his fangs showing in clear contempt. "Delicious, Yukiah."

Anger and adrenaline bought Yukiah a grace period. It would not last. He backed away, one slow step at a time, gauging everything, not wanting to rush head long into worse than what he faced already. His sword came from his shoulder in a smooth motion. He had no idea what lay in Westli's diary, but he was willing to die to find out. And they were willing to make him. They may have already... No sense thinking about it. No time to stop and think about Jarisse either. A rush of feet sounded to his left. Yukiah's eyes slewed to the side and he palmed a vial from his belt, clear glass, double-chambered, with a thin membrane in the middle that would shatter allowing the pale green to mix with the murky brown, producing Iradrim fire. Lesser bloods ... a dozen of them ... at least.

Yukiah threw the bottle hard at the lesser bloods. Glass shattered mixing the chemicals, which exploded, igniting the bloods, the bushes and leaving a crater in the ground. The ground shook hard and nearly sent Yukiah to his knees. The vampires screamed. Ambrose threw his arms over his eyes, dropping his spear as the flash temporarily blinded him. In the firelight, Yukiah could see four more, all lesser bloods running up behind Milady who had turned back to check on her husband. He

ran down the path outside the guardsmyn's wing. It seemed like only every other lamp was lit. So he was moving constantly from darkness into light and back again. The darkness favored the monsters: their night vision was better than his and he knew it. So better the monster he could see than the monster he could not. There was no question in his mind that, as good as he was, they would still pull him down. His hand went to the wound in his side; it caught at him like taloned fingers.

* * * *

"Freeeeeeeeeeeeeee," wailed the ghost in the darkness. "I have been named in an act of vengeance by a paladin of the nethergod! I am freeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" She swirled in dancing silver motes around the bodies of Westli and Philomea, wishing vaguely they were Galee and Wrathscar. But happy nonetheless. At least one of her rapists was dead and his soul sent to the uttermost hells of Hadjys. Three soldiers came pounding at the door when they heard her wailing, and opened it.

Arruth recognized them, and rushed upon them. They screamed, backing away from her. One bolted and ran. She reached the nearest one, sliding her torn bloody arm around his shoulders. "*There is a lovely window here,*" she murmured. "*A very lovely window.*"

He tried to pull back as Arruth walked him forcibly into the room. He saw her and did not see her, in the half-light of the shivering candle flames. When he looked at her fully Arruth was not there. Yet when he turned his face away there she stood, the dead little girl with her body all torn and nude, the way she had been when he threw her in the bushes for his lord. Westli and Wrathscar had killed her. He could feel her even when he could not see her. A shriek rose in his throat, but he could not get it out; for his throat had constricted too tightly around it. The soldier, who had once tied her down for them, saw his lord's body and then a long howling cry of near madness finally came free.

"*Yes, scream,*" Arruth told him. "*It's a lovely sound. Come to the window.*"

"No. Please." But he could not stop his legs from walking. "Let me go. Please let me go."

"*You did not let me go. I begged you. I begged you nicely.*"

"I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry."

They reached the window and the soldier's hands caught the edge, his knuckles whitening as Arruth's cold, ghostly hands prodded him. When he fought her harder, she slipped inside his body, possessed him, and jumped. As the mon tumbled through space from the third floor window, Arruth left him and went looking for Yukiah. She wanted to know who else the armsmaster might intend to kill that night.

* * * *

Yukiah heard them gaining on him. He whirled and spitted the first lesser blood to reach him, kicked the corpse off the blade. Claws ripped his calf, sliced down through his boot leather and the flesh beneath like it was warm butter. He stumbled twisting to strike with the pommel of his blade. Yukiah shattered the lesser blood's nose, driving the fragments into the creature's brain and broke its hold on his leg, tearing himself in the process. Another kicked him in his wound, the pain nearly causing him to black out. The armsmaster resisted it grimly, managing to stagger to his feet. Yukiah grasped his sword two handed and beheaded the creature with the kenda'ryl blade. Claws ripped across his ribs, tearing deeply into his flesh. He suspected that he would not make it to safety. He stabbed that one through the heart. It was not in him to give up.

"Hadjys, my god, keep Jysy safe. And the others ... I tried ... I tried."

Yukiah tossed another bottle of Iradrim Fire into the trees, watched the explosion, and heard the creatures scream. Then he started on at a limping run, half-swinging the injured leg to make it move. His pants leg grew quickly wet and Yukiah could tell it was bad, but he dared not stop to check it. They would be on him too fast. "Jynny ... wherever you are ... I tried."

The path opened onto the quad as he rounded the southwest wing. If he entered the palace there would be too many questions asked and he had just slain the Knight-Commander of the Guard, even if Westli had been sleeping with vampires it would not matter to the guard. And if the guard intercepted him before he could reach the Guild Wing? What chance would he have then? They would be mustered and waiting for him. The same ones that had murdered Dynanna's prisoners and their Guildsmyn guards that night. No, Yukiah needed to reach the temple where Eshraf would shield him while matters could be sorted out. Which meant he had to cross the quad.

* * * *

Arruth watched from the trees. The gardens were burning. The palace would catch fire, but even more important why would Yukiah head for the temple, which was farther? *Too few people are awake at this hour and he won't trust the guard*, Arruth reasoned. She did not trust the guard. *Wake everyone up. Yes. Yes, indeed. Wake everyone up.*

She threw her head back, her neck elongating into a banshee's throat and she shrieked in long, mournful wails like the one which she had used to torment her sister's dreams when Arruth had not yet been freed to move and speak. It echoed and keened across the grounds, it pierced the sleeping minds and sliced through the deepest slumbers. Queiggy heard it in his cellar and sat up in alarm. Eshraf bolted upright in his bed. Leeza clutched at Channadar and shivered. It tore through the halls with grief and fury and here and there it even shattered glass.

* * * *

Sculptured bushes formed an island ahead of him, breaking the path into two. Benches with floral curved backs lined the right and Yukiah took that fork. Sharp pain lanced up from his calf and he stumbled, grabbing at a bench as he went down.

Yukiah forced himself up, shoved away from the bench and staggered on. A weight hit him between the shoulder blades, sending him skidding face down along the cobblestones. He skinned his cheek and nose, rolled with a curse, and threw the creature off. Claws sliced his leathers along his biceps and opened a shallow wound. Then he shoved the blade through its ribs with a sharp twist that ended its existence. Another slammed into him, again he struck face down, breaking his nose and opening a bone deep tear from the outside of his eye across his cheek to the corner of his mouth. Yukiah rolled and threw himself against a tree, hearing the satisfying thunk and squish of a crushed melon breaking open that betrayed the shattering of the creature's skull. Yukiah saw three more coming and moved on. He could see the side of the temple where the Guild student annex extended. Lights shone in the lancet-arched windows of orange-strained glass lining the building ahead of him, which threw a fire-like glow across the low shrubs of the garden. Safety beckoned if he could reach it.

The sound of pursuit ended abruptly and that set off alarms. There was a reason for everything, and since he saw no lights ahead to suggest temple units had emerged, he suspected something else. And then it grabbed him: a royal. Milady caught him by the arm, spun him about as if he weighed nothing, and threw him to the ground on his back. Yukiah struck his head hard and his vision grayed. She began kicking and stomping him, picking her targets, getting his wounds with each blow until he couldn't breathe for the anguish, breaking ribs and cracking bones. She straddled him, her hands pinned his arms to his sides as she bowed her head and breathed along his neck.

"Did you really think I wouldn't get you?" Milady hissed. "Ambrose still can't see. He was too close to the blast." She bit deeply, angrily.

Yukiah gasped sharply and stopped moving in a jumbled rush of mental confusion and weakness as his blood rose into her mouth. Agony twisted through him from both her feeding and her efforts to get into his mind – she kept slamming against the walls that Talatiel had built there when he was a youth, walls too strong for her to breach. He cried out and then went still. After a few moments Yukiah's chest heaved up in convulsion and then again with a terrible groan as a cold presence swept into his body and he heard Arruth say, "*Be ready.*"

Peace and a transcendent clarity filled the armsmaster and he did not question how he could be hearing the voice of a dead child.

Milady made a satisfied noise deep in her throat in response to his stillness and

relaxed her grip on his arms now that he appeared to be too far gone to resist her. She tore the rings from his fingers and placed them under a bush in a little pile, and then tore the locket from his neck and threw it away. She pulled out of his neck with a swipe of her tongue to stop the bleeding.

"Ambrose will want your rings. He collects those," she sneered. "I'll take them to him when I'm finished. We killed your brothers. He has their rings." Milady bit into him again.

Cold hands gilded Yukiah's fingers in a shimmering auric pattern of silver in the black of night. Arruth flexed them in a tiny twitching that passed for a seizure, testing her control of Yukiah's body. She hated Milady and those the vampire served – those who were killing Yukiah for trying to protect her sister Jysy. Again Arruth flexed Yukiah's fingers. The ghost dared not wait any longer; she had to make Yukiah do it now. Yukiah slipped a blade from his harness and thrust it under Milady's breastbone hard, angling it up into her heart. He pulled it back a quarter length and shoved it in even harder, this time with a twist, driving the quillons grating against the bones and she fell across him, her fangs still inside him.

"Dip your finger in her mouth," whispered the ghost in his mind. *"Use her saliva to close the wound. That's how they did it with me. Or you'll bleed out. Try not to tear yourself too much."* It was an old trick of the Lemyari themselves to close a feeding wound that was not too badly torn. And only some of them ever did it well. But it would only work for a feeding wound where blood mixed with their saliva.

Very carefully he drew the blade out and then used his thumb to pop her loose from him. He ran his finger along her tongue and spread the moisture across the wound to close it. He pushed her off him and dragged himself to his feet using the edge of a bench. The calf would not support him, but he grabbed a sturdy stick and used it as a cane. Yukiah could not see in the limited light that Milady had broken the bone and it now protruded from the flesh beneath the ripped artery. He would be lucky to make it the two yards into the annex.

Arruth put the compulsion in Yukiah's mind of where to go for help, knowing that he was probably too far gone to reason it for himself and nudged him in the proper direction before sliding from his body, leaving him with a tiny bit of herself and hoped it would be enough to save him. Then she went back to the hunt. There were other Guildsmyn out this night and no more of them would get hurt if Arruth could help it. Especially if helping them would allow her to feed on their enemies.

There was no further sign of pursuit and Yukiah staggered the last few feet into the temple yard. He found concentration difficult, knew only that he had to reach the temple, cross that last small distance to safety. Yukiah reached the postern door and fumbled with his key. He leaned his head and shoulder against the edge of the wall near the door to support and steady himself. It took three tries before his trembling hand could get the key in and that was only by using his other hand to steady it.

Once inside, he turned and dropped the bar. By then he could barely stand. He used the stick and placed his other hand firmly against the wall, digging his nails into the uneven spots on the stones. He dragged the broken leg, shambling forward until he reached the first door and fell inside unable to cross the distance of a door's length. A long trail of blood marked his line of travel. Two students sitting late in the Common Room started to their feet, seeing him collapse, and came to his side.

"It's Master Yukiah," Isen exclaimed, dropping her book.

Darhm jerked his belt off and made a tourniquet around Yukiah's leg. "I'll get a priest."

"No." Yukiah reached for him. "Can't help ... me..." His head moved weakly, and he swallowed. "Listen... Names... Let me tell you names." His voice was whispery and hoarse, his lips dry and cracking. He struggled to wet them with his tongue, but could get no moisture to them although his skin was sweating.

Darhm shook his head, refusing to believe the armsmaster, who had always seemed so invincible, could not be saved. He threw his cloak over Yukiah. "Tell Isen, she's eidetic. Ommy's got the desk this night. You take care of the rest?" He glanced at Isen and a tacit understanding ran between them. Darhm did not need to tell her what he meant. Then he ran off.

"Tell me the names," Isen said while her nimble fingers quickly undid the buckles on Yukiah's harness.

"Ambrose... Milady..." A groan rose with a stiffening in his body and Isen slowed in her efforts to stroke his face for several heartbeats, tracing the edges of the tears, her eyes large with concern. "Deirgun..." Yukiah coughed, bringing up some blood-flecked foam. Isen wiped it away with her handkerchief. "Tolyg... ahhhrgg." His eyes closed and he twisted up in her arms. She got him out of the harness and slid the equipment under an aging couch covered by a throw that brushed the floor.

"Hold on, Master Yukiah," Isen pleaded, her fingers tracing along the edges of his blood-crusted face.

Then as suddenly as it had begun, he eased again as the world grayed. "Don't worry, Isen ... I'm tough."

Isen nodded, her teeth gnawing her lower lip anxiously, her eyes narrowing against the tears. She shifted around so that she could better cradle his head in her small lap and kept stroking her fingers around his damaged face in a futile gesture that was as much to comfort herself as for him. He was pale and sweating in the cool air. His blood spread through Darhm's cloak, so she pulled her own off and added to it.

The world started to go still grayer and Yukiah fought that, struggling to remain conscious. There were things he needed to tell people. He wanted to know if the rest

of his teams had returned alive and whole. *Dark Judge! I'm cold.* Yukiah wondered if Arruth's voice had been a hallucination. A death dream. The damned bitch had sucked him too close to the edge before he managed to kill her. His mind circled round that thought, although it was actually the other wounds through which his life was leaking out.

"Isen?"

"Yes, Master Yukiah?"

"You'll get ... my things to my room? ... When no one's looking?" He drew Westli's bloodstained diary from inside his shirt and placed it in her hands.

"I promise." Isen put the diary inside her shift.

His mind had started to drift, and then he was looking up at someone else, someone older, hearing her say:

"I can't stay, Yukiah. I'm a Rider."

"It's a hard life," Yukiah told her, holding her, not wanting to let go, searching her eyes for some sign of what they had had before.

"It's the one I have chosen."

"It's been fifteen years, Alysyn. You can't still be thinking about Rygen."

"I can't go back... Every time I looked at Derryl I would think about what I did to his brother."

"It wasn't your fault."

Yukiah blinked, his head listed to the side. His eyes had become heavy lidded, nearly impossible to keep open. Then he knew what it was about Isen's face that bothered him. He reached up and touched her cheek lightly. "You have her eyes ... you have Alysyn's eyes... Jynny's eyes."

Isen caught his hand as it started to fall from her face. "She's my mother."

"Your..." Yukiah swallowed and tried again to speak, but found it harder still this time. "Your father ... who is?"

"You are."

Then he understood why she had kept following him around, why she had said that time that she was protecting him. "Why didn't you... Why?"

"She wanted me confirmed first ... into the Guild."

"She would." Then he couldn't hold on any longer and his eyes closed. His head fell back against her leg.

"Master Yukiah? Master Yukiah!" Isen shook his shoulders, her voice growing frantic. "Father."

Ommy rushed in with Darhm and they dropped to their knees at her side. The priest took Yukiah's wrist and Read him, then turned his head to the side, revealing the wound in his neck. "Damn the hellspawn to perdition in the deepest of Hadjys' hells. Darhm, go to the temple and sound the alert, have the Patriarch meet us in Yukiah's rooms. Isen, sound the Guild-student alert and get me some healers, not in that order. Quickly, quickly, off you go!"

Even as they ran off, the alarms began to peel. Someone else had scented the trouble and the alert was going out as they moved.

Ommy shifted Yukiah to his own lap, took his cloak off, adding it to the blood stained pile tucked over the armsmaster in an attempt to warm him. Then he bent over him and added his own sheltering body warmth to the wounded armsmaster's. And he prayed. They needed their armsmaster; it was not yet time for his soul to be called to the Hall of Heroes. But Ommy knew his responsibilities and as he felt the man continue to weaken, he began the formal prayers for the dying.

* * * *

Osterbridge toed Milady's body over and knelt beside it, noting the blade through her in the light of torches held about him by members of the battle unit. "That's Yukiah's. And that's his sword over there." His mouth tightened, lips thinning. "He would never have left them behind. See if you can find him. Secure the perimeter."

Osterbridge shoved Yukiah's blades through his harness and that was when he saw the locket. The only way his mentor would have become separated from that locket with his wife's tiny portrait was if he were dead. Osterbridge scooped it up, dropping it inside his shirt.

"Lieutenant," Osterbridge turned to his second, "take charge. If I'm needed, I will be with the Patriarch. This monster here and all others should be staked and poled within the perimeters and under guard."

Then he headed for the temple to inform Eshraf.

* * * *

Isen ran hard through the halls, tears running heedlessly down her face. She had failed. Her father, the last prince of the blood, was dying. Battle units were already

moving into position around the doors, myn striding smartly in ordered groups, the black and flame of the church's holy warriors assembled at the doors. Isen wore the wooden beads of a healer priest around her neck, which one of them had given her so that she would not be detained or questioned over her student robes. She guessed rightly that the Patriarch would be up and in his offices since the alarms had been sounded.

She knew everyone in the room. Edouina Hornbow was just entering when Isen walked up to them. "Please I need to see Patriarch Eshraf. The senior Healer sent me. It's about Master Yukiah."

Edouina nodded and let her pass. "You're?"

"Isen, if you please."

Eshraf went to the youth. "Yes?"

"You must come quickly. They think he's dying."

Everyone in the room came to their feet.

Osterbridge arrived as Eshraf was leaving. He laid Yukiah's things on Eshraf's desk. "We discovered these thing out front by the body of a vampire we identified as Milady. These belong to Armsmaster Yukiah Woodbourne."

"Come." Eshraf ordered him.

Isen looked up at Osterbridge and grabbed him, clinging tightly as they followed the Patriarch. "Yukiah?" he asked her.

"Yes."

* * * *

Arruth shrieked mindlessly across the compound, her voice driven up the harmonic scale by the power of rage, becoming in the darkness a banshee in truth. No one would sleep that night. All were awakened. Most of the catkin fled to darkened corners. The tigerkin and the lycans, alone among the wiros, skulked in the shadowed corners of the gardens and the alleys, along the edges of the city streets. All lesser shifters were afraid to emerge. Terror walked. The fire in the gardens burned and resisted the bucket brigade that the guardsmyn and servants threw together while the Guild stole along the edges, but they were not out in force. The Guild limited themselves to small hunting bands, hoping to stake some lesser bloods and if very good fortune were with them some Lemyari and other dark creatures.

Twizzle raced across the quad, darting from bush to bench to bush and found the tiny circular window left open for him into Queiggy's cellar chambers. He wiggled

through with his message in his collar and dropped into the middle of the table where Queiggy, Leonè, and Aramyn sat with another mon. Queiggy's finger's deftly freed the message and he popped the seal, his eyes going first wide and then hooding and heavy lidded, his lips tight as a jar seal. His head settled chin on chest and cheek on shoulder. He pushed it to Leonè. "Seal the Wing. No one in or out. Twizzle, have all our units withdraw to the temple."

"What?" Aramyn asked.

"Yukiah's dying."

Leonè's face flushed with anger to the roots of his sandy hair and burned beneath his close-cropped beard. He pushed the paper to Aramyn and strode out, unable to deal with the news in front of them.

* * * *

It was turning into another nightmarish night for Sha as they rushed her from Jysy's rooms through the underground corridors to the temple, up closely guarded and warded passages that she had never known existed and only then did they tell her, once she entered the temple who they had brought her to see. She feared that they would be telling her that it was Eshraf himself who had been hurt.

When she found herself in the Guild school wing she began to breathe a little easier. And then to worry again when they turned into the teacher's quarters.

"It's Yukiah, isn't it?"

The priest nodded.

"How bad is it?"

"It happened just outside the doors, he managed to stagger inside. Collapsed in the Common Room in front of two students. It's defying all our efforts to control the bleeding."

She entered Yukiah's bedroom and found Eshraf and Edouina there. Sha wondered how they had managed pry Edouina from Dynarien's side. Isen sat closest to Yukiah with Osterbridge's arms around her shoulders. She held Yukiah's hand in both of hers and Sha wondered briefly what it meant. Their people were taking a beating and she wondered what they were accomplishing. She had not yet had any word about the casualties on the quad and the gardens around the guardsmyn's wing since the palace healers were refusing to go near it until the fire was firmly under control. Bunch of wusses. And the Guild was refusing to risk their own fighting the fire until they knew the area was secured. The palace healers were thinking fire and the Guild were thinking vampires and traitors. The mood would change a bit once dawn arrived.

For the first time Yukiah actually looked fifty-three years old, lying there in his blankets. His neck and the arm laying atop the blankets were bandaged. The neck wound could only mean vampire. Sha knew they had at least one dead Guildsmon. She had seen Jarisse's body brought in to the post-mortem room at the Guild Wing.

We're getting too old for this, Yukiah, Sha thought.

Sha started to move Isen, and Yukiah opened his eyes. His swollen, torn lips moved with an effort. "No. My daughter stays."

Sha glanced at Eshraf

The Patriarch nodded. "Isen is Yukiah and Alysyn's child. She has Alysyn's gifts."

Sha took his wrist and Read him. He was badly torn inside by a spear. Myn rarely survived that. Level two blood loss, bordering on level three. There were some Guild healers on the northwest coast trying to perfect a way to do successful transfusions, but they did not have it yet. Sha wished they did. Then she could have been more certain of Yukiah's survival and a lot of others. Talons had also set the question of it to a Nerien healer. They needed that or the Abelardian spells. As it was? "What happened?"

"The Guild took out Wrathscar's three vampiric daughters," Eshraf told her. "And Lord Westli."

"You realize we are losing Yukiah..." Sha said, her voice dull.

"No," Edouina said suddenly, rising from her chair and heading for the door. "We're not losing Yukiah."

Eshraf went after her. "Edouina. Edouina, wait. I don't think Dynarien has regained enough of his strength to fetch Josiah again. I know how you feel about your mentor. But you must not trade one for the other. It is far more complex, even than that. Listen to me."

Tears glistened in Edouina's eyes like a shining curtain across their hard depths. "Nah, you don't know nothing, honey." Then she shoved away from him and strode off. Eshraf let her go, ignoring her rudeness because he understood where it came from.

Yukiah's hand closed on his daughter's, tightening and then relaxing only to tighten again in a half convulsive manner. Sha had managed to get Yukiah comfortable with drugs and he had drifted again into a transitory state of semi-consciousness. All the memories had come unlocked when Isen revealed herself and Yukiah knew who and what he was. His eyes focused suddenly on Osterbridge standing behind Isen, pinning him. "Take her hand."

Osterbridge had no idea what was up, but he obeyed. Obedience to Yukiah had been too ingrained in him over the years for him to question it. He held the Isen's hand and moved closer to the bed. She looked up at him, expectantly. Isen had that hard and strong body characteristic of Guild students who were trained from birth.

"Mikkal..." Yukiah's voice hoarsened and faded away almost to nothing before strengthening again, "you will sanctify the union."

Mikkal nodded.

Osterbridge blinked in shock. No one had asked him. Isen was fourteen to his twenty-six. He loved her, but he still feared to touch her, knowing she was so young.

Mikkal began, "Do you Ceejorn Osterbridge accept the troth of the Princess Isen St Jon de Dulac?"

Osterbridge swallowed. "She's Sinjin?"

Mikkal nodded. "Her mother is the Black Swan. Yukiah is the last prince of the blood of the branch clan. Now plight her your troth and kiss her."

The priest finished the rites, and when all was said and done, Yukiah's expression looked more peaceful. He drew his daughter to him and held her a moment, kissed her. Then Mikkal rushed both Osterbridge and Isen from the chamber with a battle unit about them. They took the secret passage beneath the temple through the caverns, opened by a secret word that only Queiggy sensed, crossed to the Guild Wing, and swept into the annex.

"What does all this mean?" Osterbridge demanded. By then he was carrying Isen who wept on his shoulder.

"It means, my friend, that Yukiah chose you as his successor. Once you and Isen have consummated the marriage, you will be secretly anointed Grand Master of Creeya."

"But, I can't ... I mean ... I can't."

Mikkal patted the young man's arm solicitously. "Of course you can. For now, however, we will not speak of these things to anyone outside our small group. Especially Mohanja and those of questionable loyalties. We need to let matters move more firmly into place. For now, protect your bride."

"You don't still question Mohanja?"

"His loyalty, no. His judgment? He still has inner conflicts. However, he has promised to act on any proofs we can provide him, but first we must find those

proofs and they must be convincing ones."

* * * *

Edouina walked into Dynarien's bedroom, her eyes going sad and misty as she looked at his battered face. In three days some of it had already started to fade, which amazed her, considering how badly he had been beaten. Jimi dozed in a chair. Edouina swallowed and then sucked in a deep breath. She could not let Yukiah die if there was the least hope of saving him and yet she prayed she would not be risking Dynarien either, since she had come to love this mon as passionately as Talons did. Edouina bent over him and touched his head away from the bruises. "Dynarien, honey, wake up. We've got trouble."

"Edouina? What is it?" He woke instantly, clear and clean, without any of the haze that sometimes obscured other people's waking, even injured as he was.

"A vampire got Yukiah. We need Abelard or he's going to die."

"You need the spell. Josiah taught me before he left." Dynarien's eyes strayed to the window and the bright light across the quad. "The northwest gardens are burning. There are people out there."

"No one's saying it, but I suspect something got hit with Iradrim fire," Jimi said.

"You can help Yukiah?"

"Yes. I don't have a lot of strength back yet, but yes." Dynarien tilted himself out of bed, and paused, extending his hand and summoned Dawnhand's staff. Edouina gaped at the sheer majesty of the thing, seeing it again without the illusions.

"Holy hell shit, honey, like I said before, when you summon a staff, you summon a staff."

Dynarien used the staff to rise and started walking. "I can only access a fraction of its power. I'm not an Abelardian. It's my sister's. She stole it from the mon who stole it and murdered its owner. I can only borrow it from her sometimes. At least until she gives it away. Then I can't borrow it any more."

Edouina followed him through the corridors. He would normally have Jumped, but he was conserving his strength. "She's simply going to give something like that away?"

"Yes. It's a Kalirioni mage-paladin's staff. Very rare. There hasn't been one of those guys in five hundred years, not since Josiah Abelard died."

"But he's alive."

"Yes and no. He was murdered and his soul stolen. My sister raided a soul vault and I got him reborn. Put him on an island as the last of his descendants. But we tended to be rather irresponsible." Dynarien sighed deeply. "I'm trying hard not to be that way anymore after I saw what happened to Josiah. We didn't keep a watch or ward on him as a child. Just went our merry way. An apostate priest got hold of him, burned the magic out, and damaged him as a child. He's twenty-five, but he looks nearly fifty. The magic came back, but it's twisted in its channels and he's dying. And it's my entire fault really. I messed up his life and I can't fix it. I've tried."

"I am so sorry."

Dynarien went silent for a long while, his expression growing more and more worried. "What is even worse is that the return of Josiah Abelard was supposed to be an omen, the return of the mage-paladins, of victory at the beginning of a godwar we think may have already started. But he didn't become a mage-paladin because he never regained his full powers. They are always pan-elementalists. That's what an Abelardian is. Now I'm wondering what the prophecies meant. The lifemages are gone. The Abelardians will soon be gone. Many, many yuwenghau have been slain by mysterious assassins over this last century. Are the Gods of Light about to fall? Will the Gate of the Hellgod finally be opened?"

Edouina had never heard him speak so grim or so openly about the dark possibilities and she shivered. "Hadjys help me, I hope not."

Dynarien shook himself free. "I'm sorry, Edouina. It's the pain and exhaustion speaking."

"I understand, honey. I'm just sorry I had to ask you to do this."

Dynarien walked on ahead of her. That was when Edouina saw that Eshraf was coming from another room away from Yukiah's which could only mean a single thing: they were already too late.

Edouina went in first and stiffened when she saw Sha drawing the blanket over Yukiah's face. She cried out sharply in denial and Eshraf caught her by the shoulders, pulling her aside, holding her tightly against him.

"We lost him, Edouina. A few moments ago."

Dynarien let out a cry of grief and shoved past all of them. He knocked Sha away from the bed, dragging the blankets from Yukiah's face. Raw power surged around him in response to his emotions. The room changed, altered in shimmering waves of energy, Edouina tried to reach him and found her path blocked by a rush of rose briars thick with blue flowers, laced with all the colors of creation as more and more spirits filled in the lacework patterns with their own presence and powers. Eshraf chanted their names, half in terror, half in awe at the tremendous gathering. The Twice-Born Son was forcing a confrontation over the life of a friend, the last prince

of the nethergod's sacred kings, the younger lineage that Hadjys had hidden away against such a chance as Galee had forced upon him.

"That hell bitch has corrupted and destroyed faster than even I dreamed possible." Eshraf cursed and Edouina glanced at him sharply in response to his uncharacteristic language.

Edouina tried to push past Eshraf when Dynarien collapsed across Yukiah as sound and light burst forth into the room, but the Patriarch restrained her from throwing herself at the wall of briars. Power roared in sweeping movements. Trapped behind the wall of briars with Dynarien and Yukiah's dead body, Sha cowered on the floor, making no attempt to reach the unconscious yuwenghau. Then Dynarien straightened and brought the staff free from beneath Yukiah. Edouina released the breath she had not realized she had been holding at the sight of this only to catch it again when he turned to face them. She screamed.

His face was a mask of flame. He laid his hand upon Yukiah's chest, speaking words in a language she did not know, commanding and intoning.

Eshraf said to Edouina as gently as he could, "Be silent. By the wish of Hadjys, through the vessel of Dynarien, a boon has been granted. Kalirion Sun-Lord, God of Healing has come. Whether this is good or bad... I do not know."

"What will this do to Dynarien?"

"I don't know," Eshraf whispered. "Frequently, when a human asks, the payment is a life for a life."

"No." Edouina struggled to pull free.

"It's too late. You cannot stop it now. You should have listened to me. You may have traded Dynarien's life for Yukiah's."

"Then Yukiah is saved...?" Edouina's words emerged in a sob.

"I don't know. I told you it was complex. Yukiah's soul could simply shatter. This has never been done before. Hadjys and Kalirion are opposites. Should their powers connect too closely it could explode. I think that is why the vines are shielding us, keeping us out. And Dynarien has only a fragment of a divine soul. That he lives at all is a miracle of Willodarus. We could even lose both of them. You should never have told Dynarien."

Edouina began to weep.

"And if the divine energies explode, we could lose Sha as well."

Edouina closed her eyes. "Merciful gods."

* * * *

Dynarien lifted Yukiah's body up crossing the staff behind his back and shouted, "Spirit of Dawnhand help me!" Then he placed his hand over Yukiah's heart and poured in a surge of power like a lance of electricity, covered Yukiah's lips with his own and breathed his power in. And nothing happened.

"Hadjys, you cannot have him, yet! Damn, you! I'll tell my sister on you." Again nothing happened. "Kalirion, for the love of my sister! Help me! Come Kalirion! Come or my sister will never speak to you again! She will never kiss you! Never touch you!"

And then he tried one last time, even though he knew he had probably crossed the line – in fact he was in serious trouble now since Kalirion and Hadjys were not only rivals for his sister's favors, he was standing in an annex to Hadjys' temple while calling to Hadjys' rival to save Hadjys' armsmaster... Dynarien sighed and expected to be hit by a bolt of sunfire or netherflame at any minute, but instead thought he heard two grim gods laughing. He did not like the sound of it. "I think I'm in trouble. Serious trouble." Then he grew suddenly angry. "Dynanna will hate you both!"

Dynarien sensed Hadjys bow to his rival, the Sun-Lord. The young yuwenghau felt a sudden misgiving as if Hadjys had abruptly thrown him to the wolves for the audacity of invoking them both in that moment of desperation. And then they hit him for his innocent arrogance and his defiant hubris, his foolish nature that frolicked where angels feared to venture. Pain lanced upward from his hand holding the staff through his arm into his chest. The fiery hymns of the heavens sounded through the room and the burning sunfire burst behind his eyes. He heard Edouina scream just before he collapsed across Yukiah.

Sha, locked into the tight corner with Dynarien and Yukiah's body, wailed in helpless, growing terror. She pushed herself into the farthest corner from them and balled up on the floor. The ceiling vanished, becoming starlit sky and visions passed in the night. Torrundar Storm-Lord, King of the Gods, roared across the skies with his wildhunt, riding swiftly, accompanied by Tala and her moonwolves. Havoc and panic reigned over the castle grounds as the most powerful god of life and light opened an exception in the wards of a god of death's inner sanctums and entered. Hadjys strove to maintain a balance with Kalirion in shifting patterns that would not tear their shared vessel to shreds.

Hadjys attempted to open a channel to return Yukiah's soul and draw back the web he wove within his paladins to prevent this even as Kalirion's burning strength entered Dynarien and reached for Yukiah. Power crashed on power like waves caught in a hurricane, crashing against stony cliffs, neither wishing to yield to the other despite their master's wishes. The earth shook. And Dynarien shrieked in anguish.

* * * *

The earthquake hit as Osterbridge emerged into the basement of the Guild Wing with Isen. He staggered and managed not to fall. Leonè was waiting for them as they and their companions spread into the room. The door had snapped shut behind them so abruptly it nearly caught one of the priests. It felt like a backlash of power.

"Quick, Leonè, get to Queiggy! He was holding that door open for us," Osterbridge ordered without thinking, for Leonè had always been senior to him. "Check on him. See that the backlash did not hurt him."

Leonè started to protest.

Aramyn shook his head. "I'll go with you."

Osterbridge gave him a nod of thanks. "I'll get my wife settled in the star room."

"Wife?" Aramyn asked.

"Yes. Isen St. Jon Dulac, Yukiah's daughter. If Queiggy's okay, we can hold the meeting in the star room when Isen can be part of it. She's an eidetic. She has the names from him."

"He named his murderers?"

"Yes. Now, go."

* * * *

They beat on the door to Queiggy's room and received no answer. The door was locked, which was unusual. Aramyn ordered it broken down and a sea of books tumbled out. So it had not been locked at all, simply blocked by debris. The room was a mess. The earthquake had knocked every thing down. He spotted Queiggy lying in a heap in a corner, with a toppled bookcase across him. Aramyn stepped over everything and reached Queiggy at the same time as Leonè, stopping the big mon from lifting the little yuwenghau.

"Don't," Aramyn said softly. "I must check his head and neck first. Make certain that nothing is broken or out of place there. I don't want you paralyzing him." The signs were good and he gestured to two Guildsmyn and Leonè. "Okay. Lift the bookcase off him first."

They freed Queiggy, cleared a space, and dragged a blanket from his bed, using it as a stretcher to get him into the hall. Then Aramyn's smooth voice calmly took over, ordering the myn into groups. "I want every room checked for injured myn, top to bottom, wing and annex, all the rooms, quarters and so forth. Turn the dinning hall into a hospital, Guild only while we assess things, meals in the kitchens,

take the food to your rooms if necessary." Then he turned to Leonè. "I want Queiggy taken to the lower star room annex, put him in one of Captain Osterbridge's spare bedrooms or one of the adjacent rooms with a guard until he comes around. Get him a healer. I don't know how hard that bookcase hit him."

* * * *

Galee screeched. "God strike! God strikes! Lots of them! All over!" She danced and whirled as if caught in a pattern of madness. She had felt six of her allies die, six of her oldest allies. The Master of Blood had been forced to shield himself so tightly, dig so deeply into the caverns that it had been a very near thing, and she could scarcely feel him. She shrieked and danced and shrieked and danced. Her altar had shielded her, but only just.

Belyla stood chained to the wall, nude and withering from long deprivation. She had not fed since the night of her escape with Yahni. Madness glazed her eyes. The sacrificial slab stood before a shelf of images and beside it a small table with the tools of the rites, blades, incense, oils and paints, herbs and other materials in jars. The slab itself had manacles to hold its victims.

"Yahhhhhhnniiiiiii!" Belyla moaned.

Galee seized her by the dried straw of her hair and shook her savagely. "Shut up, Belyla or I'll make you my next offering." She turned to Meilurk. "Get her out of here. Gag her securely."

For a woodland yuwenghau with only a fragment of a soul, who would have dreamed that the Twice-Born Son could have called down such a conflagration? What was going on? She felt deeply shaken and that angered her still more.

* * * *

Alysyn woke with a scream. Her sleep crusted eyes focused slowly and she blinked at her surroundings. She was still in her tent on the western borders of Hellsguard. As she had promised Eshraf, she had gathered two-thirds of her riders and a large portion of her Netherguards. The former she held by right of rank, having gone to them instead of the Guild; the second she held by right of birth. She was the Black Swan, avatar-descendant of her namesake, Alysijn. "Yukiah!"

She pulled her blanket around her shoulders and rose from the cot, walking out of the canvas tent to stare into the night. Guards and others had been drawn by her scream and gathered around her, watchful and wondering.

A shivari, tigerkin, in his full human form of a broadly built, barrel chested mon approached. "What is wrong, Commander?"

She gestured from him to follow her back inside and several others came with him.

"A sending. From the gods. I refuse to march before dawn, but we will march. I cannot put it off any longer, Kerr."

"What kind..." He frowned, drawing his thick brows together until they met in the middle of his forehead.

"Send everyone else out, Kerr, save you and Father Wynn." As soon as they were alone, Alysyn began to force air into her lungs to master herself. She did not really want to tell anyone or to speak of her dream, but it required speaking of. "I believe that my husband, the prince is slain."

"That cannot be!" Father Wynn, a small wiry man who appeared almost fragile, yet was actually still tough as leather despite his white hair and wrinkled countenance.

At her gesture they settled into camp chairs by the bed where she now sat cross-legged with her blankets drawn up around her lap. "I've told you very little about him. It is a caution the swans keep, especially when we are forced to speak of a prince. He was armsmaster to the Grand Master. I say was, because sitting here, with each growing moment I become more certain that he's dead. It's the nature of my gift."

"Did you see how he died?" Kerr asked.

Alysyn closed her eyes briefly. "Yes. The hedgerows around the palace were burning. It was night. I could see their faces. Ambrose stuck the prince in the back."

"I remember Ambrose," Kerr growled. "Treacherous mon."

"Until then my lord had been holding his own. Yukiah was a powerful, highly skilled mon: he did not go down easily. They pursued him across the quad and gardens. They pulled him down and fed, tore the rings from his fingers..." Her eyes went distant. "I want a riding in force. I'm taking all the veteran and elite units, bring the reserves to active duty and order them to coordinate with Lord Channadar's home guard units."

"I assume we will proceed with scry wards raised?"

"Yes, Kerr. Full battle array."

My Dear Alysyn,

It is with a very heavy heart that I regret to inform you that your husband, Yukiah Woodbourne, is dead. Please bring your units to Havensword. I have no authority to order you, but please come, for the sake of his memory, if nothing else. Bring your units to Havensword. Before the prince died, he gave Isen in marriage to a fine Guildsmon, Captain Ceejorn Osterbridge. I hope that you may find some small comfort in that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MEETINGS

The northwest garden was a charred ruin, but the servants and the guard managed by working together to prevent the fire from reaching the buildings. The smell of smoke permeated everything. The fire had flushed vampires and other creatures out into the open where the Guild, stalking the edges, brought them down. There were only three human deaths: Yukiah, Jarisse, and Lord Westli. The Guild had counted for fifteen vampires including Wrathscar's three daughters. Twenty-five burn cases were treated.

Sha was utterly exhausted by the time she had finally been able to drop into her bed, and then was up again a few short hours later to attend a council meeting that Eshraf had called. He wanted her testimony. Sha refused to allow palace healers to treat Guildsmyn and vice-versa. She kept a cautious segregation of her patients because of her distrust of anyone associated with Galee. Eshraf had called a special session of the council. It had been a long night and it promised to be a longer day.

She splashed water on her face from a basin and looked around the room. Even on the far side of the palace, soot and ash had blown in through her partially closed windows. She had not returned to Mohanja, but slept in her own quarters among the Guild healers. Sha wondered how long it would be before she stopped smelling the fire and burned flesh. Then she dressed in fresh clothes – she had fallen into bed in her clothing, too tired to care. Walking into the Great Central Hall, she found it crowded. The fire and the divine manifestations that had accompanied it had everyone agitated. The chamber was loud with voices trying to understand what had happened, trying to overcome their fears. Fear was by far the worst of it.

Aramyn fell into step beside her. "Mohanja is asking a lot of questions."

"I can't answer them, Aramyn. Not for you. Not for him. Not until Eshraf holds his meeting."

Aramyn rubbed his chin. "So it's that way is it?"

"Yes, it's that way. I was there for all of it. Nearly all. And that's why Eshraf wants me there."

"They're saying Yukiah died last night."

"I can't speak of anything until after the meeting." She picked up her pace, not

wanting to be late.

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"Wrathscar," Galee growled sharply to get his attention as they strode down the corridor toward a small meeting room near the council chambers. He ignored her and she seized his sleeve, nearly ripping the fabric as she spun him around.

"My daughters..." An unexpected thickness to his voice overlaid the old rage.

"There is no way to prove those were Guild kills. But there are many ways to prove that your late daughters were vampires."

"Galee..." His voice caught, his eyes avoided hers, and his shoulders slumped. "I was proud of them. They were everything that Bryndel and Belyla are not."

Galee looked astonished. She had never suspected that he might have some real feelings for them. "Then act the grieving parent and keep your mouth shut. Let me do the talking. If you are asked a direct question, answer it briefly."

"As you wish."

"If you give them any reason to suspect us, we are dead." Then she walked on, leaving him to follow.

He caught up with her easily. "You should have taken the bodies."

"My people broke into the healers' chambers once too often. So they were taken to the Guild wing. My people and I cannot get past the wards."

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Mohanja had arrived first and watched as Eshraf swept into the council chambers well ahead of the scheduled meeting. Edouina walked beside him, and his eight well armed, battle-priests came along behind them. It had been years since Eshraf traveled the castle grounds alone, but it was a change to travel with a battle unit as his companions. Mohanja wondered where Yukiah was. When the summons to this special council concerning last night's events reached him from Eshraf with the Grand Master's seal on it, Mohanja had sent back that he wanted Yukiah present to speak for the training branch and vote Hanadi's proxy. So where was Yukiah? He especially wanted to know about all the weird phenomena that had occurred last night and frightened the entire palace, the earthquake that had ripped through, knocking down two of the spires.

Eshraf eyed the atrocious tapestries in the chamber. "Take them down. Take them all down. Better bare walls on a cold day than look at those travesties." Then he went to the Grand Master's throne and sat in it.

Edouina sat on the dais steps where Hanadi always sat with Brundarad. A sharp alarm ran through Mohanja. Yukiah was not coming. Edouina looked worn, her face tight, eyes red rimmed.

Mohanja moved to the steps and sat down beside her. "Where is Yukiah?"

"He's dead," she answered quietly. "Dynarien and Sha did everything they could, but he died."

"When? How?"

"Around midnight. Wait for Eshraf to tell it. He's going to announce it to the council. I'm taking Hanadi's place and another takes Yukiah's."

That should have been Mohanja's choice, but he said nothing. They still did not fully trust him. "Is it true about the daughters?"

"Yes. They were all three vampires. Lemyari," Edouina said, a grim, tightness to her voice.

"Guild kills?"

Edouina shrugged, glanced significantly at the servants removing the last of the offending tapestries, and signed, *:Yes. :*

Mohanja settled on the step beside Yukiah, moving the crutch and his halberd onto the base behind him. Then he signed back. *:How did you know? :*

:Philomea tried to take Yukiah in the Great Central Hall. :

"Hah!" Mohanja snorted. *:More vengeance for Yahni.* And then he sobered abruptly, wondering if taking that vengeance was what had gotten his friend killed.

:And the others . :

The first of the councilors arrived, taking their places with uneasy looks at Eshraf on the throne. Galee and Wrathscar came in. Wrathscar settled into his place at the table with none of his usual displays. He folded his hands and laid his face into them. Galee started to mount the dais while glancing at Edouina, and Eshraf shook his head at her. "At the tables, please."

Galee accepted the rebuff in silence, taking a seat beside Wrathscar. She patted his shoulders as if comforting a deeply grieving man.

People started to ask questions and Eshraf again shook his head. "Not until everyone is here," he said in the quiet, assertive, yet non-aggressive tones for which

he was famous.

Eshraf ordered the doors closed as soon as the room was filled, and allowed not a single guardsmyn inside. "The Grand Master is ill and has requested that I come in his stead. Last night three vampires and a lord who was trafficking with them were slain. We have no evidence to suggest that these were Guild kills."

The Patriarch allowed that time to sink in. "Lord Westli and the three daughters of Lord Wrathscar are all dead. The West Wing has been filled to capacity with Lords, their families, and entourages who have come for the wedding. Soon we will have so many that they will be camping on the green. There are too many factions here for us to begin laying blame in an indiscriminate fashion.

"Furthermore, as with all cases of undeath, it is difficult to precisely pinpoint the date of their original death and rising. There is a small room for error in Reading such things. However, having conducted the initial examination of their remains, I would estimate the time of their original death as having occurred around the time that Yahni Kjarten married Belyla Wrathscar."

Lord Wrathscar's head came up. He stared at Eshraf, disbelieving. "They were married?"

"Yes. I know that the enmity between your houses runs deep and, therefore, you might not have been privy to this information. Mikkal performed the ceremony and they were planning to run away, fearing parental disapprobation."

"Oh gods! Oh gods, Belyla ... my poor little Belyla." Wrathscar laid his face on his arms, his shoulders shaking.

"Lord Wrathscar, while I understand your grief, I must ask you. Did you know your daughters were vampires?"

Wrathscar sucked in a breath and lifted his head again. "No. Had I known, I would have freed their souls myself."

"We can only suppose," Galee said. "Only suppose, that the vampire who nearly murdered your son also turned your daughters."

"Why would anyone visit such grief upon my house? I had five children and now I have only one."

"I assure you, Lord Wrathscar, I will do everything in my power to stop these monsters and keep your son alive." Galee ran her gaze around the room, as if daring anyone to question her statement, including Eshraf.

A chill breeze out of nowhere passed through, drawn by the scent of vengeance and treachery. It touched each of the councilors in turn, making them start in their seats

and glance to see where it came from. The breeze of the spirit's passage avoided Eshraf, Edouina, and Mohanja to gather itself for a moment in the corner farthest from them and then passed through the walls in search of prey.

"Other news, Edouina Hornbow is now interim lord lieutenant to the Grand Master in charge of training to the Guild voting Hanadi's proxy. Captain Ceejorn Osterbridge, husband of Yukiah Woodbourne's daughter Isen, is armsmaster. Last night Yukiah Woodbourne was murdered just outside the doors to the Guild-student dormitories in the gardens. Two students found him. One of them was his daughter, Isen St. Jon Dulac. Our Beloved Grand Master has made these appointments out of his deep love and reverence for his slain armsmaster who served him so faithfully and long. It is felt that the manifestations of divine anger last night were in response to Yukiah's murder."

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Mohanja snatched up his crutch and limped with startling swiftness out of the chamber, and down the hall, swinging the leg along in a manner that reflected his growing practice and his emotions. He headed across the Great Central Hall and out across the quad, forcing Sha and Edouina to jog to keep up. His expression was tight and unreadable except to Sha, who could see the grief in his eyes. She finally overtook him on the temple steps.

"Damn it, Sha!" Mohanja cursed, finally venting a little. "You should have sent for me when they found him. I should never have had to find out in the damned council chambers, in front of all those people that he had died. Of how he died." His lips drew back from his clenched teeth.

"Mohanja, Eshraf thought—"

"I don't give a bloody fucking damn what Eshraf thought! Yukiah was my friend! The older I get the fewer of those I have. More and more of them are dead." Mohanja shifted the crutch around to lean it against the wall while he jerked the door open and saw the way the nave looked full of weeping students, and that made his throat tighten so that he could not speak for a moment. It also served to remind him to stop cursing. He seemed to be doing more and more of that lately. His nerves were fraying in an appalling manner and degree. Mohanja reined himself in and noticed that it was getting hard for him to do so. If he could not find some serious ways to start spending these coins of anger on direct actions of his own against the enemy ... he feared what other things the coins might find to spend themselves upon without his conscious permission or awareness. His mother had called his father's drunkenness "spending the coins of anger." But his father had not been a violent man, not even while drunk.

"Where have they placed his body, Sha? I want to see him." Mohanja headed for the nave. She caught his arm with a sigh and started drawing him toward the west

end away from the greater chapel. He shook her off, frowning.

"You won't be able to look at him right away. They haven't brought the casket down yet. He was too badly torn up."

"Oh, gods."

Sha closed her eyes with a deep breath. "There were bones protruding. An eye half gone... They set a partial stasis." Sha told it in halting words and half strangled tones that twisted Mohanja's insides. Then the gathered crowds made way and the casket came in. Cloth of black and gold covered it. Priests laid it on a slab before the altar. They removed and folded the cloth, then carefully opened it so the body could be viewed. Half of Yukiah's face had been masked in black leather, the part that could not be repaired, and buckled in place with straps. It made the big mon ache. Yukiah wore his dress uniform with the bands of his rank on his shoulders and his sword in his hands.

"His rings, Sha," Mohanja whispered. "Where are his rings?"

Sha frowned. "He was not wearing them last night. I am certain of it. You mean the square cut ruby with the ten of cats and the agate and emerald that was his brother's?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Osterbridge said it looked as if his body had been stripped, but they recovered the locket, the swords, the dagger and his harness."

"But not the rings ... some vamp bastard has his rings."

* * * *

Hubris. Hubris. Hubris. Hubris. Dynarien thought the words, yet they hummed in the back of his throat. He sat wrapped in a blanket in a comfortable chair with no shirt on. The greatest nightmare imaginable to him had happened. After centuries of warning his sister to avoid the Nine Elder Gods and the nethergod, he had drawn them down upon himself. He had been captured and bound by both Kalirion and Hadjys. How in the name of all that was holy could he have done this? He was the one who always counseled caution in the affairs of deities. It was Dynanna who always blundered in. Of course, it was Dynanna who always got into trouble and then he took the beatings for it... Of course... Until now.

They had marked him. His father would be angry with him for making this bargain. Especially for a yuwenghau like himself who only had a fragile fragment of a soul to begin with. The Hadjys brand of the book and the blade and the tendriled rune that was now burned over his heart could rip that slender soul shard out of him in a blink. His father would not be able to save him again. Not even a stasis spell would keep

Hadjys from snatching him. Dynarien opened his hand and stared at his palm, seeing the flame brand of Kalirion burned into it. What would they do? Trade him around as a party favor? Or did they intend to use him as leverage to gain his sister in marriage? Oh, creation, what had he done?

The pain worsened and he doubled over in the chair. Had he not been so totally spent and exhausted, it would not have been so bad, he could have gotten past it. Now, it just seemed to overwhelm him.

Jimi rose from his chair and went to Dynarien with a glass of brownish liquid.

"What's that?" Dynarien asked, suspiciously.

"Something your sister sent."

"It's going to taste awful. I know it." Dynarien heaved a huge sigh and grabbed the chair arm to return himself into an upright position. He took it from Jimi and chugged it. Dynarien grimaced. All of Dynanna's healing concoctions tasted nasty and he suspected she did that deliberately. But it was not long before he felt better. He stretched out again, folding his arms behind his head. "You should be with Jysy."

"I don't mind being here," Jimi said, a wry earnestness in his eyes. "I would not have Jysy if it were not for you. I'm in love with her, you know."

Dynarien grinned at him. "There's a lot of that going around."

"It's the state of human affairs," the fifteen-year-old rogue philosophized. "A man has got to have a woman. It's lonely otherwise." A shadow passed across his face.

"Still no word from your family?"

Jimi shook his head.

"When this is over, assuming we live through it, I'll go look for them. Or find someone else to. Like Lokynen Willidar or Dynarien Fire-heart the Battle-Master or a Taladri like Timjimikin Mymkier."

"You know them?" Jimi exclaimed before he could stop himself and then felt foolish because he was talking to a yuwenghau.

Dynarien laughed, although it made his sides hurt. "Well, Lokynen once beat the holy hell out of me for borrowing his face for a friend."

"You borrowed his face?"

Dynarien blushed. "Sort of. I am not a shifter. I'm a chameleon. Don't tell anyone. We use our talents and gifts very conservatively, secretively and rarely. You never

know how something is going to turn out. Or what you will be revealing to your enemies. Say, you can turn into a fox. So your enemy kills all the fox in the forest. Then rats over populate and that spreads disease and then the people all die. Cause and effect. It's rather how this world destroyed itself once. So I copied Lokynen's ugly face onto a friend's and Lokynen found out and beat me for it. But being a basically kind fellow, he didn't kill me."

"And the others?"

"Fire-heart is my cousin and Timi is my son. I will tell you more stories another time. I need to rest."

Jimi looked a little disappointed as Dynarien closed his eyes.

Dynarien had finally found the point where he could sleep and rest and stop worrying. He dreamed and in his dreams his spirit traveled in response to a summons he could not resist.

He found himself standing in an elaborate palace. Huge vaulted chambers in cool, soothing colors, dark but not threatening. There were soft couches and divans along the walls. Now and again a shadow would slide across the burgundy marble of the floors, visible only because they showed against the white veins. Again he sensed no threat in them. He felt a soft beckoning to his left and walked in that direction. A whisper of need, like a touch of memory, and the mark on his chest warmed gently. Then he knew where he was.

All the chambers were alike. He passed through seven tremendous archways and entered at last into a room that contained a bed. It was canopied like a clamshell and tasseled at each fluting edge in gold in contrast to the burgundy velvet cloth. In the middle of it lay a man with eyes of muted flame as if the fires were dimming. Dynarien recognized him and gasped, going to his side and kneeling.

"Hadjys!"

The nethergod did not look at him and Dynarien grasped his hand. Hadjys' fingers tightened weakly. "I am blind. I made you my eyes in Creeya. The Glistening One. Her avatar is in Creeya. I learned too late. My sons – your nephews – are in Murshay'di preventing the opening... of the Gate of the Hellgod. If you do not stop her I will perish."

Dynarien bowed his head, sucking in a heavy breath, feeling both shamed and worried. "Forgive me for doubting your reasons for marking me. I had no idea. I swear to do everything in my power to uncover her and stop her."

"If I could see. If I could only see." Hadjys' voice was soft with weariness and deeply edged with frustration. "The dark ones already assemble to try and retake my hells to release the souls I punish for their crimes so that they might reek havoc

upon the innocent and helpless again."

"I am certain I know who it is. But if I do this wrong, it will throw your realm into civil war and your worshipers will destroy themselves."

"Ahhhhh. Do what you must. Only do it quickly. You are growing wise, young one."

Then Dynarien woke from his spirit journey.

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Osterbridge occupied the largest chair in the main meeting chamber of their star room. Isen sat nearby, watching him with concerned eyes well laden with disappointment. Last night he had put his bride to bed, and then slept in a separate room. "I can't do this."

"It is for Isen's protection," Mikkal argued. "The marriage must be consummated immediately, and its evidence given to the temple to record. So long as she remains virgin, the dark one can simply steal Isen as they have stolen Talons. Believe me, the council will have her Read and checked. They can invalidate the marriage and give her to someone else. Do you want that to happen?"

Only a male could sit the throne in his own right should the main lineage be wiped out, which Galee was near to doing. Only two women, in all the centuries, had had enough power and primacy to defy that rule successfully. Isen was too young and inexperienced to achieve that. So by custom her husband would become Grand Master, assuming he were Guild, as Osterbridge was.

"No, of course not. But..." Osterbridge squirmed, glancing at Isen.

Mikkal shot him a glance as sharp as the point of a crossbow bolt. "Don't tell me you're impotent."

Osterbridge flushed. "I'm not. It works just fine." He ducked his head and glanced sidewise at Isen.

"Please," she said. "I am of age. I know you'll be gentle with me."

"We cannot wait two years for her to be old enough by your standards. When you have done what is needful you will toss the bloody sheets out the door. I will have a mid-wife confirm that she is no longer maiden and we will declare the marriage consummated. We will make an old-fashioned country lord's fuss over it, making out that some of the students and instructors come from Isen's holdings. Should the dark ones even begin to suspect that this is the branch clan they will be too late to claim it."

"You're assuming we might not get the ones at the top?"

"We cannot guarantee anything. We must plan for all possibilities. Furthermore, you must get her with child as quickly as possible."

Osterbridge sighed. He wished Mikkal would stop saying things like that. These things were for people like his lost friends. "I – I can't."

"Ceejorn, can you love me?" Isen asked.

He gave her a long look. "I've never loved a woman like I love you."

"Then take me upstairs and make me safe."

Isen gazed at him with such longing and love that it spitted him to the core. He shivered. His world narrowed until all that existed was her eyes.

Mikkal saw what was passing between them, and slipped from the room without another word.

Osterbridge could not argue with what he saw in her eyes. So he rose and took her hand, leading her to the bedroom.

Isen faced him before the bed, but he simply settled himself in a chair. "Please."

Ceejorn shook his head, caught again between conscience and duty. He simply couldn't stop seeing her as a little more than a child and that bothered him. But if he did not accept his bride quickly then the entire realm remained in danger. If only she had been born a male!

She got the fire going hot in the hearth to warm the room and disrobed. He watched her drop each piece of clothing and licked his lips as his cock rose to attention. Isen turned toward him, nude. He sucked in a breath at her youthful perfection, longing to touch her and be touched by her.

"This isn't just about us, Ceejorn. It is about the realm. We must make an heir quickly. It is paramount among the nobility. Secure the succession."

"Oh god, don't say that." His hands clenched up on the table. "I'll never be able to do it." He felt his body's response and refused to look at her nudity. Osterbridge had wanted to sheathe himself inside her for months, to feel her warm, moist, tightness close around his cock, to mouth her nipples, to feel her small body beneath him.

Isen brought a bottle of wine from a cabinet, a pair of glasses, and a small vial. She poured wine, and then added the contents of the vial to the glass she extended to Osterbridge.

"What did you put into that?" Osterbridge asked, suspiciously.

"An aphrodisiac. Something to help you." She ran her hands suggestively up and down her body.

"And you expect me to drink it?" He stared at the glass and then at her.

"I am strong enough to handle it." She put his hand around the glass. "Drink and it will steady you to the task at hand."

"I am not nobility," he protested. "You're too good for me, Isen."

Isen leaned in and kissed him, her tongue parting his lips. His hands closed on her breasts, kneading them, and she moaned, arching her back.

Osterbridge set her aside, drained his glass, and regarded her.

"You became a noble when you married me. My father trusted me to you. My mother told me to pick a man by his deeds, not by his riches or high status."

"You are so beautiful." His gaze dropped to her loins with a heavy exhalation, and he parted the lips of her womanhood with his finger.

"You desire me?"

Osterbridge looked full upon her, feeling his cock grow harder. "I have every desire for you, Isen. Yet I keep feeling as if I would be violating you."

Isen unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it back over his shoulders. "Your reluctance is the violation. I was bred up in the knowledge that I might have to marry as soon as I came of age and bear children should anything happen to my father. Now he is dead. For the sake of the realm, bed me."

He shrugged out of his shirt. Isen stroked his smooth chest while he ran his hands up and down her body. Osterbridge cherished the softness of her skin. Isen untied his pants, and pushed them down until his erection came free. She caressed his cock in soft touches.

"It's big," Isen murmured.

"I've been told I'm too large... I'll try not to hurt you," he whispered into her hair.

Isen swallowed in a surge of unexpected nervousness. "You'll be gentle."

Osterbridge slipped the rest of the way out of his pants, and left them on the floor. He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. "I love you, Isen."

"I know." She stretched out atop the bed, and parted her legs to him.

He climbed onto the bed, knelt between her legs, and covered her breasts with his hands. Osterbridge squeezed and kneaded each ripe mound.

"My hymen is thick and strong, because of my gifts. You'll have to strike hard to get through it, but don't panic if you hurt me."

Osterbridge rolled his eyes at her. "Now you tell me." He'd never made love to a magically gifted woman before. It figured there would be some differences. He mouthed her nipple, and put an end to the conversation by sucking on it until she was moaning insanely beneath him. Then he set to work on the other nipple. She had tears of ecstasy in her eyes when he finished.

He ran his hands up her thighs, kissing and licking her belly. His fingers explored her vagina and, finding it wet, shifted his body to cover her. She reached for him, guiding him inside.

"Do your duty," she whispered. "Give the kingdom an heir."

Isen was right: the hymen was thick and resisted him, forcing him to thrust hard to tear it. She cried out in pain, and whimpered before the savagery required to open her completely.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Keep going. Keep going," Isen whispered hoarsely.

"I'm in all the way. Are you all right?"

"Shut up and *fuck* me," she said with a trace of exasperation.

Osterbridge began to move in gentle rhythm, wanting desperately to hurt her as little as possible. Her tight vagina sucked him, gripping and releasing, gripping and releasing, sending an intense sensation through him. She wrapped her legs across his buttocks, forcing him deeper yet, while her pelvis moved in rhythm with his. Osterbridge bent his mouth to hers, kissing her deeply as the pressure in his loins built to its climax and he erupted within her. Then he dropped away, rolling onto his side, and dragged her to him. "I love you, Isen."

She snuggled in his arms and they fell asleep together.

* * * *

Galee, Wrathscar, and Ambrose watched the funeral from a balcony of the palace. Eshraf had warded the temple grounds so tightly that none of them could step foot

onto the grounds to attend. The casket would be laid to rest on the innermost gardens, a great honor. Galee seethed.

"You are certain, Ambrose, that this cannot be traced to you."

"It's been three days. Had he lived long enough to tell anyone I stuck him, I would already be arrested." Ambrose leaned against the railing with an indolent air, a smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

"I want you to pack and leave. I will send for you after the wedding."

"So be it." Ambrose bowed himself out.

As he strode through the suite, and started down the corridor to his own chambers, Ambrose's hand slipped into his pocket and he played with his new set of rings. When word came to him that Yukiah's rings were missing, he had slipped out and searched beneath the bushes where his wife had died fighting the armsmaster. He found them and now had his souvenirs. Milady had been a thoughtful wife, all things considered, even if she had liked to shove it in his face at times that she was the one who turned him. He would take several myn-at-arms with him, including several that he, himself, had turned, along for greater protection. Ambrose had no desire to end as she had with a stake or a blade through his heart by misjudging his enemies' dangerousness.

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The news of Yukiah's death caused Channadar to postpone the meeting with his mother. He was drawing perilously close to the time his dream vision said he too would die. It seemed as if the Dark One might win after all. He could not allow that, even if it meant ripping the realm to shreds. So he went directly to the mirror upon returning from Yukiah's funeral.

"Six days," Meileilyki said, her face grave. "StealsThunder arrives in four days and I can send the Chosen through on the sixth. My son will be safe."

Channadar was silent for a long time, circled by his Chosen, flanked by Tiderider and Juna. Only two fireflies were present this time Chucomei and Leeza, both held by Tiderider. "Mother, I have a firefly." He spoke softly and then fell silent again, while everyone stared.

Leeza wondered if he was finally going to tell them, and she prayed that he was because she was tired of secrets, of hiding what was between them.

"I love her very much. I've hidden her away. I can't tell you where or who yet. Tiderider knows where to find her."

"My son, what is this?"

"A powerful enemy has threatened to kill my lovers. So I hide her."

"Who dares?"

"Patience." His head tilted down, his eyes unfocused as his attention turned inward. "When I am dead, will you receive and protect her?"

Meileilyki caught the implications of his words and her face turned grim. "You received a sending of the spirits?"

Channadar bowed his head briefly. "Yes, Mother. I watched my firefly weep while Tiderider placed my dead body in your arms, saying 'your son is slain. He died well.' Unless there is some way to alter the omens, within the next six days, I will be dead."

Meileilyki extended her hand to the side and a Chosen placed a pouch in it while another spread a cloth on the carpeted floor before her. She reached into the pouch and threw a handful of runes onto the cloth, reading them slowly, searchingly. She motioned for one of her Chosen to read them and they consulted. Then the Queen of Faewin turned again to her son. "If these shadows are not dispelled... There is treachery and betrayal here. I see you betrayed by those close to you, five of them. Two doors are opened and one closes. Many will die. It will be six days before the mirror gate is stable enough on this end to allow passage of living beings from Faewin. Perhaps the Horn of Sephree will aid you. Talons holds it. Each day we will talk like this and I will send you gifts. On the sixth day I will send Tiderider's Chosen and I will also send Wolfstalker and his Chosen. Together they will avenge you. I love you, Channadar. And you also, Juna. Even when I lose patience with you. I still love you. I love you both. And now the presents."

Leeza pulled away from Tiderider, clutching her shawl tight around her, but the flimsy lace could not warm her. The pale, pale blue Lyrian lace against the equally pale gold of the delicate silk dress and white skin made a pastel toy of her topped with auburn hair. She pulled away from Tiderider and walked stiffly from the room, her eyes filling with grief, confusion, and displacement. She was losing Channadar and she had never really had him – she was not Fae, she was not really even a firefly. She was tired of prophecies and predictions and dire threats from unknown sources in strange languages. Their world was not her world. What few pieces of it they had given her were being swept away. Channadar was a dream, and the dream was about to die. She went upstairs to the bedroom she shared with Tiderider and Chucomei. Pulling open a chest, Leeza found the pair of trousers she had been wearing when she first met Channadar on the road to Havensword three years ago. He had accidentally bumped her into the mud and she had tackled him from behind in response.

Leeza struggled into them; they were already getting snug. Another month and she would need smocks, but by that time she should have gotten back to her family. With all the gold and jewels Channadar had given her over the last three years, she

and her family would live well and the child also.

He wouldn't even tell his mother her name. He wouldn't even say her name. He'd locked her out. Here he was at this moment of incredible peril and he'd locked her out of his life. She would never be a piece of his life. No crumbs. She felt like a whore. She was the summerfly. Not Yolany. At least Juna kept his women on his arms – made them a part of his life. She hid the gold and jewels in the bottom of the pack, putting a few of her less expensive clothing on top. She would buy traveling clothes along the way, something a Guildsmon might wear, hire some guards or retired Guildsmyn to get her home.

She placed Channadar's crystal on the bureau and took Tiderider's crystal from her neck, laying it beside the other.

"Where are you going?" Tiderider asked.

His voice startled her and she jumped, turning toward him. "Home."

"Why? Channadar needs you."

"Channadar does not need me. Channadar does not love me. He cannot even say my name."

"Because of the peril. It hurts him as much as it hurts you."

"No. Love is sharing the peril, knowing the risks. I am a whore, bought, and paid for, stealing into his bed at night. I should be standing at his side, not hiding beneath your arm. I am not Fae. I am closed out of your world on every side. I do not belong and I am reminded of that endlessly."

"He has done what he believed best."

"I cannot deal with this any longer."

"Do you love him?"

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about it. It's over." Leeza shoved past him and left. Tiderider let her go, his eyes falling on Channadar's crystal. Whatever there was to say, the crystal held the words far more clearly than could be spoken. To desert him now – she was a summerfly like the rest. Doubtless Channadar would want the crystal. He pocketed it, wondering if Channadar had ever explained to her that the crystals were far more than an empty symbol like humans and their rings. Tiderider doubted it.

* * * *

"Where is Leeza?" Channadar asked. The session with the mirror, consulting with

his mother, and confronting his vision, had left him exhausted. His shoulder hurt. Normally Chucomei Who-Calls-the-Birds and Leeza took turns sitting with him to be certain he had company and wanted for nothing, pleasant company among his Chosen, flowers among the deadly golden fans and swords. Yet a day had passed and there had been only the Mage of Wings and not a glimpse of his beloved Leeza.

Chucomei glanced at Tiderider, wondering where Leeza was, for she did not know either.

"She is gone." Tiderider took the crystal from his pocket, placed it in Channadar's hand, and closed his lord's fingers over it as he dropped to one knee with bowed head, signaling an ending.

Channadar stiffened, taking the crystal from his own neck and placing them together in his hand, closing it again. The crystals locked together. A rush of feelings and voices ran through him – Leeza's – and he saw, heard, and felt what she had. The memories she had of him. First the anger and outrage of the moment she knocked him down in the mud. The laughter of his Chosen laying bets on how long she could keep him there. He had not even known her name then – and he still did not know her last name for she had refused to give it. She was simply on the road to Havensword looking for work and gotten bumped into the mud by a preposterous dandy and was determined to have a piece of him for it; not a fighter, just a scrappy yeomon from one of Channadar's villages who did not even realize she had knocked her own lord down. Leeza.

He had taken her into his company, falling in love with her and she with him; but he was on his way to challenge Galee, and far more aware than he allowed her to be of the dangers, for he kept his own counsels tightly to himself – too tightly he realized now and that was where he had gone wrong with her. He had treated her like a woman when he should have treated her like a man – or like a Fae. She felt shut out, which turned to feelings of abandonment, grief, frustration and finally despair and anger and – Channadar's head came up with a conscience stricken look for there was very little time left him in which to make it right if his vision were true. "Find her. You must find her."

"She left hours ago," Tiderider said. "There seemed no reason to stop her."

"She carries my son. She thought I would refuse to give him my name. I hurt her. I didn't know. I would have told my mother then had I known."

"Go to Sha, the Guild will help," Chucomei said. "I will call the birds."

"With all the summerflies hanging about Juna, I was angry," Tiderider bowed his head in shame.

"That is not like you, so I will forgive it. Only find her."

Tiderider sent several of the Chosen he most trusted to these tasks and then sat with his lord again. With the danger so close he dared not leave him.

"Her spirit was never more clear to me than now. I saw it and did not acknowledge it from the moment she first knocked me in the mud. She has watched Juna, who is not a warrior in spirit, stand where she, whose spirit is, could not. Juna has the arts, but not the wit. Yet she never once tried to game for a place, because to her there would have been no honor in it. She gave her word and kept it – until she could no longer bear the pain of watching. I pray to Hadjys they find my firefly before something happens to her."

"As do I."

* * * *

Leeza did not immediately desert the palace compound. She was emotional by nature; yet too self-aware to act on those emotions without having considered them, which was why she had stuck it out so long after the going got tough with Channadar. She always wanted to be certain she was not acting on an emotion that would pass and be gone. Her mother had been a fickle creature; someone who had never been able to keep friends for very long and Leeza had been terrified of possibly finding that flaw in herself. So she hamstrung herself instead with indecisiveness, lingering for longer periods than she ought to have. Her mother would take one look at the child's eyes and grind it in her face that she should have known what she was getting into sleeping with one of the Faery folk.

The first place Leeza went after leaving the West Wing was the southwest leaf of the Cloverleaf, which the Guild had allowed to reopen. She knew everyone and no one really, having spent her time there entirely in the company of the clannish Fae. So she needed to think carefully. Her connection to the Fae made her a target for however was doing all the killing and she suspected that was Wrathscar and Galee. Trust no servants and no guardsmyn. Trust no one except the Guild. And with the updrawbridge, she could not get in there. She could, however, get a passing Guildsmon to help if need be. Leeza's hair was now blond, very pale, and short, barely past the lobes of her ears. She wore a new pair of black trousers and a loose mage tunic that hung in folds, sashed at the hips, and carried a stout hickory staff with a glistening hematite orb at the top. Anyone looking for either a runaway firefly or a village yeomon would glance right past her.

A black leather satchel, some pouches, leather pack and a bandoleer of nasty tricks had replaced her original pack. She had also invested in a set of matched belt knives, nearly as long as short swords – she knew how to use them, although she had tried often enough to convince Channadar of that unsuccessfully during the first year of their relationship. She was not Fae. Therefore, she should stand back and allow the Chosen to fight when it needed to be done. She had had only a staff on her the day she squashed him in the mud because her blades had been stolen –*girl with a stick. I*

don't know. I don't know. I can't explain it. I don't want to think about it.

She was still sitting at the little bench in the corridor on the Cloverleaf as the stores began to close when she realized, with a start, how late it had grown and she still had no place to stay. They were letting no one in or out of the castle grounds after dark. Her only options were the palace guest rooms, which would mean revealing herself; the visiting merchant quarters, which meant the Guild asking questions, again revealing herself; or asking refuge of the temple where she could request a seal of silence on her presence and no word would go back to Channadar. The temple then.

* * * *

Queiggy felt it when Eshraf touched the hidden door under the temple and requested that he open the hidden passage to the Guild Wing. The yuwenghau sat on the floor in the darkness of his cellar room, leaning in the shadows with his back wedged between the casks of ale and the wall. Queiggy closed his eyes and spanned his awareness like roots spreading through the soft soil of mother earth until it fully touched both the temple door and the entrance beneath the Guild and opened them. He sensed people with Eshraf, counting their feet on the floor of the corridor. Power shimmered around four of them besides Eshraf, suggestive of a battle unit. Two myn carried something and by their walk it seemed to be a litter, their hands were weighted just right, one pulled forward and the other back. Hmmmnn. They were bringing an injured mon. Male or female? Who? Then two more. A child with talent of some kind. Light footsteps walking beside the litter and sending up shimmering waves of anxiety. Someone should teach that little empath to tamp it down. Queiggy sighed. And the second was older, but not by much. Guild or priest students no doubt.

He sighed again and drew his fingers out of the small crack of earth beneath the wall. Eventually he would need to get a stone mage in here to seal all the cracks up he was making, but he needed to nourish himself secretly in order to have the strength to maintain the wards and renew himself. Queiggy ran his hand over his face. More wrinkles were gone. He wondered if people were noticing yet. Well to Hadjys with them. Then he grinned and went off to meet Eshraf.

The male on the cot's face was obscured with a gauzy mask with a hole through which he breathed and Queiggy suspected that his face must have either been seriously burned in the fire or damaged in some other fashion, though he wondered why they had not simply brought him across the quad.

"I want to place him in the new secured annex," Eshraf told him.

Queiggy saw then that Osterbridge and Isen were the ones he had sensed, for they stood very close to the injured mon. "You should have brought him sooner. I sense a kind of auric disturbance about him."

Eshraf shook his head. "We needed to get him stable first. He is one of my secret

allies. Expect many visitors for him and allow them a path through your wards. They will not come through the doors."

"I don't know about that," Queiggy frowned.

"If you set it right, they can enter and nothing of the dark can."

"That will take a delicate touch." He considered a moment. "Put him in the topmost star room. Well, come along then."

Queiggy led them in silence for a bit, waiting for them to tell him who the man was. When they did not, he asked. "Who is he?"

"I cannot tell you yet."

* * * *

Sha and Aramyn arrived as Durav finished changing the bandages on Channadar's shoulder. Night had fallen. Channadar had watched the skies change through his window, growing more and more worried for Leeza with each passing hour. Tiderider, Juna, and Chucomei sat with them. He turned his gaze from the window as the two Guildsmyn entered and knew from Sha's expression that the news must be bad.

"Leeza?" he asked, dismissing Durav with a flick of his fan. His physician bowed low and left. Only then did the Guildsmyn speak.

Aramyn shook his head. "We cannot find her and there is no way that she could have left the compound at any point today. We keep lists of everyone entering and leaving, even the cats and dogs. All carts, wagons, and carriages are thoroughly searched. The palace is paranoid."

Channadar considered that somberly. "Then I must assume they have taken her."

"That is my guess," Aramyn agreed. "I am sorry. You should have been more open with us. When all the trouble started we would have placed her in secure rooms in the Guild Wing. Where no one could have threatened her."

"She carries my child and now I have lost them both because I tried too hard to protect them and thought like a Fae instead of a Creeyan. I did not trust enough."

Juna put his hand on his brother's unwounded shoulder. "It is my fault. I gave you too much reason not to trust, collecting so many summerflies. I will not do that any longer. Tomorrow I will choose between them and settle down."

"You are a good brother, Juna," Channadar touched his hand. "But I would rather you made a marriage with someone our mother approved of. No more summerflies."

"Can I keep them for a few more days?"

Channadar heaved a sigh. "A few more days. Then send them all away."

Juna looked chastened as he nodded. "So be it."

"We'll keep looking, Channadar. Depend on that," Aramyn said.

* * * *

The mon lay in a modest bed within a chamber at the top of a star room. His chest moved faintly with each breath instead of still and unmoving – and somehow that seemed wrong. He heard people around him, but he could not see them as they moved about him quietly. His awareness drifted in and out of warm twilight, not yet ready to release his hold upon it and rise toward the light he knew was beyond it. His mind told him that he was dead, but his body told him that he was alive. He could not remember his name, only that he had once been a Guildsmon.

His good hand drifted to the place where the godmark should have been over his heart and sensed that it was gone. He worked his fingers through the opening in his robe to touch the spot flesh to flesh and the skin was smooth, unblemished as if it had never been there. His god had forsaken him. A yawning chasm of desolation opened within his breast, dragging his consciousness closer to the surface. He felt certain he had done nothing to deserve this, and yet he could not remember anything.

The greatest fear of the Guildsmyn was to become undead, feeding upon the souls, blood, and bodies of the living, and thereby forced into the service of the dark ones. For this reason the godmark on their bodies cast their souls to their liege-god in the flickering of an instant at their deaths before it could be trapped, down to his great halls and safety. The one drawback being that their hearts and breathing, once stopped in the early stages of death could rarely be restarted by healers and lifemages.

Gauze covered one eye and a long tear had been stitched from its corner to the top of his lip. He lifted his hand, running it along the stitching carefully and then touched his nose, which had been packed with something like plaster to hold the broken pieces in place.

"Am I alive?" he whispered softly. "Or undead?"

He heard people moving in the room and tried to turn on his side. Pain shot through him and he gave it up. His ribs were tightly bound and a calf splinted, as was his other arm and fingers. He vaguely remembered someone stomping on that hand. He turned his head instead and saw that a large, round table stood nearby, heavily laden with vials, jars, tiny chains, potions, herbs, and glowing jewelry. He took the latter to be talismans of some kind. In the middle sat a tray. Strange creatures and odd

humans passed silently through, leaving their offering in it. Then he noticed that a string of bright stones in auroraic patterns wrapped his wrist, shimmering with power. That had to be what held him together, held him to life, but did he want this life without a god?

A mon in long sky-blue robes noticed that his eyes were open and came to him. "Finally you wake. You have been in coma for six days."

"I am alive?"

"Yes, prince, you are alive."

"Where am I?" Each word tired him, yet he felt driven to ask.

"You are still in Creeya. A star room in the secure annex to the Guild Wing."

The mon dropped his eyes from the blue robed healer's face. "Who am I?"

The healer took his wrist and read him before answering. "You are Yukiah St. Jon Dulac, Prince of the Blood." He watched Yukiah's hand go again to the spot above the bandages on his ribs to touch the place the godmark should have been. "Hadjys withdrew from you so that Kalirion could reach out to you. You were raised. But their powers brushed together and your soul nearly shattered. There are still cracks in it. But we are striving to heal those. Your body also is very fragile. Its physical essence split in half. That too we work upon. The half that died has been buried. The half that lives, we struggle to give substance to once more."

With his naming, Yukiah's memories began to return in fragments. "You are not Guild."

"That I am not. I am Kalirioni, a mender and spirit-worker from the Great Plains, summoned with some of my brethren to tend you."

Isen's face floated through Yukiah's mind with a sharp poignancy. "My daughter?"

"The marriage has been consummated. You should rest again." The Kalirioni priest-healer brought a draught of blue liquid over and helped Yukiah to drink it before lowering him to the bed again. "When you are well enough for visitors, I will bring her. For the nonce, we dare not allow anyone through the auric shields we have set over you to hold your soul and body together. Nor can we allow visitors to tire you."

Yukiah closed his eyes and found it easy to slide back into the warm nothingness from which he had briefly emerged. He did not know that Dynarien had challenged the Nine Elder Gods to save him.

The yuwenghau, although he might balk in calmer moments when his conscience

and clearer thought was in full charge, always plunged in without thinking when the need was upon him. He had demanded the nethergod release the soul of his last scion of the lineage of his sacred kings. Kalirion made pact with Hadjys. They sent Yukiah's soul into Dynarien's body to hold it, and then Kalirion entered Dynarien and made the yuwenghau his own also. They had nearly shattered Dynarien and Yukiah both. But then it was done.

The courage of both young myn had touched the divines and aid had been pouring in for days afterward, it was only to be hoped whether it would prove enough and in time. The night of Yukiah's death had been a Night of God Rage and the anger that had ridden in upon the divine winds continued to simmer. The evil one would be discovered and destroyed by their knights and paladins.

* * * *

Galee's messenger climbed to the top of the half fallen spire, shoving rubble from the stairs, climbing over chunks of stone too heavy even for it to move. Until the night of the god strikes a week ago this had been its nest. It emerged into the night beneath a full moon that bathed the shattered roof in silvery glow. It still nested here, but it was far less happy and had begun to look for another home. The shifter's pillows had been beaten by rain and weather. He moved more of them under the remainder of the roof before preparing to set off with the newest message from his mistress. Galee wanted to bring more of her troops into the city, to make certain that those lords loyal to her would bring the entirety of their forces and not just the numbers they had originally planned upon. That was when he noticed the cat. Galee's messenger expanded to his full devil bat size, sensing there was something more than met the eye to this creature. The cat was large, easily thirty pounds or more, tiger striped, a deep almost blood red and black. The messenger towered over it.

<I will take the message , > the cat sent.

"Ohoh!" the messenger laughed. "Catkin! I think you are my lunch!"

The cat's form shimmered, changed, and grew becoming six hundred pounds of rage. "Wrong. Shivari. Tigerkin." Then the cousin to the catkin was on the messenger and blood soon filled the spire.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRANSFORMATIONS

Leeza decided that fewer questions would be asked crossing the grounds, than taking the underground route. She left the palace and discovered that the grounds were darker than she anticipated. Autumn was in the air and the grounds seemed

oddly changed from the last time she had crossed with Channadar before he was attacked in the gryphonspire. But then everything felt different without the sheltering presence of the Chosen around her. She missed them, even as she told herself it was for the best and she was glad to be free of them. And that brought tears to shame her pride. She became aware of things she had paid no notice of in their company. The quad had never been so quiet, so strung with unseen threat. She could taste it. In years past there had always been people about, even at this hour – students mostly, but some of the palace staff, guests, and nobility. Creeya was lovely in the fall. The lamps were lit, throwing a golden glow along the walks. She walked faster, wanting to reach the temple quickly. A rustling in the bushes brought a glance from the corners of her eyes, yet she did not slow. She had lost her edge with three years of soft living, but she was not stupid. Then came a growling.

"Where the hell are the guards? They should be making rounds," Leeza muttered.

A slurred voice said, "Meat," and a heavy weight landed on her back, staggering her. First she screamed and then she cursed, dropping the useless staff and going for the blades to catch it under the chin as it bit for her neck and got her shoulder instead.

* * * *

Dynarien heard the scream, dragging himself from his bed in the temple to look from the window. The pale hair of the mon being attacked by lesser bloods made her look sylvan, possibly one of the Fae. She had her blades out, fighting desperately as the lesser bloods surrounded her. He still hurt terribly, but adrenaline rushed through him, and he forced his way past it. He was healing rapidly under Eshraf's ministrations and the herbs that had been sent from his sister – Dynanna always worried about him. Rage roared up. He summoned his weapons and armor, jumping into the midst of it. These creatures would pay a price for attacking his grandsire's folk.

* * * *

For an instant, Leeza thought it was Tiderider and the Fae who had arrived to her rescue when she caught the first flash of red-gold hair and bright armor in the lamplight. Then she realized she had never seen this mon before. Not even the Fae with their flashing fans could fight like this one; he was like a god in golden armor and it ended before it was begun. The fragrance of roses swept the grounds and roses lay everywhere, littering the ground in a thick carpet. He had to be a god. And then she recognized him from their single meeting and knew who he was. He was the heir's yuwenghau: Dynarien Willodarusson. The Rose Warrior.

"Are you all right, little Fae?" he asked, in a sweet, yet masculine tenor.

"Oh, but I'm not a Fae, I'm just a firefly – I mean, I don't know what I am anymore." Her eyes filled with tears.

When Dynarien saw all the sadness and confusion it touched him. "You could use some tea and sympathy. That's what my mother calls it. My sister doesn't like me taking people to our garden, but I think she'll understand. Take my hand." Dynarien extended his hand and Leeza placed hers into his. Her whole body tingled for an instant and then she found herself standing in a garden in glorious spring filled with fruiting trees and berry bushes, an artificial pool in the middle, and standing on the far end a quaint cottage that was larger on the inside than the outside.

Dynarien indicated the soft grass beside the pool. "Sit, be comfortable."

* * * *

Galee passed the golden coins into the servant's hands. Pallon was one of her greedier pawns, but very efficient and dependable. "You and your crew will be serving at that party the Lords Kjarten are hosting in the northeast wing?"

"Absolutely. We're setting up now." Pallon smiled slipping the coins discreetly into his pockets.

"You'll inform me of what is discussed and who attends? All that is important to me? Who leans in which direction? Who bends over?"

Pallon laughed. "That's what I get paid for."

"Yes, it is." Galee smiled. "I will see you tomorrow when you arrive to help me move a few pieces of furniture?"

"Absolutely, My Lady. That's me. Good, old, dependable Pallon."

Galee swept out of the room and Pallon headed for a closet. A chill ran up his spine as he touched the knob and he shivered. For an instant he did not want to open the door and then he decided that was plain silly. So he opened it. There in the back he made out a dim form huddled down among the brooms. Pallon heard soft sobbing. "Who's there? Are you all right?"

"I'm frightened. I looked out the window into the garden and I saw something that frightened me."

The figure was tall, but it was a little girl's voice. That was when he realized it must be a Sharani girl, they tended to be tall. "Come out and I'll have a look with you. I'm sure there's nothing to be afraid of. It's broad daylight. Nothing bad happens in the daylight. Ghosts and monsters only come out at night."

The girl put her hand in his and it was cold. Pallon frowned. Granted the autumn chill was in the air and she was not wearing much, but he suspected she was either sick or very, very frightened to be this cold.

"You should be wearing something warmer. You're cold." He walked to the window with her.

Pallon pressed his face against the glass as the girl pointed at a far corner. "You have to open it," she told him. "To really see it, you have to open it."

He opened the window and leaned forward a bit. Then Arruth shoved him out. Pallon screamed as his body fell through space and impaled his chest on the spindle of a spire where it convulsed, twitched, and twisted until it finally settled, limbs splayed out like a broken doll. Arruth's form misted again into insubstantiality and fled laughing through the palace. "Queen takes pawn! Queen takes pawn!"

* * * *

Settling cross-legged beside Leeza, Dynarien summoned fruit, cheese, juice, and wine. He told her about Talons as a way of encouraging her to talk about Channadar and when he had heard her story, tried to explain about his grandsire's folk. "All the sylvans play games on humans."

"All of them? All!"

"Except for the Badree Nym, yes. And I guess the Nym play with them. Sometimes it backfires. About forty years ago the Valdren lost a half-breed prince. They spent twenty years searching for the child, a young female. A Sharani Saer'ajan had found the child and raised her as her own. However, because the sylvans have a policy called 'don't tell the humans', they never told the Sharani what it was they were hunting through their lands for and never found the child. The child grew up to become a Sharani hero, set off on an important quest, turned up in Donyanon and was found to everyone's astonishment."

"Kalestari."

"It was a little more complicated than that, but you get the idea."

"So Channadar meant everything he has been saying."

"Yes, the Faery are the most clever players of all. Very intense. Had he known about the child, he would have changed the game. He must have believed that one of his own is untrustworthy or perhaps even a traitor."

A look of sorrow and regret came to Leeza's face. "Juna."

"That's sad. Too much human blood – or maybe not. Waejonan was sylvan." Dynarien's face darkened and then he shook it off. "If you truly love him as I love Talons, you will go to him."

"You're right. I'll go back."

"First, let me get you some things to even the odds." Dynarien started snapping his fingers, first came an ivory horn. "This is the Horn of Sephree of the Streams. She was one of my sisters and the first of the Faery. Those to whom it speaks always answer its call. The Dark Ones cannot hear it. I would give it three sharp blasts; blow the Fear, Fire, and Foes if you know it. Should wake the entire compound up. I don't advise that for just anyone, but I'd make an exception in your case. Forget those blades, these are better. Kenda'ryl and runed for undead slaying." Another snap of his fingers and two golden gilt blades appeared beside him. Leeza drew hers and laid them on the ground as he extended these strange new blades to her. She accepted them, sliding them into the sheaths at her sides.

Dynarien thought for a moment. Leeza was beautiful and he could see why Channadar loved her. Her nearness made his body react despite his wish that it wouldn't. Before he encountered Talons he would have had someone like Leeza on the ground beneath him in a flash, caring not one whit who she belonged to, and probably have filled her belly as quickly as he had Talons' if he wasn't careful. He sighed. "When all of this is done, I'll take you to visit my mother, she could teach you to dance on Channadar's head and all the rest of theirs. In fact, just whisper in Tiderider's ear that you've scheduled dancing lessons with Mariko-Who-Dances-With-Sprites and watch for his reaction."

"Who is she?"

"The Queen of Imralon. My mother."

Night became day and then night again in the world beyond Dynarien's garden while they spoke. Dynarien periodically summoned more gifts for her. He deliberately filled her thoughts to confusion with stories and old lore. He fed her strange fruits, odd meats, and many cheeses, both sweet and sharp. To wash the food down, Dynarien brewed her wondrous drinks such as the one that was layers of thick black and orange but when stirred turned an iridescent light blue.

"What's that?"

"My sister, the God of Cussedness, calls it Be Careful What You Wish For. The ingredients are a single fruit stolen from each of the gardens of the Nine." He laughed as she sipped it, quickly changing the subject enough to prevent her asking why Dynanna had called it that. "Grandsire was so angry when he found that she had taken half his tree, that he caught and spanked her, locked her in the dungeons. I was passing her cookies through the bars that time."

"Have you ever gotten locked up?" Leeza liked it and drank every last bit.

Dynarien laughed. "The time I glued her hair to the tree I thought Grandsire was never going to let me out. And he spanked me until I couldn't sit down. So there I

squatted, for three days, with Dynanna passing me cookies."

Finally he returned her to Ishladrim Castle, left her in the Great Central Hall, and vanished.

* * * *

Leeza drew every eye in the Great Central Hall as she walked across it, but no one stopped to speak to her, even those who knew her well. She tensed when she saw Lord Wrathscar glance up at her. He was sitting with Galee and Lord Naren in one of the clusters of chairs. Leeza expected him to come after her, seeing her alone, but he only blinked and rubbed his eyes as if unsure of what he was seeing. So she walked on.

She passed Sha and Aramyn on the stairs. "Hello, Sha," she said and walked on.

"Do I know you?" Sha called after her in a tone of puzzlement.

Leeza quickened her step as she headed for the stairs to the third floor, wondering at Sha's question and suddenly afraid to go back. Surely her disguise was not so great that Sha would not know her? Her skin prickled on her arms. Something was going on and she was almost afraid to find out. Leeza reached the third floor and ran down the hallway toward the isolated star room that the Fae lived in.

She heard the first sounds of fighting as she entered the outer hall of the star room and looked up to see hordes of creatures emerging from the upstairs rooms where they had no doubt been butchering the servants. The Chosen had anticipated an attack and moved their lord and the fireflies – including Juna's harem into the meeting hall. She clapped the horn to her lips, blowing three sharp blasts.

The door to the meeting hall burst open and Channadar stumbled toward her, his Chosen trying valiantly to keep themselves between him and vampires and other creatures that had burst into it as well. He stared at her in confusion.

"Channadar! Tiderider, look out they're everywhere!" Leeza shouted.

"Leeza? Leeza!" Channadar's crippled arm hung useless; he had a single fan out and there was blood along the edge.

Leeza pulled a handful of tiny glass globes from her pockets that Dynarien had given her which he called 'beast repellent,' and tossed them into the thickest group of vampires on the stairs, a crowd that had not yet reached the Chosen since she did not want any of it getting on her own people. A bright green gas and liquid splash came out as the glass broke. "Badree Nym!" Leeza shouted. "Have some Nym, you shits!"

The Lemyari screamed, tumbling from the stairs, clawing at themselves and rolling

frantically as the "beast repellant" ate through their bodies, smelling like essence of skunk and ammonia. But she did not get another clear shot because the battle closed too quickly around them.

"You've been to the Nym?" Channadar asked astounded.

"For help. It's coming."

The fighting spun around her. Jangflower and Da'Shanagara jumped to come between her and two Lemyari. The vampires fought like warriors, with swords. Leeza had not expected that. She had expected them to be like animals, like the lesser bloods who had attacked her on the quad – the creatures that everyone connected with stories of vampires. These were what Channadar always called the royals. He had said there were many kinds.

She stayed by Channadar's injured side, her blades out now, her nerve steadying, taking each one as it came. This was not one against twenty or more in the dark and her taken by surprise. Furthermore she knew help was on its way. Dynarien had restored her confidence. She blocked a cut and caught the vampire under the breastbone with her other blade. The creature shrieked as she learned why kenda'ryl was so often called the metal of the gods, especially when runed. The blade went through the bone and into its heart, killing it.

"My dragonfly, my Leeza," Channadar murmured, as if recognizing her for the first time for what she truly was. Leeza thrilled to see that in his eyes.

Where in their lighter moments they had wrought illusions, the forms they wove had substance. Their eagles had fiery claws that burned and tore. Their strange white birds with the flowing tails destroyed the undead with their glowing purity. When the creatures closed with them and there was no time to weave the magics, they simply sliced them with the golden blade edges of the magic fans and let the demon blood flow black onto the floor like vile ichors.

The Chosen fought hard to keep the foe from their injured lord and his lady, but one would get through, as the now surrounded Fae struggled to reach the door to the hallway. Jangflower staggered, a sword point sticking from her back. She fell against Leeza, who killed her murderer, blood splashing in her eyes. A vampire seized her hair, jerking her up only to release her abruptly as Blue Lily's golden fans sliced his throat to ribbons, and then severed his neck bones.

The room filled suddenly with birds. Chucomei had entered the fray, followed by the desperate fireflies trying to rescue their mates and loved ones with whatever lay to hand.

A path was opened to the door and Tiderider yelled for Leeza and Channadar to flee as one by one the Chosen began to fall. A vampire seized Leeza from behind, dragging her from Channadar's side. Tiderider, the golden Fae who had seen the sea,

darted in and severed the creature's hands, spun it around and drove his folded fan through its heart. Then he caught Leeza's hand and put her behind him, snapping the fan open again.

"Keep moving," said the voice she loved most and she found Channadar had reached her once more. He looked so weary and in pain that it tore at her. "I hear Mohanja in the corridors, Dragonfly, but he's still a ways off."

Six Lemyari and their minions suddenly wedged up and charged, breaking past Tiderider and Da'Shanagara to reach Channadar. Juna leaped to stop them. His summerflies flooded around them. Yolany yanked him back, dragging at his arm, hanging on him with all her weight, preventing him from reaching Channadar.

"Let them kill him," she hissed, her eyes strange. "He's kept you from what's yours."

Juna shook her loose, but by then it was too late. The other summerflies had seized Channadar, pulling at his arms, throwing his guard wide open to his enemies. There was a blade in his brother's chest and Channadar was falling, his fan sliding from his fingers. All the games and laughter and songs were ended forever. Their eyes met for an instant, Channadar's lips shaping a single word without the breath to speak it. "Juna."

Juna whirled and killed Yolany.

* * * *

Leeza glanced from the corner of her eye, seeing the summerflies descend on Channadar sent a chill alarm racing through her. Before she could get close enough to him to intervene, the three women had entangled his good arm and thrown his guard open. Leeza fought free of her opponent, but it was already too late before she reached him. A vampire's blade took him in the chest and a second ripped his side open. Leeza's heart was that of a warrior, even if her training was not, and she had learned a crude, yet effective, precision with her blades growing up. The golden fan fell from his fingers as he staggered and then jerked suddenly forward with another succession of impacts, which was when Leeza realized the three summerflies had stuck him also.

The tableau slowed to a crawl in Leeza's perceptions. Shock, grief, and rage, it all spun through her being. There were two ivory hilted blades in his ribs and a third in his back. She did not know that she screamed, seeing him crumple as Tongari yanked her blade from his ribs. Leeza saw Yolany hanging on Juna's arm, keeping him from his brother's side, from his aid; saw Channadar's lips form Juna's name, questioning the treachery, which had slain him. Then Channadar lay crumpled on the floor and Leeza could not think; she could only feel. A wild expression swept across Leeza's face like madness.

Tongari, who was nearest to Leeza, shouted a warning to Sysymi and Pelaui seeing her stalk toward them. They had started to kneel and retrieve their blades, but left them protruding from his body to flee instead. Seeing that she was abandoned and frightened by the expression on Leeza's face, Tongari faltered and brought her blade up. The summerfly was a murderer and an assassin, not a warrior. Tongari knew how to kill, but not how to fight. Leeza knocked aside Tongari's attempt to defend herself and gutted her. Then Leeza stalked them across the room, ignoring the rest of the battle.

* * * *

Tiderider saw first Leeza vanishing into the side hallways leading to the bedrooms and then Juna spring to stand over Channadar, facing the vampires alone as he and the others fought to reach them.

"Now that it's too late, Juna?" Tiderider muttered his words through clenched teeth, seeing that his beloved lord lay dead.

Then the golden Fae cursed, seeing a Lemyari shove a longsword through Juna's chest and still his heart with a twist. Juna's body fell across his brother's as if defending him even in death. Tiderider gave a small nod, acknowledging Juna's courage.

The room filled suddenly with fresh troops as Mohanja and the Guild arrived. They slammed into the Faes' attackers, driving them back, rescuing the beleaguered survivors. The mixed unit of Guildsmyn and private soldiers – part of a group that had been quietly assembled by Yukiah before his death – hit the undead with raging force. The healers, under Sha's command, moved up behind them, dragging the dead and wounded into the hall, clear of the fighting.

"Hell shitting damnation!" roared Mohanja. "Don't let a single one of these murdering assholes get away!" It was hard to say what was more shocking, all the death and destruction or the sound of the usually unflappable Mohanja cursing.

Only then was Tiderider able to cross the room and drop to his knees beside his lord and Juna. He turned Juna's body over, confirming that he had died. The golden Fae laid Juna aside, quickly, impulsively touching Channadar's throat in search of a pulse, which he felt certain he would not find. A white froth flecked with blood emerged from the chest wound.

"Let me have him."

Tiderider looked up at the voice to see Sha beside him. He nodded curtly, surrendering his lord to her.

Channadar's eyes fluttered open as they shifted him. "Leeza?" His voice emerged in a struggling whisper. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth mixed in with a

frothy white that wheezed up from his lungs with each breath.

Tiderider swallowed, recognizing the signs that Channadar did not have much time left him; but perhaps the golden Fae would at least be given a chance to say goodbye. He touched Channadar's head. "I will find her."

Sha read Channadar and then reached in her satchel, bringing out a jar and a folded piece of gauze. She applied the salve to the gauze and pressed it down hard over the chest wound. Her assistant reached in and applied pressure to hold it there. Then Sha brought out a bottle and a glass with markings on it. She measured, tilted his head up, and made him drink. "We're going to move you to a secured area that's been added to the Guild Wing. We're taking your people also."

"Leeza ... where is she?" Channadar whispered again.

"We haven't found her." Even as she spoke, Sha realized he could not hear her. His eyes had closed as he slipped from consciousness.

She turned to her assistants. "Get him down to the Guild surgeons in the secured sections immediately."

They bundled the Fae lord onto a litter and carried him away.

Tiderider squatted. "She was here, fought at his side. I'll find her."

"Tiderider, is there anything magical that needs to be removed immediately?"

"His mother's mirror." Tiderider watched the soldiers and Guildsmyn covering the bodies of the dead Fae. They piled the dead vampires along a wall. Only four of the Chosen besides Tiderider, Chucomei, and a handful of fireflies survived.

Sha gestured to a Guildsmon at her elbow. "Make it happen." The mon left her.

"My lord?" Tiderider asked, praying that Leeza's quest for aid had somehow altered the vision and omens.

"The damage needs to be surgically repaired. We've added a secured section onto the Guild Wing for noble guests in need of protection and we're sending you all over there."

"Will he live?" Tiderider persisted.

"I don't know. I just don't know. The Guild surgeons are good. But I don't know." Then Sha caught herself and shook her head. "I doubt it. He has a sucking chest wound and two blades sitting in his lungs. The sooner you find Leeza, the better the chances are that she'll see him alive. I'm sorry."

Tiderider's expression tightened. His hand drifted to Juna's face, drawing his long fingers across the stilled features. "My lord's brother died well. Laughing in their faces. It is worthy of a song. 'In such wise, Channadar's laughing brother died, who had known too well the taste of joy and too little of responsibility.' That is how it will be sung among the Fae." He saw Channadar's fans and picked them up, tucking them in his belt. "My lord will want these when he wakes." *If he wakes.*

Then he spied the linked crystals on their braided chains that had fallen from Channadar's pocket. Tiderider's hand quickly covered them, hesitating briefly before slipping them into his own. It made his heart ache. There was no longer any question in his mind but that they had loved each other.

* * * *

One of Sha's assistants covered Juna's body and two Guildsmyn lifted it up, bearing it away. Sha rose and went in to see if there were any other survivors that she could help, with Tiderider walking at her heels. "When you are ready to go ask any of the healers or Guildsmyn to take you."

"I must find Leeza."

Sha nodded at that, and went to Mohanja who squatted, examining each of the demon-vampire corpses with Aramyn bending at his shoulders. Soldiers were cutting their hands off, dropping them in sacks. "Are any of these people you recognize, Mohanja?"

"No. She must be calling them in from all over this continent, summoning an army. This is not just a coup, it's an invasion."

Sha's eyes widened and her voice quickened with realization, "Did you hear what you said, Mohanja?"

"Hear what?"

"The word you used. We've been dancing all around it, but sometimes when you finally say the word itself things begin to fall into place. Maybe if you had said the word sooner it would have hit me and maybe it would not. But it has just now. It is a coup, Mohanja. There are now only two Wrathscars left, other than the unborn children. There are now only two Gees left, the Grand Master and Talons, other than the unborn children. The heir is dying. Takhalme is in bad shape. It would be easy to take out Wrathscar and, by Yahni's dying words, he is already under her influence. Who would be the obvious choice as regent for the children? And the regent for the children, if they were Guild would control the Guild. If Channadar should die without heirs the lands would go to the crown and they abut on the escarpment. I must get him to acknowledge Leeza's child as soon as possible. Those lands must not fall into the wrong hands."

"If I could connect this attack upon the Fae to Galee I would have a legitimate complaint against her. But we have searched their pockets and found no papers, no identification. Nothing. Crystal their faces and see if anyone recognizes them and can remember seeing them with Galee or Wrathscar." Everything Sha told him clicked more things into place. He wished he could tell her that the branch clan had come and brought hope that Galee's move to seize power in the realm would be challenged by a legitimate heir who did not require a regent.

"I will see that it is done," Aramyn told him, leaving.

"What are you doing with the hands?" Sha asked.

"One of the temple healers wants samples of the venom to see if an ante-venom can be developed."

"That's an excellent idea. I'd like to have some myself."

"Talk to Mikolinas, there's plenty here. He should be willing to share."

"How is Galee coping with the silent mutiny?"

Mohanja went very still. "Ask tonight, when we're alone. She isn't. I think that's why she murdered my clerks."

* * * *

"I want to take you to Imralon," Dynarien told Talons. Despite healing at an astonishing rate, he still looked battered. His hand moved unconsciously to the binding godmark on his chest. He could take her there, but only briefly before he had to have her back. "Let my father's healers Read you." But it was not the healers he wanted to Read her, it was his father himself, otherwise he could have simply brought them to Creeya.

"No," Talons said, turning her face away to stare listlessly at the windows. "You would never bring me back."

"I would. I promise."

"No. Stop bringing it up. If I wasn't so tired I'd kick you."

A small sad look fled across his features. He had not liked it when she kicked him, yet now he would have given anything for her to be able to do it again. Dynarien walked out and sat down on the couch beside Edouina. She closed the bedroom door before returning to him.

"There's no longer any maybe about this," Edouina said, her eyes haunted. "She's dying."

"If I could just get her to Imralon, maybe my father could help. But she refuses to let me take her."

"Then I'll have to start talking her into it."

"Can you?"

Edouina snorted. "Honey, she's not anywhere near as stubborn as I am – especially when it means keeping her alive." Then her face went sad and angry. "Did you hear those soldiers talking? About raping the heir? No, you wouldn't have. You were out by then." The image of Dynarien lying unconscious and bleeding flashed through her mind and turned up her anger a notch.

"Talons doesn't remember it. I've read her after each of those episodes. There were six males involved."

"And you didn't say anything?" Edouina snarled.

"Can you imagine how she would have felt? Bad enough knowing Bryndel did it."

"I want them dead. Every last one of them."

"So do I." Dynarien turned grim for a moment and then added. "I'm going to ask him to send a healer to look at her."

"Do you think he can help?"

"I don't know."

* * * *

Brandrahoon sat before the mirror in his house in Timbren on the Blood Coast. The room was small and cozy. A fire burned in the hearth. It was one of those oddities of his peculiar form of undeath that, while his body was not fond of solid food; he did quite well with liquor while the lesser bloods did not. He swirled the blood red wine and drank it. He had come in with only six myn, Mephistis, one of his sa'necari retainers – Isranon – and Anksha, leaving the rest in the ruins of Aubrudrin. There was something odd about Isranon that Brandrahoon could not quite identify, besides the fact that he bore the name of Brandrahoon's dead brother, the one who had defied Waejonan and been murdered.

At Brandrahoon's command the mirror's surface swirled and then cleared, revealing Gylorean Galee sitting in her chair.

"I have been waiting for you. I require a favor. I want Dynanna destroyed."

"I have anticipated you, Galee. All those long talks about those infuriating twin yuwenghau. I am in striking distance of the female at this moment."

"Are you?" she purred. "Well, let me inform you of the date and the time. Then we will kill them both. And how is our young prince managing?"

Brandrahoon glanced across the room, watching the cat-like Anksha straddle and feed upon the moaning Prince Mephistis on the floor before the fireplace. "Quite well, I assure you. He has made the acquaintance of my little pet. They like each other very well."

Galee repressed a shiver at the thought of Brandrahoon's demon-eater, Anksha. She had tried to destroy it before it reached its maturity and failed. It was far too late now. The creature was grown into its power. Only Galee and the Master of Blood knew that Anksha was one of the Tinkerer's toys, possibly the last of its kind, bred to devour creatures like themselves. Brandrahoon had rescued Anksha as a baby and reared her. Few challenged Brandrahoon, knowing Anksha would come after them. The creature was relentless once it began stalking someone or something. "You always were my favorite, Brandrahoon."

"I suppose that is a compliment, Galee," Brandrahoon observed, dryly.

* * * *

Derryl found the gates standing open at his mansion in Havensword. The swirling autumn breezes carried the smell of death. They had been here. He knew what he would find. Already he felt sick with anger, violated, his heart, and psyche raped with the deaths of the people inside. People, who had pledged to him, trusted him. They had been his. Noblesse Oblige. And he had failed. A leather messenger's pouch was tied to the gate bars, the leather still fresh and relatively untouched by the weather. They knew when he would arrive. Therefore they were watching him. Possibly right at this moment. Derryl dismounted, walked to the gate, and pulled the pouch free, feeling inside it. He took a paper out.

"RETURN MY BOOK OR DIE."

Rage boiled up in him and he screamed, "Damn you, I don't have your book!" He dropped the pouch, stomping on it as he crumpled the paper and threw it away. "I. DON'T. HAVE. YOUR. BOOK."

A heavy weight landed on his shoulders, carrying him to the ground as he heard his myn shouting and horses screaming in fright. He reached for his sword, but before he could draw it, his head cracked against a rock and fangs sank deep into his throat. Derryl's last thought before sliding into the darkness was of Maya and Leslie, of how much he loved them.

* * * *

Tiderider walked from room to room, searching for Leeza. He found treachery written on every window where the signs of warding had been removed with subtle dabs of dark black stain in the heart of each symbol; and the results were written on the floor in blood. He dragged blankets off the beds, covering the bodies of his folk he found in each room in the course of his search. His heart grew heavier with each one he found. The enemy dead he left uncovered. The Guild could remove those or deal with them as they saw fit. Galee was Guild and therefore they had hesitated to trust the Guild; they learned too late that the Guild was not Galee. They had learned too late whom they could trust among the Guildsmyn.

Perhaps it was not possible for a ruler, even a mere lord, to stand with his feet balanced in two such different worlds – a precarious balance at best. Especially with so powerful an enemy as Galee. *Is she the ancient monster? Or merely a younger descendant? Perhaps StealsThunder should give her a hug*. StealsThunder was the only Fae who had ever eaten a Lemyari. At least that Tiderider knew of. She claimed that if she sniffed or licked her fingers after touching someone she would know instantly if they were Lemyari because she never forgot a taste. That brought a wry smile to his grim lips despite his sorrow amid the carnage.

Only two rooms remained to be searched in the direction he had last seen Leeza traveling. He felt certain of where he would find her. He neared the rooms Juna had shared with his summerflies. He opened the door to Juna's harem room. There were four opulent gilded beds and matching dressers of walnut heartwood with huge mirrors and elegant claw footed chairs. A long divan in the middle flanked a low table accompanied by over-stuffed chairs suitable for draping oneself over in a seductive manner. A wealth of cushions filled every crevice on the floor, and it was in one of those crevices that Leeza had cornered Pelau. She had apparently tried to block the rain of Leeza's blows because her arms and hands were cut. It had done her no good. Her chest and stomach bore mute testament to Leeza's fury at their betrayal of Channadar. Tiderider began to search around the room, looking now under the beds. He found no further sign of Leeza.

Sysymi must have fled into Juna's room, which meant he would find Leeza there. Juna's room was bright and airy, full of sky blues and bright golden hues of sunlight, blond woods. Mobiles of birds hung from the ceiling, turning slowly in a breeze from the broken windows. The open bed was plain, a simple thing, covered by a joyful azure spread with golden birds that matched the carpet – a carpet marred by crimson drops of blood. Tiderider followed the blood trail to a deep box of a wardrobe. He paused before the wardrobe, listening to an intermittent thunk of metal against wood and a squish of metal into something softer, and then a dull, detached voice repeating, "You killed him."

Tiderider opened the wardrobe. A dead leg popped out and hung from it, half concealed by the clothing. The golden Fae saw Sysymi's body slumped in one corner and Leeza curled up in the other, striking the dead summerfly with one blade

and the bottom of the wardrobe with the other.

"Leeza," Tiderider spoke softly, not wanting to shake her. His hands shot out, snagging her palms, popping the blades from her hands with his thumbs and then snatching them away. He wiped the blades and thrust them through his belt. "He is asking for you. Channadar needs you, Dragonfly."

"He's alive?" Leeza's slanted green eyes fastened on Tiderider, hope flaring in their depths.

"He's badly hurt, but he was alive when they carried him from here."

"Take me to him."

Tiderider helped her from the cabinet. "You look like one of the Faery folk, your hair like that and dressed so fierce." He ruffled the blond hair hanging to her hips.

"Dynarien said that."

"Willodarusson?" Seeing then that she was more composed than he had first suspected, Tiderider drew her blades from his belt. He handed them back to her hilt first and saw the maker's mark. "GimliGloikynen? Blades out of legend, Dragonfly."

"Dynarien Willodarusson gave them to me and the Horn of Sephree as well and many other things. Badree Nym magic."

"Beast repellent. Our folk have gotten hit with those things a few times." His instinct warned him to keep her talking, keep her focused. "Let me tell you, as we walk, about a certain white haired Nym who styles herself Mally the warrior princess and how she bested a creature they call the Beast, but whose name is actually Anksha. Mally rides around on a one-horned goat she pretends is a unicorn, waving a wooden sword."

Leeza's eyes cleared, reflecting a sudden trust. All the games were gone and a different dance had begun. Dynarien said it might; that it could; and it had. She was a dragonfly.

Tiderider pulled the linked crystals from his pocket and put it in her hand, folding her fingers over it.

She frowned for an instant in question, and then her eyes went distant again. Leeza looked up at him in shock. "This crystal ... it's a memory stone."

"When the two are locked together, yes."

Leeza sucked in a long breath, flicked back a strand of waist length blond hair, and met Tiderider's eyes. "He knows about... He really loves me."

Tiderider gave her a slow nod. "His child. And he loves you, Dragonfly. Only the crystal can show you how much."

* * * *

Queiggy leaped off his chair as the Guildsmyn carefully carried the heavily wrapped flattish, long rectangular object into the converted great hall of the appropriated branch wing, followed by others with several chests of objects from the Faes' apartments. They would be storing everything in this wing, except those things that had been specifically designated by Da'Shanagara as going into the great hall the Fae were staying in. The survivors intended to camp here in a single chamber with their wounded lord. The bodies of their slain Chosen lay wrapped in their colors along the farthest wall, including Juna who was cloaked in the colors of Hellsguard, the black with stars, and the white and blue birds of purity and defiance of the darkness they stood fast against.

"What's that?" Queiggy demanded, running his fingers along the fabric, feeling the shielding, which could not keep it from him in his highly sensitized state.

"A very expensive, precious antique mirror, which Da'Shanagara insists must be kept with Lord Channadar at all times." Aramyn eyed Queiggy suspiciously as the wing master appeared to become more agitated by the moment.

"Sneaky! Sneaky! Sneaky!" Queiggy stamped his feet. "Teach me to keep an eye on my relatives."

"You're related to Channadar?"

"Enough over there!" Sha stalked across to them. She had managed to move Channadar into a bed in the corner near the door, with a divan to the side along the wall and given him some privacy with decorative folding screens, the only thing she could find on short notice. The Fae would have it their way and no other. Her patient did not need the noise Queiggy was making. "Take it elsewhere, Queiggy."

Sha noticed for the first time that the Wing Master no longer carried the sword cane. Queiggy walked as straight as the younger myn, a sword belted at his side. The healer had known the mon since she was a child. He had to be at least seventy or eighty and she had watched him grow old; yet she would swear she was now watching him grow younger.

Mikkal moved among the survivors, offering comfort, talking, and listening. The temple had responded as swiftly as the Guild. Everyone had. The whole compound had been thrown into motion by the call of the horn. The survivors had gathered pallets into a circle like the comfort nesting of the lycans, piling them with cushions, pillows, and blankets. Tables had been placed along the outer edges, laden with food, tea, and wine.

Sha had barely started to return to Channadar when Tiderider entered with the blond Fae she had passed on the stairs earlier that night. Then the newcomer's face registered as Tiderider guided her to Channadar, changed somehow, and yet still Leeza. The young mon had, apparently, bleached her hair nearly white and it fell to her waist. Sha did not remember it being that long.

* * * *

The three Chosen, Da'Shanagara, Juniperarrow, and Starsilent, rose from the cushions, approaching without a word to anyone to regard Leeza curiously. She stiffened, her hand tightening on Tiderider's arm, wondering what their expressions meant. He ignored her tension, their looks, and Sha's approach, bringing her to Channadar's side, where he settled her in the closest chair. Tiderider took the crystal from her, and released the two halves. He laid one beside Channadar's face on the pillow and secured the other once more around Leeza's neck.

Sha narrowed her eyes to stare at the mon she had taken for Leeza between the veiling of her lashes to try and part the illusion – if illusion it was – as Tiderider lifted the long white blond hair to slip the silver chain around her neck and clasp it. This had to be some new trick of the Fae, for this was clearly not Leeza. Or had the firefly been a Fae all along?

Tiderider fastened the other half about Channadar's neck.

As the clasp closed Channadar's eyes opened. "You found ... her?"

"Yes."

Leeza slipped her hand into his, pressed her face against his. She could not miss the purple stain of pollendine on his lips – healers only gave it to the dying. The bottle sat beside a glass on the bedside table. She glanced at Tiderider and saw from his faint flicker of expression that he had noted the pollendine also. Then her attention returned to Channadar.

"Leeza, Dragonfly ... marry me ... now. Mikkal waits."

There would be no secrets, no games. The Chosen stood around them, waiting for her answer. "Yes."

She noticed Tiderider gesture for Mikkal, and she knew then they had all been waiting for her from the first while he searched. Channadar intended to give his unborn son his name before he died. The words were spoken, witnessed, and recorded in utmost simplicity. Despite the brevity of ceremony, it exhausted Channadar.

"I hurt," he said softly.

Leeza glanced around and saw Tiderider pour a measure of the pollendine into a glass, which he pressed into her hand.

Together they got Channadar up enough to let him drink it. "Leeza ... my people ... take care of them... I love you." Then his eyes closed.

Leeza began to cry softly, certain that he would never wake again, and Tiderider withdrew to give them privacy.

* * * *

Tiderider gestured the others away, leaving Leeza alone with his lord. The tall Fae had many matters yet to attend to, the hour approached when Meileilyki would expect to find them before the mirror. Queiggy and Aramyn had seen to the placement of the mirror and chests, awaiting them patiently as they approached with Sha.

"How is Lord Channadar?" Queiggy asked.

Sha shook her head. "I don't expect him to last the night. We've done all we could for him. Only his need for Leeza has kept him alive this long."

"From this moment until the child she carries reaches its majority, Leeza is Mistress of Hellsguard." Queiggy decreed.

"I will inform Mohanja immediately," Aramyn walked out.

Tiderider's eyes turned distant listening to them, his expression reflective as he closed the humans out entirely, like a deadly porcelain doll. "Leave us, Sha. Take your people with you." He saw her mouth begin to shape words and interrupted her before they could escape her lips. "Withdraw your people to beyond the doors at least. This deep within the Wing nothing can reach us. Our lord is dying... We must mourn our losses. Grant mine a few hours alone together."

Sha shared a glance at Queiggy and Mikkal who nodded agreement. Sha drew a black bottle from her pocket and pressed it into Tiderider's hand. "Should he wake in too much pain or wish to have an end to it..."

Tiderider turned the bottle over in his hand. "What is this?"

"The Gentle Path. We give it to those whose death is arriving in too much agony. It gives them an easier death."

Tiderider nodded, shifting the bottle into his own pocket.

Then they gathered their people, leaving quietly through the rear door, giving the Fae

their privacy.

Chucomei slid into the shelter of Tiderider's arm, leaning her head against his shoulder, to whisper, "What game is this? Who is she, this Fae? You've persuaded everyone she's Leeza, but she is not Leeza."

Tiderider's lips brushed her dark hair. "In time. Follow my lead and do not question."

The last shrouding remained around the mirror as Tiderider set the final touches in readiness to meet with Meileilyki. They had missed the appointed time yesterday. If they missed too many, the queen might become alarmed and simply attempt to send the units of the Thirteen through the instant the anchoring was in place on the other side. Because the tides of magic were a constantly shifting pattern in Faewin, they had to be monitored and adjusted with great frequency, making permanent gates impossible. Hence their reliance on the mirror and moon gates. The instability had proved to be both a bane and a blessing: although difficult to work with at times, it made the Fae versatile and able to react at a moment's notice. It also made them extremely creative and inventive as well as gamers of great skill: they danced the Great Dance with consummate mastery, combining subtlety and flamboyance.

They laid Juna's body, wrapped in the colors of Hellsguard, before the mirror. Tiderider placed the survivors in seated ranks, the Chosen would stand when the time came and he placed them nearest; their fireflies next, with the fireflies of the slain behind them. Finally he sent Chucomei-Who-Calls-The-Birds with a widowed firefly, who would take Leeza's place sitting with Channadar, to bring her for the meeting.

Leeza started to take her usual place beside Tiderider; instead he set her directly to herself apart from him, taking only Chucomei under his arm. She felt alone, unprotected, and exposed. At his nod, the curtain was drawn. As always the mirror swirled and cleared. Meileilyki stood forth, her brow furrowed, concerned. She dressed in lacquered armor as if prepared for battle. Four units of the Chosen stood ready arrayed around her. Clearly the queen knew the day foreseen had arrived.

"Where are my sons?" Meileilyki demanded.

"My Lady Queen, your son Juna is slain. He died well, defending his brother," Tiderider responded in a formal tone. "Channadar lies grievously wounded. The healer fears he will not survive the night."

Leeza swallowed, her eyes filling. She had feared. They had not spoken those words, yet she had sensed them in his weaknesses, in the stain of pollendine upon his lips, the urgency with which they had been waiting for her to perform the marriage to legalize the child she carried. Until that instant she had been able to hold it in. Now she had to fight for this last bit of stoicism.

Tiderider stepped from Chucomei to her side, taking her hand to draw her closer to

the mirror. "This is Dragonfly, Channadar's mate and wedded wife. She carries his child."

Meileilyki regarded her with curiosity, but not disapproval, so her words came as even more of a surprise when she asked, "But what became of his firefly? I swore to care for her. This woman is a trueblood. Where is his firefly?"

Leeza felt totally confused, looking to Tiderider for explanation. He took her hands, placing them gently on the pointed tips of her ears. Her heart skipped a beat, her pulse racing. "Dynarien did this."

Tiderider had the same kind of impish tiny smile that Channadar always got. "When you go to a god for help be careful what you wish for little Fae, you just might get it. Even from a yuwenghau," he whispered and then said to Meileilyki, "For three years we have called her Leeza, as a game, but in truth, she was always Dragonfly. There never was a firefly, but only Channadar's trueblood mate. This is how we hid her."

The other three Chosen came closer, staring as if seeing her for the first time. Da'Shanagara ran his fingers through her hair, head tilted suspiciously. "Trueblood. For three years we've been treating a trueblood like a summerfly and we're only half bloods ourselves. And you put up with it?"

"She plays the game well," Juniperarrow smiled. "Best I've ever seen it played."

Tiderider motioned them back, continuing his talk with Meileilyki, telling her all that happened except the truth of Leeza's origins. The bodies of the slain were passed through the mirror with all reverence and honor.

The queen knelt, flicking back the covering to gaze on Juna's face. "He ended better than he lived. He could not find the balance between the game and the reality. Summerdancers should be kept out of the ranks of the Chosen and sheltered better. His loyalties were never in question, only his wisdom."

"Juna loved his brother." Tiderider bowed his head. No more needed to be said. Juna had fought hard for a place beside Channadar, accepting nothing less. The young half-blood had been impossible to refuse; his love and devotion too great to be denied; and he had died for it. The brothers would soon lie together in death as they had stood together in devotion and love. "The time nears when the hunted must hunt the hunters."

"Yes." Meileilyki hissed, bending across her son's body. "Yes! I have hurried the anchoring, but it is secure." She gestured, sending the ranks of the Chosen forming up around her. Her spiritmyn began a chant of vengeance and battle, blessing the Chosen. Two priests rose, male and female, Willodarian and Daveranan. Each of the Chosen was marked on their foreheads, cheeks, and chins with green and brown symbols, banyan oil mixed with the paint. Then the Daveranan priest opened her bag of earth and smudged their faces still more. They turned their palms up to receive a

bit of earth, which they rubbed together and then along their arms.

* * * *

The council met in an emergency session after word of the attack upon Lord Channadar went out. Sha suspected that Galee had called it or arranged for one of the lords to call it once the horn of Sephree awakened most of the palace. It had spoken only to those who could hear it with their hearts, yet that had been enough to set off a reaction that awakened those who could not hear its call. Sha had been practically dragged in from her bed and Mohanja with her.

They found only Derryl missing and Eshraf. Somehow Galee had managed to exclude the very mon who should be sitting in the Grand Master's place. That frightened Sha. More and more of the lords seemed to be siding with Galee, turning to her for protection when they should be turning to Mohanja.

"My sources says that Channadar is slain," Galee said, regarding Sha closely.

"Channadar was alive when last I saw him," Sha repeated obstinately. "He lived long enough for Mikkal to marry him to his firefly and legalize their child."

"This is the first I've heard of a child ... and my sources are very clear. Channadar died of a sword thrust to his chest, one to his side and several to his ribs, some of them from the back," Galee repeated. "I say, that he died without issue, as did his brother Juna. He was dead before you carried his body from their star room and hid it within the Wing. You are trying to cheat the crown of its due. The lands, holdings, and titles of Hellsguard."

"Why should I do that, Galee?" Sha responded.

"More control of the realm for Mohanja?" Galee looked sharply at the big mon. "Do you believe the council has no eyes to see with? You sleep in his bed. You hide the Grand Master from us, so that Mohanja can control him."

Mohanja said nothing, refusing to be baited. They were standing on dangerous ground. No doubt Galee would have her small army of palace healers contest the findings of the temple and the Guild, which would throw it to the council to decide if the child Leeza carried was indeed Channadar's. They needed the branch clan's influence, which would be immediately felt. But where were they?

"It has already been decided, unanimously," Lord Naren interjected. "If you cannot give us irrefutable proof by morning, the lands will be forfeit to the crown."

Mohanja turned without speaking and walked out. Sha overtook him heading for the Guild Wing. "It's impossible, Sha. But we must try. Are you certain Channadar is failing that fast?"

"Yes."

* * * *

The door opened abruptly and the room went silent, everyone staring at those who had broken upon them as Queiggy and Aramyn entered. Queiggy's eyes nearly popped out, first because the mirror now appeared to take up half of the long wall of the chamber, revealing the entirety of the Faery court and then because of the woman he stared at.

"Meileilyki!"

"Queig, close the door, your mouth." She rose angrily, flicking the sheet over Juna's face. "Sit down and be silent. They have returned to me my son Juna's body and my eldest lies dying. Don't rustle your leaves at me, son of Teakamon."

Queiggy sighed, nudging Aramyn who went and closed the door before returning to the Wing Master's side. Queiggy sighed again. Well, if he had not let it out widely enough before, it was completely out now. The yuwenghau dropped cross-legged to the floor, blowing another still deeper sigh with wide puffed cheeks.

"The Faery queen?" Aramyn asked.

Queiggy nodded. "Meileilyki, I beg pardon, but we have serious problems. The council has convened an emergency meeting. The one we suspect to be behind the attack upon your sons claims that both of them are slain, that Channadar perished without issue and invalidates both the marriage and the lineage of the child. She demands we produce Channadar and Dragonfly to be examined by the Council of Lords. I do not want to admit these people to the Wings lest one of them create an exception within my wards. Neither do I wish to allow Dragonfly and Channadar out of here. For one thing, I fear another attack upon them and for another Sha fears to move Channadar as weak as he is."

"And who are these enemies and what do they hope to gain?" Meileilyki asked, her expression hardening.

"Gylorean Galee, first lieutenant to the Grand Master and Lord Wrathscar whose son will soon wed Talons Gee, called Trollbane. We believe they seek to take Hellsguard."

"Galee, that is an ill-omened name." With a sweep of her hand, the Faery queen extended the mirror to span the entire wall, revealing the room to her court. "Is my son resting behind those screens?"

Aramyn bowed acknowledgment. "Shall I remove them?"

"Yes."

The screens were folded back. Hara, who sat with Channadar, moved his chair aside so that Meileilyki and her court could have as clear a view of his dying lord as was possible. The anger and grief of the Faery queen, unable to go to her eldest child because her power held the unstable magics of her realm together, was terrible to behold. She studied the beloved features, the pale golden skin against his black hair, which flared around his face upon the pillows. "You do not hunt the Fae, for then the Fae will hunt you." She gestured to the Chosen who began coming through the mirror, the first were only twelve, led by a tiny snowdrop of a woman, hair, eyebrows and eyes like ice. She stepped high like a dancer, smiling catlike at Tiderider.

"Allow me to present to you, Wing Master, StealsThunder, my second in my band of Chosen among the truebloods."

"Son of Teakamon?" She wiggled her eyebrows at him and then turned serious, moving to take a stance with wrists crossed before her as if to draw her fans and fight. The others came through, taking their places behind her.

* * * *

Dynarien's eyes saucered as he came to his feet at the table in the Patriarch's study. What had he sensed? Great power had suddenly opened into the compound. He caught the edge of the table. Every movement hurt him. Had they not stopped at beating him unconscious they would eventually have killed him. Combined with his actions on the Night of God Rage and then his efforts with Leeza, he was worn. Stubbornness held him together. In that he was a match for his sister. He had been pushing himself to his limits and he felt them.

"You should be resting, Dynarien," Eshraf told him, turning from the fireplace with two glasses of wine and more of the Night-Elf brews Dynanna had sent from Imralon.

"Something more is about to happen. I feel it. There is movement in the earth. I am not always this sensitive. But I feel it."

Eshraf handed him a glass and then the brew. "That one first." He patted the glass of dark tonic.

"I must go." Dynarien drank the dreadful tasting stuff and then rinsed his mouth out with the wine and swallowed that also. "I must find this disturbance."

"You should sit. Queiggy will have sensed it."

Dynarien had met Queiggy briefly at Eshraf's first council and then the mon had never come to another. "Why? Why would he feel this?"

Eshraf sat across from him, sipping at his wine. "Because he is our other yuwenghau. Not as powerful as you, but powerful still."

"Of what lineage?"

"Teakamon. He is using his tree gift to shield the entire Guild wing and the annex they have taken as a second wing."

Dynarien nodded then. Yes, a tree-gifted son of Teakamon would know how to deal with this. His eldest brother's get were strong in the earth. "Channadar. How does he fare?"

"The Guild surgeons did all they could, yet... Channadar is dying. He will not see the morning."

Dynarien prepared to Jump.

Eshraf dropped his hand upon Dynarien's shoulder to stay him. "You cannot save him, Dynarien. You dare not repeat what you did with Yukiah. It could destroy you. As for the Abelardian spells, Shared Life was not designed for this. Channadar was too torn up inside. Too much blood was lost. It would be impossible. It would take a lifemage."

"It's battle medicine," Dynarien said. "There's a random factor I saw when Josiah helped Aeijys. I must try to access it. I must try. I cannot let Channadar die. I've let too many people down."

Dynarien Jumped into the middle of the Great Central Hall, striding through the late night crowds to the Guild Wing just as the great steel doors had begun to close. Someone, somewhere within that wing had opened a door to Faewin. That was what he had sensed. And there would be major trouble if he did not help Channadar. Meileilyki would rip through here like a hurricane if Channadar died. Creeya did not need a war with Faewin on top of everything else. He had finally figured out who Channadar was. Dynarien cursed himself in a dozen languages for spending his last four thousand years being an irresponsible rakehell. Channadar and Juna were Channi and Ju-ji. He had spent time chasing their mother in a pleasantly casual dalliance that resulted in three children before drifting away to join his sister in playing dangerous games against the dark ones. "Let me in!"

"If you're not Guild, go away. Doors closing."

Dynarien caught the doors, forcing them apart. The wenchs controlling the doors groaned, yielding to him with great reluctance, and he stepped through. He heard the shouts of armed myn charging toward him. "I said, let me in."

Dynarien released the doors, which clanged shut behind him with a grinding sigh of machinery.

Porthy rose slowly smiling broadly. "Lord Dynarien! You are most welcome, of course."

The Guildsmyn lowered their weapons.

"What is it you need?" Porthy asked.

"To see Channadar. I must try and help him."

Porthy liked the sound of that. He had been enraged to hear that Galee and Wrathscar were trying to discredit the marriage and Channadar's child's parentage. "Hurum, get Lord Dynarien there immediately."

* * * *

Meileilyki turned an angry eye toward the door at being interrupted once again and then smiled through her sudden tears at seeing Dynarien. "It has been too long, Twice-Born."

"Meileilyki," Dynarien said, bowing slightly. "Where is your son?" He turned about and saw the bed. Leeza had returned to Channadar, holding his hand again, his fingers folded in hers.

"He's nearly gone," Leeza said, looking up at them with tears running down her face.

"They will pay for what they have done!" Dynarien growled and moved her aside to take Channadar's wrist and Read him. He could feel the fading energies

<Dynarien, you must not do this, you could permanently harm yourself. Your sister would never forgive me . > Kalirion's voice spoke in his mind.

Dynarien ignored the Sun-Lord and cast Shared Life with himself as the first donor, knowing his divine blood would work quickest.

<Kalirion, Shared Life only. Grant me that much at least . >

Kalirion resisted and then gave in. *<Call the staff from her hoard, but do not ask again. And no, we cannot heal your beloved, she is godmarked and would shatter like glass. Yukiah was stronger material to begin with . >*

The spell had severe limitations, since it could mimic only a single aspect of the decimated lifemages; it had been designed to replace blood loss and damage to the life force itself. But if he cast anything stronger he stood a powerful chance of burning himself out. Dynarien summoned the staff of Dawnhand and, with it in hand, he was able to find the random factor in the spell and gave a second time from

himself, passing some of his innate ability to heal to Channadar.

"What did you do?" Meileilyki demanded, certain she saw the color improve in her son's face.

"Shared Life. I need donors. Many donors. Strongest first."

Tiderider pushed through the others and placed his arm against his lord's. A queue formed, which included Queiggy immediately behind Tiderider, and Dynarien gave as much from them as he dared and felt Channadar's body could handle. It would not do to kill the patient by trying to save him. Soon they could all see the difference.

Dynarien understood what Kalirion had meant when the Sun-Lord said he might burn himself out. He felt brittle inside and nauseated. It took everything he had to remain standing. He sent the staff back to his sister's hoard.

Leeza lifted grateful eyes to Dynarien's face. "I am in your debt, Rose Warrior."

"We all are," Tiderider told him.

Channadar's eyes fluttered open, glancing at all those clustered around him, then closed and fluttered open again with the effort to remain aware. "Leeza?"

Leeza pushed through, took his face in her hands, half-laughing and half-crying and began to kiss him. "You'll live, Channadar. You'll see your son grow up. The Rose Warrior has saved you."

"Has he?" The question was rhetorical. He was still very weak. "I love you, My Dragonfly."

"He will live, Meileilyki," Dynarien said, and approached the mirror, his steps unsteady. He scarcely noticed that someone brought him a chair as he sat down in it. "So long as he does not over tire himself before he has time to heal."

"I am in your debt again, silly runagate. You must visit me. Come to Faewin?"

Dynarien shook his head. "It would not be the same. I am in love with a woman I cannot have. Two of them. Sharani triad."

"Ahhhh. I hear such sorrow there. Come visit, and we'll just talk."

"When this dance ends, perhaps." Dynarien had sired three children on Meileilyki, during a long visit decades ago. Each time he had watched her swell with another of his children, he had contemplated settling down with her, but in the end he had not.

* * * *

"This will stand the Council, Galee, and Wrathscar on their heads," Shaheeramaat said, her lips tightening into an expression of sheerest disdain as she watched guardsmyn under the close supervision of a handful of Guildsmyn move chairs, sofas and tables about the Great Central Hall in the course of establishing a perimeter for the meeting that afternoon.

"Bang their heads, Sha!" Mohanja replied, leaning against the wall near the Guild Wing. "It will bang their heads to see him alive and healing. Let alone married with child and heir coming." Mohanja had insisted that if there were to be a meeting, it would not involve carrying Channadar any great distance and thus put him in danger. This close to the Guild Wing's doors, Channadar could be easily withdrawn into its safety should an assault come.

Sha moved closer, snuggling against Mohanja. She saw so many changes in him, and liked most of them. She had been astonished at the difference in the Lord of Hellsguard's condition when they summoned her that morning. "Dynarien gave us a victory, saving Channadar."

* * * *

Paranoia showed in the cautious ways the councilors took their places. Eshraf arrived with a letter from the Grand Master, authorizing him to speak on his behalf, and the Patriarch took the throne chair at the meeting's head.

Galee's eyes widened as she observed the clearly veteran unit of Chosen march in beside Channadar's litter and another Fae she had never seen before yet was oddly familiar, who held the wounded lord's hand.

Mohanja moved to the middle of the circle while Tiderider and two others shifted Channadar from the litter to the couch, putting pillows to the Lord of Hellsguard's back so that he might sit as upright as he could comfortably manage.

"This is not to be a long meeting, My Lords," Mohanja told them, scanning all the faces and finally fixing his eyes on Wrathscar with great intensity. "You demanded proof that Channadar lived, that the marriage had taken place, and that he claims the unborn child as his own. So I have brought you proof."

"As you see, the news of my death was a lie," Channadar said, unfolding a single golden fan. "This is my wife, Dragonfly." He indicated Leeza with the fan. "I felt the need, with our child coming, to legalize our union. I am certain, good lords and ladies, that the laws of inheritance being what they are, you can appreciate the necessity." He gave them as much of one of his usual smiles as he could manage.

"You cannot simply produce a woman out of nowhere and expect us to believe this nonsense?" Wrathscar demanded.

"I have been here for three years, Lord Wrathscar," Leeza said, stepping into the

game. "At my beloved's side in plain sight beneath your noses."

The Chosen laughed. Wrathscar's glare slid across them and they laughed again, knowing how it infuriated him.

"I've never seen you before," Wrathscar hissed between his teeth.

"Oh, but you all have. You especially, Lord Wrathscar, but I'll not embarrass you with descriptions of how many times I fended off your advances. Let us say simply that you called me Leeza and believed me human."

Galee stared hard at her.

"Where better to hide her, Galee, from your threats?" Channadar said in the same language in which she had threatened him in years earlier.

Galee's eyes widened, for it was the language in which she kept her journals. If she gave the slightest sign that she understood his words, she would be revealed.

"An old language, but not entirely lost," Channadar told her. *"It is justly said, do not hunt the Fae, for then the Fae will hunt you."*

"I withdraw my objections," Galee said. She dared not allow this conversation to continue. If she should answer him once, in the old tongue, then whoever had her book in his keeping would have proved her the author before everyone. This had to end quickly lest she fall into his trap. "This is, indeed, Lord Channadar and Leeza."

Wrathscar turned from glaring at the Fae to glare at Galee. "Leeza belonged to Tiderider! How do we know the child is not his?"

The Chosen laughed again and several council lords joined in.

"I have confirmed the genetics, Lord Wrathscar," Sha put in quickly. "The child she carries belongs to Lord Channadar."

Eshraf,

I'm coming. Hold fast as I know you will.

Alysyn

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BLACK SWAN

The woman wore black leathers, smooth and soft as butter, and a sword at her hip.

A harness of throwing blades crossed her body, white leather against the black. Her coarse black hair lay braided tight to her head in an intricate coronet that carried countless silver pens, all sharp and deadly woven through it. Fifty armed myn rode behind her in a double column, lancers leading, and horse-archers in the rear. She carried herself with shoulders squared, her head high and proud as she led them into the yard of the waystation. They passed through the gate of the split rail fence and halted before the long, chinked-log building. Alysyn of the many names. Alysyn Sinjin, a corruption of St. Jon by dropping the Dulac, heir and avatar of the Black Swan, the first Alysijn. Alysyn Larkwood to the Guild, who had left them when the vampire war ended nearly thirty years ago. Alysyn Woodbourne, the name she had taken on when she married Yukiah. And others less known. She dropped from her horse, landed lightly, and tossed her reins to the stable child. Then she signed her company to dismount. Her three closest companions followed her inside, Father Wynn, Kerr, and Gerri.

A thin mon emerged from a back room wearing an apron, which he took off and tossed onto one of the tables in the common room they had just entered. The expression in his eyes spoke to her of grief and worry as he grasped her shoulder, guiding her to a bench inside the door.

Her mouth tightened and her eyes narrowed slightly, very, very slightly. "What is it?"

"You must ride out again immediately. I have saddled horses waiting for all of you and another six myn to go with you."

"What is wrong?" She demanded. "Is it Isen?"

"No." The old man said. "No, Alysyn. It's Yukiah. He's dead. The vampire is back. It butchered him." He sucked air. "Brutally... brutally butchered him. Isen found what was left of him." He gave Alysyn the letters. Three of them had been following her around for weeks before they finally caught up with her there along with one for Leish pleading with him to bend all efforts make certain that she got them.

Alysyn settled more heavily against the wall, her lips parting to let more air into her lungs. Her vision had been true. "My husband ... my child ... my poor family. I should never have left him."

"Duty is where you find it." Leish made a clumsy attempt at comfort and went silent, unable to find more.

"Ah, my dear god. I could not bear to dwell in Havensword so near to where Rygen died. And Yukiah could not bear to dwell away from the Halls of the Guild." Her face tightened and moisture gathered in the corners, but she did not release it. "I did not tell him about Isen. Give me a double and then show me these fresh horses, Leish."

"The prince..." Kerr's expression as he repeated his words, grief etched into every line of it, tore at Alysyn. "They murdered the prince."

Alysyn handed the letters over to him as the Shivari sat down beside her.

"Like in your vision..."

"Yes. Exactly as in my vision."

* * * *

Derryl lay naked in the filthy straw of a dank cell beneath one of Wrathscar's warehouses, shivering with fever and chills. The cell smelled rank with urine and feces, and the lingering musk of the rats that ran through. He could smell rot and decay and a sharp acridness of the sewers, so he knew they were below ground and close on them. The heavy weight of the irons on his wrists and ankles twisted and pulled at him. He could barely manage to move wearing them. The irons lacerated his wrists and ankles, which then swelled and bled painfully with the burning tenderness of infection. The irons never came off.

Galee did not want to lose him too quickly, so she would periodically send one of her tame healers to tend him. She liked having him heal enough that she could do it all over again. The process broke down his sense of self, knowing that he waited for it to begin once more, which instilled fear. Yet, so far none of his answers to her questions had satisfied her. She had made all of that plain to him.

He dreamed of Maya and Leslie mostly, praying for their safety when he could manage a coherent thought amidst the anguish. Sometimes his brothers' spirits visited him, or at least he thought they did. He wished he could go completely mad, slide off into a realm where none of this was real. Or die. That would be the true victory. But Hadjys' lady of the sacred blade never came for him.

Three of Galee's jailors had made him their butt-boy, adding humiliation to his suffering. He could hear them coming in the darkness, but not yet see the faint light of their lantern. His damaged sphincters puckered at the knowledge of their approach. What had hurt even more was having his myn watch.

A wall of iron bars separated his cell from that of his five surviving myn. Galee wanted them to see what she did to him each day, to see what his jailors did. She thought to break his myn by forcing them to watch and him by the humiliation of their watching. The opposite had occurred. Derryl felt more determined to withstand her. In return, his myn stood fast and did not break, as a gift to his courage. They could not be less than he; and he could not be less than they.

He heard the keys rattle in the door and then the jailors entered quietly with their shielded lamp. They dug Derryl out of the straw and forced him onto his stomach, took hold of his shoulders and pulled him backwards until his ass was positioned for

their pleasures. Derryl clenched his teeth and locked his jaw, refusing to cry out or beg as he felt the first one's hard knob begin to force its way inside him.

"We're gonna wear your noble ass out," the jailor told him, grunting loudly as he thrust with deliberate savagery.

"But not before I have my piece," said the other one.

Derryl retreated into a corner of his mind where they could not reach, detaching himself from his body in the moment of violation.

* * * *

The only light came from lamps in the corridors so the cells were very dark. One of the five myn remained awake at all times, listening for their lord and what chanced with him. Bram, the oldest of them, sat up when he heard the keys rattle in the door to Lord Derryl's cell and he moved closer to the iron bars. Then he turned his back to it, his face tight, knowing. A younger mon woke at the sound of grunting in the next cell. His eyes widened with a stricken expression and he said to the older man, "Are they...?"

"Yes. It happens every night. Sometimes one, sometimes many." The man's voice was grim and chill, detached from his heart and head. "I have heard them each night since we have been here. Our good lord will not break and neither shall we."

"We should give her what she wants," said Hurst, roused by the sound and his cellmates' voices.

"Shut up, Hurst," Bram growled. "And don't watch."

"Give her what she wants, for hell's sake!" Hurst repeated. "Then she'll let us go."

The youngest of them, a beardless youth, balled up and covered his ears at the sound coming from Derryl's cell. Bram squeezed his shoulder in sympathy, and then turned on Hurst. "You're an idiot if you believe that."

* * * *

They rode into the city of Havensword in the dawn light, as it stretched pale fingers across the snow tipped peaks and broke across the high walls. Alysyn led. She held herself stiffly in the saddle, determined and straight as the blade at her hip. People watched them and no one stayed them. They had never seen such a large unit of the border riders before. She did not betray the tension in her body at being here after thirty years. It had not changed at all. She remembered every twist and turn of it as if it were only yesterday that she and the others had raced about it, fought the undead through its alleys and dark paths. Rygen had competed with Yukiah for her. But she had only wanted Yukiah. Only really wanted Yukiah. Yet for a time, in a brief

flirtation she had turned to Rygenas Tormuth. He had been dashing, wealthy, and highborn. Everything a poor girl from the back streets could dream of and her head had turned. She had lost her virginity with Rygen. For years she had kept telling herself that briefly, only briefly had her head been turned. That was before Alysijn had appeared to her and revealed what she was.

She had meant to meet Rygen that long ago night. They had planned a rendezvous, but then she came upon Yukiah and forgot Rygen. She genuinely loved Yukiah. And when the morning came, and she woke in Yukiah's arms, Rygen was dead. The creatures had killed him. And it was her fault. If she had kept the rendezvous it would not have happened. Rygen would have been somewhere else, not waiting for her in that tavern. When the war with the creatures ended, she left Havensword and that would have been the end of it, but she encountered Yukiah again and they married fifteen years later. But it hadn't lasted. His duty called him back to Havensword, a place where she had sworn never to go again. Yet here she was. They had remained legally married, neither of them wanting to entirely let go. She had never told him about Isen, not wanting him to be forced to choose between his duty and a child. Bad enough he was choosing between her and duty.

"Kerr, you sense them yet?"

"Yes, commander. Scry wards in place. Scouts securing positions. Havensword doesn't know it yet, but they are now invested. No one enters or leaves the city without our knowledge and, when the time comes, without our permission."

Six hundred Netherguard and three hundred Riders of the Escarpment Guard had assembled around Havensword after traveling there in smaller groups cloaked by scry wards.

"Thank you, Kerr."

Yukiah ... Yukiah should have been safe. Not slain taking it in the back from a slimy little toad you could have broken in half with one hand. Yukiah. Alysyn felt doomed by her name, for she had been named for the Black Swan, the swan-may who had been too late to save her lover. She rode into the courtyard of the temple and dismounted. One of her riders took her reins.

"I'll take it, Alysyn," said Kerr.

A priest came up. "Can I assist you Rider?"

"Yes," Alysyn replied, her eyes avoiding his uncharacteristically, almost distant. "I want to see the armsmaster's grave. That is what we are here about."

"Ahhhh. Come this way."

Alysyn followed and when she saw the grave, covered in flowers and offerings, her

eyes filled and her throat choked up. She dropped to her knees, dragging her fingers through the offerings until she could clear a spot and then clawed into the soil with a sob. "Yukiah, my love..."

The other Riders withdrew and knelt, giving her a modicum of privacy.

The privacy did not last long, for a large mon dressed in priestly robes emerged from the back door of the temple and called out to her, "Alysyn?"

She glanced at the voice and saw Eshraf approaching with seven Hadjyshadon, a temple battle unit, which sent a tremor of disquiet along her arms. "Holy father." She rose, walked to him, and then dropped briefly to one knee before rising again. "I would like to talk about Yukiah. Perhaps see my daughter."

Eshraf tilted his head, considered. "That would be well, come with me." Then he gestured to a priest among them. "Show the other Riders to where they can rest and clean up. Have Captain Osterbridge brief them completely."

"Osterbridge is my daughter's husband?"

"Yes and he is a fine mon. You will approve of Yukiah's choice."

They walked through the gardens and into the temple. Alysyn strode along beside him. She had a loose comfortable gait, the grief, and tension showed only in the tightness of her shoulders, and the way she held her neck. Alysyn's eyelids hooded to conceal the questions that entered her mind as they turned away from the student dorms and headed for the teacher's annex. Eshraf led her along a little used corridor, down a long flight of stairs into the lowest level beneath the temple, and he stopped near a bookcase and rapped on the wall beside it. She could see nothing odd about it. Abruptly the scent of spring air and a rush of pine, laurel, and mint swirled through the room with a taste of sweet power that tingled the tip of her lips and tongue.

"Open it for me, Queiggy," Eshraf said. "She's here."

The wall opened.

"Queiggy? He's still alive?" Alysyn asked, wonderingly. "He must be well past a hundred." It startled her past her brooding.

Eshraf smiled. "Yes."

The wall drew inward and then slid aside. Alysyn gaped. "What is this?"

"The secret paths of the first Grand Master."

"You know them?"

Eshraf shook his head. "Our yuwenghau has deigned to show me this one recently. Only he can open it."

Alysyn followed him through. The scent of laurel and mint soon overpowered the pine as they traveled. "My love died hard." She drew the letter from her shirt.

"Yes, he did. I was with him. Isen held his hand. She cried."

"He knew? She told him?"

"He recognized her eyes."

Alysyn smiled at that and her eyes misted. "I am glad. I should have told him. He had a right to know. Oh gods, I made so many mistakes, Patriarch. So many mistakes."

"We all do, child. We all do." Eshraf patted her arm and then put his arm around her shoulder and drew her close, holding her against him as they walked. "Isen is holding up well."

"I am certain that you did. The vampire. It was the same one?"

"It was Milady, you remember little Milady? The one who claimed to have a trace of sylvan blood, but not the ears?"

"Yes." She thought about that for a moment. Milady had come from Darr near the Vallimran border with her husband Lord Ambrose thirty years ago. Both with traces of Valdren blood that had been confirmed by one of Galee's healers. Enough to have kept them young this long... And yet no ears. "What happened to her? And Ambrose is he one?"

"Milady is dead. Yukiah got her. Ambrose stuck him in the back. Right at the start of it. Otherwise he might have gotten away."

Tension hummed in her blood and she closed her eyes. The image from her vision still haunted her and her mental words over the past weeks had become a repetitive chant with little variation. *In the back. Oh Gods, Yukiah. Not in the back. Not by that slimy little toad.* "Has Ambrose been brought to account?"

"No. We were watching him, but he fled and escaped us."

"I am going to find him and I am going kill him." The corners of Alysyn's mouth had drawn down in a sneer. "He is dead. I have the means of overtaking him, no matter how swiftly he's ridden."

"He is Lemyari."

"The vampire?"

"One of them. That is why we had been watching him, but there is more. I assume you haven't spoken to anyone in the city yet?"

Alysyn shook her head. Eshraf was as shrewd as ever. "No. We rode straight on. Why?"

"Then I need to brief you as we walk." Eshraf told her everything up to the moment Isen found Yukiah, covering months in swift clear sketches. Alysyn listened, catching it all with the skilled ear of a verbal as well as a visual eidetic.

They traveled through the hall and linked up through the cellars into a corridor into the Guild Wing by a path she had never seen before. Queiggy greeted them, looking younger than she remembered him, which startled her. He led them to the door of the guarded annex. Alysyn found that startling. And even more startling, even in view of Eshraf's words, were the number of Guildsmyn in armor and the numbers moving about the Wing itself.

"Queiggy, before I introduce Alysyn to my special patient, I want you to summon Mohanja to join us in the star room. Leonè has been waiting most of the day already. I want all of you here for this."

They strode down to the Star Chamber at the end, nodding to the guards at the door and entered the outer chamber in the center of the bottom floor. A ginger haired mon sat with his feet propped in a low table, his nose pressed tiredly against his steepled forefingers. He appeared to be dozing lightly. Yet he snapped to attention, his head lifting and turning to the side to regard them and then his eyes brightened and a smile sprang across his face to pop his lips wide revealing his large white teeth. "Alyssyssyn!"

"Leonè!"

The mon was out of his chair in a trice to catch her up as she rushed him. He lifted her and swung her around. Then he set her down, hearing the sob emerge

"He's dead..."

Leonè glanced a question at Eshraf who shook his head. "I am sorry, Alysyn. You want to see Isen?"

"Yes."

"Isen is in with our friend upstairs," Leonè said, glancing at Eshraf.

Eshraf ran his eyes across them. "When I take you up, I will be revealing one of my

most closely kept secrets. You must not go near this mon. Especially you, Alysyn. He was badly injured the Night of God Rage. He's being held together partly by an auric field and other magics. Entering that, you could damage him."

The Patriarch led them upstairs. Mohanja's eyes widened into disbelief, for there, propped up on several pillows sat Yukiah with Isen spooning broth into his mouth. "What devilry is this? I touched his dead body."

Queiggy gasped in shock and then burst into tears of joy.

A strangled cry erupted from Alysyn as her hands went up, reaching in Yukiah's direction.

"Quietly. Softly." Eshraf said. "I wanted you to see before I spoke. He's barely alive, scarcely there."

"But it's my husband. He's alive. You lied to me," Alysyn accused.

"Come away to the next room and listen."

They did so and sat down at a table in the upstairs study between the bedrooms.

"Yukiah died."

"But..." She glanced back, shaking her head in silent denial.

Mohanja frowned deeply. "Guildsmyn cannot be raised."

"For three days he lay dead, wrapped within a stasis web." Eshraf said to Alysyn, adding to Mohanja, "For those days, his soul resided within the vessel of Dynarien Willodarussan. Hadjys removed his mark from Yukiah and released his soul as Kalirion manifested through the vessel of Dynarien. When the stasis was released, the morning before the funeral, I discovered that they had accidentally split his physical body into two myn at the malikyoles level that only a highly skilled Reader can perceive. One was completely dead, past raising. We buried that one in his grave. The other was barely viable. Kalirion raised that one from the dead. It was a chancy thing. Hadjys and Kalirion's sovereignty, brushing against each other, caused the earthquake. Worse, his soul nearly shattered and was left with cracks in it. The connection between his soul and this body is very fragile, tenuous. It strengthens day by day. The Kalirioni are trying to re-weave the fabric of both his soul and his body. He cannot be left alone while his damaged body heals and regains substance. Yukiah will never again be truly well, certainly never as strong as he was. Fifty-three and doing things more suited to someone in his twenties? He was getting too old for this. You understand?"

Alysyn nodded. "From what you've told me, losing three of his students must have been part of his decision to go after the creatures himself. I should have been here. I

should have come at the first indication of trouble. I would have sent in squads sooner. I was never one to wait as long as Yukiah. Except when it came to returning to Havensword..."

"He needs you, Alysyn. Because of the manner of his raising, he is now a mon without a god. Hadjys cannot take Yukiah back. Yukiah would shatter at his god's touch. He is a devout mon, and this steals his purpose in life. You must give him a reason to heal, to live."

"I will try." Alysyn closed her eyes against the flood of memories. "I should have come when you sent that first letter last spring. I should have come."

Mohanja clasped her shoulder. "We have all made mistakes. I am equally to blame for this, parroting the Grand Master's words until no one trusted me."

"Your unit is free to take up quarters here. This area, the annex has been specially secured for people of rank and others. We expect to be bringing special groups into the annex, which is why we opened it to the wing and closed it to the others. One of our yuwenghau has shielded it. Lord Channadar's people are lodged here."

"One? You have more than one?"

"Yes. If he decides to take you into his confidence, he will."

Queiggy gave a nod at Eshraf's discretion and then extended his hand to Alysyn. She was the only one in the room who did not already know about it. "It's me."

He extended his hand, letting his fingers go twiggy.

Alysyn's eyes widened, "You? I would never have guessed."

"I am Queig, son of Teakamon. A yuwenghau of modest talents."

Alysyn took that in and then said. "I would like to see my husband now. I would like to talk to him. Then I will get my Riders settled here. Afterwards, some rest, a bath and start assessing the situation and how to handle it, how we fit in."

"I am not certain how wise that would be, but if Kalirion's people are willing, then we will test it carefully."

"The situation is that fragile?"

"Yes. All the gods of light are caught up in this effort."

Alysyn went back.

"She wishes to try and touch him," Eshraf told them. "She is his wife."

One of the white robed Kalirioni considered and then nodded, he led her around to the side of Yukiah. She saw how laden the tables were with medicines and amulets, talismans and objects of power.

"You see auras?"

Alysyn nodded. She could see the blue and white grid lining Yukiah's body with patches of black and red to indicate the worst areas of damage.

"Move forward in tiny incremental steps, should anything flare red or black, stop. Simply freeze and wait for it to change, if it does not, then withdraw. Worse, if the grid color itself changes, retreat quickly away from him. Think always loving calm thoughts. No anger. Not even at those who did this to him. Only love, reassurance. We are trying to keep his soul in his body."

The Black Swan approached her husband in small movements: step and pause and wait, step and pause and wait. She filled her mind with images from the happiest days they had spent together. Whenever a memory of Rygen rose to stain her thought she saw the red flare on the auric field, and she repressed it and waited until the field stabilized again. Alysyn had fallen in love with Yukiah, nine years her senior, when she was ten in a fit of puppy love that matured into something more. Holding tightly to her memories, Alysyn reached Yukiah and bent over him, stroking his face, smoothing his hair. "Forgive me, Yukiah. I'm sorry I let Rygen get in the way. The memories. I'm sorry."

Yukiah's eyes opened and his face turned towards her. "Isen?" A long pause and then his head inclined with an uncertainty of expression that deepened steadily until he said, "Jynny?"

"Yes, Yukiah. It's Jynny. I'm here. And I will never leave you. Not ever again."

* * * *

Osterbridge sat uneasily in his favorite chair in the sitting room of their apartments, his long legs drawn tight against the edge while his mother-in-law sized him up. She was an impressive mon. Yukiah must have been the only mon strong enough to handle her.

"So," said Alysyn. "You are Ceejorn Osterbridge. Eshraf tells me that the temple has already anointed you in secret to be the next Grand Master."

"Yes, ma'am... My Lady... they did." Osterbridge squirmed. He still could not imagine himself as becoming the next Grand Master.

"Have you gotten an heir on my daughter, yet?"

"No."

"You did consummate the marriage?"

Ceejorn sighed. "Yes. I didn't want to."

Alysyn arched an eyebrow at that. "Why not? Don't you love her?"

"I love her. But she's so young."

Alysyn laughed. "In many cultures they marry the girls off as soon as their first bleeding. Isen has been bleeding for two years now."

Ceejorn's eyes widened. "You wouldn't have..."

"No. No, I wouldn't have. But fourteen is a legal age to wed for a female and sixteen for a male in this realm. You did nothing wrong."

"She just seems so fragile..."

Alysyn laughed again. "The sinjin are not fragile. It is important, with this battle before us, that you make an heir with all speed. Should you die in battle, without issue..."

Ceejorn dropped his head. "I have never been important before."

"But you are now. You are the anointed Grand Master to be. My daughter's greatest chance of safety and rallying others to her cause, should all go wrong here, is to have your child in her belly."

"Did Isen send you here to have this talk with me?" Ceejorn asked suddenly.

Alysyn smiled warmly. "Not in so many words. I am her mother, after all. I asked her if she was pregnant yet and she told me of your inhibitions."

Ceejorn sighed. He was trapped.

* * * *

A few days later, the five of them sat together in Queiggy's chambers, drinking ale with Tiderider. It was time to begin drawing everyone necessary into the conspiracy to save the realm.

"How many of the inner circle of lords who support us remain whole?" Alysyn asked. She was still assessing the situation while more units of the Netherguard and her Riders arrived almost daily. If all else failed, she would invade the city. Although her white swan had been raised, his suffering had rage roiling beneath her calm

exterior.

"None," Tiderider answered. "Except Derryl. He left nearly two months ago for his hidden lodge to protect his wives. Leslie is pregnant after the Sharani fashion. He has not yet returned. We are beginning to wonder if he intends to."

"We need him," Eshraf said. "We need his influence."

"I have people who can find him," Alysyn said.

"Of the second rank, only the Kjartens and a few younger sons," Tiderider continued. "My Lord Channadar is far too weak to go among them. Although I tell people that I speak with his voice, few seem to hear me."

Alysyn did not want to face Derryl, even after all these years, but had arrived knowing she would and prepared to do so. A sudden chill brushed across her neck and along her arms. Had something happened to Derryl? "Let us hope they find him alive. I have a bad feeling," she replied. "A very bad feeling."

Everyone looked at her then. "What is it, Alysyn?" Eshraf asked, putting his hands over hers. "What made you say that?"

"Spirit shivers. When we are finished I'll send word to my allies to set off in search of that lodge. Does he still have that house in town?"

"He closes it up whenever he's going to be gone this long," Mohanja threw into the pool of information. "There will be no one there."

"There have been too many deaths. It seems I have come too late."

"While we live, Black Swan, it is never too late." Tiderider folded and unfolded his golden fan.

"And how many have we killed while I have been away?"

Tiderider thought for a moment. "That is an interesting question. Something walks the gardens by night. The guards are frightened. It looks as if they are killing themselves in the gardens. A single powerful thrust, but the hand on the blade is their own and, when two or more are slain in the same night, they are positioned as if in the act of love."

Alysyn shivered. "You are certain that one of ours did not do this?"

"Positive," Mohanja answered this time. "That is how they found Terrys and Jajinga. They were nude, Jajinga lying atop her with her legs around him. Vampires killed them. But Jajinga had had his own blade driven into his chest and his hand was around it. It is almost as if their spirits were killing the guards."

"There is another thing," Leonè added. "Aramyn tells me that something sobs in the closets and a child's voice is heard to call from them, begging for help. Any servant or guard – anyone at all who answers the call is later found dead. They have all apparently jumped from the windows."

Eshraf leaned closer, his voice lowering, "And Tuhk tells me he hears the ghost of Yahni Kjarten wailing for his lost wife and cursing Lord Wrathscar outside his tavern at midnight. I have never heard of the ghosts of Guildsmyn lingering like this. I think they slipped from Hadjys' Halls of the Faithful on the Night of God Rage."

Alysyn sketched the rune of Hadjys on her chest and the others followed suit. "Our dead walk."

* * * *

Osterbridge and Isen watched the procession of nobles with their entourages slowly winding their way up the mountain and passing through the gates of Havensword. Bright banners snapped smartly in the autumn breeze. He kissed her forehead and then her lips, drawing her more securely into his arms, treasuring the warmth of his wife. They traveled nowhere alone. Even then two shivari lounged nearby pretending they were not aware of the small intimacies passing between them. They had learned to ignore their guards, to seal their awareness of them out so that it was as if they were alone with each other.

Isen had wanted to see the nobles arriving for Talons' wedding. Osterbridge folded his arms across her, passing them beneath her breasts and rested his chin on her head. "It is quite a sight," he said.

"Yes, it is. I never dreamed there would be so many of them." She pressed her head back against his shoulder. "But it is good they are coming in such numbers. It is very convenient for mother."

Each day that passed more of the nobility and their retainers arrived for the wedding. Although they rode with the traditional panoply, there was a conspicuous aura of unease to it. The tale of what was transpiring had leaked far and wide. The Netherguard seized upon this opportunity to begin filtering into Havensword in greater and greater numbers. Eshraf accessed Derryl's network through Tuhk to find secure places to conceal them.

"I am glad she came."

"So am I." Isen raised her eyes to her husband's. "I want to go back now." With Osterbridge's back blocking her action from their protectors, she wiggled her body against his crotch.

Osterbridge arched an eyebrow. "Behave yourself, wife."

Isen giggled. "Are you going to beat me with a stick if I don't? A big friendly stick?"

"Absolutely. And I know exactly where to put it." He slid one hand to her loins and poked her. "Right there."

"Shall we go home and see how well you do it?" Isen arched an eyebrow at him with a cheeky grin.

Osterbridge let a slow smile spread across his lips. "You do have some interesting ideas, wife. Let's go test them."

They turned and started home.

Since his conversation with Alysyn, Osterbridge had delegated his work as armsmaster to others, in order to spend every available moment with Isen, showing her how much he loved her – most of it in bed.

* * * *

Lord Yron sidled along the south edge of the saddle gyre, watching some the Guild gryphons and a single roc being led out. The roc was Bright Eyes, Gaffer Hornbow's roc and he was headed for the Northwest Coast, which was about as far from Galee as one could get, since she had her claws most firmly into the eastern seaboard. Bright Eyes would do nicely. A small black cat with a broken tail scuttled past Yron. He kicked at the cat and it darted away from him.

"Going some place, Milord?" old Jorry, the avian hostler, asked. He carried Twizzle nestled in his arms.

Yron jumped with a yelp. "Yes. Yes, Grand Master's Orders. Letters to Rowanhart, you know. Special orders."

Jorry scratched around Twizzle's ears appreciatively and the little cat purred. He smiled toothlessly and spat on the ground before smiling again. Twizzle leaped down, twining about Jorry's legs. "Come on and I'll see you get aboard. You're just in time. Storms coming in and only Bright Eyes can handle the big ones."

Jorry showed Yron how to grasp the straps, got his foot into the stirrups and, just as the nervous lord started to pull himself up, the hostler's hand snaked out. Jorry covered Yron's mouth with his hand, jerked him backwards, brought his other arm around Yron, and shoved the blade into his heart. Yron's eyes bulged. Jorry pinned Yron against the placid roc with his body, holding him while giving the blade a good twist through the organ. The moments it took Yron to die seemed longer than they were. Jorry felt Yron's body turn flaccid and start to slump. Jorry dragged the mon into the barn where he gave the blade a few good twists before searching him. He found the documents Twizzle had spoken of.

"Yup, Twizzle, they're getting careless. Nervous most like, wanting to get out fast. Queiggy still hasn't broken the code yet. Maybe Isen or Alysyn can. I hear Alysyn was serious good in her time. Okay, you get the documents to Alysyn and I'll feed the corpse to the perytons."

* * * *

Yukiah writhed, twisting in the physical expression of his anguish. Alysyn came to his side, feeling for a renewal of the fever. "Trouble," Yukiah muttered. "The darkness is moving." He had become highly sensitized to it since crossing into the realm of death and back again.

Alysyn stepped back as the Kalirioni came forward to administer a dose of medicine to ease the broken prince. Then she turned and strode out, intuiting his words. She found Timjimikin waiting for her in the study. The man wore three strings of human ears around his neck and a bearskin cloak with the empty paws tied loosely across his chest. His face was seamed and battered, red-golden hair hung wild and undisciplined down his back, trapped away from his face only by a sweat stained leather headband. A wolf, ghostly white walked shimmering at his side.

The Black Swan noted that he had added more ears to his strings over the past week. "What have you got for me, Timjimikin?" Alysyn asked.

"The target has left the city with a small guard."

"Lemyari and vampires do not need large guards," Alysyn gave a harsh bark.

"They do when the Taladrim hunt."

"There is that. Especially when the Taladrim run with the Netherguard." Alysyn snatched up her cloak and strode out with a sign to her waiting myn. She would slip out of the city in the night, taking no Guildsmyn with her. This was her fight. It did not matter that Yukiah had been raised. What mattered to her was that he had suffered and died, that he was still suffering.

Guilt jabbed a spur in her side as she climbed to the top of the gryphon spire, leading her companions. She should have stayed with Yukiah and guarded his back, instead of fleeing Havensword and exchanging one guilt for another. When the guardian spirit Alysijn appeared to her descendants and gathered them together, she had also given them the cloaks of feathers, armor and weapons of their ancestors, sent them blue gryphons. Twelve swan-mays in silver armor waited for them there. Alysyn donned her cloak of feathers. Ambrose thought he had a fair head start, as he would have had his pursuers been traveling on horseback.

Poor Belyla, Alysyn had felt that simple lost soul calling to her in her dreams of desperation and not dared to go to her. She had sent her instead what strength she

could, since she could not yet reveal herself and the reality of the branch clan to the enemy. Then she became Alysijn and changed into a black swan, as did her women. Her males mounted the blue gryphons she summoned, as did Timjimikin whose wolf changed into a ghost and climbed up behind the Taladri. They launched from the spire, circled the city thrice, and set off in pursuit.

* * * *

Ambrose's horse spooked, rearing in panic as the armed myn emerged from the forest ahead of him. He struggled to control his mount, brought it down with an arresting drag on the reins that cut into the beast's mouth, and turned it. That direction, also, was blocked. Swan-mays drew their blades, waiting for him. Then the gryphons moved into view. He recognized their leader, for Alysyn was nearly as unchanged and youthful as she had been when he murdered Rygenas Tormuth.

"Alysyn, my friend, what is the meaning of this?"

She favored him with a smile of disdain and her voice was ice. "Hadjys rot your soul. You murdered my husband."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never touched the mon. I was as grieved as everyone, if not more so, at his tragic death."

Alysyn disregarded his words. "If you'd dared face him like a mon, instead of a bloody coward, he'd've cut your cockwhoring heart out. You could never have matched him. He was always twice the mon you were. So you had to stick him from behind."

"Alysyn, grief has unhinged your mind. I'm willing to forget you have said these things. You don't want to press this matter. Just let us go before blood is spilt and you have reason to regret it." He turned his horse, making it clear that he had no intention to fight her fairly on foot. This would not be a duel. Ambrose drew his sword.

Apparently, he considered the swan-mays the easier to cut through. Alysyn signed her companions and they spread out in a skirmish line. She would not make this easy on him. "He lived long enough to speak. He named his murderers. Your wife was a vampire and died with my husband's blood on her lips."

"Your messengers have been delicious. And so informative," Kerr added, grinning as he allowed just his upper body to change and drew his blade. His hands turned clawed and stripped in orange and black fur.

"Ahhhh." Ambrose signaled his guards and they charged the swan-mays.

Arrows with Taladri fletching, black and white, flew between the myn to strike down the horses. Ambrose was thrown by his dying mount, rolled and came to his feet to

find himself facing Alysyn.

His blade came down at her in an overhand. Hers met his and she held him just long enough for their eyes to meet. "Ready to die, Alysyn? I killed him. And Rygenas."

Rage surged up within her and she threw him back. Her strength caused a sudden widening of his eyes to betray his surprise.

"Ready to die, monster?"

She lunged in with a two-handed cut to his side and he blocked it, circling away from her. Alysyn followed cautiously. Their blades met in a flurry of strikes and parries that flashed in the sunlight with a sharp ring of metal upon metal. She drove him backwards, forcing him to retreat.

"Damn you! You're as good as he was."

"No," Alysyn contradicted him. "I'm better. I'm the Black Swan."

"That's a myth." He glanced over his shoulder quickly for a direction in which to escape, but found his retreat barred by gryphons.

Alysyn came at him again, and this time, she drove him to his knees. He blocked her descending cut and once more their eyes met. She felt the intrusion as, in desperation, Ambrose attempted to snare her mind. Alysyn kicked him in the chest, knocking him onto his back, and severed his sword arm. He screamed, clutching at the stump of his arm while black, ichorous blood fountained. Alysyn stomped him to make him release his stump and cut the other hand off. Ambrose curled his mutilated body into a ball, shrieking and writhing.

Around her, captured myn – most of them already wounded – from Ambrose's guard were losing their hands on the assumption that they were probably Lemyari. They stripped the armor from them before bringing out the stakes and hammers. Ambrose's shrieks rose to a fever pitch. Two shivari turned him on his back and held him firmly down. Alysyn bestrode him and sat on his hips. Kerr passed her the stake and hammer.

"For my husband." She positioned the stake and gave it the first strike of the hammer. "For Rygenas." Another strike and Ambrose's chest arched up in convulsion. "For the others." Ambrose's eyes rolled up in his head and he went still.

All of the captives were executed in similar fashion. She ordered the bodies searched and did Ambrose's body herself. Apparently he liked to take the rings of his victims as souvenirs of his kills, much as the Taladrim did ears. Hanging from a chain around his neck were Yukiah's rings and those of a Kjarten.

She searched his packs and found the rest of his trophies. Over one hundred rings

lay in a velvet lined box. Judging from the sizes and shapes the victims had been both male and female, all from noble houses and several she recognized as coming from friends slain in the last siege of vampires. Set aside like a prize trophy, wrapped in black velvet, she found Rygenas Tormuth's two rings which had been taken from his fingers the night he had been murdered thirty years ago. After thirty years the little vampire must have figured no one would catch him or that they no longer dared to call his position and power to account. Why else have the audacity to wear Yukiah's rings beneath his shirt?

Well, had a rogue godling not dared to oppose them, Ambrose would have been right. He would still be calling the tunes for the dance. But it was ended now. With Yukiah's survival still so precarious she had to continue this dance. She slipped two of the rings back into her pockets, leaving the ring that Derryl had given Yukiah thirty years ago on the chain. "Gather your folk, Timjimikin and ride to Tormuth's lodge. Tell Derryl that I have sent him Yukiah's ring in remembrance of the friendship that was between them since my husband is now dead. We will need his help with the inner circles of the court. I dare not yet reveal either Yukiah or Isen."

"It will be done."

She gave him, also, Rygenas' rings. Derryl would want them.

* * * *

Maya found the mon, sitting in the foyer of Derryl Tormuth's hunting lodge, strange and hard on her eyes, totally unpleasant in visage. She wondered what could have possessed Beyard to let him inside, especially with all the dark deeds that had been going on. He dressed in buckskins. A bearskin wrapped his shoulders with the paws across his chest. He wore three strings of human ears, beads, and bones, a bandoleer of strange objects and odder weapons that resembled the full harnesses of the Guild. A huge white wolf lay beside the mon's leg.

She watched the way Leslie, sitting to the side of her, tried valiantly to keep her eyes on the mon's face yet could not keep from dropping her gaze to the strings of ears. Maya reached over and patted Leslie on the shoulder, letting her know that she understood completely.

He rose and bowed to them. "I am Timjimikin of the Taladrim. The Black Swan, Commander of the Netherguard, has asked me to bring something to Derryl Tormuth."

"Lord Derryl has ridden to Havensword," Leslie said. "I would be happy to hold these things for him."

Timjimikin placed a chain in her hands that held several rings. "These were taken off a captured Lemyari, which the Black Swan and our people executed."

Leslie turned the first two over in her hands. "Oh my gods, these were Rygen's. Derryl's dead brother's. And this one... This belongs to Yukiah. Derryl gave it to him. Why would he send it back?"

"Alysyn has sent it so that Derryl will have a remembrance of the friendship that was between them. Yukiah Woodbourne is dead."

The color faded from Maya's face. "When?"

"Over a month," Timi answered. "We've been looking for you for two weeks."

"Derryl left for Havensword," Leslie told him. "More than a month ago. We haven't heard from him."

"That's not good. We trailed the murderer from the city and caught him. All the while my people have been seeking this estate and had difficulty finding it."

"Derryl has never allowed anyone to know where this estate is," Leslie told them. "He has always been cautious about these things since his brothers' deaths thirty years past."

Timi looked closely at Maya. "You, My Lady, have been marked by my father. Shielded. He kissed you?"

Maya flushed. "No one has kissed me, but my husband."

Timi laughed. "I doubt you would have had much say in the matter. The Twice-Born son is very persuasive. How else get me on my mother who had vowed celibacy? You will return to Havensword, Lady Maya, with a small force of arms. I will ride with you. One of my people, a fine one will remain with Leslie to defend her. Another band will remain on guard and range the area in search of the dark ones. This is a war. If you will host us over night within your halls?"

Maya glanced at Leslie, caught her tiny nod, and said, "Yes."

* * * *

Galee stopped in her tracks as she crossed the quad at midnight, staring at the spires and rooftops of the palace. Golden flickers of light danced across it and down from there like fireflies out of season onto the burnt ground and over the far side of the quad, then through what remained of the west gardens to disappear into the trees. She had been hearing about this for weeks, but this was the first time she had seen it. People said it was the murdered Faes. Galee extended her senses across the grounds in a wide sweep and found nothing. If this was some trick, she could not discern it. Neither living being nor undead thing had crossed those roofs. Nor could she find traces of yuwenghau magic or the hands of the greater divines in this. Her body prickled all over. Suddenly she wanted to get out of the night.

She walked more quickly into the palace and went immediately to her rooms, wanting something to settle her nerves. Meilurk and his three companions were waiting for her in the parlor. Galee ignored them, going immediately to the secret shelf behind her mirror and returning with a bottle of blood which she sat in the middle of the table. Then she retrieved a bottle of wine and glasses, deciding to mix them, and poured a glass of each.

"You still have heard nothing from Ambrose or the others?" Galee asked, downing the wine and then the blood.

"Nothing at all, Galee," Meilurk replied, taking his feet down from the opposite chair at the table and straightening. "I don't like it."

"We must simply count on killing the nobility in one fell swoop at the wedding. If we get all of them, then we can destroy their lands before their surviving members or the Guild can organize or become a threat. Eshraf will perish with the nobles. We will re-consecrate the temple to Bellocar. And then build one to myself. The branch clan is in the city. I can sense them, the similarity to Takhalme. Find them, Meilurk. I want a rite of worship tonight, for myself. That is the only thing that will truly settle my nerves. My first rites of worship in centuries, for me and not from me for my husband. Granted Bellocar might be a tad unhappy..." She smiled. "But I must have it. There are strange powers moving. Things I don't understand."

Meilurk's eyes narrowed and he regarded her closely. "As you say, My Liege-God. You are very deserving. Who did you have in mind?"

"The branch clan. Find them. But for tonight, find me someone interesting."

"Why not do Derry?"

"I am not finished with him yet."

CHAPTER TWENTY

ATONEMENT

Queiggy's cellar extended out from the castle into the earth with nothing built above it for six feet along one side. So he could safely crack the wall a bit and get his fingers into the soil. He slept sitting up, cross-legged with his twiggy fingers deep sunk, soaking up the energy, strengthening, and renewing himself, growing younger.

Now and again he would catch the whispering of the servants when they leaned against the walls or stood too close to them. Talk, so much talk of the child who wept in the closets. They feared the child most of all. And no one went into the

gardens in the evenings where once there had been so much love. Fear of the lesser bloods was there. But even in the daylight there was fear. Fear of the beautiful, young woman who sat upon the ivy bench, although this late in the season there was no longer any ivy. She killed both men and women. It always looked like suicides, but everyone knew better. Sometimes they would glimpse her walking with her lover, a young Fae half-blood who looked like Jajinga in his Guildsmon's dress uniform. They were spooked. And now the golden dancing apparitions on the rooftops, and the rumors of Yahni Kjarten wailing on the streets of Havensword.

He shifted in his sleep as he felt Galee slam her awareness against the Guild Wing and wakened. At first he had not been certain who his assailant was, for the power's source was masked. More and more it tasted of Galee, screaming, ranting, and raging, but she could not get past his defenses, or the Grand Master's signed edicts. The silent mutiny continued, and she now had no Guildsmyn at all answering her calls. In the last two weeks before the wedding Galee had discovered she could neither send, nor receive messages; nor gain any information concerning the Guild. The catkin and their large cousins insured that not even the smallest and most agile flyers of her shifters could escape the city with messages. The Netherguard had her sealed in most effectively. She was only now beginning to realize how thoroughly she was cut off from the outside. They had activated their picket line and added it to one which he had been assembling secretly since spring and it was now mid autumn. Queiggy's main regrets were that, while he moved his pieces into place, many of his closest friends had died.

"Rant all you wish, old bitch," Queiggy muttered bitterly. "Whatever you are. You murdered them or ordered their deaths, even if we can't prove it."

He sensed Mohanja, who was leaning against a wall, shrug as he listened to her complaints about this. Queiggy wished she would come close to the wall so he could hear her himself. Mohanja had begun to speak with her only in rooms Queiggy designated as ones he could access. The messages might have betrayed her, except that they were written in the old tongue as well as code. Alysyn have begun to work upon those messages with help from Isen, yet that still left Queiggy overburdened. So far no one had been able to break the code that Westli wrote his diary in either.

Queiggy's half-drowsing mind acknowledged that tomorrow was the wedding.

The little cat came twisting and clawing frantically, frenziedly through the single pane that Queiggy left slightly open. All his black fur stood on end and his half a tail was corkscrewed tightly as a piglet's as he plopped on the yuwenghau's lap, waking him fully. Twizzle was eager to win himself some mates with acts of daring, but this newest adventure had nearly eaten him. He had barely managed to reach Queiggy's window after a mad dash across the rooftops, into the trees and then down to the window.

Twizzle put his paws on Queiggy's shoulders, yowling.

Queiggy blinked, drawing his fingers from the soil and looked at him in momentary confusion, his awareness slowly clearing. "Twizzle?"

The little catkin changed and sat on his lap. "They released Belyla Wrathscar on the Kjarten grounds in their mansion gardens."

"Did you see who they were, Twizzle?"

"No. Faces covered, masked. No livery. I was alone, so I couldn't follow. I did wake everyone up first, yowling to wake the dead."

"Apt expression." Queiggy rubbed his cheek against Twizzle's in solemn thanks. "Start rousting people while I dress. We'll get myn over there at once, healers and priests also."

* * * *

A bright lamp was brought into Derryl's cell, followed by Galee and several guards with a wooden box. Derryl had not moved or made a sound in more than a day. His face impassive, Bram watched them lift Derryl. His lord hung limp in the soldiers grip like a broken doll, his head lolling back with each movement of the soldiers. They folded his still body into the box and sealed the lid. Then they carried it out.

Derryl's myn watched and Hurst murmured to his companions, "He's dead. My lord is dead. They will start upon us next."

Bram knocked him across the cell. "Shut up."

"Tell them what you know, Bram," Hurst urged. "Tell them."

"If you try to tell them anything, Hurst, I'll kill you."

* * * *

Dynarien shimmered into Talons' rooms in the late morning. He had just returned from Imralon and, although he knew she was usually still sleeping at this time, decided to surprise her with a bunch of rare orchids from his sire's gardens. Cass sat beside Talons, steadying her hands while she drank. Dynarien settled onto the bed, the orchids held behind him. He leaned close, kissing her cheek impulsively for the first and only time, and caught an odd scent that seemed to be coming either from the glass or her mouth.

"What are you drinking?"

"A little wine," Talons said. "It helps me rest."

"Can I taste it?"

"No," Cass snarled, shoving him away. "It's hers."

Dynarien dropped the orchids, grabbed the glass, and threw it against the wall, shattering it. Cass launched herself at him, clawing for his eyes. He caught her hands, but she kneeed him. Dynarien lost his grip on her. Cass ran toward the window. Glass splintered as the maid hit it and sailed out.

Talons lay back, breathing hard, as if having to work at it.

"Edouina!" Dynarien shouted.

"What is..." She saw the window first, the wine-stain on the far wall, and then the pieces of the shattered glass. "What happened? Where's Cass?"

Dynarien shook his head at her. "Talons? Talons, how long has Cass been giving you a glass of wine?"

Talons blinked, looking dazed, and confused as if she had not seen or understood anything. She did not even question why Cass had gone out the window. That absence of awareness as much as anything else frightened Dynarien. "Since the ... the day I was beaten."

Dynarien took her wrist. She was weaker than ever. And there was something new in her system that he did not recognize. "Cass has been getting the drug into her. When I tried to question her, she threw herself out the window."

The orchids lay crushed and scattered around Talons' head.

"Edouina, help me get her dressed, we're going to visit my father."

"Can he help?"

"I don't know."

"Dynarien, I don't want to go," Talons said. "I'm so tired. Where's Cass?" She looked down at her arm, frowning. "Do you see it? The blue frog on my arm? Pretty little blue frog?"

Dynarien and Edouina exchanged a sharp worried glance. "Do you want to try Amphereon?" Edouina asked and Dynarien nodded. She headed for a cabinet.

Dynarien gathered Talons against his chest. "Just a short visit. We'll have lunch and I'll bring you back. No one will miss us." He kissed her forehead. So long as he did not keep her there too long, Hadjys would not rip the soul out of his body through the godmark – at least he hoped that Hadjys would not. "Besides Edouina and I

would not enjoy it without you. And there will be lot's of blue frogs."

"All right ... I don't ... understand ... eh," Talons' eyes rolled up in her head and she went limp against him, her breathing stertorous.

"Edouina!"

"I've got it." Edouina poured a small amount of the drug into her palm, administering it to the mucus membranes of Talons' nostrils and gums. Her breathing eased.

"Help me get her dressed. Then I'll wake her through my sister's mark and we'll go. I haven't let myself completely lose hope yet. But if my sire can't help her..."

* * * *

Twizzle did not wait to see how his message to Queiggy turned out. This had become a very full day, haunting the streets of Havensword, collecting rumors. He would be long into the night acting on all of them. He had also heard that several men were being held in dungeons beneath Wrathscar's warehouses. The little cat needed a ride into the city quickly so he went to Jorry. If Jorry's apprentice found it odd to be transporting a cat on a search through the taverns of the east side, he did not say it. The tow-headed youth put Twizzle on his leather-shouldered jerkin, and rode out.

They found Timjimikin and some of the Taladrim drinking and eating at the Broken Wheel, a modest establishment catering to guardsmyn, soldiers, and others who made their living by the blade. With so many armed myn in the city since the influx of nobles, many of the taverns and eateries were once more staying open after dark. Twizzle leaped from the apprentice's shoulder, bounding to Timjimikin and leaped onto him.

<*Captives under the warehouses.*> Twizzle sent. The little catkin was becoming very certain that he would soon have a harem. His stature among his people had grown enough that females were already giving him some very firm maybes.

"Let's go." Timjimikin rose from the table, signaling his companions who immediately deserted their fare to hunt. Once outside, Timjimikin turned to the apprentice, "Go home. Tell Jorry we are handling it."

The apprentice headed off, glad to be out of it.

As he walked, Timjimikin nodded at myn lounging along his route. Some of them ducked into buildings and re-emerged with others. They were picking up members of the Netherguard who had infiltrated the city and some of Tuhk's contacts from Derryl's network.

Twizzle jumped down, running along the street and darted into an alley. Daylight

lingered although the sunlight had disappeared behind clouds. Until the moon rose, the wolves would not be visible to any save the Taladrim. The little cat, with his crooked tail held high, paused and sent back to Timjimikin.

<That one . >

Timjimikin knocked.

"What is it? What do you want?" asked a surly voice.

"Your mark on a bill of lading," said Timjimikin. "Then perhaps ye'd like a taste a me wares. A good brew we're plannin' ta market fer the solstice crowd this season."

The door opened and Timjimikin faded back to let a more presentable member of the group stand to be viewed. As soon as it opened wide enough, Timjimikin kicked it in the mon's face and they shoved in. They killed every mon they found wearing Wrathscar colors and every mon their wolves proclaimed as dirty. The rest and the prisoners were assembled and moved to be sorted out later. The people were being promised a miracle, but no one was being told what that miracle was. A few, a very few, who could be vouched for, were being allowed to join the ranks with someone attached to them as companions. One by one Wrathscar's warehouses and storerooms were falling. Some of the captives were able to lead them to places that Twizzle and his people had not yet discovered. And the search continued.

* * * *

Aramyn could see the lines being drawn in the sands as the nobles and their entourages formed their islands of influence and alliances amidst the chairs and couches of the Great Central Hall. He had no doubt, as he headed for Mohanja's office on the lower floor of his apartments, that it would come to violence – it had to. And Galee would discover that much more was going on than she dreamed. She should never have sent her minions after Channadar. There were now twenty six full-blood Fae like Tiderider concealed in the Guild Wing, and they would be at the wedding – one of them wearing Channadar's likeness. It was said that you should not mess with vampires because they would eat you; Aramyn had a thought that the same could be said of the Fae, except that they would do it with style and throw in lots of sauce and seasoning.

The more matters came out in the open, the more dangerous the situation became. With Derryl having withdrawn to his estates and Channadar still too weak from his wounds to make an appearance, Galee and Wrathscar dominated most of the circles. Aramyn could see it only too well. Lord Taurlys Kjarten had tried, but he did not have their presence and influence, their turn of phrase and ability to play the games. True, some of the nobles, mostly those from the southeast were listening to Kjarten, especially since Tiderider had made a point of traveling with him in the palace to state Channadar's support.

"All we need are some witnesses," Aramyn muttered to himself. "Or some documents proving the bitch is behind it all."

Aramyn found himself passing close to Galee. He no longer wore Guild colors in the palace and had let his beard grow thick and heavy. With the wedding so near, the nobility and many chieftains had gathered into Havensword and Ishladrim palace compound with their entourages. The place was so thick and packed, that some were having to camp on the grounds themselves. Hence it was easy to pass himself off as merely another face among the many.

"But how can I protect anyone?" Galee protested. "Mohanja has practically stolen the Guild from me." She fluttered her long fingered hands over her breasts.

"Now, Galee," Lord Talkyn trapped a fluttering hand patting it in a smugly condescending rite of paternalistic manhood. "I'm sure you're over-reacting."

"Am I?" Her voice got small. "Ask Lord Wrathscar. Ask a dozen others who've seen what happens when I try to get my messages and requests sent."

"They won't even let you get messages out?" Talkyn sounded shocked.

Aramyn quickened his pace, putting Talkyn on his list. He let himself into the apartment after making certain the corridor was clear, knocked briefly on the office door and entered.

"Mohanja?"

"What is it?"

"They've loosed Belyla Wrathscar on the Kjarten estate. One of Queiggy's mysterious little spies just reported in."

"Get our secret soldiers mounted with Guild officers. Take some priests, one of Eshraf's battle units if he'll let you. Or some of Alysyn's people."

"You think it's going to take that much?"

"For a starving, blood-maddened Lemyari who could be hiding anywhere on the mansion grounds?"

"Yeah."

* * * *

Galee left the party early, and went down into the city to the warehouse to which she had ordered Derryl moved. Per her instructions, they had left him in the box. The basement let out on the sewers and the stench was overpowering. Hooks on heavy

chains hung from the ceiling. She opened the box, and had her companions, led by Meilurk drag Derryl from it, hanging him up from one of the hooks by the irons on his wrists. He dangled like a side of meat. Ghouls and lesser bloods gamboled around them, licking their lips.

"This might have been far easier, Derryl, if you had not had a shielded mind like Yukiah's," she said. She nodded at her companions and they doused him with a pail of water, rousing him.

Derryl stared at her, groggy and disoriented.

"Tomorrow the wedding will take place. Then the game will be over and I will have won," Galee told him. "But I want payment from you and as many as I can catch." She gestured at one of the lesser bloods that came near. She cut the lesser bloods' wrist, filling a glass with its blood. Then she nodded at Meilurk.

Meilurk seized Derryl, shoved a tempered glass tube down his throat, and held it positioned for Galee. She poured the entire, large glass of lesser blood down his throat through the tube and directly into his stomach. Derryl writhed in horror and anguish. Galee laughed. "The only thing remaining is to kill you."

She stroked his face. He was more torn up than Yahni had been, because of the lash and the irons. In places where his ribs had been exposed by a taste of the lash, a yellow film formed over them with reddened edges. Galee caught him by the hair and fed for a time from his neck. Then she stood back, regarding him. She flexed her fingers, bringing forth her claws.

Derryl watched the venom beading on her nails, knowing what was coming. And, in a final flash of his old spirit, he spat in her face. Galee screamed. Two nails went into his thigh while she imprisoned it with her other hand, letting the entire quantity of her venom pump into him. Derryl convulsed and then sagged unconscious.

"Throw him in the trash," Galee ordered Meilurk. "It matters nothing to me where he rises."

The pair of lesser bloods complied, the animal expression so common among the rest was missing from their faces. They were old and beginning to regain their abilities to think as myn and not simply as animals. Which was why they ruled their kind. They threw Derryl onto the trash heap beside the swiftly running river, which moved through the sewers. His body settled into the discarded mess of feces, animal and human, discarded furniture, old clothing, rotted food, and animal bones. Derryl writhed into consciousness and cried out, "Hadjys! My Good Lord God, vengeance and justice send."

The lesser bloods watching him shrieked and began throwing dung and dead rats at him. Another toppled the side of the trash pile onto him. He was nearly covered, one foot and part of that leg showed, the fingers of one hand and a few shadowed

patches of his chest.

* * * *

On the far side of the world it was early afternoon. Willodarus chose to hold this lunch in the east garden; the one whose name in Night-Elf meant Thought Sealed Within Contemplation and Lost Within the Idle Thread of Sleeping Memory. Chambers within chambers within chambers, all sealed by walls of trees and nothing wrought by the hand of man, save that one marble table and six delicate silver chairs shaped like birds and flowers in forms that could never exist save in dreams. These lay within a glade of banyan circled by baobab and guarded by an impenetrable wall of kapok. There Willodarus waited for them, looking, at first glance, like one more tree that had grown over the throne chair at the table's head. His green hair spread like leaves over his shoulders, and hung over the chair's back nearly to the ground. His long fingered, twiggy hands gripped the arms lightly. He wore a short baobab leaf-green robe and his limbs looked carved from mahogany, burnished and polished with great and loving care, every muscle defined.

The elder god rose and greeted them, his eyes straying to Talons' hugely swollen belly. He knew from Dynarien that she was six months along. She leaned heavily on his Twice-Born son as she walked. "So, you are the lovelies who finally caught my wandering son's heart."

"Father, allow me to present to you Talons Trollbane."

"I remember you," he said graciously, although had Dynarien not told him he never would have recognized her: her cheeks were sunken; there were deep purple – almost black patches beneath her eyes; she looked gaunt, as if whatever sustenance she took in went to the children and none to herself. He could tell by looking at her that she was dying, even had his son not told him. "We met at the gathering."

"Yes, Holy One," Talons smiled. Willodarus reached out and stroked her belly, feeling the children kick at his touch.

"You are the one who nearly broke his heart. Why couldn't you let him touch you?"

Talons' face burned. "I'm an un-trained bi-kyndi. I thought–"

"That you would hurt him?"

"Yes."

"I am grateful you found otherwise." He stroked her belly again, pressing his face into her hair, his own falling around her and veiling their conversation from the others. "My grandchildren, perhaps?"

"They're Dynarien's." Talons' face burned at the memory. She had forced the

mating to be a cold one, wanting only to get the children and get it over with. And she had not let him touch her again, although she loved him.

Willodarus whispered in her ear, "You know. You want to know why. And how long?"

Talons lifted her eyes to him, feeling a weight taken from her. "Yes. Knowing would make it easier."

"Poison. Pretend I haven't said it. Dynarien has asked that I Read you." He extended his awareness through Talons down to the deepest levels. "Be strong. You will be fortunate if you last till you can bring the children to term. There is no antidote. Dynarien did not want me to tell you. But you deserve to know. Keep silent."

Talons' expression wavered, and then she forced herself to smile. Willodarus released her and straightened, turning to his son and Edouina.

"And this, father, is Edouina Hornbow. We have triaded after the Sharani fashion."

"Lovely." He kissed Edouina's hand.

"Talons, Edouina, this is my grandfather, Willodarus, lord of the woodlands and wild creatures, oldest of the elder gods."

"Now, before we dine," Willodarus said, "Let me give you both the sacred language of my Night-Elves."

* * * *

Maya drew rein with her escort before the gates of their mansion in Havensword, the one where she, Derryl, and Leslie had been so happy together, and what she saw left her chilled. There was no one there. The gates stood loosely closed, the latch not quite caught. She had feared for him and ridden hard for Havensword immediately upon hearing from Timjimikin.

"My lady," Gyrerd stepped between her and the gate, pushing her aside, trying to be gentle, yet causing her to half stagger. His deeply seamed face had gone haunted as he gestured two myn forward and into the yard. "Stay behind us." He knew her well enough that he did not order her to remain behind. All swords came out, including Maya's.

They could smell death as soon as they neared the mansion in the middle of the grounds and found the first of it in the entry hall: A Tormuth guardsmon, sprawled across the floor, the rotting body identifiable only by his livery.

"Old death," Gyrerd said, kneeling by the body. "This happened at least a month

ago."

"Around the time, my lord arrived," Maya said, her throat tightening. She walked from room to room. Everything had been thrown about, broken.

"They were searching for something," Gyrerd said. He righted an overturned couch. "My lady, it would be best if you sat and let us search for him."

"He's dead, isn't he? They killed him?" First Yahni and now Derryl – it was almost more than she could bear.

"When we find him, I'll come for you. Tomas and Cerwyn will guard you until then."

Maya nodded, swallowing. She would be brave. She was Sharani and a daughter of the Guild. It was in her blood to be brave. She would not cry. Not here. Not now. Not in front of her husband's myn. The book. This was because of the book. The damned book. Galee must have thought Derryl had come back for the book.

She waited; it seemed like forever, before Gyrerd returned. "Derryl?"

"He isn't here."

"Then they have taken him. I must reach the Patriarch." Her heart hammered, making it hard to breathe. "Quickly."

* * * *

The guards at the gates to the Kjarten grounds opened them wide the moment Aramyn unfurled his colors. They had marched under church colors, but arrived under Guild battle standards. Forty myn and priests rode in.

"Fetch Lord Oakwithe Kjarten out here immediately!" Aramyn barked. "Alert and arm the household. You may already be under attack by Lemyari."

One of the Kjarten guardsmyn dashed inside while the other began shouting orders to his companions. "What is going on exactly?"

"Belyla Wrathscar."

* * * *

Belyla looked human only in outline. Her skin had dried, as her flesh withered away for want of blood, to the look of cracking weather-battered leather. She laid her head on her shoulder in a sad, sidewise fashion as she dragged more wood into the little graveyard and crypts. Her mind no longer worked exactly right, so she did not know that these were only temporary in terms of the Kjartens themselves – the family's

permanent crypts were in Mistdale near the border with Iradrim, the dwarven kingdom with which the mountains shared their name – yet she could sense Yahni's body down there. She had been building the pyre up steadily and already found a lamp burning along the walk where she could safely stick a branch into it to light.

"I'm awful hungry, Yahni. But I haven't killed."

It took her two tries to get the lamp open without touching it with her hands. She was too dried out, like the husk of a mummy too long beneath the desert sands, to risk touching it, knowing that she could easily catch fire. She could reason that much. Then she went back and lit her pyre. "Hadjys will give them the book, good as new. Not even the Master of Blood could make me kill, Yahni. Watch the flames, Yahni. It's nearly big enough. I'll sit down in the middle there and everything will be fine again. Like it was before."

Belyla stopped talking, her head straightened, and her eyes went distant for a moment, listening. She heard the jingle of harnesses, the uneasy noises of horses, and myn talking. They were coming up the slope toward her, drawn by the flames. Belyla rose and faced them, outlined by the pyre.

"Don't come any closer! I'm very hungry. I'm just going to be with Yahni. I haven't much control. Hadjys will make the book right if I don't hurt anyone."

"Belyla." Lord Oakwithe moved to the front of the crowd, but did not come near. "I will gather your ashes and bury you with him."

The withered undead thing smiled. "Thank you."

"Who turned you, Belyla?" Aramyn asked, trying to sound firm, yet not upset her.

"My father. With freedom near, I need not fear them. Gylorean Galee turned him." Then she stepped into the flames and sat down. Belyla was so desiccated the fire consumed her swiftly.

A gasp of rage and anger swept the assembled host and Aramyn had to shout to be heard. "Stop! No word of this goes out until I can consult with our leaders. Lord Oakwithe, I will need for you and those of your folk who witnessed Belyla's statement to accompany us as witnesses. I would also prefer that your family removed themselves to secure quarters in either the temple or the special wing the Guild has prepared for these exigencies while we confer. Before the night is out Galee will find herself on the wrong end of the Guild's wrath."

"We will come. All of us, bringing all our swords," Lord Oakwithe told him. "My son will finally have vengeance that his soul may rest."

"Good mon."

* * * *

"Well, father?" Dynarien asked. He had taken Talons and Edouina back to Creeya and then returned for his father's verdict concerning Talons' condition.

"Sit down, my son," Willodarus told him. "Your young lady is dying. They no longer need to keep giving her the drug you told me about. The damage is already done. She has, perhaps, two or three weeks left her. This is a very, very old drug. And subtle. In small, infrequent doses it merely produces a pleasant warmth, a mild relaxation and does no harm. In larger doses, taken frequently, it builds up in the body and it always kills. I thought no one knew how to make it any more. The ingredients are rare and nearly impossible to find. It pre-dates the Age of Renewal. Most Readers would never have even found it in her system."

Dynarien's mouth twisted and tears ran down his face as his last hope vanished and he finally gave way to despair. "It isn't fair."

"I know. But with the lifemages gone... There is no antidote. Even if there were, Fusaaki is right. She would survive, but never be well. I doubt she could live that way. There was too much life in her."

"What about the children?"

"They should survive, assuming she manages to carry them near enough to term. Which I doubt she can. It has not passed through to the children."

"Kalirion. Could you ask him to help?" Dynarien had not told his father about his binding by Kalirion. He would be forced to eventually, but not now.

Willodarus shook his head. "He would want your sister in exchange. He has barraged me for months with requests for her hand in marriage. I cannot give him Dynanna."

"I would not ask you to."

* * * *

Eshraf rose from his chair behind the great desk as Mikkal and Maya entered. The expression on her face sent a tremor of alarm and concern through him. The Patriarch held out his broad, strong hands to her. "Maya, whatever could be wrong? Why are you alone? Where is Derryl?"

"Galee has taken him." She collapsed against Eshraf, trembling, unable to say another word for a long time.

Eshraf held her for several minutes, letting her cry. "Mikkal, pour her a drink."

Slowly Maya's sobbing eased to the point where she could speak again. "She must have thought he came back for the book. Everyone in the manor was killed."

"He was not among the slain?"

"No, Gyrerd checked every one of the bodies."

"Tell me everything. Why did Derryl come back?"

"He thought you needed him."

"We did not send for him."

Maya looked stricken "Galee. The messages were to lure him into a trap."

"So it seems. Mikkal, take some guards and fetch Dynarien. If Derryl still lives, only he can find him."

Eshraf settled Maya in a chair near the fire. "Finish your drink. Galee has most likely decided that if I had the book I would already have moved against her. So she believes that Derryl still has it. She does not know the book was too damaged to read."

"Oh, Gods! Oh Sweet Gods All Nine." Then Maya began to cry again. Eshraf wrapped his comforting arms around her.

* * * *

Mohanja's eyes widened as he watched Aramyn bringing both the lords Kjarten into his upstairs study, which was larger than his office. "What has happened? Did you catch her?"

"She never tried to harm anyone, Mohanja. She built a pyre beside the crypts and immolated herself," Lord Taurlys told him.

"That is not the important part." Aramyn interrupted. "She gave testimony before witnesses first. Against her father and Galee. They are the vampires. Furthermore, she says that with her death, having harmed none, our god will have restored the book."

"Sooooo," Mohanja breathed out in a long breath. "I want the statements written down before we do anything else and signed. Move too quickly and we are damned. Too slowly and we are dead. Send someone to Queiggy. Tell him nothing; ask him simply to check the book again. Pester him if you must. The book is our omen. Then stand there and watch as he looks upon it. See if it has indeed changed."

"I will go myself."

"But not alone. No one travels alone." At Aramyn's nod, Mohanja then addressed the lords Kjarten. "When I have your statements, I wish to send you on to Eshraf. He will want to hear you and perhaps you might wish to say prayers for poor Belyla's soul." *We have Galee! Dear My God, we have her, at last!*

* * * *

When Dynarien Jumped back to Talons' rooms, he found Bryndel sitting in the parlor with Edouina and Talons. The sight of Bryndel enraged him. He knew, in his mind, that Bryndel was not directly to blame. But in his heart, torn by grief, Bryndel represented all the terrible things that had happened since spring: Arruth's murder; the attack on Jysy; the attempt on his own and Edouina's lives; Yukiah, and now Talons' dying. He seized Bryndel, slamming him against the wall.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bryndel shrieked, his face flushed with panic. He grabbed at Dynarien's hands, trying vainly to get loose.

"Dynarien," Edouina said. "Let him go."

"Edouina, bar the door. Now!"

Something in his tone set off alarms in Edouina's head and she obeyed.

Dynarien slammed Bryndel again. "You'll tell me everything, because I've got nothing left to lose. My last hope is gone."

Bryndel looked at Edouina and then at Talons. "Help me, he's crazy."

"Dynarien, let's talk about this."

The Twice-Born Son's next words built up into a shriek of rage and grief, erupting from his core before he could stop it. "Don't you understand, Bryndel? You must have known it. Talons is dying. They poisoned her. They've been poisoning her for months. There's no antidote. And even if there were, she'd never be well again."

Bryndel paled and ceased to struggle. He could no longer force aside his own knowledge and fears for her or himself. There came a tiny echo in the back of his memories, as if Galee had told him this and then took the memories or shoved them too deep to reach. Anguish came rushing in and his own life ceased to matter as it had that day when he slit his wrists, and in the dream vision of Hadjys. He thought of Belyla, of Yahni's dead face as his body lay in the Temple surrounded by his grieving family, of the sound of his sister's voice shivering up through the walls at night in her heart-broken weeping for Yahni. His terror of Galee became nothing more than an aching numbness. "What do you want to know?"

"It's all right, I've known for several hours, Willodarus told me," Talons said in a

soft, oddly detached voice. She heard weeping and looked down to see Edouina at her feet. "Don't cry, Edouina. It's all right. I always believed I would die in battle. I would have preferred that. I feel cheated."

"Who is the vampire, Bryndel?"

"Gylorean Galee." As soon as he said her name, he doubled over, clutching at his head and screaming. Pain, like daggers thrust into his brain, seared through him.

"Edouina, his hands!" Dynarien shouted.

Edouina pulled Bryndel's hands down, holding them tightly. Bryndel twisted and writhed, desperate to get his hands to his head.

Dynarien touched Bryndel's temples, extending his awareness into his body. "This is bad." He began to release the coercions. Galee had been thorough, probably working on Bryndel since childhood. Vampires could afford to be patient, though they often were not. It was all a matter of appetite.

Bryndel's pain receded. He curled onto his side; his face wet with tears, and said something so horrifying it sent a tremor through everyone present. "Sa'necari ... vampire royals ... demons ... sleepers... Galee says," he began to sob with terror. "They're in all the realms. Even in the far east ... all set to take over ... no place to run ... no place at all."

Dynarien's expression turned still graver. "We routed them in Shaurone, Bryndel. I'll tell my sire and we'll hunt them from one end of this continent to the other. For now, let's just worry about Creeya. Edouina, let him go. Fetch Jysy and Alora and the Guildsmyn guarding them. Then someone find Alysyn. I suspect she's had some experience with this."

Edouina raced out.

Talons lowered herself to the ground, put her back to the couch, and took Bryndel's hand, patting and stroking. "It's going to be all right."

Dynarien gave his shoulder a companionable squeeze. "This may take all day and all night."

"I'll handle it."

The group soon circled Bryndel. Dynarien ordered Talons to the far side of the room. "One of a vampire's main gifts is terror. Most of the coercions here are based on terror. If it gets too bad, it could stop his heart."

"I don't want to outlive her," Bryndel said, his voice filled with desolation. "Do what you must."

The others arrived. Alora glanced at Bryndel and then Dynarien. She slowly shook her head, a stunned and disbelieving look on her face.

"Talons is dying. She's got a month or less. They poisoned her. There's no antidote," Dynarien told them.

Jysy's eyes teared up, her fears confirmed.

"Help him," Talons told them. "It's too late for me, but maybe not for him."

"We know the vampire is Galee, as I release his mind, he'll be able to tell us more. Jysy, you take one hand and Alora the other. Edouina, sooth him when he starts to panic. Monitor him closely. We don't want to lose him."

Edouina opened Bryndel's shirt and gasped, he was almost as badly bitten as Arruth had been and all of it was recent, perhaps just in the last few days. Jysy saw it also, wincing. Edouina began to rub his belly, letting the bi-kyndi extend into him. All the cells of his body felt laced with terror. She pushed against it, soothing and relaxing Bryndel's body, fighting for control of it. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry... How much you suffer."

The Guildsmon moved up behind Jysy and, seeing the extent of Bryndel's scars, said grimly, "They'll pay for this. For all of it."

A chorus of meowing sounded at the door. Talons rose slowly and answered, letting seven catkins, led by Lo'Ah, into the rooms. Now that she knew what was wrong with herself, she fought harder to move about. Anger helped.

Bryndel screamed and thrashed: Each time he revealed some new atrocity committed by his father and Galee, it set off a round of seizures. The Guildsmon captured Bryndel's legs, holding them down so that he could not inadvertently kick someone. The group working with him redoubled their efforts.

"My father," he gasped as Dynarien freed more of the deadly coercions. "My father killed Arruth ... attacked Jysy." A long, anguished howl tore from Bryndel's throat, quivering with pain and desolation.

Jysy lost her hold on his hand as something warm and wet erupted from it. Her stomach turned queasy looking at the blood. His palm lay opened in a long gash as if slashed by a blade. Another gapped along his stomach, and then another across his ribs. Jysy swallowed a scream. Galee's spells and coercions were killing him.

Lo'Ah shape-shifted, pushing Jysy aside, taking Bryndel's hand in her place. The catkin shaman sang and Bryndel stilled. No more wounds appeared. Bryndel gave him a pathetically grateful look: For the first time in his life, he perceived people as caring for him.

Jysy stood back, watching them. Tears of anger and grief ran down her face. The murderer of her sister, and her own assailant, were now revealed. She felt sorry for Bryndel – he was in so much pain – and she understood why he had not told anyone. He was paying a terrible price for opening up to them. Warm, furry hands touched her in comforting strokes. The catkin embraced and held her. Others hugged her briefly and chin marked her.

"Something bad is going to happen at the wedding tomorrow. I don't know what. They don't talk to me any more."

Dynarien released Bryndel and sat back. "It's time to put the word out among the Guild. The Netherguard and the Taladrim already move."

The Guildsmon nodded. "I'll take care of it."

* * * *

Alysyn arrived and Alora filled her in.

"It's a coup. I'm certain of it," Alysyn said. "Everyone of importance will be at the wedding. They can wipe out the entire Creeyan aristocracy in a single blow. The only one they need alive is Talons and that's only until the children are born."

"I wish we had figured it out sooner," Talons replied. "There are so many things I would have done different."

"So would we all," Alysyn said. "My husband's brothers' and sister's deaths are on Galee's head. She is the one we could not find. She butchered Talatiel, I know it now." As Alysyn finally said her name for the first time in thirty years, her eyes filled and her expression hardened. Like all the rest of her circle, she had loved the yuwenghau who had worked with them to stop that long ago plague of vampires. Yukiah had been the one who found her dead. There had been no more attacks after that, almost as if the vampire had butchered her out of spite – as Wrathscar had Arruth – before going into hiding. Apparently Galee had chosen to bide her time, watching for another opportunity. She had found it in Wrathscar.

"Talons," Alysyn leaned close, putting her mouth to the heir's ear. "I do not know that you will find comfort in this, but the branch clan has come. We have a prince to lead us."

Talons gave Alysyn a look of relief and gratitude so pure that it was heart breaking. "Yes. It comforts me, knowing there will be strong prince upon the throne when I die."

Alora and Edouina helped Bryndel to sit. He looked exhausted, haggard.

Dynarien turned to him. "You need to rest a bit. Eat something. I'll do everything I can today and tonight. It's my opinion that it will take years for you to be completely free of them. Under no circumstances are you to leave this room. She'll know what I have done."

"Get enough of them out that I can kill my father tomorrow." Then for the first time in months he allowed himself to think deeply about Belyla, and Bryndel began to cry.

* * * *

Aramyn cracked the door open before giving it a hard rap and then swaggered in, having decided that the best way to get Queiggy to pull the book down and look at it might be to irritate him and leave him no room to maneuver politely. The Guildsmon had never done this before, it was out of character, but he had seen some of the younger myn pull it on the old record's keeper to great effect – especially when Queiggy had a lot on his mind. Which he certainly did then.

"Hey, Queiggy! Mohanja wants you to look at the book!"

"Why? It's too ruined to make sense of. I've tried." Queiggy made a gesture of brushing Aramyn off.

Aramyn knew where the book was, so he started poking through everything on the wrong shelves. Queiggy jumped up, stalking over, eyes widening in suspicion, his head leaning in and forward. "What is wrong with you?"

"Mohanja wants you to look at the book. Where is it?"

"Is that really you, Aramyn?" Queiggy sniffed at him, grabbed a strand of his hair, bringing it to his nose and sniffing that.

"Mohanja wants you to look at the book. I'm going to harass you until you do." He leaned against the bookcase and nearly sent it crashing, which he never intended, and it startled them both. Aramyn jumped.

"One more strange behavior," Queiggy warned, in a tremulous attempt at a growl which failed because his voice was a tenor. "And I'll be stripping your shirt off to check for bites."

"Okay! Okay." Aramyn gestured palms up and sat down. "It's important. Look at the book. It was a silly ploy, but it works for the young guys. You always talk rings around me, old mon."

Queiggy looked mollified as he took the book down, dusted it off, and carried it to the table. The first thing he noticed was that the cover was all nice and shiny black, like a fine new book. All the mildew was gone, the water staining, and the curled up corners. Queiggy glanced at the shelf, since clearly this could not be the book, yet

there were no others there that could be it, except this one. So he opened it up. He was a tree and trees knew books. All the smudged ink was now clear; all the words that had been missing were back. Page after page of words, they were all back. His eyes darted from line to line, reading a little here and a little there, glancing and turning pages, glancing and turning more pages. Then he came on something that made a scream rise in his throat and he swallowed it back.

Although I am fallen from my godhood, I shall one day find one with the power to re-open my god box and restore me. Then even my accursed husband, Bellocar, had best guard his back. Then all shall fear and revere Gylorean Galee once more.

Aramyn saw the look on Queiggy's face and touched him, getting a sharp flinch reaction. "What's wrong?"

"The book has been restored, but by the High Holiest Nine, we are in so much trouble. Galee is wife to Bellocar."

Aramyn felt sick, a bit unnerved yet determined not to be unmanned by it. "Read me." Queiggy did so and then Aramyn asked. "So how much power are we talking about? Is she a yuwenghau?"

"Irrfelghau. Dark side. No. But easily as strong. She's old. This means she's the same one who fought my grandsire for seven days and seven nights."

"So what do we do? Belyla did show up and she witnessed against Wrathscar and Galee to the Lords Kjarten. Mohanja sent a bunch of us plus a temple battle unit off to their mansion. We found her building a pyre by the crypts close to where they entombed Yahni. Her sacrifice, made without ever having taken a life, was given to Hadjys in exchange for his restoring the book. That's what she told us before climbing into the flames."

"So that's what this was all about? Having me check on the book? Why didn't you just say so?"

"Mohanja wanted the omen to arrive cold with no expectations from you."

"Ah. Well, get back to him. Tell him the secret ways are now open; I'll wait for word to end the silent mutiny. We need only for Eshraf to declare Galee anathema and excommunicate. Meanwhile I intend to gather all our magic workers, magi, every practitioner of the arts from among our allies, starting with the Fae."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MOHANJA ACTS

Mikkal stared at the gathering. "What is happening?"

Alora rose from the floor, going to his side. "We have the whole story now. Dynarien has begun to break Galee's coercions in Bryndel. It's half killing Bryndel at times, but Dynarien is getting them out. If you want to sit down somewhere I'll tell you all of it."

"No time. Galee's taken Lord Derryl. Everyone at his mansion is dead."

"Maya and Leslie?" Alysyn had come up.

"Maya is with Eshraf. Leslie is still at their lodge. When Maya heard from Timjimikin that he had never arrived at court, she came to find him. Eshraf needs Dynarien if we've any hope of finding Derryl alive."

Alysyn went for the yuwenghau, spoke briefly in his ear, and returned with him.

"There's going to be a coup in the wedding chapel," Alysyn told him. "Arrive armed tomorrow, Mikkal."

The priest nodded.

Dynarien glanced at them, extending his hands. "Eshraf's study? Join hands."

The four of them Jumped and startled Maya by appearing at her elbow.

He's matured, Maya thought, when she saw Dynarien's face. Eshraf had told her only a little, but that had been horrific. She scarcely heard what was said to her.

"Maya, I'm sorry about Derryl, tell me how I can serve," Dynarien said.

"The lore books," Eshraf interposed, "speak of a wondrous scrying pool in your garden."

Dynarien frowned. "I'm not close enough to Derryl to find him. We have met only a few times."

"But Maya is."

Lore books? He's written about in the lore books? Somehow her grief wrapped mind could not wrap itself around that, although the implications were obvious.

"My sister doesn't like me bringing visitors to the gardens ... I've already done it once in the last week. I'm going to get into so much trouble," Dynarien started to explain, shook his head, and grabbed Maya's hand, "Come. Let's go look for Derryl."

They appeared in a lovely garden filled with fruiting trees and plants, berry bushes of all kinds. An aura of peace lay over it. Birds sang and small creatures peeked out at her timidly. At the far end stood a quaint white cottage trimmed in forest green and dark brown, and in front of it a pool.

"Is this your home?"

"Yes. I haven't time to show it to you." Dynarien took Maya's hand, leading her to the pool. "I've only met Derryl a few times, so I haven't formed a close enough connection to him to find him. Look into the pool, Maya. Look with all your heart and love. Emotion is most important, that's what the pool responds to best. If it's ugly, you must stay calm so we don't lose the image before I can use the pool to Jump us there."

Maya took a deep breath. "I'll try."

She looked deeply, trying to see Derryl, imagining his face, calling to him. She remembered his face when he got those messages calling him back, that look of determination to help his friends; heard his promise to write and send word; the way he looked riding out.

The water roiled and cleared. Lord Derryl hung in chains in a brick arched room, sooty red-brick walls on three sides and a low arch on the third, beyond it lay a room of bookcases with books and files and boxes and chests. He was bloody, beaten, and burned by the torturer's irons. When Maya would have screamed, Dynarien steadied her. Galee stood before Derryl. Only the image came through and no words. Strange creatures with fangs capered about her, twisted things. She waved fingers in his face, venom oozing from the tips. He roused enough for a shadow of his old devil-may-care smile and spat in her face. Her mouth moved as if in a scream of rage and she shoved several nails into his leg. Derryl convulsed and then sagged in his bonds. Galee stalked out as her creatures took him down, dragged him through to a door to the outside, and threw his body onto a trash heap. Water ran past in the roofed over darkness of the sewer depths. Dynarien seized Maya's hands and Jumped.

Maya ran to Derryl, kneeling in the filth, scarcely smelling it while she dug through the mounds of excrement half covering him. He lay sprawled among animal droppings and human feces, broken bricks and pieces of furniture, rotted food, and other detritus that had been swept up by water that ran through the cavern system from which the sewers had been carved. Some of the filth had been tossed here from the basements that opened on the sewers. His rib bones showed through the tears left by the lash, which had been applied with cruel force. His arms lay twisted, the wrists still confined by the irons. There were a multitude of burn scars, reddened vicious things, crisped around the edges, some long and others just dots. The marks of vampiric feedings covered his arms, legs, neck, and much of his body.

Derryl groaned.

Maya touched him, tentatively at first, and then dragged his head and shoulders into her arms.

"Maya? How?" His voice was a rasping whisper, struggling to breathe. "Run ... get away from here."

"Dynarien!" Maya called, struggling with the irons on Derryl's wrists. "Help me! I cannot manage him with these irons they've set him in."

Dynarien knelt beside her, snapping the irons with his hands, and then removing the wristlets. Maya stared at his sheer strength. Although Dynarien had tried to be gentle, removing the irons had broken open the swollen, infected lacerations around Derryl's wrists. Pus, blood, and other putrid matters ran down Derryl's arms. He finally took Derryl's wrist to read him. There was nothing they could do for him and that angered Dynarien. Another damned death and he had not been able to stop her. At least he knew his enemies now. Dynarien summoned blankets from his home, covering Derryl's battered nudity, as gentle as a father with a babe. "We need to leave, but I'm taking a lot of them down as we go."

"Can't we just Jump?" Maya asked.

"No," Dynarien shook his head at her. "He's too weak. The Jump would kill him. We need to get him to Eshraf."

"There are things I – I need to tell... Warn Yukiah." Derryl stiffened with a wave of pain cresting through his shattered body.

Maya nearly broke into weeping as she drew the chain from around her neck and placed the ring into his hand, closing his fingers around it.

For a moment, he simply looked at her and then he knew. "He's dead?"

"Yes. Ambrose did it. Struck from behind."

When he could speak again Derryl continued, "Eshraf. Galee is the Lemyari. She stuck me."

Dynarien summoned his pack, poured from a vial into a glass, and helped Derryl to drink. The pollendine left a purple stain on Derryl's mouth. "Just enough to take the edge off. Not enough to put you out."

"You look a proper battlemage now," Lord Derryl said suddenly.

That was when Dynarien realized that Derryl did not know. He had not been in the city when his sister Dynanna stormed through. Maya turned to look at him and

stared, for he had summoned his armor and weapons. In light of what the trolls had done to him at Errilyn and the weapons of those guardsmyn – which he was only now beginning to suspect had been enchanted – he had added a breastplate to his chain mail, vambraces, and greaves. His surcoat proclaimed his divinity and with his anger his aura shone forth in all the glorious greens of the woodlands.

"Holy One," Maya gasped and Dynarien blushed.

"Yes, we've found ... the yuwenghau Eshraf has been ... hiding. Before you kick that door down ... who are you? Device is familiar."

"The Rose Warrior. Dynarien Willodarusson. Twice-born Son of Willodarus."

"Eshraf found us ... a good one, my love."

"Talons did." Dynarien corrected. "I promised her I would come."

"Thank you." Derryl sagged against Maya and then his body twisted in another convulsion, twitching. He clutched at her.

"Derryl!" She held him tightly until it passed. "You're the one Timjimikin said had come."

"He's my son. You haven't much time, Lord Derryl. We need to go."

Dynarien went to the door of the basement from which Derryl had been tossed, and kicked the door in. It flew inward, shattering and splintering into a thousand shards as if hit by an impossible ram. Loud cries of alarm and rage erupted. Dynarien's lips thinned into an icy smile. He summoned his golden sword into his hand, beginning the slaughter as the lesser bloods descended upon the door, letting them come to him. He needed no art. Not yet. These were common folk that Galee's people had turned. The bright blade, forged by Eldarion Havenrain, greatest of sylvan smiths, sliced through them as if their bones were made of butter.

Maya followed him, Derryl's arm drawn across her shoulders, her Sharani strength seeing her in good stead where a female of lesser race would never have managed it. Derryl smiled at the slaughter. "Rose Warrior indeed... He equals his legend."

She walked gingerly among the scattered body parts, some of them twitching spasmodically. Mixed among them were blue roses, many with long stems. The fragrance filling the chamber was overpowering, making her head swim, filling her mind with strange images of pastel sunsets and castles with a thousand spires, each one more delicate than the next. "Do you see it, Derryl? Just behind your eyes?"

"Yes, Maya... Yes, I – I see it. It's the roses ... doing it, my love." He shuddered with pain and for a minute he could not speak. "A thousand forgotten shores..." he murmured, reciting from an ancient poem, "and lost dreams."

Dynarien summoned his pack again, taking out a crystal globe. He tapped it and everything in the room of value and importance was swept up, sent whirling into the globe. Then he returned the globe to his pack. Dynarien Read Derryl again. "It is fortunate she chose to be cruel and make your death a slow one. There is a good chance you will reach Eshraf."

"And Eshraf can help him?" Maya asked.

"There is no cure for Lemyari venom. It is one of those things that came out of the last godwar. Derryl will be able to give Eshraf his testimony. Name his murderer."

"No," Maya looked from one to another, her voice desperate with denial. "No. Someone is going to help him."

"Maya! Don't dishonor me with ... a show of weakness ... daughter of the Guild."

Maya went silent.

Dynarien opened the next door, revealing a stair. The steps were short and narrow, with a splintery rail along one side. "Can you manage him?"

"I'm Sharani."

Dynarien accepted that as a yes and started up. Lord Derryl had saved Edouina, bought Mikkal time to arrive by delaying the vote of the council that day, and faced off against Wrathscar time and again. The yuwenghau raged that there was so little he could do for Derryl now. Dynarien could hear voices at the top. A board creaked under his foot and he cursed silently. The door opened and the first mon came down at him. This one was human, wearing chain, but with all of the yuwenghau's strength driving the blade it did the mon no good and Dynarien split him from groin to breast bone. The second mon tried to back up as Dynarien stepped onto the fallen mon and beheaded him. Kenda'ryl, forged by Eldarion Havenrain into a matchless blade, could not be stopped by anything these commoners possessed. It was not lightly called the metal of the gods. Dynarien went on and killed three more as he emerged into a small warehouse. "It is safe, Maya."

Maya entered, bringing Derryl, staring at how in moments the room had carpeted itself in roses. As before, Dynarien took his globe out and stole everything in the room.

"Why do you do that?"

"It's a policy of my sister's that I have picked up, looting the enemy. Sometimes we recover stolen souls, stolen artifacts, and important documents. And it is important to leave them with fewer resources to use against us. I'll give these things to Eshraf."

The next door led out onto a street and Maya recognized it. "We are three blocks from the Black Lady Tavern. Tuhk will help us."

Dynarien hung his shield at his back, lifting Derryl to his shoulder. "Lead us."

Faces watched from every dark corner, staring at Maya. Voices called to her, making remarks about the pretty lady until they noticed the heavily armored male walking behind her and realized that she was not alone. She pushed at the door and was surprised to find it locked. Maya pounded harder.

"We're closed," Tuhk's voice sounded suspicious, angry.

"Please, Tuhk. Please, my lord is hurt."

The door opened a crack. Tuhk peered at her and then tried to close it again when he saw Dynarien. However, Maya, seeing the door start to close, pushed in so that he would have been forced to hurt her had he shut it. Tuhk released the door, stepping back to let them in, looking unhappy. Then he slammed it to, barring and locking.

"Wrathscar is giving me trouble." The tavern master glanced at the tortured man draped over Dynarien's shoulder, seeing only his back, wondering what fresh trouble had been brought here.

"I'm sorry, Tuhk." Maya touched his arm briefly. "Dynarien is carrying my lord."

Tuhk's eyes widened and then narrowed. "Lord Derryl?"

"After tomorrow," Dynarien growled, "Wrathscar will be dead." He carried Derryl to a long plank and trestle table, easing him down upon it.

"Truly?" Tuhk brightened with grim relief, showing that he had been hard pressed. "That is a promise?"

"By the creation and my father's name, I swear to see him dead for the harm he has done the woman I love."

"And who is your father?" Tuhk moved to Derryl's side as he spoke, his face growing grim as he realized the extent of his friend's injuries.

"Willodarus, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures. I am Dynarien, his Twice-Born Son, called the Rose Warrior, dragon slayer, trollbane." Roses swept through the room, reflecting his simmering rage.

"Holy One!" Tuhk bowed to him, and then added, "He needs a healer. I will fetch one."

"No, Tuhk," Maya stopped him. "We need horses. We must reach Eshraf quickly. Healers can't help him. Look at his leg, Tuhk. He's dying. They threw him on a trash heap in the sewers."

Maya parted the blankets, dreading what she would see, but she had been watching the green pus emerge for a while. There were great red welts and in the two centers necrotizing splotches of black oozing green and yellow pus with spidery lines running from ankle to hip.

Tuhk's eyes widened at the small punctures through which corruption oozed. He knew what it meant. His brow wrinkled into deeply folded valleys all the way to his heavy black thatch. "We have horses. My sons and I will get you to the castle. I will take him up before me and cradle him like a child to my chest." His voice grew hoarser with each word until it became a grating whisper. "Who did this? Do you know?"

"The building was owned by Wrathscar, but Galee did it. She is Lemyari, a demon-vampire. Her nails contain deadly venom. She stuck him."

"Tuhk, none of this must get out before tomorrow," Dynarien said. "Galee and Wrathscar must not learn that we plan to attack them."

"But won't they know you rescued Derryl?"

"They won't know whether I found him alive or not. I found him by scrying. Then I stole everything out of their warehouse. No evidence. If we are attacked, everyone must keep riding. I'll fight them off."

* * * *

Tulik sat on the benches at the training grounds, watching the others practice, waiting for his turn. When he had dropped by Talons' rooms a short while ago, he learned that Dynarien had taken her and Edouina to Imralon for lunch with his father. If Cass had not thrown herself out the window, they would probably know by now who had been behind the plot against Talons. He wished he had been there. Nothing exciting ever seemed to happen around him. Everything important tended to happen before he arrived or after he left. He had even missed the discovery of the vampires nesting in that rundown warehouse in the Poor Quarter. By the time he arrived the fight had been over. His only comfort was that, having been marked by Hadjys, he was guaranteed a place in the Guild. Eventually the rest would come.

"Tulik?"

Tulik started. He had not heard Galee come up.

"Yes, Lady?"

"You're going to the wedding tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Absolutely. My father expects it."

"I have something I want to show you. It's for the wedding and I really need your opinion on it."

"What is it?"

"I don't want to spoil it, so will you come along and let me show it to you?"

Tulik glanced at the field and back to Galee. "I don't know. I'm waiting for my turn."

"It won't take long, I assure you." She slipped her arm through his, ending his attempts at protest. Tulik had always found arguing with females difficult, especially when they looked like Galee. He wanted to refuse, but something about her drew him irresistibly.

"Okay," Tulik said, doubting it could hurt to look at a wedding gift.

Galee led him to her chambers and gestured for him to precede her. He went in and felt a fleeting sense of wrongness here. The other knights were constantly telling him that Galee was not to be trusted. He stared at the black lacquer furniture and the hellish colors of the wall-hangings. Tulik heard the bar drop and his heart jumped into his throat. He started for the door, but she blocked his way, striking a seductive pose. She opened her blouse, exposing her breasts.

Tulik gulped as his body reacted, his member going hard and aching to get inside her. He knew her reputation. He had never been with a woman before, but he had dreamed about it constantly.

"You've probably heard the rumors that I favor young males like yourself. Well, they're true. I've been watching you for a long time," Galee purred, exuding sensuality.

"You – you have?" He could not move and she came and rubbed herself against him. Tulik could smell her perfume and beneath that an incredibly sexual musk.

"Yes, I have." She took him by the hand, leading him into the bedroom.

Tulik goggled as she slithered out of her clothes, throwing them on the floor.

She took his hand, rubbing it against the mound between her legs while she teased his manhood with light touches. "Take your clothes off."

Tulik climbed out of them as quickly as he could manage and grabbed at her

breasts. He could not believe his luck. All the warnings from his friends dissolved into nothing. Galee laughed, drawing him onto the bed with her. She opened her legs wide, beckoning him. Tulik sucked in a deep breath and stuck his fingers into her, not quite certain what to do first. He rubbed at her clit for a few seconds, but his cock felt as if it were screaming to get inside her. All the sex talk among his buddies had told him that he needed to satisfy the woman, yet he was losing it steadily. Impulsively, he grabbed his cock and, after a few tries, managed to get it into her. Tulik moaned at the warm wetness closing around his cock; shuddering with the intensity of pleasure in finally losing his virginity. He was coming fast, he could feel it building.

Galee nuzzled his side and then licked his arm. Tulik did not know what she was doing, but he did not care – he was finally getting some. He grunted and shoved, panting with his efforts. Galee's teeth lengthened. She found the large vein in his arm and bit. He cried out, thrashed for a minute as he came, and went suddenly still. Tulik lowered his eyes to watch her sucking the life's blood from his veins, tendrils of power slid into his mind. He wanted to scream, but his throat would not work. Lethargy stole over him as she continued to suck greedily. She rolled him onto his back.

Tulik stared dully up at her, so weak he could barely keep his eyes open.

"You know who I am?"

Tulik nodded. "You're the vampire we've been looking for."

"Are you going to tell anyone?"

"No."

"Now get back into your clothes like a nice little boy. I have something for you to do tomorrow."

Tulik had to grip the edge of the bed to remain upright as he obeyed.

Galee brought out a wrapped package from her dresser, placing it in his hands. "You will go to your rooms and sleep until tomorrow. You are not feeling well. You will let no one know you have this. Do not open it until the vows are exchanged. When you open it, you will know what to do with it."

Gylorean Galee watched Tulik walk unsteadily from her apartments with a satisfied smile upon her face. She had gotten past the godmark on his chest in a single thrust because sex had lowered his guard, and she had placed a seeking blade in the hands of an innocent. Tomorrow a godmarked Guild student would murder the Grand Master before witnesses. One by one her enemies fell. If only she had found a way to gain access to the temple and desecrate the altar. She never understood how Eshraf sniffed out her minions. It was as if he possessed some arcane instinct, some

sensitivity. He could walk into a room and unerringly point them out. He never traveled alone, exposed, but always in company of armed priests and guards. Eshraf was a canny devil. He had mysterious spies, invisible creatures that no one saw. Were there Shadonmi in Havensword? Could he possibly have gotten the shadow folk from Hadjys? Galee shivered. What other explanation could there be? Well, tomorrow it would be over and Eshraf would be dead with all the rest. Channadar and his surviving Fae would prove no challenge either. The city would be hers and the realm would follow; she had agents in every holding except Channadar's. Curse him.

* * * *

Eshraf insisted they place Derryl in his own bed. The Patriarch favored warm, dark colors that kept the light out well when he wanted to sleep – his body's instincts were still that of the farmer he had once been and the first touch of light woke him completely. The bed was a huge curtained monstrosity with the Rune of Hadjys and the Book and the Blade carved into both the headboard and the footboards; the canopy supported by thick smoothly finished columns. The deep green velvet of the curtains was the full extent of the elegance he was willing to endure and the bed was covered with his favorite old-fashioned quilted comforters. He sent priests to fetch Shaheeramaat to ease Derryl's passing.

Alysyn settled on the window seat. Tuhk and his three sons sat on the floor in a downcast circle in the corner between the window seat and the Patriarch's desk. Mikkal sat at the desk itself, recording the last accounts that had been given them of finding Derryl in the sewers and how they succeeded in reaching the temple.

Maya sat on the bed, cradling Derryl while he shivered violently in tiny twitching convulsions. "Not clean... Eshraf, you'll do it?" Derryl's voice hoarsened.

"I'll do it."

Alysyn closed his eyes, her heart filling with anguish. Thirty years ago a large band of students, both Guild and non-Guild, some of them sons and daughters of the nobility, with a yuwenghau to lead them, had gone up against a vampire. It started as a series of skirmishes, became a war and dwindled to skirmishes again and finally ended. They never found the master vampire. As students died, more rose to take their places and some became Guildsmyn and older Guildsmyn joined with them. Of the original group only five survived until the end. One of those five was Lord Derryl. Now the creature had not only tortured him, she had violated both his mind and his soul. Alysyn rose, going to him. "Derryl, with your permission, I would stand in my husband's place as Eshraf's second to free your soul."

Derryl stretched his hand to her, trembling with weakness and Alysyn seized it. "Yes. I wish it ... you comfort me. I only wish you ... had never left. I never blamed you for my brother."

"Ambrose killed Rygenas. I killed Ambrose. Your brother and my husband are avenged."

"Thank you."

Maya looked with gratitude at Alysyn. "True friend."

"Now, Derryl," Eshraf interrupted. There were forms to be observed. "You must name your murderer. Mikkal will record it. All present are witnesses. She can then be slain out of hand."

"Gylorean Galee is my murderer. She is Lemyari. A demon-vampire. She sent me ... a letter ... signed your name. Said meet you at ... my mansion. But when I rode home ... it was not you ... waiting there. It was Galee. Murdered my household. Took me captive. Wanted book." His voice was a rough, rasping whisper. "Bitch stuck me. When she ... was still just threatening ... said there was ... antidote. Trade for book. But I knew about the coup ... wanted to cost her... If you're lucky, they won't all be back ... in time for the party. Imagine she lied. Soon as she stuck me... Told them ... throw me in the trash."

"There is no antidote," Dynarien said. "The Tinkerer herself has never found one. Even yuwenghau died of it during the godwars. Which is why she has been tinkering with the Sharani. I think Kalirion has been tinkering also. There have been rumors. Now we know they are true. Where there is one Lemyari, there will be others. She has doubtless made others of her blood."*And it may be that I will die tomorrow, but I will take Galee with me.*

Mikkal wrote furiously and then nodded at Dynarien to sign the account. Dynarien did so and while that was occurring, Eshraf leaned close and Read Derryl. The mon had spent heavily of his remaining strength to give them his testimony. He wished to leave this final act to those who were close to Derryl, so it was time to ask Dynarien to leave. Furthermore, Eshraf had kept Dynarien from his task of freeing Bryndel from Galee's coercions as long as he dared.

Eshraf turned to him. "Dynarien, it's time you returned to Talons. There is still much work to be done with Bryndel. We greatly appreciate what you have done. But I need to be alone with them to offer comfort."

Dynarien handed Eshraf the crystal ball. "Tap three times and say everything out." Then he left.

"Mikkal, you heard him, go through this stuff carefully just in case this antidote actually exists."

Mikkal glanced at the spreading corruption of Derryl's leg, met Eshraf's eyes, and shook his head – even if he found it, assuming it existed at all, Lord Derryl was past saving. They all knew it.

"Say the words ... and then send Maya away," Derryl asked. "Let me die like ... a Guildsmon."

"Derryl, please!" Maya's voice cracked in a half-strangled protest. "You cannot send me away."

"Don't dishonor me, Maya."

She closed her eyes for a moment, pulling herself together, focusing on being a true daughter of the Guild. "Derryl," she said sternly. "If you chose the Gentle Path, I should be the one to lift the glass to your lips."

"I love you, Maya."

"I love you, Derryl."

"Justice first and foremost; best loved virtue of the Dark Judge who sees into the hearts of myn," began Eshraf. "Those who harm the smallfolk should beware the blades in the dark of his holy avengers who hear the prayers spoken in his temples. Honor is the second virtue. Vows made in his name shall be kept and the innocent shall not be harmed. Truth is the third virtue. We shall not lie to ourselves or to each other. Traitors will be excommunicated, cut off from the sight of god, hunted down, and executed. Courage is the fourth, we shall not fear death. His Guildsmyn—"

Eshraf faltered Lord Derryl was not Guild. Had he been Guild, he would be godmarked and Eshraf would not now be faced with mutilating his body to save his soul. The Patriarch felt his eyes filling. "His Guildsmyn's souls are snatched too quickly from their bodies for the enemy to capture or turn them."

Sha had arrived in the middle and stood patiently. She had already noticed Lord Derryl's leg, recognizing the damage. That and the terrible evidence of torture sickened the healer. "The Gentle Path, Eshraf?"

"Yes." Eshraf turned to the gathered people, Alysyn, Tuhk, and his sons. "Would all of you stand and bear witness to the passing of a great mon?" Alysyn indicated that they should come close to the bed.

Shaheeramaat filled the glass, turning to Maya. "Will you be giving it to him?"

"Yes, it's my place. Eshraf explained it to me ... better this..." Maya faltered, and then forced her voice on, wanting Sha to see that she understood what was happening. "Better this than progressive convulsions ripping his arteries apart until his heart stops."

"That's close enough." Sha nodded, gazing at the purple stain around Derryl's lips. "It's ugly and agonizing. I was informed on the way over about the high doses of

pollendine they have been giving him. We can't go any higher as it is without killing Derryl. This is really the only decision."

"I understand. It's what he wants."

"It's time, Maya," Derryl said.

Maya raised him up a bit more, bringing it to his lips. He drank and she eased him back down. Derryl managed a weary smile for Maya, his eyes glazed with drugs, pollendine, and fire poppy. "Maya, fireflower. Take care of Leslie and the baby."

He sank slowly into it, sliding deeper and deeper, until the only sign that he lingered was Eshraf's fingers monitoring his life signs by resting on Derryl's shoulder. An hour passed and then the venom made a last, harsh assault on Derryl's defenses. He stiffened and then writhed in the harsh grip of a sudden convulsion. Blood fountained from his mouth, but the fatal dose of the Gentle Path had drawn him so close to the edge that he never awakened to the agony and slipped, instead, into the final stillness an instant later.

Maya screamed hysterically, thrashing in Shaheeramaat's arms, Derryl's blood coating her face, breasts, and arms.

"Get hold of yourself, daughter of the Guild!" Sha snapped. "The venom nearly always kills this way. He did not feel it. I promise you. He did not feel it. By your own hand you gave him that gift."

Eshraf drew his hands over Derryl's face, closed his eyes, and began the prayer for the dead.

Servants appeared with a basin of warm water and soft cloths, and disappeared quietly when Alora shooed them off. The young student began to wordlessly bath the blood from Maya's face and arms.

Maya sat very still, tears running freely down her face. "How does one destroy a Lemyari?"

"You must not go after her, child. Dynarien will destroy her."

"I want to fight."

"There are many who will fight, but there is only one you. Derryl's will makes you regent. It is set up oddly to protect both you and Leslie. Our laws allow triadic marriage, but don't really know what to do with them in terms of inheritance and such. Stay here. When we finish, someone must stand watch over him in the temple."

"No, not so soon, please!" Maya realized what that meant and stretched herself

across him, losing her commitment to strength at the thought of Eshraf's blade cutting into his already torn body.

The healer caught her and was soon joined by Alora. Together, they lifted her away from Derryl's body. At first Maya struggled and then she stilled, turning into Sha's shoulder to weep. Alora stroked and patted her.

Eshraf signed Tuhk and his sons to follow and they came, looking uncomfortable, as Eshraf gestured for priests to carry Derryl into the corridor with Alysyn at his side. Several more priests waited there. They bore him to the innermost shrine, and Eshraf again had the taverner and his sons wait outside, which they were grateful to do. The Patriarch and Alysyn did the work. Since Derryl had not completed the change, they needed only to take his heart. Together they performed the rites and placed holy objects in the cavity. Then they gave him over to the priests. Priests bathed Derryl's body, wrapping it in linen, before clothing him in silk and samite; they brought a vengeance sword, and closed his hands upon the hilt before wrapping his arms and shoulders; then they laid him upon a table they brought in to stand before the altar.

Eshraf called the taverner into the shrine and sent for Maya. One of the priests had found a clean robe for her, so she had changed from her bloody clothing.

"You will stand watch over his body and comfort Maya?"

Tuhk nodded. "What now for you, Holy Father?"

"A long day yet and a longer night ahead, Tuhk."

"Day is nearly gone. Vengeance? You will pay her for killing My Lord?"

"I will pay her."

* * * *

Eshraf stepped into the corridor with Alysyn, Alora, and Sha as Maya's fathers arrived with six of their retainers led by one of Eshraf's bishops. The Mistdale guardsmyn stood quietly back. Eshraf saw the hard looks in the brothers' eyes and wondered what more could be happening, even as he felt a deep gratitude that they had arrived. He knew it had to have something to do with Belyla, since he had sent a battle unit to their mansion just hours ago. The Patriarch recited a brief silent prayer that they were not bringing news of more losses in Maya's family.

"Belyla?"

"We lost no one, Holy Father," Lord Oakwithe said quickly. "She immolated herself over the crypt where Yahni's body lies."

Eshraf exhaled deeply. "Praise Hadjys she did no harm."

"Mohanja sent us to give testimony about Galee and Wrathscar," Lord Taurlys told him, an undercurrent of excitement in his voice.

"It can wait." Eshraf reached for Lord Taurlys' arm. "There is something I must tell you."

"No, it can't. They're vampires. He wants you to hear us out and then meet him in the heir's apartments."

"I know it. I have sad news. Derryl's dead. Your daughter is in the chapel. Go to her."

"Hadjys mercy." Oakwithe looked horrified and then concern and grief followed it across his gentle face.

"Galee murdered him. Go to Maya. She needs you."

Both lords gave him a tiny nod and went past.

"We'll go to the heir's apartments to await Mohanja?" Alysyn asked. "Or straight to Mohanja?"

Eshraf's face was hard. "The heir. That is the center point in these atrocities."

* * * *

Eshraf and Alysyn entered the heir's apartment with Alora and Sha, standing for a moment near the door. A large crowd filled the parlor, spilling over the room, sitting on the stairs leading to the upper rooms. They spoke in quiet, urgent tones while Dynarien worked on Bryndel whom they had laid on a pallet in the middle of the floor, having moved all the furniture to the sides.

Eshraf cleared his throat loudly to get their attentions. "Lord Derryl has passed from this life. His last request, of necessity, was that I take his heart to free his soul. It has been done. He lies in state in the inner shrine. His murderer, the Lemyari, had forced her blood upon him while she tortured him. He named his murderer. Gylorean Galee. May she be eternally damned to the ninth hell of Our Most Holy Lord God Hadjys."

They were so caught up in Eshraf's words, no one had heard the hidden door open, nor saw the big black mon enter. "What manner of conspiracy is this? Every major figure in the Guild save myself, the Grand Master, and Galee. Yet we have the Patriarch and the heir."

Everyone in the room tensed, except those who were aware of the growing interaction between Mohanja and the conspirators. Alysyn stood and faced the

Master of the Wing, Third Lieutenant to the Grand Master, restored to his rightful place in their eyes. "May we now declare the silent mutiny to be at an end, lord?"

Mohanja nodded. "You may." He turned to Eshraf. "Are you prepared to excommunicate Galee?"

"It has been done," Eshraf said. "I only wish the book had not been damaged."

"Then you have not talked to Lord Kjarten?"

"I did not have time. Besides, Derryl had already given me his testimony, I did not need more. Mikkal and my bishops prepared what was needed, and the deeds were done before I left."

"The book has been restored because a vampire could still love."

Slowly the story came out with Mohanja Raam inserting his own pieces. All the deaths saddened the big mon. "Had you trusted me sooner I could have done more. Lord Derryl was my friend."

Bryndel's scream tore through the room and the conversation halted for a heartbeat. The little-catkin shaman Lo'Ah sang, his sweet voice lifting firmly. Edouina rubbed Bryndel's belly. Bryndel quieted, tears running wetly over his face. Dynarien stroked his temples. They waited until Bryndel indicated he was ready for them to begin again. A Guildsmon sat with pen and paper taking notes of the revelations.

"What are they doing?" Mohanja asked.

"Two things," Eshraf explained. "Galee was so deeply into his mind with her coercions that they were set to kill him if he revealed anything. So we never pressed him. Dynarien is getting them out. Each revelation sets off the triggers. Lo'Ah and Edouina are preventing them from killing him, although the pain is still severe. This morning Dynarien carried Edouina and Talons to Imralon to see his father for one last attempt to find a cure for the poison. Bryndel has been refusing to believe that it is poison and not an illness. The god Willodarus says poison, no cure, no antidote, and no hope. Two weeks, perhaps three at most. Bryndel folded and the first thing he gave us was Galee's name and nearly died on the spot."

"What is that little creature?"

"Catkin."

Mohanja snorted. "Many things are clear. Your spies are clever." Then his eyes went distant, dark, chocolate turning to flakes of obsidian in anger. "Galee has subverted the guard, I am certain. Queiggy and Alysyn agree with me. I do not want Galee alerted to the change in her status by seeing the branch of the Guild, which defied her by refusing to emerge from the Wing, at large tonight. But I must have the

entire resources of the Guild mustered to move at dawn and into position as quietly as possible, dressed like guests. I never wanted power. I never asked for it. But before the night is out I will have quietly taken control of it without Galee even realizing it and marshaled it against her. We must fight it at the Wedding when she calls out her legions of undead and whatever else she plans to throw at us, including traitors. Otherwise we may never find them all. We failed thirty years ago. It is also time to finally admit how badly off Takhalme is. Sha will declare the Grand Master mentally unfit and I will become regent for him. I feel like I am betraying him. But I see nothing else to do."

"He refuses to do anything save pray, Mohanja. And yes, he still drugs constantly." Eshraf felt pained to admit that. "We have been unable to wean him off the substances."

"I have brewed myself a cup of bitters and now I must drink it. I am a careful mon. I always thought they were for other folk. Not me. Someone must bring Leonè to me, but by the secret paths." Mohanja walked to the staircase, ran his hand along it, and spoke a word of command. "It is keyed to my voice. Without the word it will not open. The door at the bottom is now opened also. Alysyn, choose three to accompany you. Go down and bring Leonè to me, I am giving him Galee's command as an interim position. And bring Osterbridge also, he is key to this, but I am not ready to divulge that. I will use Talons' study for the command center. Alora, get word to the maids, servants and wedding planners to stay away from the suite that the heir is too ill to be disturbed and that you and the other students will be caring for her needs, such as preparing her for the grand event tomorrow. Have your furry spies keep watch for Wrathscar and Galee. We want no surprises. I want word of all movement within the palace complex."

"How is it you know these secrets, Mohanja?" Eshraf asked. "These secret ways?"

Mohanja grinned. "They had all been forgotten. The first Grand Master wanted to kill the builders to hide the secrets, which appalled a little yuwenghau, so he cast a spell and made everyone involved forget them. Unfortunately that included the Grand Master himself. Only the yuwenghau remembered. Rumor of their existence remained and nothing more."

"Then how is it you know?"

"He told me. Aramyn, you've got Hanadi's units. Act with full authority. Get Tiderider up here, he's running our mages. Galee doesn't know yet that Channadar's mother's mirror was a damned Faery gate and we've got ourselves two full compliments of thirteen of the prancing fellows as well as his surviving half-bloods."

"Mohanja!" Sha slid her arms around his shoulders, kissing his face, whispering softly. "You're starting to sound like the rest of them. Such language!"

He grinned. "I've always known the language and I've a year's worth of rage to

spend, can't I spend the coins?"

"Spend away, so long as you remember who you were before you started spending them."

"I promise, Sha. I swear by my god."

"Then that is good enough for me."

"It is time for another thing to be made known," Eshraf said. "The branch clan has come."

That elicited a roar.

"A prince of the blood has risen to fight the darkness. The evil one slew him, yet Kalirion and Hadjys would not allow this and combined within a single vessel, Dynarien, to restore him to life. Then his daughter, the Sinjin wed a Guildsmon of low rank but great courage. The Nine Elder Gods raged in might all that long night over this city. Their sign to us was the earthquake. Yukiah should have been the rightful King of Creeya, but his health and other matters will never allow it. Kalirioni priests still work to re-weave his soul and body. So he has stepped aside in favor of Prince Ceejorn Osterbridge and his wife, the Princess Isen. A month ago, I secretly anointed Ceejorn Osterbridge Grand Master of Creeya."

A ripple of astonished joy rippled through the assembled students and Guildsmyn at the news that Yukiah lived and the branch clan had come.

Talons looked up at Eshraf with a beatific smile. "Then tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, child, you will keep your word, because you gave it, and we will draw them out. Then Grand Master Ceejorn will grant you a divorce."

"I will be free..."

* * * *

Dynarien came in to check on Talons near midnight. He lit the lamp and settled on the bed beside her, stroking her head. "I love you, Talons. More than life itself I love you." She woke at his touch, smiling.

"I'm sorry I made our coupling an act of vengeance. It should have been an act of love. I loved you even then."

"I know you did," Dynarien murmured, kissing her forehead. "I know."

"Make love to me. Now. Before I die." Tears welled in Talons' eyes, running down her dark skin. "No. Wait ... get Edouina. Pledge me my triad ... the one I wanted ...

let tomorrow be ... a sham."

Dynarien fetched Edouina. They closed her door and locked it. When he had called them his na'halaefs to his father, he had been speaking from his heart. He spoke the words together with them, calling to both Hadjys and his sire to witness, felt their presence and made it fact.

Tears started in his eyes as he began to kiss Talons, gently, hungrily, his heart breaking. Edouina joined him in making love to her and, when Talons fell asleep, she showed Dynarien all the delights of having a trained bi-kyndi in his marriage bed.

* * * *

"The heir betrays her betrothed," Leonè observed to Mohanja. "The yuwenghau sleeps in her room."

"Anyone with eyes can see he is the mon she loves."

"That is not the point."

"The point, Leonè. The point I have not yet given you. Is that within three weeks, if not sooner the heir will be dead. Wrathscar poisoned her and there is no cure. Let her have what may be the only night of love she will ever truly have with the mon she loves."

Leonè was shocked. "But why? The marriage."

"They planned for it to weaken her so that she would die in childbed. A rare thing among Sharani. But she is failing too quickly. We may lose the children also. Edouina is a very powerful bi-kyndi. When the time comes, she and Dynarien will try to combine their powers and pull the children into Edouina's body. Normally an impossible task this late in a pregnancy. But Dynarien is yuwenghau." Mohanja signaled a change of subject by slapping the table. "We need to go over this. Dynarien holds several of the Abelard spells. He will Jump into the chapel, focus on the enemy and cast Revelation. All of her followers, all those she has subverted, guards, and servants alike will be marked instantly with the hellbrand. This will include all in the palace compound and in the city itself. Take no prisoners. Just kill them."

Tiderider, Ceejorn, and Jimi completed the group of leaders, since Queiggy would continue to remain in the Guild Wing to which helpless innocents and wounded would be evacuated: nothing of the darkness could pass his wards so long as he remained within.

Mohanja unrolled a map of the palace indicating how he intended to place his troops to best advantage to storm the chapel and stand off the palace guard before moving to destroy them. The temple battle units would take care of fighting in the compound

itself with the help of the Kjartens and Maya leading Derryl's surviving troops, those she had brought with her. They hoped to rally the households of other lords once the hellbrand started appearing. The city would have to take care of itself, until the palace compound could be brought under control, was the consensus – however Maya had not been content with that and slipped Tuhk and his sons out in the night to speak with Derryl's network of informers, telling them to watch for the hellbrand and pray because a great magical working was being done. That and nothing more.

"I will need two people to open the doors of the chapel which will be locked from the inside," Mohanja said.

"Eshraf has already arranged that," Alysyn told him. "The shadow hounds will."

"We have two?"

Alysyn looked to his four companions. "A vow of secrecy before our god is needed before I reveal this."

She got it and then spoke. "Hanadi never left Havensword. The pact of the Shardith is that she spend every seventh year as a hound. She and Brundarad have guested with Eshraf. They hunted the vampires with our furry spies. They will be hidden in the chapel to open the doors. Normally they go to the monastery of St. Tarmus for her to bear her pups. Instead she birthed them in one of the west bedrooms with Shaheeramaat in attendance."

"Hanadi!" Mohanja slapped the table. "I did hear Hanadi that night when I stood on the tower! I did. Now I am certain that victory will be ours. Then we will search the castle, the city, the caverns down to the smallest caves and crevices. Nothing will remain hidden. There will be no secrets left to return and haunt us. All will be cleansed and revealed. The light of Justice will shine forth once more and the will of the Dark Judge will be carried out. I do so swear by the Book and by the Blade, my life be forfeit to my God if I falter or turn aside from my duty."

* * * *

The unauthorized last minute alterations began on the palace chapel at midnight. Galee had made the original arrangement for it to be held here and not in the temple – her reasons were now very evident: she and her creatures could not get past Eshraf's wards. Alora led some of the students in this foray accompanied by six novices from the temple. They carried in six long boxes, setting them along the wall and draped them with blue satin to try and make them less conspicuous. Most of the noble guests would be arriving without wearing weapons. The boxes contained blades to be handed out.

The decorators arrived for their official last minute alterations while the students were still working and put up a protest. Alora gave a nod. The students stripped, bound and gagged the myn, dragged them down a side corridor and locked them in

a broom closet. Tiderider, passing by, pulled his golden fan from his sash and erased the closet door with a casual wave of it and then proceeded on with an impish smile and a casual shrug. Alora, being known to Galee's people, affected a veil, and they continued their changes. The bulk of Galee's forces would be lesser bloods and while garlic would not stop them, it would make life unpleasant for them. Chests of garlic were brought in and one placed at the end of each and every pew, as well as beside the altar, replacing the baskets of flower petals. The number of priests to be present at the wedding had been increased so that there would now be a priest to open every chest at the instant the wedding concluded: Instead of throwing flowers, they would be throwing garlic.

"That will surprise everyone, do you think?" The soft, lilting voice drew Alora's head up. StealsThunder stood watching her shyly. The little Fae was as tiny as Tiderider was tall; yet they were both full blood. Alora guessed it must have something to do with the magic to produce such dissimilar types. She stood no more than perhaps four foot ten, slanted silver eyes, silver hair and eyebrows, ivory skin. Alora thought she looked like a pale doll or statue carved from marble or alabaster. She wore pale blue knee pants, tucked in shirt and an open jerkin of deep amethyst.

"Yes, I believe it will," Alora replied. She would love to see Faewin, but that was invitation only. The closest she was ever likely to get would be if she were ever invited to Channadar's estates in eastern Creeya where his enclave of half bloods lived as part of his court.

"Our warband will stomp them!" StealsThunder proclaimed, whipping out her fans and stomping a little dance. She carried a sword at her shoulder as well as her fans.

"Enough, Thunder," Tiderider said, stroking her head and stopping her. "We know what you will do. Go join the others before you raise the magic too soon." They watched her leave and he said to Alora. "She is small, but very strong. Otherwise, she would not have been sent. We will teach these dark ones that you do not hunt the Fae."

"How can the two of you be so different?"

"You suspect the answer. The magic. The magic is intense in Faewin, as it is in Elveron. Our islands exist atop the ruins of a drowned city larger than some kingdoms. It is a city of wonders beyond comprehension from the Burning Age. Through the magic we can swim there with the naiads and explore. We find strange things. Things we guard and must not share. Sometimes they change us."

"Which of you is truest born?" Alora clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my, that's a rude question."

"I take no offense. You are merely curious. Thunder is."

Alora saw the sun begin to edge up between the mountains. "The hours have sped. We need to finish here."

"Should we survive this dance, will you share a glass with me?"

Alora flushed. "Of course."

Tiderider smiled, slow, and languid with a small bow and left her.

Hanadi and Brundarad arrived to conceal themselves behind the great tapestry of Hadjys as the lawgiver that hung to the floor behind the altar. Attendants filed in to take their places and Alora blinked in surprise, before hurriedly leaving. She would make a very poor Guildsmyn if she kept reacting this way. If the enemy had been watching they would have known something was off. All of those attendants were Guildsmyn drawn from obscure sections of the clerical staff and they were armed. She knew them only because she had recently been running messages for Alysyn.

They had done all that they could. In a matter of hours either Galee or the Guild would be utterly destroyed. Yet even if the Guild fell, Galee would not win, for there was still the Netherguard poised to take the city and the castle. Alora prayed it would not come to that, since it meant they would all be dead.

* * * *

Bram listened for many hours to Hurst trying to convince the others and himself to offer Galee what she wanted. He tried to remember when Hurst had first joined Derryl's company. Bram busted his boot heel off. The edge was sharp. Not sharp enough to harm a vampire, but sharp enough for what he wished with it. The cobbler's nails had come free with the heel. He worked one loose and began in the darkness to dig into the rear wall, carving, by feel alone, the rune of his god into the surface.

He finished as the light of morning came, although he could not see it, and traced his fingers over the rune with a silent prayer. Behind him, Hurst screamed, clutching at his forehead. The others gathered close to see what was wrong. The guards had not appeared since the middle of the night, and the single lamp still burning cast a meager light. Bram shoved through his companions to reach Hurst with a grim expression on his face. He forced Hurst into that single strand of light and cursed. "Traitor!"

The brand of hell was on his forehead. Bram caught Hurst by the throat slamming him hard upon the floor. His huge hand went around Hurst's neck, and then he took the boot heel with the three remaining nails and shoved it into the hollow of Hurst's throat. He added his other hand into the hold and with his palms drove the nails and boot heel deep into Hurst's throat. Hurst tried vainly to pull Bram's hands loose. Blood welled around the boot heal and Hurst's eyes widened as he struggled to breathe. One of the younger myn pulled his boot off and began to use the heel on

Hurst's groin in a dispassionate manner. Two others forced Hurst's fingers loose from Bram's wrists and methodically broke them one by one.

"You betrayed our lord and now he is dead."

Bram continued tear at Hurst's throat with the nails, then dropped it and shoved his fingers in, widening the hole and clawing at the soft tissue from the inside like a beast gone mad.

One of the others grasped Bram's hands, pulling them loose. "Bram. Bram, get hold of yourself. He's dead."

The calm voice penetrated and the older mon rocked back on his heels, sucking in deep, shaking breaths. "Lord Derryl was a good mon," Bram said when he once more had control of himself. "A fine mon."

Before anyone could answer, shouts, and the clash of steel brought them crowding to the bars to see what chanced. Light from many lamps came down the corridor. Bram ordered them back as Timjimikin arrived with the keys and unlocked their cell.

"We're Lord Derryl's myn," Bram told him.

Bram's eyes dropped and then lifted again as he swallowed. "They killed him."

Timjimikin's face turned grim. "We know it. It is a longer story than you know. We'll tell it as we walk."

Tuhk's son brought out a stake and drove it through Hurst's heart.

"You're taking no chances..." said Bram.

"We cannot afford to." Timjimikin told him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BATTLES

In the hours before dawn Mohanja summoned all Guild officers and unit leaders from each of the three branches into the largest hall they had in the Guild Wing. He allowed them to bring a few of their myn with them. A dais had been constructed at one end of the hall and several chairs fanned to the sides of it. He motioned everyone to stand away from the doors, which caused all eyes to turn in that direction. Leonè and Alyslyn entered first, moving to either side and watching the gathering for a reaction.

"The branch clan has come," Mohanja declared. A murmur ran through the

assembled ranks.

Eshraf entered and stood beside him. "By order of the Temple, in the sight of our god, Takhalme Gee is no longer Grand Master."

The murmur became a roar and Mohanja banged the dais with the butt of his halberd for silence. The room quieted again.

Eshraf resumed, "I anointed a new Grand Master, chosen by our god. The Dark Ones struck down the last prince of the branch clan, and so I presented the crown of Creeya to the Guildsmon husband of his daughter: Ceejorn Osterbridge."

"Has Takhalme been informed?" Someone shouted from the assembled officers.

"No. I feared to allow the enemy to know these things. Gylolean Galee is the vampire who has afflicted us for the last thirty years."

"The blasphemy of fiat indeed," growled Leonè.

That brought another roar and again Mohanja quieted them with a bang. He turned to the door, "Let them enter."

The door were thrown wide.

Ceejorn and Isen came first and took their place on the central thrones. Yukiah, still too weak to walk, followed on a litter carried by priests with the Kalirioni walking beside him. He was recognized instantly as they sat the litter beside Ceejorn and his name rippled through the room.

Mohanja gave the tale of Yukiah's resurrection to the officers who stared in wonder at the mon they had believed dead and mourned over. When he finished the wonder had deepened into awe. Then he ordered the highest ranking among them to come forward, one by one, and swear fealty to Grand Master Ceejorn. There would be time for a greater ceremony, if they survived this day. When all was done, Ceejorn rose and gave them their orders.

* * * *

Edouina dressed herself in white trousers and tunic with her swords at her back. She had been told repeatedly that both the clothes and the weapons were inappropriate, but she ignored those warnings. She and Talons would be marrying Bryndel in a Sharani style triading. Her expression was grim: a chill rage masked the grief at her core.

She and Alora helped Talons don a long white dress. Talons' steps were unsteady and she leaned heavily upon Alora and Edouina. She had spent the pre-dawn hours in prayer, greeting the day with an expression of serenity and acceptance. Her

grandsire had ordered her to leave her claws behind, but instead she had simply concealed the black, fingerless gloves beneath long white ones. She did not want to upset him by pointing out any sooner than necessary that Mohanja now ruled as regent until the anointing of the branch clan prince. Let him have his illusions. Mohanja had taken a great burden from her by taking the rule of Creeya. She had never wanted it. The realm was safe in his hands. Or it would soon be.

All the noble families of Creeya and most of the chieftains from around the Merezian continent would be at the wedding. They were expected to attend without their weapons. It was the perfect opportunity for Galee to decimate the Creeyan aristocracy. Edouina and the Patriarch had alerted all the families who they knew to be truehearted that they anticipated a coup breaking out after the vows were exchanged. The lords would go armed to the wedding and their private guards would watch for the hellbrand, placing themselves at the disposal of Lord Taurlys Kjarten. They also asked about beloved Channadar whose representatives were attending in his place.

Eshraf showed them the documents and the evidence against Galee. There was horror and outrage and among some grief, for many had admired the dashing Lord Derryl. The tragic conclusion to the tale of Belyla Wrathscar broke hearts also and many swords were pledged to vengeance and justice.

Sixty catkin and shivari gathered in the attics of the palace, converging on the chapel by secret paths which they alone knew, for cats were exploratory creatures and the palace had become their playground. The catkin would give the signal for the armies to converge on the chapel, mind-speaking each other with one of them assigned to each waiting unit. Two shadow hounds slipped from under a floor length wall hanging behind the altar, moving into place beside the doors, ready to open them.

The knights had spent most of the previous night going among the students and enlisting their aid – so the students armed themselves and gathered in the great hall in their holiday clothing, as if the wedding would be a joyous occasion. The Guildsmyn mustered secretly throughout the building, dressed for a party and looking for a fight. Only the guards and servants were left out: there was no way to know how many might have been subverted and they did not want the information leaked to Galee.

Bryndel spent the night in Talons' apartments, guarded by Dynarien and Edouina. Bryndel Wrathscar had finally found his courage. Once the coercions had been removed from Bryndel's mind, the young mon felt dizzy with relief. For the first time in Bryndel's memory, he was his own mon. Bryndel Wrathscar dressed in white and armed himself, sword, and dagger at his sides. He felt certain that, while the guests might feel offended by his weapons, they would not want to make a scene and ruin so important an occasion. *And if they did ...* Bryndel decided, *Well, to Hell to with them.*

Talons entered the chapel on the arms of Bryndel and Edouina. They helped her to the altar. There were no trailing maids of honor, no flower girls and attendants. Edouina had managed to dispense with them on the grounds that Talons' precarious health would not allow her to handle an elaborate ceremony. Talons scanned the room and saw shadows around the ceiling that might be vampires clinging to it. She scarcely heard the Patriarch's words as he bound her and Edouina to Bryndel. She made the proper answers, prompted by Edouina. She could barely think, but focused on the need for action. The vows concluded. The three kissed and a cheer went up from the assembled guests. Takhalme came and clasped her with tears in his eyes.

"I love you, Talons. You were always my favorite."

"I love you too, Grandsire. And I forgive you."

Over his shoulder, Talons saw Tulik pull something out. The young knight's face changed, his eyes turned scarlet, without iris, white or pupil; he frothed at the mouth like a rabid dog and lunged at Takhalme's back with a strange blade in his hands.

Screams and shouts erupted all around her as vampires dropped from the ceiling to tear at the guests.

* * * *

The instant that the vows were exchanged the priests threw open the chests, showering everyone with garlic, tossing it high in every direction, striking the lesser bloods as they dropped from the ceiling. The lesser bloods flinched, thrown into momentary confusion. Some of the guests protested the indignity, but then someone heard the cry of "vampire" and others saw Wrathscar's allies on his side of the aisle draw their blades. By then Hanadi and Brundarad had the doors open; Guildsmyn poured into the chapel. A priest threw open the boxes of weapons and shouted to the guests. "Arm yourselves. Galee and Wrathscar have betrayed us."

The initial surge of attackers charged the aisles, trapping many of Takhalme's supporters between their assailants and the hapless folk to their right hand, many of them women and children who had accompanied their husbands to the wedding. Those loyal folk, who had arrived with their weapons, tried vainly to shield those who had not. The ones on the far left side of the benches tried to flee, and some trampled each other. The priests began grabbing some of these myn, putting blades in their hands, and then forced their way over and around the vulnerable guests, shoving people behind them as they reached more of the guests with weapons.

The arming went quickly, and those not cut down in the first rush, fought back. Many died as the lesser bloods rallied, recovering from the priests garlic tossing. It became quickly apparent that the reasons the Guild had found no bodies was because every victim, no matter how young, had been turned.

The fragrance of roses rushed through the chamber as Dynarien materialized in the middle of the wedding chapel in his golden armor, longsword in hand.

"Let it all be known!" he shouted, instantly blue-white light swept the room. It flowed out through the palace, the school, the libraries, and the training grounds. It continued until it had engulfed the city. Gylorean Galee and several of the nobles gathered on Wrathscar's side of the isle screamed as the traitor's brand burned suddenly on their foreheads.

At that signal, magic sang through the room as thirteen angry Fae loosed their power in a whirling dance of golden fans that sliced and summoned, leaving trails of fire and ice, streaks of lightning and whirls of spinning winds. Galee shrieked in wordless impotent fury, realizing she had – not Channadar's half-blood sycophants – but a raging veteran warband of truebloods in her midst. *How in Hell's name did they get here?*

* * * *

<*Are you hungry, Brundarad, my love?*> Hanadi asked, brushing her rough coat against her mate as they slunk along the edge of the fighting. The room seemed a bit crowded for them.

<*I don't eat humans.*> he growled, nipping at her ear remonstratively.

<*Galee kept strange creatures in the caverns, shall we hunt her holdings?*>

<*I like the taste of demon flesh. Let's hunt, my love.*> The two shadow hounds slipped out into the corridor, racing away.

* * * *

The signal to strike reached the Guild Wing and Ceejorn shouted, "Stand to your arms, Guildsmyn! There's fighting in the chapel." He emerged into the Grand Central Hall with the rest of the Guild behind him and sixty of the Netherguard. Leonè walked at his side.

Then Wolfstalker arrived with his band of Chosen. Already they could hear the screams of women and children, those who had not been part of the gathering in the chapel and had been waiting in the hall for the wedding party to emerge. They found Creeyan guardsmyn and Wrathscar soldiers slaughtering the families of those who had opposed Galee and Wrathscar.

Suddenly blue white light swept the chamber. The guardsmyn, Wrathscar's soldiers, and all those who had been subverted screamed. They hesitated in their slaughter as the hellbrand burned suddenly upon their foreheads, revealing them and their purpose.

That was the signal that Ceejorn and his Guildsmyn, and the Fae had been waiting for.

"At them!" Ceejorn led the charge. *Yahni, this is for you.*

* * * *

Dynarien attacked Galee, his sword flashing down at her shoulder for a cross body cut. The ancient monster seized his sword and, though it burned her hand, making her shriek, she wrested it from his grip, throwing it across the room. She leaped upon him, biting and clawing. Galee slammed Dynarien into a wall, broke the lacing on his breastplate, tore it off, and hurled it across the room. His marvelous chain mail beneath it, wrought by Eldarion Havenrain, split and yielded before her strength and savagery. His blood ran through the severed links, soaking his shirt and surcoat. Dynarien stared into her fanged face as he gripped her throat, and slowly crushed it in his hands as he forced her mouth away from his neck.

Then he felt a sudden shock in the inner reaches of his heart and mind: Dynanna! Something terrible was happening to her. She needed him. He faltered, losing his grip on Gylorean's throat.

Galee hissed in his face, her claws striking deep between his left ribs and right side through the rents in his armor. He stumbled backwards, struck the wall with his back, and could go no further. Dynarien forced her claws out of his body before Galee could empty her venom into his flesh.

She broke free, grabbed his arm with a twist, and sprang onto his back, clinging to him with her legs wrapped tight around his waist, ankles and calves locked together across his belly. Galee's arcane awareness sighted the arteries in the captured arm. She stabbed her nails in. Her fangs pricked his neck.

Forcing her head back from his neck with his free hand, Dynarien twisted and yanked at his imprisoned arm, but her unnatural strength equaled his own. He felt the deadly burn as she emptied the full load of her venom, all ten fingers of it, into his veins. Her nails twitched in his flesh while she tried to pump still more from the exhausted sacs.

The Twice-Born Son staggered as the venom swept through him, falling to his knees. His body went cold, and sweaty chills covered him in moisture beneath his armor. Blood ran from his nose and he coughed up a bloody froth. His awareness grayed, and he fought it.

Galee jerked her nails out of his arm, with a purr of satisfaction. "It's over for you. This time you'll stay dead."

"Damn you." Dynarien coughed up more of the bloody froth, and groaned in agony.

She twisted her fingers in his hair, forcing his head around to expose his throat for a lethal strike with her fangs.

"Mephistis is killing your sister," Galee hissed, her eyes glittering like a cobra's. "Neither of you will be going to the other's aid this day." Then she reared back to plunge her fangs into him.

Dynarien felt the link snap – he could no longer sense his sister. She must be dead. It could not be anything else. Rage did what his will could not. Fresh strength flooded him in answer to his fury and grief. Dynarien reached back, caught her by the hair with one hand and beneath the armpit with the other. He threw her off. Gylorean came instantly to her feet and rushed at him to sink her claws into his chest, reaching for his heart. Dynarien pulled free, stumbling backwards, his face transfigured by insane wrath at what had been done to those he loved. She sank her claws into his mid-section, twisting them in the wounds. Dynarien screamed in anguish. Green flames erupted from him, dancing madly in an auric pattern. His eyes lost their whites; iris and pupils, turning a dark forest green, burning with energy.

"I am the Twice Born Son!" Dynarien roared, and felt the woodlands surrounding the city respond, feeding his power. He felt his father's mind turn toward him and link with him, feeding his gifts and energy still further. Blue roses carpeted the chamber. Vines of blue roses like a wall of thick briars swept around the castle and climbed it, reaching within minutes through the shattering windows for the vampires with their thorns.

Galee recognized what was happening and shrieked, "Willodarus!" Her claws in Dynarien's flesh began to burn and shrivel. She released him, turning to flee. She could not fight both Dynarien and Willodarus together.

Dynarien caught her, one arm thrown around her chest, pinning her arms to her sides. With his other hand he trapped her head, and twisted her neck. Galee went limp in his grasp as her spine and neck bones snapped with a loud pop, and he ripped her head from her shoulders. He released her body, which collapsed at his feet. Dynarien brandished Galee's head at the room, waved his other arm, and spread his power through the chapel in leaping vines and leaves of deep green energy. It left the living untouched, but the vampires perished as it reached them.

Meilurk sprang back as the green energy wrapped its pointed, spearhead leaves around him. He spun to flee, but it had encircled him, closing tightly like a thousand jade hands that clung to his clothing and flesh. Where it touched his arm, it quickly ate through his flesh to the bone like acid. He screamed in anguish and despair, howling as it ripped his clothing away to get at his flesh. Within moments, Meilurk was a pile of stripped bones on the floor.

Lord Wrathscar saw it coming for him, saw Galee's severed head in Dynarien's hand, and panic took hold of the vampire lord. He whirled and leaped for the

window, smashed through it and vanished, leaving behind bits of his flesh and clothing on the rose thorns.

Seeing their undead allies slain or fled, some of the hellbranded humans threw down their weapons and pled for mercy – a mercy the Guildsmyn refused to grant them. Aramon and his wife, both branded, dropped to their knees before Aramyn who killed them anyway.

* * * *

Talons shoved Takhalme aside with a strength born of need and rage, moving between her grandsire and the possessed Tulik. She summoned her claws and lunged at Tulik, but her unwieldy body made her slow. Her claws caught the side of his face, missing his eyes. Tulik thrust his blade at her and they grappled, going down together in a heap. Searing pain erupted beneath her breastbone as the blade meant for Takhalme found Talons instead. Tulik gave it a ripping twist and brought it across, slicing the organs on both sides beneath the breastbone. His eyes were wild as the magic of the blade held him in thrall. Talons' claws found his eyes and then his throat. He reared back, clutching at himself. She shoved her claws into his heart as she had the stone troll in Armaten.

Tulik died instantly. Talons pushed herself away from him, rising on one hand to stare down at him.

"Poor Tulik," she said, her gaze shifting to the blade protruding from her body. The quillons pressed against the white dress, a crimson stain widening around it. The hilt and quillons bore Waejontori runes: one for death and another for possession as well as others she did not recognize. Talons felt weak, awareness fading and returning to fade again with the waves of pain. She grabbed at a pew, dragging herself to her knees. The room tilted oddly. She swayed, trying to get one foot beneath her. Her mouth tightened as she fought her weakness, trying to master her body and stand. She slid down, collapsing on her back. Her claws disappeared and her nails dug into the flesh around the blade. A small, whimpering sob forced itself between her clenched teeth. She could feel the chill of the stone floor through her dress. She stared up at the flickering light of the candles in the three large chandeliers that hung suspended on strong ropes tied to hooks along the walls. The intense colors of everything, like a landscape before a storm, bothered her, though she could not think why.

Stillness swept with stunning force through the room. Talons realized that the battle was ended. She did not know if they had won or lost in the chapel, until she turned her head and saw myn with the hellbrand on their foreheads dropping their weapons as they fell to their knees, begging for quarter.

"Bind them," said Eshraf. "We'll execute them later."

"We've won," Talons murmured softly, feeling relief steal over her to blunt the

knowledge that she was dying.

Strong hands raised her head and shoulders from the floor as someone else grasped her hand and pulled it gently from the wound. She looked into the worried, black-skinned face of Mohanja Raam as he reached for the blade.

"No," she gasped. "Seeking ... blade. Don't ... touch it."

Mohanja tore off a piece of the dress, wrapped it around the blade carefully. "I'm going to pull it," he said.

Talons nodded, gripping someone's hands tightly without looking at them. Her body stiffened and her face twisted into a hideous grimace at the icy sear of the blade being drawn from her flesh. Blood rushed more quickly from the wound, soaking her bodice.

Mohanja Raam tucked the covered blade into his belt.

Someone rubbed a powder into her nostrils and gums – there seemed to be people crowding around her on every side. Purple stain spread around the corners of her mouth. As the drug hit her system, the pain retreated to a manageable level. Her head felt light and clear. She glanced at the mon holding her hand and saw her grandsire with tears slowly forcing their way from the edges of his slanted eyes.

The Patriarch shoved a folded bandage through the tear in her bodice, pressing it against the wound.

"No," Talons said. "Don't bother. It's a good day to die, and a finer way to die than I was dying."

* * * *

Alysyn sensed the shift in power from where she stood with her swan-mays. She knew the fighting going on throughout the palace had to be intense, and wished she could have been with her Netherguard who had followed Ceejorn's charge. But they had remained in the Guild Wing, as the last defense of it should the tide turn against them. Somewhere outside the palace, their gryphons circled, waiting for the order – should it come – to land and bear them to safety.

Isen crept into her mother's arms; she was dressed for battle if it reached them. They had made her sick father comfortable in an old, well-padded chair and Yukiah listened with them, waiting for some word. "Ceejorn... I worry about him," Isen said.

"I worry about us all," Alysyn replied. "I should have sent you both out of the city. If worst comes, Queiggy will take you both through a secret passage and out."

"No. I needed to be here this morning. The officers needed to see me," Yukiah said.

"There is that," Alysyn agreed reluctantly. "We three are the last of the Branch Clan. So it worries me."

Isen drew her mother aside and whispered in her ear. "Thank you for speaking with Ceejorn. He isn't so afraid to bed me now ... and mother ... mother, his child grows inside me."

Alysyn glanced down at her for the first time. "When?"

"The first night after you spoke to him, I think. He was more eager for me then. I have Read myself after nearly all of our coupling. When I detected it, I had the midwife Read me. She confirmed it."

Alysyn hugged her daughter. "I wish you had told me before. I would have sent you to safety then."

Isen smiled. "I did not want to be parted from him."

"He's a good mon. An heir to the throne is good too. You will be fine."

Isen's hands fluttered to her belly. "It feels strange to have a child inside me. Do you think he'll be happy, when I tell him?"

Alysyn clasped Isen tighter. "Of course, he will be. Does your father know?"

Isen shook her head, with a small rim of sadness around her mouth. "I wanted to be a Guildsmon to make him proud of me ... now that's not going to happen."

"You'll just have to be a queen, instead."

Isen's eyes went distant. "I'm not as ready for this as I thought I would be."

"You'll do fine. And I'll be here to help you."

* * * *

Dynarien reeled away from the dead vampire, staggering. Galee's head fell from his hands, and rolled across the floor to thump against a bench. The strongest Lemyari venom that ever existed burned through his body like acid. He refused to allow his mind to embrace the knowledge of what was happening to him yet. Would Hadjys have his soul through the godmark as the nethergod had with Yukiah's, or would he go free to join his slain sister, their fragmented souls once more joined as one.

< *You have served me well. I release you.* > Hadjys' voice echoed through Dynarien's mind.

The yuwenghau felt the godmark vanish from his chest in a cool breath across his skin.

"Thank you." Dynarien had to force each step each step he took, his legs threatening to give beneath him as he limped toward a knot of people gathered near the altar, surrounding Edouina who crouched on her knees, weeping. Then he saw Talons. He felt as if he had been thrown from a tremendous height and struck the earth with impossible force. Dynarien dropped to Talons' side, and almost fell in his weakness. He saw first the widening red blotch of blood on the white dress, then the violet stain on her lips. His stomach tightened, and then his throat.

"Pollendine?" he asked, knowing that meant she was dying. "Talons! No. Not yet."

Then he looked down at his arms where ten punctures were already turning black. Galee had done for him also. He would follow after her soon. Dynarien had intended to aid Edouina in rescuing the children from Talons' body if her time to die came before the children's birth. With the venom burning through him, he could not do that. The children would be lost with her, and nothing of their love would remain behind in this world. Willodarus. His father would act in his place, if he could get Talons there before consciousness failed him or she perished.

"I am sorry," the Patriarch said. Eshraf's gaze touched on Dynarien's arms, and rose to Twice-Born Son's face in dismay. "You know what this means?"

Dynarien swayed unsteadily, leaning close so that only the Patriarch could hear. "Yes. She was the same Gylorean Galee, mother of all Lemyari, most potent of them all. We knew that last night. Say nothing till I've left."

"So be it. The bards will make songs."

"There will be many songs. These months of struggle have made many heroes."

Talons opened her eyes. "Bryndel?"

"Where's Bryndel?" Aramyn asked the people around them.

"Bring him ... to ... me."

Aramyn turned and saw Bryndel, hovering at the edges. He was cut and bloody, unsteady on his feet. Someone put an arm around his waist, helping him to come forward.

"Lift me up a bit," Talons said. Mohanja raised her to a sitting position in the crook of his arm and chest.

"I love you," Bryndel told her.

"I know," Talons said, regret lining her words. "I never loved you that way. You were my friend."

Her eyes met Dynarien's. "I love you," she whispered, then fell back against Mohanja, her eyes closing as consciousness deserted her.

Jysy stood close to Dynarien, her eyes watering. Jimi wrapped his arms around her. They had saved the kingdom and lost Talons.

Dynarien took Talons from Mohanja's arms and rose. Edouina laid her hand on his arm.

"Where are you taking her?" Takhalme Gee asked.

"To my sire, Willodarus. We must try to save the children."

Takhalme nodded. "So be it, then."

"Take this," Mohanja drew the wrapped blade and handed it to Dynarien. "It is the blade that killed her. It is a seeking blade apparently meant for Takhalme."

The yuwenghau looked shaken, but accepted it. A blade made for death. Tears forced their way from the corners of his eyes. "Hold onto me, Edouina."

His form shimmered as he began his Jump.

Jysy, realizing that physical contact would take her with him, grabbed Dynarien. So great was Jysy's devotion to Talons, that she would not allow him to take Talons away without her. Jimi grabbed Jysy instinctively, without understanding why. Then they all vanished, carried off to Imralon in Dynarien's auric field.

* * * *

Ceejorn Osterbridge sat in the Grand Master's throne chair in what had once been Takhalme's star room in late afternoon, the day after the battle. A second throne chair stood beside his, and Isen occupied it. He stole glances at her. The business before them was serious, but Ceejorn could not completely put aside his joy and worry over the fact that his young wife carried his child. The Readers said he had a son coming.

Alysyn now led her Netherguard and allies in hunting the rest of Wrathscar and Galee's followers through the streets of the city. The Guild had secured Galee's apartments until priests could examine their contents.

All of Galee's tapestries had been ripped from the walls and the dark wood stood naked at Ceejorn's order. With all the signs of taint gone, the room seemed warmer despite it's being emptier. Eshraf sat at his right hand and, Ceejorn could tell from

the way the Patriarch's eyes roved about that he was taking in all the changes and approving them.

Aramyn and Mohanja brought Takhalme in to him. The former paladin-king had exchanged his grand garments for the unadorned, brown robes of a penitent. He leaned heavily upon Mohanja, moving with a weary, shuffling step. Mohanja settled the broken mon into a chair facing Ceejorn and took his own place beside the new Grand Master.

When Takhalme learned that he no longer ruled – even in name – it had broken him still further. He had allowed the sensuality of Galee's body in his bed as a middle-aged mon to lead him into the folly of blasphemy by fiat. Now he was old and had lost everything, even the heirs of his loins. He sat hunched with the tentativeness of the aged, weakened by grief, the side effects of the drugs he had become addicted to, and the lasting physical damage of Galee's nightly visits. Everything sat heavy upon his thin shoulders.

When no one ventured to speak, Takhalme stepped into the void. "What did she mean? When she said it was a better death than she was dying?"

Ceejorn nodded at Eshraf. "Galee had been poisoning Talons for months," the Patriarch told him.

"Why did you not speak?" Takhalme asked.

"Talons tried to. You refused to listen to either her or myself," Eshraf growled, his voice strained and edged. "Or to anyone else."

"You condoned and justified the rape of your heir," Ceejorn's voice was cold, measured. "You allowed her to be tormented, instead of turning to your god and his teachings. But you have thirty years of transgressions to atone for and I will not go into all of them now." Then he allowed his companions to piece the whole ugly story together for Takhalme.

Takhalme looked sadder and more desolate as the tale wound to its end.

"You will remain a penitent before god to the end of your days." Ceejorn pronounced his judgment. "May Hadjys have mercy upon your soul."

Aramyn answered a knock at the door, and Bryndel entered. He walked unsteadily to a chair and sank into it as his legs threatened to give. His right arm – which had been severely bitten and torn – rested in a sling. His shirt hung partway open, showing the bandages beneath.

"You should be resting," the Patriarch admonished him.

"No. I wanted all of you to know what my part was in this."

"Bryndel," Ceejorn said. "You were as much a victim as the others. Galee was deep into your mind from childhood. You do not need to confess the actions, which her coercions forced you to do."

"I know." He sounded lost. "I still want to tell them. It – it needs to be known. Perhaps then something like this will never happen to anyone in Creeya again. It isn't just for Talons, it's for Belyla. She walked into the flames, rather than harm Yahni's family. They killed the mon she loved and made a monster of her. She had more courage than I did. I lost my sisters, my wife, and my children. It needs to be told."

Isen regarded Bryndel with a steady, compassion in her eyes. "Let him tell the tale, and let Takhalme listen to the suffering his failure of faith has caused."

"My Queen is wise," Ceejorn said. He extended his hand to Isen. She placed hers in his, and he kissed her fingers. "So let it be."

* * * *

"Something is troubling you, Eshraf," Aramyn asked, as they left the meeting with the Grand Master.

"Many things still trouble me. Takhalme will be content to spend every moment in prayer or sleeping. Ceejorn is already making a fine Grand Master. I finally know more about who and what Gylorean Galee was. It haunts me. I have been reading Queiggy's translation of her journal. Galee was very ancient ... the mother of all the Lemyari that exist today. She was practically a god. She had been a god. She existed during the Age of Burning. Willodarus did battle with her for seven days and seven nights before he could subdue her and seal her into Hadjys' ninth hell. Yet she escaped."

Aramyn gave him a long searching look. "You still haven't gotten to the point. Where is all this going?"

The old Patriarch's eyes moistened and he looked ready to cry, which startled the Guildsmon. Eshraf looked suddenly extremely old, as if the years had caught up with him once the stress and pressure ended.

"Dynarien is dying. I saw his arms ... Galee plunged all ten fingers into Dynarien's arms..." Eshraf's face twisted up. "She injected her entire load of venom into his veins." He sighed heavily, shaking his head. "So many deaths. There are so many candles burning beside the altar. All day and all evening they come to light the candles and pray. The Fae are staying until spring to continue their hunting. Dynarien. There is so much in the book. Her mother was a lamia. Maybe we could learn more if we could catch one of those creatures, but I have no idea where to even look."

Aramyn saw that Eshraf's gait had become unsteady and he had begun to weep. He helped the Patriarch into a secluded alcove, slipped an arm around his shoulders, and sat with him until Eshraf could master himself.

The Guildsmon rubbed his hands over his face, finally pressing the corners of his eyes with a heavy sigh. Although they had won, in many ways it was much like thirty years ago over again. Their divine champion had perished each time. "I'll walk you to the Temple, Eshraf. I want to sit with Derryl."

* * * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IMRALON

They materialized in the ancient inner court of the Palace at Imralon. Thick vines wrapped the columns that rose in a maze of conchoidal arches along the covered walkways. A banyan tree spread its arching and descending branches in a secondary maze around the open spaces. Dynarien staggered, dropped to his knees, and laid Talons gently on the ground. His fading strength exhausted, Dynarien folded over half on his side, and lay still, bleeding heavily from a score of long tears in his body.

Edouina knelt, feeling for his pulse, and found it racing. She touched his forehead, feeling the heat of a high fever. His left arm had settled with the palm half closed as if it had been clenched shut in pain. The ripped, bloody sleeve had something green oozing through the tears. Edouina tore it open and found ten punctures, around which the flesh had blackened with red streaks radiating around them, and green pus oozed from the centers. Venom. The creature had poisoned him. The full load from the most ancient and powerful of the Lemyari. As the creatures aged, the venom became more concentrated and more potent. Sick dread gripped her and she fought it down. Could he be dying? They were in Imralon, the garden of his father. There had to be help here if she could find it. "I'm not losing both of you!"

She stood up, shouting, "Help us!" in the Night-Elf tongue, grateful that Willodarus had given her the sacred language two days ago. "Dynarien is wounded! Help us!"

The Night-Elves answered led by an aristocratic female snapping orders that set them to their tasks; six warriors in green and brown silks and golden dragon scale mail, accompanied by four ladies. They seemed to almost materialize out of the dense forest of vine draped foliage.

Mariko's slanted green eyes widened with distress, her lips tightening a moment before she mastered herself as she knelt beside Dynarien, "My son!" She touched

him, and then gestured to her guards. "Quickly, quickly!" She Read first Dynarien and then Talons. She spoke to the leader in a high-pitched singsong pattern. Warriors immediately lifted Talons and Dynarien, carrying them away. Her ladies surrounded Edouina murmuring meaningless phrases intended to comfort. Then Mariko rose, slipping her arm around the Sharani, leading her along behind them.

* * * *

When Dynarien collapsed, Jysy lost her hold on him and tumbled backwards into Jimi. They crashed through the bushes and out the other side. She started to stand, but strong hands threw her down on her back hard. The Sharani looked up into hostile, slanted blue eyes in opalescent black-skinned faces. A silver spear-point rested lightly against the hollow of her throat. From the corner of her eyes she saw Jimi in a similar situation.

"What?" Jimi gasped.

"Night-Elves," Jysy said.

"Nahn!" one Night-Elf growled. He looked to be the leader, clad in glistening silver armor over knee-length white robes.

"Friends," Jysy said. "Beijoan."

"Nahn!" the leader snarled. "Gehjojin!"

"Shit. They think we hurt them."

"Tell them different." Jimi told her.

"Can't. I only know a few phrases."

The leader motioned to the warriors who bound them with spellcord, hand and foot, and snapped deadly seals upon the cords, slid a spear under the cords and then lifted them up as the spears were settled fore and aft on sturdy shoulders.

Their captors carried the pair into the palace, down a winding stone stair and threw them roughly into a small cell.

* * * *

As soon as Mariko saw her son and his mates to the healers, she dispatched their warleader to find her husband in the Garden of Thought.

"Lord," Akira said, "Your Twice-Born Son is grievously wounded and the Hadjeeshyn paladin he brought with him is dying. The other paladin begs your assistance to save the children. I have thrown their attackers in a cell."

Willodarus shook himself, sending a cascade of leaves and twigs about the clearing. His trunk and roots separated into legs, as his form shrank back into vaguely human form. As the battle raged, he had sensed the presence of an evil he long believed he had destroyed. "Dynarien?"

"Yes, lord."

"Edouina and Talons?"

"Yes, lord."

"Take me to the paladin first." Willodarus followed him. As they walked Willodarus wondered about the attack itself. "They were attacked here? In my citadel?"

"No. The assassins followed them."

Willodarus frowned. Anyone with enough power to harm Dynarien and then chase him halfway around their world should have left traces in the ether, but the god sensed nothing. "Show me where Talons is. We will examine your captives after I have seen to her and my son."

* * * *

Talons lay unconscious in the middle of a bed. The Night-Elf healer had bound her wound, and several ladies had changed her into a white shift. Edouina bent over her weeping. The bloodstained dress lay folded on a small chair in a corner. The healer and ladies bowed themselves out when Willodarus and the Night-Elf warleader entered, leaving them alone with her. Willodarus gestured and Akira left them. Edouina moved to the foot of the bed, shoving her tunic off. She pushed Talons' shift up and opened her legs. Then she climbed onto the bed, pressing her bare stomach skin-to-skin against her lover's swollen belly. She roused the bi-kyndi and reached out for the children. It could easily kill her to try and move so large and so many fetuses as the three unborn babes.

"Better to try and die than not to try at all." She gritted it out between her clenched teeth. The bi-kyndi flooded Talons' body, taking away her pain. Edouina could feel the way her heart struggled as the blood from her severed spleen poured into her belly around the children. She reined her power back, concentrating on the children, and trying not to think about what was happening to Talons. She wrapped the three unborns in her power, drawing them toward her, feeling their forms go ephemeral, shifting into that misted essence that would allow them to rise out of Talons' body and nestle in her own.

Gods, it hurts! Edouina felt as if she were being ripped in half. The children slid away from her. She caught them again, pulling, pulling. Her heart hammered in her head. The blood vessels in her temples throbbed, feeling ready to burst. Tears ran

down her face.

Willodarus lifted his hand with a word of command, dropped his other onto Edouina's shoulder, and filled her with his power. Edouina cried out as the children came free of Talons, entered her, and nestled safe beneath her heart. She sank to her knees, exhausted. Immediately she pulled herself up, moved to Talons' side, and took her hand, gazing into her face from which consciousness had fled. She touched her throat, finding the struggling pulse.

Brilliant green light flared around Willodarus as he strove to place a stasis on Talons before she could die. The small semblance of humanity fell away from him, leaving only his glowing eyes. Energy pulsed around his eyes, spreading in leaves and vines of sparkling light. He worked quickly, feeling the way her heart slowed towards stopping. When he was within seconds of completing his work, her heart stopped and her soul lifted from her body, trailing a fraying silver cord.

"No, no, not yet!" Willodarus caught her soul. It struggled frantically in his grasp like a small wild creature, crying out to Hadjys. But in the sacred precincts of Willodarus' palace, the Dark Judge either could not hear her or would not answer. The elder god refused to release her, and she could not get free.

"Dynarien and Edouina need you," he told her soul. Talons quieted in his grasp at their names. "Give us time to look for help before you take flight." He pressed her soul gently back into her body, and then snapped the stasis into place. He touched her head. "If only you had had some Nordrei blood, I could have bonded you to a tree and you need not have died at all. You would have made a fine dyradrei. But you might have found that form too limiting. Many of them do."

Willodarus walked tiredly away, starting toward Dynarien's rooms, when he sensed another of the Nine reaching out to him and turned into the garden instead. He went to the scrying pool, gazing into it as Kalirion's image appeared in its clear depths.

* * * *

Kalirion went to the speaking pool beyond the holadil trees in his garden of eternal springtime, where flowers bloomed year round in every shade of blue and trees fruited in rainbow colors. "Willodarus," he called into the vapors rising from the pool. "Willodarus!"

The spirit-form of the old treeman appeared. "What is it?" he asked in his deep, gravelly voice. "I am very tired."

"Your daughter Jumped to me, dying. A sa'necari arrived with her, caught in the act of raping her. I killed him. I have pulled her out of danger, but the babes she carried are slain and our son LorenRain, who was with her, is missing. The sa'necari have found a cache of the ancient weapons. And Dynarien – she thinks he may have been slain."

"Dynarien is in Imralon. He is terribly hurt and his fate is uncertain. His beloved, Talons Trollbane, has been murdered."

The Sun God's face twisted into a hideous, burning mask of rage. "I will have vengeance. I will destroy these sa'necari."

"As will I. Send Dynanna home to me. I will send out my birds, gryphons, and swan-mays to search for LorenRain."

"It will be done."

"We may not find him alive, but we will find him."

"Thank you."

* * * *

For a dungeon cell, it was not entirely unpleasant. The straw was fresh and fragrant. The air was very warm and comfortable. They had a barred window just out of reach that allowed in plenty of sunshine. Jimi sat staring at the massive door, which had a tiny shuttered window that could be opened only from the outside to view them. He had never even imagined being incarcerated, especially in so foreign a land as this. In the aftermath of the battle and all the stress of the past months, he did not have the energy to school the apprehension from his face and manner. Not even for Jysy's sake.

"What if they die?" Jimi asked. "There will be no one to tell them we did not do it."

"They'll probably kill us," Jysy said calmly, working the cord off her hands.

"Those are sealed cords!" Jimi's eyes widened as he watched her remove her cords. "How did you do that?"

"Old thieves trick. I tensed just enough to make them loosen when I relaxed."

"Why didn't they explode or something?"

Jysy laughed. "I don't have any magic to touch them off. I'm not a mage, silly. Except for Birdie and Lizard, there's almost none of us hasn't been caught at least once. You people are just sooo obsessed with fighting and evasion. We worry about escape a whole lot."

"Yeah, I guess we do. What did you call these people, anyway," Jimi asked. "I've never seen any thing like them before."

"Night-Elves," Jysy told him. "I learned about them last spring – met a few – when

we accompanied Talons to a meeting of deities for the sharing out of the spoils from the soul-vault at Dragonshead. That's where we picked up a few of their words."

The image of her slain sister romping with the Badree Nym on that long ago spring brought the pressure of tears behind her eyes. She held the backs of her hands against them until she mastered herself. While getting Jimi free, she told him the story as Dynarien had told her, Arruth, and Talons one afternoon.

The Night-Elves of Imralon were the result of the intermarriage of a special group of humans and sylvans. Willodarus had had a dalliance with a lovely sun god on a distant world during the early part of the Age of Renewal nearly twenty millennia ago. When a volcanic eruption threatened a castle and four small villages of her worshippers, Willodarus opened an enchantary-gate and transported the inhabitants to his new world. Now their individual languages and culture were blended almost past recognition.

They sat for a long time in silence when Jysy finished the story. She sucked in a deep breath, thinking hard about what she wanted out of life and it all came down to Jimi. Jysy shoved her tunic over her head, revealing her small, but well-formed breasts, her high nipples, and the full, curving swell of the underside.

"Jysy..." Jimi gasped, his body reacting. "I don't think this is right."

She gave him a sad smile. "I can't get pregnant. Not ever. The healers told me... I'm damaged goods. I'm too scarred inside."

Jimi shook his head. "I don't care. It's just that you're so young..."

She laughed through a curtain of tears, torn by sorrow and patched by a need for hope. "I'll be of age in a year and a half." Jysy slipped out of her pants.

His glance went to the black thatched triangle between her legs, rose to her breasts with an expression of longing, and settled on her dark eyes. The edges of his lips softened, and the corners of his eyes followed, as he rocked back on his haunches, casting his gaze at the straw beside her as a flush flamed across his face. "Jysy..."

"Old enough to fight and die, old enough to love," she quoted the old Sharani proverb. Legal age for Sharani was fifteen, the time when the kyndi released their fertility to blossom – but that would never happen for Jysy.

Jysy reached out, took his hands, and placed them on her breasts. "We could be dead tomorrow, give me today."

A sharp intake of breath from him told her that she was melting Jimi's resistance.

He circled the aureole with his finger in a tentative, yet hungry manner, as if afraid to touch the nipple in the center.

"Virgin?" she whispered in his ear.

"Yes," he confessed, embarrassment on his face and heavy in his voice.

"I'll teach you." She undressed him, stroking and kissing every part of him. He imitated her, followed her directions, and strove to please her. Jysy reclined in the clean, fragrant straw of the oddly pleasant cell, and put her legs on his shoulders.

The moment had come.

Jimi hesitated, with his weight on his arms.

"Enter. The door is open," Jysy said.

Her hard, athletic body curled forward, her hand slipped to his loins, and she guided him inside.

A soft, low moan escaped him as her warm, wet lips closed around him and he went deep into the core of their pleasure.

At least, if the Night-Elves decided to execute them, she would have had Jimi before she died.

* * * *

Akira came to his feet as Willodarus entered the outer great hall and turned towards his son's rooms. The Night-Elf warleader followed his liege-god in silence for a time. Akira had served Willodarus for two millennia and they were, after a fashion, friends. So Akira encouraged his master to speak. "The paladin, wife of your son, Holy One?"

"She died." He shook his mossy head. "But I caught her soul and so long as my stasis holds, we may yet revive her."

"And the children?"

"Edouina is a bi-kyndi master. She took the children into her own body before Talons died."

"Thanks be to the creation."

They walked down the halls to Dynarien's rooms.

The healer rose from working on Dynarien to face Willodarus, bowing. "Holy One," he spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "I have never seen anything like this."

The healer, Fusaaki, was very young, not quite five hundred years old, but well skilled and highly regarded among the Night-Elves who dwelled within and about the palace. Willodarus placed his hand upon the young man's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance.

"Be at peace, Fusaaki. Let me see what I can discern from my son's wounds. You must attend Edouina. She suffers from exhaustion. Be gentle with her. Her na'halaef has died. Her ba'halaef is grievously wounded."

Fusaaki bowed and withdrew.

Willodarus laid his hand on Dynarien's forehead, feeling the fever burning through him. "What did I sense, when I sent you my power?"

He pulled a chair up and sat down, grasped his son's wrist. His eyes fell upon the blackened flesh around the wounds in Dynarien's arm, and he knew what he would find. Willodarus began to Read him. Venom raged through his son's wounds, coursing in his blood. It felt ancient, powerful, and familiar. He had not seen anyone suffering from its effects in millennia, just as he had not known of anyone poisoned with the drug that struck down Talons in that time. An evil from his past had risen up and struck them both down. It was no accident that those who nearly killed Dynanna did so at the same time, the same moment that Dynarien battled that ancient evil to which Willodarus could not yet set a name to.

Dynarien snarled in a fever dream. Willodarus bent close to listen and the young god said it again. Willodarus stiffened and then straightened.

"Gyloorean Galee. My fallen angel. Never did I dream she walked the earth again."

"Lord?" Akira asked, startled by the vehemence in his voice. Willodarus was slow to anger, but once roused the fires would burn for centuries.

"Lemyari. Demon-vampire. Six thousand years ago I chained her to a rock in the deepest pit of hell I could find and left her there to perish. I filled it with demons that feed on the undead and sealed it. She was ancient even then. A venomous creature, she injects her poisons with her nails. She is the get of a demon on a mortal woman of lamian descent. She embraced a vampire to increase her powers." His eyes hooded for a moment and then he shook himself free of his memories. Galee had struck him a hard blow. Dynarien was more than a favorite child, he was the only son Mariko had given him and therefore prince and heir of Imralon. Should Willodarus perish first, his divine power in all its vastness would pass to Dynarien. But if Dynarien died first... Galee would have slain another prince. His power could not pass to the others and Dynanna could not handle it. Galee had slain his first wife and their son. He had not known until later that Galee was responsible for their deaths, or he would have destroyed her when they fought.

He rose and departed the room. Servants waited just beyond the doors. Willodarus

turned to them and said, "Have Fusaaki join me beneath the banyan tree when he finishes with Edouina. I will tell him what needs to be done for my son. You will send for me if there is any change. And have Mariko summon my swan-mays."

Willodarus crooked his finger at Akira. "Come, my warrior, show me your prisoners. I know none of them are Galee for I would have felt her presence."

Akira bowed and preceded his liege-god to the little dungeons dug into the north corner of the palace. They were rarely used. He indicated the room where he had thrown his prisoners.

Willodarus opened the shutter on a little square window and peered through the bars. He cocked his head in surprise. "Jysy? What are you doing here?"

Jysy's face burned. "I grabbed Dynarien as he started to Jump. Jimi grabbed me."

Willodarus smiled at the image it made in his mind. "*Let them out, Akira. You imprisoned the paladin's young squire,*" he said in Night-Elf.

"*Yes, Holy One.*" Akira produced the keys and opened the door. Jysy boiled out, swarming into the ancient god's arms.

Willodarus hugged her, kissing the top of her head fondly. He treasured all young creatures, even humans. Jimi followed, glancing tentatively at Akira as he passed him.

"And who is your young friend?"

"This is Jimi, leader of the knights," Jysy told him.

Willodarus extended his twiggy hand and grasped Jimi's. "Already a knight and so young?"

Jimi's cheeks flushed. "Not exactly, Holy One."

"*Akira, have food and drink brought to the banyan tree.*"

Akira bowed assent and left them. Willodarus led the pair out into the inner courtyard and settled beneath the central trunk of the tree. As they sat down beside him, Willodarus put his palms on each side of Jysy's head. "Let me give you our language, young ones. You will probably be here for a while. I will do so for both of you, then we will talk about what happened to Talons, Dynarien, and Edouina. And where is your sister?" The god had a great fondness for young creatures of all kinds, their joyfulness at simply being alive. That was one of the things that had drawn him to Jysy and Arruth that long ago time.

Tears welled in her eyes. "Dead. She was murdered."

"I'm sorry," Willodarus wiped the tears away.

Jysy told him about her sister's death, the tale of Talons' forced marriage, of how the knights had suspected treachery, and uncovered it too late to act, and finally of how the battle in the chapel had gone.

"So," Willodarus said when she finished. "The ancient monster is slain at last." That eased his heart. The God-Slayer was dead.

"Dynarien ripped her head off," Jysy said, with grim relish.

"Gylorean Galee came to me in the days after we had forced the Hellgod into the north and sealed him behind the Katal Escarpment which we raised to hold him, his wives, and minions. We were all, the nine of us, exhausted. She came in the guise of one of my sylvans and became my lover. At first I did not know what she was and, in my exhaustion, did not look. By the time I knew her nature, it was too late. She had wrought havoc among my peoples. We fought and I defeated her, but I did not have the heart to destroy her myself. Instead, I left her bound to a rock in a pit of Hell which I filled with such monsters as feed on the undead and I sealed it."

"What about Talons and Dynarien?" asked Jimi.

"Young ones, your paladin has died."

Jysy's face crumpled. Jimi pulled her into his arms and held her.

"It is not within my power to defeat death. However, I placed her in stasis quickly enough that we may yet find a way to revive her. Hadjys will not allow me to hold her spirit indefinitely – a dozen years perhaps, but certainly no more than that."

"What about Dynarien?" Jimi asked.

"My son was grievously injured. His fate is still in doubt. Galee was a powerful foe. As to Edouina, I sense her presence in the orchid gardens."

* * * *

Edouina sat upon the cool, dark soil among the ferns and orchids. She had resisted Fusaaki's attempts to send her to bed. She did not want to sleep. Her body cried out for it, but she fought it off. She had watched Talons die, seen her soul rise from her body and be captured by Willodarus. It hurt. Talons walked the corridors of her memories. Not the suffering, bed-ridden creature she had become, but the matchless paladin of the Dark Judge she had been before she was trapped by circumstances. Edouina felt hollow and lost for the first time in her life. She could not remember a time when Talons had not been there. Duty would separate them for a time, but they always returned to each other. She felt as if Talons was still out there somewhere, if

she could just figure out how to find her. Talons was not gone, she was just away and would return. They would sit and share their stories, fill the night with love... Talons liked orchids. She had first seen them on an island along the southern most tip of the eastern coast. Dynarien brought her orchids from this garden during her illness. How Talons would have loved this garden!

Edouina folded her arms across her belly, feeling their three daughters kicking. Their movement comforted Edouina and she smiled through a veil of tears. If Willodarus had not intervened, she would have died reaching for them.

"You will be strong like your ma'arams. I will teach you and you will never be trapped as she was. Takhalme has no claim to you. I repudiate him in her name. I repudiate all connections to the throne of Creeya. I repudiate all things that would lock you in a cage and call it duty. Your only duty will be to yourselves and your god. Not to kings and thrones who would have you lie down and die unresisting in the name of duty. I repudiate it!" With each sentence, Edouina's voice rose until it carried like a war cry through the garden, echoing. "I'm going to hunt them down and kill them. Every one of them."

Then she began to cry, her grief and anger forcing its way from the pit of her stomach, up her throat and between her lips in struggling, racking sobs. Two pairs of arms closed around her, holding and comforting. She looked up at Jysy and Jimi. She wrapped her arms around them in a group hug. "I don't know how you got here, honnies, but I'm glad you are."

* * * *

Edouina sat beside Dynarien's bed, her fingers twined through his, her eyes distant, thoughts turned inward, trying not to let her gaze stray to the wounded arm stretched on the opposite side of him, pale against the delicate print of dark blues and roseate birds of the coverlet. She lifted his hand to her lips, kissing each finger and then pressed the back to her cheek. Tears came grudgingly. She swallowed, refusing to cry. The time for tears would be when the debts were paid. At least he had slain the creature.

"Ah, honey, you can't leave me. You know you can't."

Willodarus watched her from the door, and then entered.

"Edouina," Willodarus said, his voice soft and his touch gentle on her cheek as he settled his tall frame onto a chair beside her. "Have faith, my son is strong."

"I don't understand. I thought Galee was a vampire..."

"Galee was a prime Lemyari. I suspect—" The god hesitated a moment. "I thought we had slain them all. Servants of the Glistening One. A race of demon vampires bred from lamias and serpent fiends. Galee was the most potent of them all. Much is

made clear that I did not understand about this lineage ... now that I know for certain that Galee is their founding blood."

"He's become so weak..." Edouina stroked his red-blond hair, moving a strand from his forehead, feeling the returning fever. "Can't you put a stasis on him as you did Talons?"

"No. His soul is too fragile. Waejonan shattered it in the rite and a piece of it still resides in the Legacy. There is nothing I can do. You and the children will be taken care of. I have proclaimed your triading to all the gods, from the greatest to the smallest. Lovers and children are many, marriages are rare."

"I did not plan on being widowed on my wedding day."

"There is something I would ask of you." Willodarus extended a long piece of twisted cord to Edouina. "Is this the kind of spellcord they used to bind my Twice-Born Son in Creeya?"

Edouina's eyes widened as a cold shiver ran down her. "Yes. That's it exactly. I'll never forget the purple – it's like livid-flesh. I've never seen that used before. Where did you get it?"

"LorenRain's body has been found and was returned to me this morning. He was taken in the rite. My creatures tell me it was Mephistis who took him. They bound him with these. They have not been seen since the godwar more than twenty thousand years ago, before we began to cleanse Merezia, Jedrua and Ursarius to make them fit for human and sylvan life. He lay in the ruined temple to the Glistening One."

"I am sorry for your loss," Edouina wrapped her arms around him. "This is the second time you have mentioned the Glistening One. Who is she? What is she?"

"We do not know. She never appeared during the godwar. We believe she is or was a wife of Bellocar. Even Ishla knows little of her, save that her cults were secretive and murderous."

"Could she still be out there?"

Willodarus shook his head. "I cannot imagine how she could have hidden herself from us so long. Every temple we have found was broken. She has never risen against us and we have found no sign of anyone worshipping her."

"I don't mean to argue with deity, but that does not mean she isn't." Edouina went very cold and still inside, finding herself thinking like Guild and clutching Dynarien's hand tighter. Her other hand drifted to her stomach, feeling the babies. "I'll take all the help you can offer with the children ... because I'm going to get her for this."

Willodarus nodded with eyes of infinite sorrow, and all the depths of the forests reflected in their light. "Then you must see the handfasting gifts that have begun to arrive." He rose and went in search of Fusaaki.

* * * *

Willodarus found Fusaaki in the Garden of Thought, contemplating in a circle of pungo trees, their tentacle like folded fronds drooping to his shoulders. He started to rise when he saw Willodarus enter.

"Holy One," he bowed his head and shoulders. "You must tell Edouina the truth. Your son is dying. Trade Kalirion Dynanna to save him."

"Kalirion would lock her in his garden. She would wither to death even in a pleasant cage. Dynanna was not meant for cages. I will not trade the life of one child for another. Think of something else. I refuse to believe that you cannot think of something else to try."

"I cannot think of anything more that I can possibly do for your Twice-Born Son. Perhaps if I had a sample of the venom itself I could make an antidote."

"I will send my swan-mays to catch one of the creatures and bring you its severed hands. The venom is in its fingers."

"But even if I had an antidote, his life force is halved with the link broken. Dynanna refuses to let us bring her to him. She thinks he is dead and we are trying to trick her into coming to his sepulcher to claim his half of their shared soul that might be trapped there with his ghost. She escapes from us and runs away."

"As it would be, unfortunately." Willodarus' eyes hooded, brooding. The rite by which Dynarien had been slain had been so dark and terrible. The god would never forget gathering all the shattered pieces that he could find and never getting them all – some had been stolen, locked in the Legacy of Waejonan. He had punished the Waejontori, but he had not punished them enough yet and they still held those pieces of his son's soul. The god shook himself loose and leaves of many colors fell about him, materializing out of the air. "Then you must find a way to bring them into physical contact."

"I am trying, Holy One. I am very sincerely trying."

"I know. With all that has been happening, Fusaaki, I have not even taken time to ask if your travels were successful. I know they were longer than we expected."

Fusaaki looked up. "Hai."

"Shall we talk about it?"

"If it is your will, Holy One."

"But you are reluctant?"

"It gives me nightmares, Holy One. We were cornered, chased, trapped. We lost several gryphons."

"But you came through and that is what mattered. How did you find the uncleansed lands?"

"Two of the continents can be settled. The vegetation has returned. The taint has receded. Tiny species can be reintroduced. The predators there are huge, dangerous. There are also some tiny pockets of native sapients remaining, but in a twisted mutated state, horribly mutated. We managed to capture some and I examined them. I do not believe the genetic code can be repaired, even if we had lifemages to repair them."

"I had hoped for better. You did not happen to find any of Ishla's little demon-eaters, did you? She's convinced that at least one of them must have survived the Age of Burning. They're very dangerous and she does not want one of them falling into the wrong hands. They're very impressionable when they're young."

"No, Holy One. I found no demon-eaters."

"Something else is bothering you?"

"Yes, Holy One. The mage in Rowanhart. Because I was delayed he nearly died. I was only able to help him a little. Why is all this happening?"

Willodarus sat down on one of the silver chairs. "Your faith is a wondrous thing, Fusaaki. And your loyalty even more so. However, even gods are not always good parents. We are not monogamous creatures. When we have gotten children, half the time we forget about them after a few years until they get our attention or some else reminds us or they become a favorite."

"Like Dynarien and Dynanna."

"Yes. Just so. We get so many things on our minds. So many demands. And those two rascals don't always think to call for help. Any way as I was saying. I have not been a good parent. The three brothers, Brandrahoon, Isranon, and Waejonan were my sons by my daughter. I did not know she was my daughter until many, many years later. As usual, I had not kept track. I suspect, knowing now that Galee escaped, that she must have completed their corruption. Had I been harder of heart and destroyed her in a decisive fashion..." Willodarus shook his head, like a dog shaking off water. "Wild creatures do not kill out of anger or hate, but only to survive. That is how I have always been. Now it is to my sorrow."

* * * *

"Queiggy?" Aramyn found him in his cellar, working steadily on his translation of the journal. "I've asked Mohanja to give you some time off. You look like you could use some rest."

The yuwenghau had happily gone back to his old job as chief clerk the moment the palace was secured. He looked up, startled. "But, I don't want any. I want to do this translation."

"That's just my point. You need a nice, pleasant place to work on that translation. Some place like Imralon."

"But... I've never been there." Queiggy flushed, his cheeks brightening with his increasing uncertainty.

"I know you don't Jump, but I'm certain you must know someone you can hitch a ride with."

"It's a very long way if I took a gryphon."

"No. You need to Jump. Gather up your translation and the book." Aramyn took a satchel from his shoulder. "Here are samples of all our attempts to make an ante-venom. Healer's notes. Dynarien's dying. Maybe something here or some information in that book can help him."

"Dying?"

"Galee. All ten fingers. Go. Now. No arguments."

Queiggy lifted his backpack, which lay in a corner near the table, onto it and stuffed everything in. He did not bother with clothing, but pulled a pouch of coins from a drawer. Then he shouldered the pack and the satchel before walking out and leaving Aramyn to close up behind him.

His head spun round and round, and he could scarcely think. People spoke as he passed, but he forgot to answer. Aramyn followed. Queiggy drew his focus together. He had not reached out to his father in centuries and was not even certain that he could do it any longer. His head sank until his chin rested on his chest. The air smelled clean and clear, all the darkness had lifted. Channadar reclined in Dragonfly's arms, wrapped up in a blanket against the autumn chill. With each passing day, Channadar appeared much improved – except for the arm, which he would never be able to use again. The Fae danced for them. They paused, watching Queiggy, but said nothing.

"He leaves," whispered Channadar.

"He gathers his power," Tiderider whispered back. "Feel it. Feel it gathering in waves."

Queiggy walked into the Stalking Grounds, commanded the postern gate to reveal itself, and strode out onto the mountain. As he climbed, he began to Call. Queiggy found a sheltered spot and he Called and Shouted, extending his awareness through the sky and earth, for three days without result, calling first "Teakamon," and then "Willodarus." Finally he became a tree, giving himself over to the magic completely, and he shook his branches in rage and anger at their ignoring him when he might well have the key to saving Dynarien. For another three days he got no answer. Then he wept, his tears running down his trunk until they became a pool of amber beads.

An iridescent sapphire hand scooped up the beads and smelled them. "Lovely. They are as sweet as your heart is kind. You are a very strange assassin. But, then you are actually a holy avenger. My husband's sons and grandsons rarely turn to Hadjys, Queig."

"Grandsons – Mariko?" Queiggy's form swiftly shrank and shifted, his limbs dwindling to human again.

She smiled at him with infinite gentleness. "Hai. You have something to save my son?"

"Possibly. It's better than no chance at all." Queiggy quickly explained.

"Better. Fusaaki can use this I think." She offered him her hand. "Work on your translation in Imralon with us, grandson of my husband."

Queiggy put his hand in hers and they vanished.

* * * *

When Fusaaki returned to Dynarien's side later that day, he found Mariko and a strange yuwenghau waiting for him. "Who is this, Holy One?" he asked Mariko.

"I have brought someone to help save my son," she replied.

Queiggy unshouldered his satchel, handing it to Fusaaki. "The Guild was trying for an ante-venom. This is what we've produced so far. Also you'll find some vials of the original venom. I'm translating the creature's journal for more clues as to its nature."

Fusaaki felt his energies renewed by hope as he accepted the little yuwenghau's offering. "Who do I thank?"

"I am Queig, son of Teakamon."

The healer clasped Queiggy's arms in thanks. "Now there is a chance for him."

EPILOGUE

Arruth visited Jysy that night. Jysy knew, finally, that the episodes were not true dreams. Willodarus called them visitations. Jysy did not quite understand it, but she took his word for it.

They sat on the beds in the suite they had shared in Creeya.

"I have the whole west wing to myself now," Arruth told her. "No one lives here anymore."

Jysy felt a chill run through her. When Arruth had been alive, the two sisters had been given to pranks – especially Arruth who had been quite audacious. Arruth had put the noodles down the front of Bryndel's pants while he was paying court to Talons before the betrothal. "What did you do?"

Arruth laughed, making Jysy cringe. "I chased them out. I killed many of them." Arruth took Jysy into the outer room of their suite and showed her the bodies. "I want you to kill the children. I will haunt you until you kill the children. Bryndel's children."

"I won't hurt them. I won't hurt Edouina!"

The ghost chuckled. "I'll make you, and you can't stop me."

Jysy screamed.

Then she blinked at the bright sun – too bright and hot for autumn – piercing the east window of her room. She felt disoriented: she did not remember where she was. Tears ran down her face and she clutched at the light coverlet, sobbing. She woke a little more from the dream that was not a dream, realizing she was in her bed in the palace at Imralon. While it was chilly fall in Creeya, it was a very warm, humid spring on the far distant underside of their world where Imralon lay on the continent of Sealandia.

Jimi reached her first, gathered her into his arms, and held her, letting her weep.

"Arruth. It was Arruth again."

"And who is Arruth?" Akira demanded, his tone severe as he entered the room, looking about for whatever or whoever had frightened Jysy in her bed. Her screams had awakened half the palace.

"Her murdered sister. Her ghost anyway," Jimi said.

When Akira left, Jimi wedged a chair under the doorknob. Then he returned, drew Jysy's nightgown over her head and began to kiss away the terrors.

THE END

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