

JOURNEY OF THE SACRED KING

Book IV

CHILDREN OF WRATH

By

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"Just because most of life is lived in shades of grey, does not mean that black and white do not exist."

St. Tarmus of Lorendon

CHAPTER ONE

THE CLEANSING OF ERRILYN

Josiah rode into the City of the Dead with Laelyn, a captain of ha'taren guard, on his way to see King Aejys, his lover. He had known Laelyn for barely more than a month, but liked the quiet mon. There was something very solid about her considering manner. She did not rush into things when they were important, and yet he had witnessed her rare displays of humor with relish. A few soldiers on foot and mounted ha'taren passed them, giving quick nods to Laelyn and him as they went.

He had felt stronger for the last two days, and had pressed the healers to allow him to leave their camp and enter the city. His injuries still dragged at him dangerously in

a recurrent fashion that had many worried, yet Josiah refused to give into it more than he was forced to. He wanted to see the banyan forest that Dynarien – divine knight-errant and son of the Woodland God Willodarus – and the mages had raised to destroy the undead army that had risen from the sewers to battle the invaders.

The ruins of the city were lost in a forest that had been raised in mere moments. Growth enveloped everything except this one densely shaded path that led through the city walls to the gates of the keep itself. All Josiah could see was green and brown, leaves and trunks, with here and there a glimpse of gray stone walls and broken roofs. He dismounted to see it better, and marvelled at the incredible vegetation.

Laelyn frowned, fully aware of the healers' orders that he not tire himself, and swung out of the saddle to saunter along beside him. Josiah walked with the reins of his horse loosely in his hand; taking small steps, his head back as far as he could lean, trying not to trip while glancing frequently back and forth between his feet and the dark green ceiling of leaves dappled by sunlight.

"It's truly miraculous," Josiah said. "I've never seen anything like it."

Laelyn chuckled softly. "You should have seen it happen. One moment the undead was all around me and the next... Well, I can't describe it really. It just happened too fast."

"I imagine so. Mages can't compare to the divines."

Josiah had managed to assemble a fairly solid account of what had happened, just from the various things that people had told him over the past few days – Dynarien especially. He had shared a tent with Dynarien while they were both under Laurelyanne's care in the days following the battle.

Dynarien was healing at a phenomenal rate, and they would not be sharing quarters much longer. So Josiah had gotten as much of the tale out of him as he could, while he could.

"Dynarien said the memories lodged in the earth itself awakened."

In a single act of desperation, Dynarien had reached out to his father, and in that moment the Twice-Born Son and the Valdren earthmages became vessels of Willodarus to draw the divine power into this place of death, to bring life here. It must have been wondrous. Those mages would speak of it for the rest of their lives. As would every one who had witnessed the miracle. Josiah wished he could have seen it happen, but his wounds from an earlier battle and the recurrent fever they brought had prevented him.

"I wouldn't know about that," Laelyn said. "I'm not a mage. What I do know is the undead were going down like grain before the scythes."

Josiah wondered why Laelyn bothered with him. Maybe it was a favor to Aejs. He was afraid to ask, knowing how easily the question could be misinterpreted, and just asking it could lead to revealing more than he wished to if she hadn't heard the rumors. On the other hand, there were so many Vorgen in the ranks of his lover's army that he had no doubt that most, if not all, of the Sharani, like Laelyn, had to have heard at least some of it.

Those from the city of Vogensburg still tended to think of him as Josh the Sot – the town drunk. He had overheard their gossiping about him. Sometimes they got in his face, openly disputing his right to a place in Aejs' bed. No matter what he did, it never seemed to be enough to stop the talking, as if they were all watching for him to fall on his face again. It hurt. A wave of desolation swirled up inside him and he fought it.

He almost told her what he was feeling, responding to that quiet way of hers. But Josiah held it in, tried hard to close it out and deal with it, barely managing to keep his silence. After all, he still felt the seiryn's call of the liquor when his nightmares pressed down upon him in the middle of the nights, and he had been fighting hard not to reach for the comfort of the whiskey.

Laelyn's wynderjyn drifted along beside them, it was a dappled grey equine, cloven hooved and dish-faced with a narrow delicate muzzle, large intelligent eyes and a deadly looking sword's length of twisted horn. The wynderjyns were sterile hybrids, the get of a unicorn stud on specially selected horse mares. The bradae, priests of Aroana, were bringing a large herd of mares, and six studs to Rowanhart – the studs had volunteered themselves for the journey and chosen the mares. Josiah could tell by the bemused look on the paladin's face that the pair had an animated conversation in full swing.

"What's her name?" Josiah asked, moving to a safer topic, afraid that if he allowed his inner desolation to show she would be offended or think less of him.

"His," Laelyn corrected. "Wylleo. He's an ass-biter. Be careful." Her quiet face and easy bearing gave way to a flicker of impishness that surprised Josiah. Laelyn's skin was burnished bronze like all Sharani and her coarse hair was black, hanging in a thick braid down her back. She wore brown leathers with a coat of fine chain over it and a scarf in Rowan azure tied to one arm to indicate which army she belonged to. Her people had gathered and ridden out too swiftly for tabards or other signs of allegiances once they learned that Aejs Rowan, the Lion of Rowanslea, had founded her own kingdom and required an army to fight for her in Norendel. In their line of march, they purchased or bartered for every bolt of azure cloth they could lay hands upon.

The wynderjyn gave a whickering noise that could only be a laugh.

Laelyn thumped his cheek. "You know how the ha'taren are chosen?"

Josiah shook his head.

"They take the children up to the High Meadows in late spring. We get a bowl of porridge. Small bowl, small glass of water before dawn. Meditation is better when you're empty – or nearly so. Daylight is spent in prayer, meditation, fasting out on the meadows among the herds. I was so deep in my prayers that when he came to announce to me that our god had deemed me worthy and therefore he had been allowed to choose me, I did not hear him. After several tries he bit me on the ass to get my attention. The bond came upon me as a startling experience." Laelyn grinned. "Some are found to be unsuitable and other paths are suggested. Some are rejected entirely with no explanations. Some are told to train only for knighthood. Others are bid to deepen themselves in the sacred teachings and return again the next spring. All these matters are decided during that season of prayer on the High Meadows. This year there will be male children on the High Meadows. The first in a thousand years."

"Do you approve?"

Only one in four Sharani had been born male since the curse ended nearly twenty years ago, but that was considerably better than when there were none – except along the fringes of the kingdom where the affects of the curse frayed out.

Laelyn's manner reflected that inner stillness again that Josiah could not penetrate. "Yes. One of them is my youngest grandson."

Josiah looked startled at the youthful mon and almost lost his step, staggering to regain it as his foot came down in a nest of shattered cobblestones and twisted roots. He still had trouble getting used to the slow aging of the long-lived Sharani who often saw two hundred years, starting new families in their seventies although they achieved sexual maturity early and had an easy-going attitude toward precocious sexual exploration among their children – something they could afford since the magical energy called the kyndi protected them from pregnancy before their bodies were mature enough to handle it.

"You're tiring," Laelyn observed, seeing his steps falter. She cupped his elbows, steadying him. Then she caught Josiah by the waist, swinging him into the saddle as if he weighed nothing before he could protest. The Sharani were all at least half again as strong as they looked and Laelyn was as muscular as a blacksmith.

"Rest you, mage. I get you to your lover exhausted and she'll have me in irons on suspicion of having taken my liberties," Laelyn grinned widely. "I'll bet you were handsome when you were young."

Josiah's stomach clenched, yet he said nothing. He looked to be deeply into his forties; yet, he was only twenty-five

Long years of hard drinking, combined with the rite that had burned the magic from

him as a small child, had given his seamed, battered face its abraded complexion. His drinking had started when he was barely seven, soon after the loss of the magic. He begged and stole drinks before he was old enough to have money in his pocket to buy them. Josiah spent every odd coin he could get on the burning liquor long before he was a man, trying vainly to close out the anguish of finding himself mage-blind while not understanding what it was, because it had happened so young.

The healers did not want him drinking, but Aeijys would not say anything if he did so. Private matters, she called them, and her philosophy did not include harassing or persecuting anyone for their private matters. It was one of the things he loved about her.

Laelyn, grateful for a chance to stretch her legs, led his horse rather than mounting when he did.

The keep rose up before them. Josiah could see the smoke blackened walls where the strafing runs by the fireborn, the giant birds of Vallimrah that some called phoenix, had destroyed the defenders upon it. The keep had been breached by the fireborn and a strange fishing dragon, a quetzlcoatlyz, who had allied with them.

Inside they found soldiers shoving a huddled group of myn in tattered finery into a corner of the outer courtyard while another six soldiers began throwing fagots around seven stakes in the center preparing for another burning. Josiah's lover, King Aeijys of Rowanhart – the Sharani had no gender endings to their titles of power, calling both male and female rulers king – had ordered all captured sa'necari burned alive. A small band of Valdren rangers rested in the shade of a pair of sheds, watching the scene with passing interest.

Laurelyanne spied them, crossing quickly as Laelyn helped Josiah from his horse. She was a tall, elegant Valdren earthmage, walking with her staff, a moonstone orb clutched in the fingers at its top. Streaks of white contrasted against the dark auburn of her hair that she wore pulled back in a tight knot.

"Who are those people?" Josiah asked.

"Most of them are nibari," Laurelyanne explained, reaching for his wrist to Read him.

Josiah suspected the answer, suspected it was something that he did not wish to know, and yet he had to ask. "What's that?"

"Genetic-altered human cattle. The sa'necari and other hemovores have bred docility and dependance into them, while resistance and independence have been bred out. They have to be bled frequently or they become ill. Those with the skull brands, you can see there are a few of them if you get closer, are the depnane– full meal humans, or sylvans marked for complete consumption and death and reserved for the rites, like mortgiefan – usually slaves purchased at market, captives from the occupied

zone, or nibari that have displeased their owners. Aejs is trying to get them to identify their masters."

"Will they?" His knowledge of the sa'necari, hemovore necromancers with the powers and appetites of the undead, was limited to what it required to destroy them on the battlefield.

"No. Mostly the Readers and mages are culling them out from among the prisoners. You brought the medicine?" Laurelyanne asked, frowning slightly at what she Read and that made Josiah uncomfortable.

"Yes." Josiah had not told Aejs that he was dying, and had no intention of doing so. He did not want her pity. He wanted her love.

"You need to take some of it immediately."

Josiah pulled the bottle from his saddlebags along with a jigger glass, measured it to the mark Laurelyanne had drawn earlier and drank it. His body warmed. He replaced both, pulled the bags off, slung them across his shoulder, and turned.

"You'll take over now?" Laelyn asked.

"Yes, get on with your duties, Captain." Laurelyanne dismissed her with a wave.

The healers did not want Josiah wandering around alone, since they feared he might collapse and not be found in time. They believed it was only his wounds coupled with the effects of his prolonged alcoholism that was killing him. Laurelyanne knew different. He had used his damaged, twisted magic to cast a dangerous spell to save Aejs in full knowledge that the casting would probably kill him. And the lingering effects of it was.

Laelyn gave the mages a bow, departing.

Laurelyanne led Josiah into the keep through the foyer and into the Great Hall, a sweep of her arm banishing a group of rangers from a couch near the front. She stretched Josiah out on it, claimed a large piece of half shredded drapery and folded it as a pillow that she placed under his head. Then she pulled a chair close and sat beside him. She Read him again, wishing he had remained in bed back at camp. It was a trade, being near Aejs was good for his spirits, but taxed his strength badly.

Soldiers dragged two sa'necari into the middle of the floor. Their wrists had been spellcorded and the cords sealed with silver runes of Aroana by one of the bradae, the fighting priests, so that they could not be removed by anyone – except an Aroanan priest – without killing the sa'necari. Josiah shivered at the sight of the cords; most mages dreaded the sight of those bands woven of enchantary fibers, puce, ebony, cerulean, and gold, which could seal a mage from all access to his magic. Some mages were condemned to wear them for life – no mage would speak

to them, no mage shops or apothecaries would sell to them, no libraries would allow them to enter. Josiah rubbed his own wrists uncomfortably and then stared down at them. He could almost feel them tightening around him, imprisoning his powers – ripping away what little he had regained. He shuddered. Josh had been subject to visions and presentiments, but never Josiah. The merging of his incarnations had been less than perfect. Was this a vision of the future? Would he be corded one day? He folded his arms across his chest, hiding his wrists beneath his arms.

The vision tried to force its way out.

Josiah could feel the cords tighten around his wrists, the fangs entering his throat as a blade slid into his ribs, and the savage pressure against his buttocks of the most barbarous violation imaginable: mortgiefan.

For a moment he wanted to scream. Then he thrust it out of his mind. Josiah was stronger than Josh had been. This would not come to pass. It was just seeing the cords and the sa'necari, knowing their rites.

He forced himself to look at them. Wearing the cords, the sa'necari could not conceal the single most condemning evidence of their true nature: their eyes. The first time they took mortgiefan their eyes changed to amaranthine, lacking in iris, whites, and pupils.

Sa'necari, necromancers, had stolen all of the powers and abilities of the undead that they could take or control, assuming them through their rites, mastering and perfecting them in addition to their native arcane talents. This had been gained at a price, for they also had the needs and cravings of the undead, the unnatural appetites for blood. After generations of sa'necari being created in the rites, their very genes had altered until more and more of their descendants began to be born sa'necari with those appetites and powers manifesting in puberty. Their rites of blood, rape, and death had become merely the means for increasing their powers through the shattering of souls.

That much Josiah knew about them, but there was so much that he did not and keenly felt the holes in his knowledge.

These two sa'necari were male, their faces bruised and beaten, their robes torn. The soldiers had to support them to keep them standing. Josiah had never seen sa'necari so terribly reduced and battered. One of them had a long string of burn scars on his face, as if he had been dabbed with the end of a hot poker in a deliberate manner. The Sharani had tortured them.

Josiah understood the need of this with his mind, but his stomach tightened with a rebellious rush of bile to his throat. He remembered the single act of torture he had participated in back in Vorgensburg: Talons had systematically butchered a sa'necari, who had nearly killed Aejs, while Josiah watched. Somehow that seemed different because it had been personal. He suddenly wished Aejs would simply

grant them a clean death and then burn the bodies – not the living.

Hoon's banners had been ripped from the walls and for the first time in five hundred years Rowan blue hung above the throne in the great hall of Castle Errilyn and the last scion of the lineage of Rowan sat there in judgment. Aejs regarded the sa'necari harshly with Spiritdancer lying unsheathed across her knees.

"Have they told us anything about where Mephistis and Hoon have fled to?" Aejs demanded.

Josiah wanted to know the answer to that as fervently as she did. They would be back, he was certain of it. Mephistis had been her traitorous sister Margren's lover and co-conspirator, equal in responsibility for the deaths of Aejs' family and the attacks on Aejs' and her properties, as well as an attempted coup against the Sharani realm. Hoon was Mephistis' ally. She had sworn to see all of them in hell – they both had.

"Nothing, my liege," Soren answered. "Sa'necari are notoriously hard to break." Soren Deontamei, a spry woman who had stopped counting her birthdays after she passed one hundred, served as Aejs' Rowan's general. She was Laelyn's ma'aram

Aejs' voice was chill as a blade of ice. "I will find Hoon and Mephistis eventually. Burn them."

It continued in that wise until there were no stakes left to fill and then Aejs rose, walking to the couch where she had spotted Josiah. She dropped to her haunches, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him. "I love you."

"You know, daughter," Laurelyanne interrupted when they parted. Her son Brendorn had been Aejs' first ba'halaef, husband. An assassin sent by Margren and Mephistis murdered him nearly a year ago. "The nibari are your people, the descendants of those who served the brother of your ancestor."

Aejs stiffened, straightened, and whipped round on her. "They are not mine. I don't want them."

"You do not understand them. Have some compassion," Laurelyanne pleaded, looking to Josiah to help her, but he only shook his head. He refused to become involved in this, knowing his beloved's reasons far better than anyone else, since he had witnessed them. However, the story was not his to tell. Should Aejs choose to tell someone, then that was her decision.

"Anyone who would enjoy having monsters feed upon them ... who would protect those same monsters..." Aejs snarled, her hands tightening into fists. "No. I don't want them."

Aejys stalked off.

Laurelyanne had ruined the moment – to have a single moment with Aejys spoiled, twisted his heart. Four months ago Josiah had believed that he and Aejys would have a lifetime together, now they might have a year at most. Dynarien had said autumn, six months of life; Laurelyanne believed she might find a way to stretch that to a year with luck. He grabbed at the Valdren mage. "Help me up. I must go after her."

Laurelyanne's lips parted, her eyes reflecting confusion. "I do not understand why she became so angry. She was always one to understand the misunderstood..."

"You asked too much." Josiah caught at the edge of the couch as he nearly fell in his haste to get up. "Aejys!" His chest tightened suddenly. His whole body seized up. He collapsed, panting and gasping. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." Consciousness deserted him.

Laurelyanne sat down, turning him in her arms so that he leaned against her chest while she dug in the saddlebags, bringing out a vial of finely ground amphereon, which she administered to the mucous membranes of his nostrils and gums. It acted like adrenaline. She followed that with more of the medicine. He shivered violently, although it was a warm day, and showed no signs of returning awareness.

"Someone get me a blanket!" Laurelyanne shouted at those who lingered in the Great Hall.

Laelyn and two other Sharani appeared at her shoulder, they had been crossing the Great Hall together when they saw him collapse. One of them looked rather young, not more than sixteen and large, easily topping Aejys' six three by at least two. The other was close to that. Nearly all Sharani tended to reach and often top six feet.

"What's wrong?" Laelyn squatted on her haunches, one foot pushing up on the ball, her arms draped loosely across her knees, eyes scanning Josiah. The youngest of her companions leaned against the wall, watching casually outward like a guardian that did not want to be immediately noticed while the other bent forward, hands on knees. "My granddaughter, Bryngaryn," she indicated the one closest and then the mon leaning against the wall, "My youngest niece, Maranya."

"He's had another bad spell."

Laelyn could see him shivering. "He's chilled. Bryngaryn?"

Bryngaryn removed her cloak wrapping him in it. "He's light, grandma'aram. I can handle him." Bryngaryn had the open, willing helpfulness of youth in her eyes and kindness in the concerned tilt of her lips.

Laelyn nodded and Bryngaryn lifted him easily.

"He put his life between hers and the blades of the unseen foe as they erupted out of the forest," Laurelyanne said, not noticing the odd, startled look passing between Bryngaryn and Maranya at her turn of phrase, while they walked beside her.

"They must have hurt him badly if he still cannot seemed to fully recover," Laelyn observed.

"The tools of the enemy..." Laurelyanne left the rest to their imagination.

"What happens here? Someone is hurt?" The blunt voiced query came from a stout mon of middling height, wearing a mar'ajan's coronet with a bit of gray ribbon attached to indicate she wore it in trust for another as regent. Anaria Dovane de Danae, Regent of Danae looked more like a farmwife than the ruler of one of the most powerful mar'ajanates of Shaurone. She pulled off her gloves as she approached, shoving them through her belt. Two ha'taren flanked her. They wore the golden gryphon on green of Danae on their tunics. The mon limped heavily, having been crippled in the early days of the Great War by one of the hellblades of the Waejontori. The spell-breakers had acted quickly with the menders following behind them, yet could not entirely spare her the residual effects. Anaria had suffered less than some and more than others who had felt the bite of those blades.

They recognized her immediately; all bowing slightly with their shoulders, except Bryngaryn whose arms were laden with Josiah.

"Your grace," Laelyn acknowledged Anaria Dovane, Regent of Danae. "It's Josiah Abelard. He was sorely wounded in Norendel defending our king, overtaxed himself today and had a bad spell."

"Where is Aejs?"

"In the yard, watching another burning."

Anaria frowned. "She's become a grim one."

"She has."

"Well, let's go find her."

* * * *

Aejs watched the bradae ritually secure the seven sa'necari to the stakes, and remove the spellcords. Once the priests had finished and withdrawn, soldiers doused the necromancers with oil and set the faggots blazing. When the fires reached the sa'necari, the screaming started – they screamed a long time. The nibari keened and shrieked in anguish as their masters burned, several falling prostrate on the ground to curl up in balls of suffering. Aejs' expression remained as impassive as stone, standing there with her arms casually folded across her chest. This would

not give her back her child or her mates, but these; at least, would take no one else's loved ones. They would shatter no more souls. Her lips curled in grim satisfaction as flesh on their faces began to melt, the greasy layers of fat separating from the meat and bone, filling the air with a scent reminiscent of roasted pork.

The King of Rowanhart did not look like the other Sharani beyond her height. Magic had changed her. She had wings that were azure feathered with crimson tips. Her once bronze skin was now an iridescent black, sapphire hued. Her smoky black hair had turned white with a fringe of black and flame around her face. Only her features themselves had remained unchanged by the magic – except the ears, which were now pointed. Her deceptively young face – Aejs was a mere forty – was just a little too squared at the jaw and too wide at the cheekbones to be called oval, and too rounded and long to be called square.

"Aejys!" Anaria shouted.

She turned at her name, seeing first the Regent, and then Bryngaryn with Josiah in her arms. All other thoughts went out of her head. "Josiah."

Aejys had a brief flash of their flight from the shifters go through her mind. Her hands and body had still been crippled, for she had not yet reached the blade she carried, the sacred blade called Spiritdancer. Josiah had been guarding her back as she fled. He was yelling at her to run. He had his blades out, killing them and then he fell. They swarmed over him.

She had thought him dead and committed an act of blasphemy in her despair, accepting the blood of Hoon in hopes of rising undead to seek her vengeance after they captured her. The image and the knowledge of what she had done haunted her dreams and waking. It was the source of her anger at Laurelyanne earlier and her contempt for the nibari. And it grew out of the depths of her sense of guilt, for her liege-god had forsaken her. Although Spiritdancer had cleansed her of the taint, she still felt as if she would never be clean. The nibari's filthy devotion to their masters sickened her, craving the touch of their fangs and bodies. Only the fact that nibari counted as human made her spare them. They would not get their freedom from this: the Regent's Sharani would sell them into slavery. Nibari could never be trusted with freedom.

"Josiah." Aejs pressed her face to his, getting no response, and then she looked to Laurelyanne.

"They hurt him very bad, Aejs. And he's overtaxed himself. We should take him to Norendel where I can care for him better."

"That's what I've come about, Aejs," Anaria said. "I've three requests for you to pull back to Norendel. Your settlers are en route to Norendel and should arrive within two or three weeks. Also, that High Priest of Willodarus, Tehmistoclus, wishes to conference with you, and so does Carliff, something about your owing

him a debt."

Aejys was silent for a long time. There was nothing here that she wished to deal with. This may have once been a valley of her ancestors, but like the Rowan Mar'ajanate, which had been given over to the Wrak Clan by the Sharani saer'ajan, she had no desire to own it. She had Rowanhart, a kingdom she had established out of the virgin wilderness of the Northwest Coast. Her Sharani settlers would have farms and land there. She had many duties to others, although her heart was no longer in it as strongly as last winter.

"I can more than handle matters here, Aejys," Anaria assured her. "Go on, my friend, get your new life firmly planted, tend your orchards like your little gardener used to. You've babies coming I hear."

Aejys brightened. Her half-Valdren lover, Tamlestari carried her twins in the Sharani fashion, sired by her slain mate Brendorn, Laurelyanne's son. Aejys has passed the children to Tamlestari in the Valley of St. Tarmus with the brilliant magical energy of the kyndi flaring hot between them. Sharani required three parents to produce viable offspring: sire, bloodmother and wombmother. That necessity made their marriages triadic when they chose to marry. "Yes. That would be best. Laelyn, find your ma'aram and tell her to get our people packed up. We're getting out of here."

"If Hoon or Mephistis escaped through Danae, I'll catch them," Anaria promised. "They killed my daughter and I'll catch them."

"There's no chance they might find the heir?"

"None," Anaria responded grimly. "I've hidden my niece where the Hellgod himself could not find her. Teakamon, Shepherd of the Wilds, defends her. Reynan is safer than the saer'ajan herself."

That satisfied Aejys. "Godspeed, Anaria. Fair winds to you, Gryphon of Danae."

"Healing to your lover, my friend."

"Thank you."

Aejys started to turn away and then paused. "I have met some Euzadi. It may be that, if your sister still lives, I can find word of her."

Anaria's tired face dropped years. "If you could get me the smallest certain clues to finding her, I would force the Saer'ajan to allow me to go after her. Zaren never intended this exile to be permanent. That's why she told her to wait in Doronar. But the Lionhawk was always so damned stiff-necked. Yes, see what you can find out. I would be grateful."

* * * *

A week later, Aejsys dismounted at the edge of the cooling lava flow and frowned at the distant pass between Errilyn Valley and Norendel. The sky remained sooty and everything lay under its shadow, thrown in darkness by the explosion of the sacred mountain Kaliridonni – Lord Kalirion in the ancient tongue – its curtain of ash showed no sign of having thinned in the month since they left here to attack Hoon's castle. The air still stank of sulfur, brimstone, and other gases. The lava completely blocked the pass and still glowed in scattered places. Aejsys drew her gloves off and stood slapping them against her thigh. Then she raised her hand and signaled the dismount before turning to her friends with a sigh.

"There's no crossing it. We'll have to go back the way we came."

Soren walked up to her and stared at the blocked pass. "Then I suggest we camp for the night. Prepare the wounded and others who will need to be airlifted by the fireborn in the morning when we are all fresh."

"I'll have Jumpfree take the rest of across."

The arcane defenders of the holy mountain had been angered when Lord Hoon's undead army pursued Aejsys up it in an attempt to prevent her reaching the sacred blade, Spiritdancer. Kaliridonni had long been believed to be extinct, but Firefinder, a Jesmyrran, had found the slumbering fire in its core and exploded it.

The explosion had completely destroyed Hoon's advancing army. The lava flow would have filled both the valleys of Errilyn and Norendel had the fireborn not intervened when Firefinder lost control of it. The great fiery birds absorbed the heat and force, slowing it to a standstill. Meanwhile Talons riding her red gryphon Little Bit and Aejsys on Skelly, the dragon that guarded Spiritdancer, got off the mountain. But it had been a close thing.

Aejsys felt certain that this would probably be the last time that anyone crossed from Errilyn to Norendel. A system of tunnels still existed, but according to the fireborn, the Valdren were sealing them closed as swiftly as they could discover them. The Valdren Queen Magdarien had declared Norendel a protectorate of Vallimrah and, so long as King Baaltrystan held even a fraction of Waejontor, she would keep her realm sealed off and out of his reach. She took the perceived threat to the fireborns' breeding grounds along the northwest corner of Norendel seriously. Aejsys could understand that, since it was she who had carried that warning to the Valdren. The fireborn had not flown to war outside their lands before, according to any known records of her folk, with the single exception of Kalestari. But the threat of them deterred the dragons from gathering and nesting in Waejontor and other northern wildernesses.

With the exception of the quetzalcoatli, the feathered, fishing dragons like Skelevratham, the dragons were allies of the Waejontori and even married into the royal house, but they never came in force because of the fireborn. Had Hoon taken

Norendel, as he intended, and destroyed the breeding grounds that would have changed. Now there would be no passages into the Valdren lands. They were walling themselves in – and not just in Norendel. There would be no more Valdren rangers coming to Shaurone's aid as they had in the past if the remnants of the sa'necari should strike at the realm.

The twisted, treacherous, convolutions of ridges, deep valleys, and tortuous paths through high mountains that could dip suddenly into unexpected plunges made these north fringes of Waejontor and the northern expanse of wilderness places that were easy to defend and nearly impossible to invade. Riddled with caves and hidden valleys, at the end of the Great War, the Sharani had chosen not to pay the tremendous price in lives it would have cost to dig out the last of the Waejontori strongholds into which King Baaltrystan and his surviving lords had fled. Aejs suspected that Baaltrystan still held great power in his hidden citadels, and she wondered how much she had really accomplished by her hunger for vengeance in pursuing Hoon and Mephistis. *But it had had to be done. It absolutely had had to be done*. Her mind circled around that thought, repeating it many times before she could let it go. One danger was ended, but perhaps she had created another? Time alone would tell.

The Valdren and fireborn would be making their own camp adjacent to hers as they always did. Her thoughts had turned again to her wounded, especially Josiah and her best friend, Tagalong the dwarf, who had taken a head injury requiring trepanny. It frightened her heart with guilt when her friends and loved ones paid for her victories with their bodies and lives.

Aejys wondered how the assassin, Talons, fared as she walked down the line of horsemen and wagons. Talons was an ally, and how much of an ally, Aejs was still discovering. Without the aid of Talons and the Assassins' Guild to which she belonged, Aejs would have been dead a year ago. Talons had announced her betrothal to them before Aejs crossed into Errilyn and then gone home with her betrothed who had come for her at their camp.

"I don't think much of your choices," Aejs muttered at her memories. "But I wish you every happiness. I pray that Josiah, Tamlestari and I can have as much."

"What?" Soren asked, returning to her side.

"Nothing. I was speaking to myself." Aejs said, attempting to shrug Soren off.

"I've known you since you were fourteen, Aejs. What is troubling you now?"

Aejys shook her head, took out her pipe, filled, and lit it. She drew on it for a time before answering. "Just remembering all that's happened. Thinking about missing friends."

Soren squeezed her shoulder. "We all do. Should you need to talk, I'll listen."

* * * *

Aejys folded her wings tight to her body so that she would not bump anything, and pushed back the flap as she entered. Josiah looked more pale and tired than he had before they left Sweetwillow. He lay upon a cot with a white sheet folded back over the green coverlet. Aejys settled upon a canvas-bottomed campstool beside him, took his hand and threaded her fingers through his.

His collapse a week ago troubled her. Josiah should have been getting stronger; it had been over a month since the fighting in Norendel. "I love you. Do you hear me, damn it, I love you. Why aren't you improving?"

"I'm just slow to heal. That's all. Be patient with me." He smiled that crooked smile that always slipped right past her guards as he captured her arms, pulled her close, and gently held her prisoner, getting a face full of feathers for his troubles. Aejys shifted her wings, squirming a bit to bring her lips to his.

"Majesty," a voice interrupted and they looked up. The healer Millias stood there with two novices and a litter. "It's time to move him."

Josiah started to stand.

Millias stopped him, placing a hand on his chest. "Laurelyanne says you're to be moved flat. She's afraid you'll fall again."

Josiah exchanged a glance with Aejys, seeing the odd, troubled look in her eyes, yet he did not argue with Millias. They wrapped him in a blanket, stretched him out, and strapped him securely onto the litter, which the novices then raised between them, and they carried him out to be evacuated.

Aejys walked back to her pavilion, which felt painfully empty, as if this had been a defeat and not a victory. She pulled her pipe out, decided there was no comfort in it, and put it away again. It had been only a partial victory, after all. Only her mad sister Margren had perished. Mephistis and Hoon had escaped. Years. So many heartsick years. Aejys sank onto the bed, folding her wings tightly against her as her stomach knotted and soured.

In the stillness the flood of memories would not stop coming, although she fought them. They erupted in hot burning splashes of pain that seared through her. She slid to her knees and turned her face into the blankets, clutching them until her knuckles whitened.

"Margren is dead. Margren is dead," Aejys gritted between her teeth, struggling not to think about the turns her life had taken because of her sister's machinations, trying to let go of it, to cram it down into the lockbox in her heart.

"Let it go," she told herself aloud. Yet, try as she might, Aejs could not get the lockbox within her closed. She had once been the quintessential paladin of Aroana, the Lion of Rowanslea, and had given her ma'aram, Kaethreyn, the Mar'ajan of Rowan, every reason to be proud of her. Aejs had shown her younger sister, Margren, nothing but love and patience, and had never understood how the child could hate her. Each year it had gotten worse until finally, Margren had begun to insist that Aejs intended her harm.

"How, in hell's name, could you ever have believed that, Margren?" Aejs demanded of her memories, of her dead sister's spirit as if it stood beside her. She felt as if she were unraveling inside in the stillness of the tent. "I loved you. I never wanted to kill you." *You made it a self-fulfilling prophecy, didn't you? Trying to kill me because you believed I would kill you ... forcing me to kill you.*

Aejs rubbed her hands across her face. For a moment she was almost able to stop the flow of remembrances. At least she was able for an instant to stop speaking aloud and hold it inside her.

Kaethreyn, her ma'aram, had demanded of her a vow of her that she would never do the slightest thing to harm Margren – a vow so tightly worded that, even should Margren draw steel against her, Aejs would not be able to defend herself. "My life be forfeit to god ... if I break this vow." Eventually that vow forced Aejs to flee or die, so she fled with Tagalong the dwarf, her closest childhood friend.

Aejs stayed away for seven long years until Brendorn, her ba'halaef came to fetch her home to rescue Laeoli, their child, and Ladonys, their na'halaef from Margren. Margren's assassins killed them all. Kaethreyn, too late, executed Margren, and was, in turn, killed by one of Margren's people. Josiah's love and magic had called Aejs back from death after Margren tortured, crippled, and finally gutted her on an altar of unspeakable rites. Knowing that Margren, a sa'necari, would eventually rise as an undead necari, Aejs went after her, invading Errilyn, which was held by Lord Hoon, ally to Margren and her sa'necari lover Prince Mephistis. Aejs destroyed Margren, but Hoon and Mephistis slipped her nets and escaped.

Aejs folded forward over her arms, feeling bile rising sour and stinging into her throat.

"Majesty? Are you all right? Is your wound bothering you?" The young woman knelt beside her, touching her lightly on the shoulders.

Margren had managed to cut Aejs before she killed her. "No," Aejs replied, shrugging her off without looking up to see who had come in. The voice was not familiar, but had Sharani accents.

"You were talking to someone?"

Aejs looked into her face then, wondering when she had entered and who she was.

She disliked strangers catching her in a moment of weakness. It made her uncomfortable. She was king and a king had to be strong. Getting lost in her memories to the point of pain was weakness of the highest order. How much had this young woman seen? Would she speak of it to others? The newcomer reminded her of Soren, only much younger, perhaps no more than sixteen. Her coal black hair had been shorn impossibly short all over as if she had shaved it a few months past. The ha'taren did not cut their hair except as a sign of grief or an offering to their god in dire circumstances and then they only cut it at the base of their necks. Aejs reached out, raking her hand across the stubble of the woman's hair. "Why?" she breathed.

The woman met Aejs' eyes squarely and without flinching to speak of her reasons. "Someone I cared for deeply was slain. I shaved my head and cast my hair into the grave as they threw the first dirt over her."

That was such an extreme expression of grief it made Aejs shiver. Certainly this woman's pain was as great as her own. It called out to her, demanding that she meet it as fearlessly as this one. She straightened, folding her wings back, drawing herself in. "Who are you?"

"Maranya Deontamei. Soren's granddaughter. Are you all right?" The young woman asked again.

"Yes." Aejs pushed away from her. The intensity in Maranya's eyes both drew and pushed at Aejs. She could not yet say what it was she saw there. Maranya wore black from her great boots to the broad paneled leather jerkin loosely laced at sides and front brushing the tops of her boots, close fitting trousers. Her sleeveless tunic and a charcoal shirt had the sleeves laced loosely enough to give access to the stilettos Aejs suspected were there. Maranya carried two swords at her back in the Aluin borderer style and had the conspicuous upper body strength to handle them as easily as a pair of daggers. Yet, rising with Aejs, Maranya moved with the easy grace of a mountain chekaya – a hunting cat. Aejs noted that she did not wear the Aroanan Rune and wondered at that for she was clearly old enough to have been consecrated to Aroana.

"If I can help you, let me."

"Only god can help."

* * *

Jumpfree, a young Jesmyrran who had served as one of the minor guardians on Mt. Kaliridonna, hovered above the army as they formed the lines in close order. His white wings beating rhythmically as he looked down at them, waiting to Jump them to the other side of the pass where their original camp still waited for them. The more people he carried in a mass Jump, the shorter the distance he could travel: therefore they had to get themselves packed tight and as close to the cooled basalt and

obsidian as they could get. Jumpfree had carried them across the lava into Hoon's valley a month ago and this morning they would return to Norendel.

Soren and Laelyn watched Jumpfree for a time, waiting for the signal to mount from Aejs, which would precede the Jesmyrran's own sign to prepare for the Jump. The horses did not like it and neither did the riders, but they managed. The sharp tingling sensation and rush of disorientation always made Soren's body itch and her head spin when he Jumped them. She suspected it was the same for the others.

At the signal from Aejs, Soren mounted up. "So what do you make of the king's mage, Laelyn?" Soren asked her daughter.

Laelyn considered the question in silence before answering. Her mother waited patiently. It was frequently thus between them. "He's a good man. Wylyleo likes him. He never tried to bite him." She tangled her fingers in his mane absently.

"I suppose that's something" Soren responded dryly. She had not liked the rumors she picked up from members of Aejs' company who had ridden to Shaurone with her and then on the journey out to Norendel. They had known the man since childhood. "I've heard he likes the bottle a bit too well. A man that's wedded to the bottle is never wedded to a woman."

"He received his wounds going into an armed camp after her."

"Don't give him too much credit, Laelyn. Look! Jumpfree is signaling."

The sharp tingling sensation rippled through the ranks and they were gone. The field of asphodel stood empty. The flowers of death lay crushed by the hooves of the horses that had been standing upon them moments before. There would be no more blood spilled here and one day the flowers would no longer grow in this place. On that day Errilyn would be truly cleansed.

CHAPTER TWO

VAMPIRES AND SA'NECARI

"I must have a life! I must have mortgiefan! I am in pain!" Prince Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan screamed, pacing back and forth in a sitting room of Hoon's mansion near Minnoras. "I cannot... I will not continue living off blood from a bottle."

Timon watched him from behind the large, heavy maple desk that dominated the room. A tremendous broadsword sat upon pegs behind the vampire. Four chairs took up the space between the desk and the hearth. Shafts of sunlight gilded all the furniture edges and pooled in the middle of the floor. The linen curtains fluttered in the afternoon breeze. Timon was Lemyari, one vampiric lineages called royals

because of their strange talents and immunity to sunlight. Timon liked the sun.

"And food from a table. You are, after all, a living man," the vampire pointed out, alternately amused and irritated by the prince's petty tirades. Mephistis' continued survival depended upon the vampires, and Timon played with him like a subtle cat; while the prince – a legendary player in his own right – seemed scarcely aware of it. Could Mephistis really believe that Timon's father, Lord Hoon, held no darker motives in continuing this little alliance now that Mephistis' resources had dwindled and his health had begun to fail due to deijanrael? Probably. Both the effects of deijanrael and the prince's growing dependency on Sanguine Rose were equally capable of causing a steady deterioration in the prince's ability to concentrate, analyze and think clearly. Deijanrael resulted from having had a victim of great power stolen from him in mid-rite just as their bodies and minds joined at the edge of the other's death, the magic rebounding on Mephistis, leaving him with a raw and hungered longing for the death of Aejs Rowan.

Furthermore, Hoon was subtle beyond a sa'necari's imagining. As was Timon. The game had begun when the ailing prince took refuge with Timon's father in the City of the Dead. They had also played with Margren and Mephistis' liege-mon, Bodramet, without the prince's knowledge. Neither had been trustworthy. But then that was the way sa'necari were, and one of the many reasons the Lemyari held them in such contempt: they fed upon each other as well as mortals.

There were similarities of build, face and coloring between the two males. Timon stood a shade taller and broader through the chest and shoulder, earthily masculine where Mephistis was intensely sensual, and slender, aristocratic with a delicate precision of feature as if sliced and planed from stone.

"I need a life. I am sa'necari."

"Don't remind me," Timon said tiredly, his fingers tapping an impatient staccato on the desk. "I could have left you behind. You know what the Sharani do to sa'necari when they catch them. They'd burn you alive. At least with my kind they put a stake through our hearts and I assure you it's a far better death than what they give yours."

Mephistis subsided, dropping into a chair. "I did not mean to sound ungrateful, Timon. It's my condition. The deijanrael. The constant discomfort makes me irritable."

"And the 'blood in a bottle' as you put it is Sanguine Rose, which is very expensive and difficult to come by. And it is the only thing that can ease you. Had you gone to anyone but my father, you'd be dead by now."

Mephistis squirmed, evidently feeling his pride squeezed. "I am in yours and your father's debt. I always pay my debts."

"I should hope so. Now I beg you to remember that this household is a private

preserve of my father's. Not the smallest, most minor servant is to be harmed. There are no full meals here, only nibari. I will send servants to the Minnorian slave markets to purchase meals for you. What do you prefer? Male or female? Light meat or dark?"

"Female. Get me several to eat. But also some that I could ride for a while. My bed is cold. Light meat. All light meat. I – I don't wish to be reminded of Margren."

"She was dark, as I recall. Sharani." Timon steepled his fingers and tapped his lips with them. He knew full well what Margren had looked like, since he had spent many hours trying to avoid her at his father's city.

The vampire could see the pain was creeping back into Mephistis' body by the way his shoulders began to sag and his face pale. It was nearing time to end this session.

"I'm worried about my people," Mephistis said. "Both those who were at Dragonshead and those who were with me at the City of the Dead. Very few of them have reached me here."

"Yes, I can well understand that. I assure you, I have my people watching for them. They will be brought here when they are found."

Timon watched him more closely. Yes, it was time to throw the dog a bone. He rose and unlocked a cabinet, taking out a bottle. He uncorked it, pressing it into the prince's hands.

Mephistis looked up at him, and then drank. Color gradually returned to his face. He started to hand the bottle back and Timon shook his head.

The vampire smiled at him with a gesture of generosity. "Keep it."

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Timon snapped his fingers and three females entered. "I had not meant to make you suffer. Only to make certain that our rules were not transgressed. This is not Waejontor. Here, we survive by living according to strict rules. You may now feed while I watch to be certain you do not harm them. Then you should go upstairs and rest."

The nibari settled around him on their knees with their heads inclined to the side, exposing the favored vein. They wore nothing above the waist since they had come as food. Timon smiled, his nibari were very well-trained, if a trifle spoiled at times. One of them winked at him saucily and he pretended to ignore her.

Mephistis drew a blonde to him, settling her between his knees. He pushed her long hair back, bit into her neck and began to feed.

* * *

Mephistis lay on his bed for a long time after returning to his rooms, one hand tangled into the blue satin bed-curtains. He had taken another long pull from the bottle of Sanguine Rose before stretching out. His powers were fraying at the edges, his nerve endings and muscles burned and hurt. As the warmth spread through him and the pain retreated he felt both grateful to have the bottle and resentful of his dependence on Hoon and Timon. His pride hurt intensely, even as he acquiesced to Timon's demands and desires. Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan was the most powerful sa'necari of all time, humbled by circumstance and deijanrael.

The Waejontori prince had taken a thousand times a thousand mortgiefan, many of them from foes of incredible power such as the fireborn warrior, Kalestari Havenrain. Mephistis had no peer. He was the paternal grandson of the most powerful banewitch of all time, Aurean the Golden, Queen of Waejontor, whom Kalestari had slain in the battle of Sharatier. Shintar, his sire, had begotten him and three of his four brothers on Aevrina Coleth, the only known Sharani banewitch, who had in turn kyndied him and his brothers into the womb of Aurean more than doubling the necromantic power of his bloodline. His fourth and oldest brother, Baaltrystan, who now sat upon the Waejontori throne, was a product of incest between Shintar and his mother, Aurean. Of the four brothers, only Mephistis and Baaltrystan had been born sa'necari: a very rare thing since most sa'necari were made not born. Estopholes, the middle brother, had been made sa'necari only a few years past; Farendarc, the youngest brother, a duelist, was now dead, slain by Aeijys Rowan last summer. Farendarc had been no loss: Mephistis felt nothing for any of his brothers.

One single act had placed Mephistis beyond all others in power. The legacy of Waejonan, the dark magics that sustained Waejontor, passed from parent to child in unbroken succession through an act of mortgiefan perpetrated on the parent by the child. The power should have passed from Aurean to her son, Mephistis' father, Shintar. But Shintar had died before her. The power should then have passed to Baaltrystan. Mephistis, however, mounted the dying Aurean and stole the power for his own. One day he would mount his brother and ride him into death. Should the one who carried the legacy of Waejonan ever perish by the arts of the life-mages or the sword known as Spiritdancer – which could release all the fragments of souls and stolen magics – then Waejontor would perish also. Or so it was said.

And yet, he had been brought down to this: a beggar in a house of vampires. Oh, they did not call him that. They called him guest and ally. Mephistis felt his anger rising and released the curtain, falling back against the pillows before he could shake off the pleasant warmth of the drug-laced blood, and he slept.

* * *

Bodramet, Mephistis' principle lieutenant, had fled south for two weeks with the

vampire, Haig, and Haig's nibari, Nainee. They had traveled mostly by night along the back roads of Shaurone to avoid the patrols searching for those who had fled the City of the Dead. Bodramet had believed for a time that Haig was his friend, but the way the vampire had acted since the City's fall, made him wonder. Haig kept Nainee for himself, refusing to share. He had also refused to allow Bodramet to eat lives, forced him to feed from a bottle rather than leave bodies in their wake. The few way stations they came upon had only nibari and not depnane and that irked Bodramet who wished to find himself between the legs of a dying mon.

They crossed into Beltria by way of the Yarrendar Mar'ajanate at the Fords of Idar and camped in a circle of thick black ash and Beltrian elms. Haig sat cross-legged while Nainee stretched out beside him and laid her head in his lap. Nainee was an uncommonly beautiful nibari, tall and elegant with aristocratic features, one of a prized strain of nibari first successfully bred in the Black Rock region of Waejontor. There they were jealously guarded and rarely sold, especially the studs. Bodramet watched enviously, his hands tightening on his bottled blood. It seemed unfair that a mere vampire had managed to acquire a Black Rock nibari. Bodramet had tried for years to acquire one to no avail. He had not thought much of this while they were in the City of the Dead because Haig had been sending Nainee to him while they were there. But that had changed and he resented it.

Haig brushed Nainee's blonde hair from her face and neck, spreading it over his leg so that all the length of her long neck was revealed. She smiled, arching her neck a little more, suggesting her impatience. Haig kissed along her neck until he found the spot he wanted. Nainee stiffened for an instant, betraying the fact that Haig's fangs had entered her. Her face suffused with bliss as Haig continued sucking.

Bodramet seethed, wanting her. Had he not needed Haig's assistance to reach his prince in these foreign lands of which he knew nothing, he might have tried to take him. Plus, Haig was a large male, larger than Bodramet, and powerfully built and bearish. The Lemyari were the sa'necari's natural rivals in power. Bodramet was well-built but slender. Dark-skinned, he wore his shiny black hair slicked back and woven into a dozen small braids at the base of his neck with human-bone beads in them.

"Ho, travelers!" A new voice hailed them and a tall, lanky male walked into their copse.

Haig lifted his face from Nainee's neck, wiping the blood on the back of his hairy hand and reaching for his sword. Nainee gave a squeak of startlement and crouched behind him. "Don't fear, Nainee," Haig reassured her, drawing the blade and planting his feet.

Nainee recognized the newcomer first, scrambling to her feet with soft cry of welcome. "Dane!"

Bodramet's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned into a sneer at he looked at one of the people he least wanted to encounter. "It's been awhile, Dane Jayce."

Dane gave him a languid, disinterested look. "I guess...what, six months? Just after last Sowayn?"

The newcomer was old in power, and it shimmered in Bodramet's senses to a degree the sa'necari had not detected when last they met. Bodramet suspected that Dane must have been tamping it down somehow at Dragonshead to conceal his age. He reminded Bodramet now of Lord Hoon.

Dane was tall and lanky to the point of seeming all legs and arms at times. He stood with his weight resting comfortably on his forward leg and his hand casually upon his sword hilt out of habit. The tumbled locks of his sienna-brown hair framed his pale, narrow face in a careless manner, which compounded the illusion of a male utterly at peace with himself and his abilities.

Nainee threw herself at him so quickly that he had barely time to open his arms and receive her. Dane laughed and kissed her, then licked the drops of blood still clinging to her neck away. "Ever your servant, Nainee," he grinned. Then he leaned in and ran his tongue over the tiny punctures. "I should have ridden over sooner, then I might have gotten guest-right with you."

"You!" She punched him in the shoulder.

Haig came up and clasped arms with Dane. "It is good to see you again. Where are the others?"

Dane rarely traveled alone, since he led a group of explorers and mappers marking the various lost ruins on the continent. Dane was the one vampire Bodramet never wanted to see again. Dane had befriended that half-a-man, Isranon, whom the prince was so fond of. Bodramet had been forced to go through Dane's people, destroying two of them to get at Isranon. There was bad blood between them.

"Waiting for me over the next hill. I have a favor to ask so I came on after we made camp. We just missed you by a day at the last way station."

"Ask," Haig said.

"In private. Why don't you move your folk to my camp? Nainee would like that, wouldn't you, girl? I have acquired a couple of Black Rock studs since last we saw each other."

Haig shrugged and started saddling his and Nainee's horses. "Studs? From Black Rock? How did you rate that?"

Dane's grin spread wide. "I made their owner an offer he could not refuse."

"And what could that have been?" Haig sounded intensely curious.

"I killed him. He was trying to cheat me at cards."

Haig clapped Dane on the shoulder. "Oh, well done."

* * *

"Don't trust that one," Dane told Haig while they rested in the back of his wagon. Haig sat upon a chest lashed to the side. Nainee sat on the floor between his knees.

Haig tipped back a glass of blood-laced wine, drinking it in long swallows. "I don't. Timon set me to watch him. I'm taking him to the Minnorian estate to rejoin his prince. I got all of my nibari out with four servants, night flyers, before the city fell."

"Good thing, that. This could work to both of our advantages. I received a request from Timon to deliver this letter." Dane took it from a pocket of his cloak and extended it to Haig. "It reached me at the way station."

Haig read the name it was addressed to and gave Dane a surprised look. "Isranon? He's the mon Bodramet complains about endlessly."

Dane laced his fingers behind his head, leaning back against the wooden side of the huge wagon. "I am not surprised. Bodramet tried to kill him."

"But what am I supposed to do about Bodramet?"

"I need to go south and find a reason to stay at the estate long enough to get a good look at the Beast on behalf of the Ymraudes. It's a private matter. I could take Bodramet with me."

"The Beast is there. I've seen her." Haig stroked his beard. "She's dangerous."

"Yes, but if she is what I believe her to be, then the Ymraudes are the only ones who know how to handle her. They want me to identify her species."

"And what is it you think she is?" Haig settled forward as he asked, propping his elbows on his huge knees.

"I am not at liberty to say, old friend."

"And Isranon?"

"Make your own judgments. His secrets are not mine to tell. If he wishes to join his prince, you are authorized, as I was, to bring him to the estate."

Haig thought for a moment. "There's one thing you could do for me that would give you a reason for remaining there for a time. I've not bred my nibari herds in several years. I have four that have caught traveling with my night flyers to the estate. However, I have fifteen females there already and a couple of male mules to keep them happy."

"Does that include Nainee?"

Nainee's eyes widened and she shook her head. Haig grasped her hand. "Be a good one, Nainee." Haig turned his glance to Dane and explained her reaction, "her first master sold her infants before they were even off the breast. I won't do that, Nainee. Do you trust me?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "Yes, Haig. You've been good to me."

"Then I want to find you sweetly swollen when I return to the estate. You'll go along with Dane. I assume you have some decent nibari studs. Intelligent and with some looks about them?"

Dane grinned at him. "I'll give Nainee her pick of three very fine ones, good bloodlines. Two of them from the same stock as herself. Ones I was telling you about."

Haig nodded.

Dane went to the tent flap and called out to his nibari. One of them was barely into his twenties, blonde and slender like Nainee. "Ras, take Nainee and introduce her to Esu and Brem. She's to be bred to one of you three and I'd like it begun as soon as possible. It is her choice of you. Make certain all my people know she is not to be fed upon lest it interfere with conception."

Ras ran his eyes over her and then extended his hand. Nainee put hers into his with the hesitancy of a virgin and allowed him to lead her out.

"Once she's given me five or six offspring, I intend to turn her as my mate. Now, tell me what you've not been telling me, Dane," Haig said.

"Bodramet persecuted Isranon. Isranon is a very minor sa'necari, not much power. I consider him a friend. Bodramet tried to make Isranon play ewe to his ram. He's little more than a youth. Just eighteen years old. When this failed, Bodramet – I am convinced of this – provoked Margren into declaring an orgy in Mephistis' absence. To rescue his nibari lover, Rose, they made Isranon cross the gauntlet, nearly killing him. In the end, Bodramet's followers rited her. I imagine Isranon is still grieving. He genuinely loved her."

Haig guffawed. "A sa'necari in love with a nibari? I can scarcely credit it."

"It does not matter what you can credit. Make your judgments when you meet him. Only bring him safely if he wishes to come."

"I will do that. And you be careful of Bodramet. That one would rite his own mother. Nainee seduced and drugged him before helping me question him one night. He confessed to wanting to rite his prince."

"Does the prince know this?"

"No. Brandrahoon said not to mention it."

* * *

When his father did not come down, Timon decided to take lunch up to him. Months of playing polite host to Margren and Mephistis' more arcane whims and then witnessing the destruction of his favorite citadel had left the private and mostly reclusive vampire lord feeling weary on many levels. Hoon had chosen to rest here for awhile with the Waejontori prince in tow. The royals, as the greater vampiric lineages were called, could not be controlled or influenced by the necromantic arts of the sa'necari; and, where the House of Waejonan was concerned, Hoon was nothing, if not cautious – even of one whose powers were fraying with the advancing effects of prolonged deijanrael as Mephistis' were. Eight more sa'necari had joined Mephistis at the estate. He wanted them here, where there were no lesser bloods for them to influence.

Timon rapped smartly on the solar's doors and then stepped inside. "Father?"

"Out here, Timon," Hoon answered from beyond the open glass doors of the roof top garden. Far from the threat of the Valdren earthmages trying to crush him with his own trees, the vampire lived much as he had in life, with his gardens and creatures. Like many ancient vampires, and all the Lemyari, the sun held no danger for him, although he remained mostly nocturnal by preference. His speech patterns made some folks squirm: each and every word precisely pronounced, sentences more suited to an old dry book than living speech.

Tables and benches sat among the flowers, potted trees and shrubs, forming successions of delicate secluded alcoves and bowers. Hoon lounged on a central couch, his arms spread along the back, shirtless, wearing only loose black, claret-sashed trousers and soft slippers on his feet. He was tall and sleek with dark, finely drawn features. His black hair was pulled back and tied, revealing the points of his ears, which he usually concealed or illusioned away and he looked much as he had the day he fled Imralon with his two brothers and five others millennia ago. Battle scars marked his ribs and biceps, which his turning had not taken from him.

"I thought you should feed," Timon said, ushering six nibari into the garden with sweeps of his long fingered hands.

Three males and three females, clad only in gossamer loincloths, quickly spread themselves around Hoon, kneeling with crossed wrists and bowed heads, waiting. "I assume you will be joining me?" he asked, tousling one dark head fondly.

"Yes, father. We need to discuss our guest. He wants a life and mortgiefan."

Hoon's expression turned stormy. "Have you informed him that this is a special household and he is not to harm them?"

"Yes, father. But he insists. Furthermore, there are eight of his sa'necari followers here. All hungry."

"Very well. Send him into Minnoras immediately to the slave markets with Whirly. Have Whirly purchase him a few dozen full meals to keep him quiet for a few weeks. They are not touching my household. Can you handle his people?"

"I can handle them, father. I can definitely handle them. I can handle twice that number and I may have to. He has a small army making their way in this direction in bits and pieces with my royals as guides. I'm directing most of them away from here to other holdings, but some are coming here. He wants his sons."

"His sons..." Hoon closed his eyes for a moment as he accepted the obsession that he denied. The obsession of the newborn, the true obsession of the blood. He had scryed Mephistis' sons and one of them drew him: Wolff, the black haired child, the one that was a Rowan. Amalthea, the wife he had loved and murdered, had been a Rowan. He had invaded Errilyn and taken the valley, made it his because he wanted a taste of the king's blood and his sister's because they were Rowans. The blood called to him, ruled him. Shularrien and her Abelard descendants were Rowans. He could taste it in them. The Rowan blood was dominant in the genes. If he could only turn one of them and taste their blood for eternity in vampiric sharing, their bodies and blood joining. But the one he kept had to be just right. Margren had been unstable. He would have destroyed her eventually. Aejs. It had to be Aejs.

"Father?"

Hoon jolted from his reverie. "What?"

"I'll get Whirly going." Timon left and returned, then pulled a chair nearer his father's bench. He sat, settling one of the young males between his thighs, arms spread, and back arched like a drawn bow, and head tilted back and to the side with throat exposed. The sensuality of the young male nibari brought a hunger to Timon's throat as well as his loins. Timon slipped his arms around the nibari's body, supporting him and felt the nibari relax into the position bonelessly. Then the vampire swept through his mind and slipped his fangs gently through the fragile skin to feed quietly.

"You found me a troll?"

<Yes, father. Anksha is securing three of them. > Timon's tongue stroked the vein as blood welled around his fangs. When he had taken as much from the young male as he could safely, servants removed him to a place where he could recover and Timon took another. He had chosen humans for lunch and they were not as resilient as some of the other nibari, although their very fragility was part of their appeal.

"I need to find him a greater death, since I do not intend to give him Rowan." Hoon slid into the nibari's mind; putting her completely under before he began to feed.

<You play a dangerous game, father. With both of them. >

<When have I not? One by one her allies will fall. Even now Galee destroys the Guild. That is the greatest of them. >

<Is the Dancer still chasing you off? >

<Yes, so I will try another approach. >

Timon raised his face with a sigh, pulled a soft cloth from his sleeve, and wiped his lips before rising. "I'm going for a walk."

"An assignation?" Hoon asked fondly. "Someone I know?"

"Yes, father, and no." Timon's mouth took on a tiny lop-sided smile. "A lycan I met in Darr and brought with me."

"Handsome?"

"Yes, father, he's very handsome. You know my tastes."

* * *

"Bodramet!" Haig bawled the name out like a bull making demands of a cow.

The sa'necari came from around one of the wagons, wiping a smear of blood from his lips. Apparently one of Dane's lieutenants had allowed him to feed. Bodramet regarded Haig with a surly expression. "What do you want?"

"You're continuing on with Dane's company to Hoon's Minnorian estate. Nainee will be traveling with them also. You keep your fangs and fingers off her. Black Rock nibari are hard to breed and she's going to be trying all the way to the estate. No upsets, no stresses. Understand me?"

Bodramet glared back. "You have my word. Why dump me on Jayce?"

Vampires fanned slowly around them, watching cautiously. Haig could see from

their expressions that they had had problems with Bodramet before. That reassured him that they would be watching for it. Their nibari formed a half-moon line behind them, creating a strange tableau. Dane's folk made it clear that one wrong move from Bodramet and he would find him fighting not simply the vampires, but their nibari also.

"I have a letter to take north. I will be leaving in an hour."

"I don't trust these people..." Bodramet began and broke off at a growl from the vampires.

Dane stepped out of his wagon and lounged against the side of it. His voice was softly casual, as he said, "No more than we do you, considering what you did to Isranon, Corcyr and Rhium. However, when we give our word, we keep it. You are safe with us unless you do something stupid like last time."

Bodramet frowned deeply, pulling at the tiny braids at the base of his neck. "I have no choice. So be it."

Dane gave him a thin smile. "We will get you there alive so long as you are gentle with our nibari."

CHAPTER THREE

FOUR BANNERS

The company materialized at the edge of the camp, on the open plain between the tents and pavilions and the wooded tangle along the river. The healers and the auxiliaries, who had been airlifted along with the wounded that a day earlier, had already set up. The rest had been left in place with a skeleton crew when Aejs led them out a month ago to fight in Errilyn.

The rush of disorientation from the Jump had barely settled before she dismounted, threw her reins to a soldier and headed for the tents where she knew she would find Josiah. Until now, Aejs had not fought a war in over seven years. She had prayed that she would never have to stare one in the face again, to see the price her friends, loved ones, and companions paid for it. The price her people paid for it. Victories were only a little less melancholy than defeats.

She pulled off her gloves, slapping them against her thigh as she walked, thinking about all of this. That she had never gone looking for the trouble that found her was no comfort at all. *I will always make trouble – they will wish to hell it had not found me. When Hoon and Mephistis come looking for me again, I will smash them against the rocks of Sophren Bay. And they will come. I know it. Hoon still wants me and by then I will have Mephistis' children in my hands. I promised*

their mother that he would never be allowed to bring them into the darkness. They will come.

The healers' tents lay along the west side of the camp, closest to the water. Aejs found them easily, for they flew their own standard above their brown tents: a golden sprig of heaven flower, holadil, on a brown and green divided field, the two colors separated by a band of white. She went to the main tent first, finding Millias and the Valdren surgeon, Ciscerus, talking in the fore part.

"Where is Josiah?" Aejs asked.

Millias glanced at her, nodding. "Josiah is over here." He led her to a partitioned section, opening the drape cloth entrance.

"Why isn't he getting better?" Aejs asked. Laurelyanne seemed evasive and Aejs decided that a second opinion was in order. Millias and Ciscerus were the leaders of these healers. She would have her answer from them and would brook no argument.

"We don't know," Millias answered. "It's as if his body simply doesn't remember how to heal."

"There is no infection from his wounds, Majesty. They have closed," Ciscerus added. "No explanation for this at all. But you'll see he is somewhat improved."

Aejs could only nod to that. She entered the little cloth-partitioned room to find him sitting up. Ciscerus was right, he did seem better – at least his color had less of that yellow cast. "Josiah?"

He smiled at her; that same old smile that always reached straight into her. "I love you," his lips shaped the words without quite speaking them aloud.

She unfolded a campstool that leaned against a chest, settling it beside the bed and kissed him. "Can you move him to my pavilion?"

"Yes," Millias answered.

* * *

The villagers approached in a small band, six myn, with a tall male leading wearing an open vest that hung to his knees. Except for him, they looked like farmers in grayish-brown, homespun trousers and tunic. Aejs chose to speak to them outside her pavilion since Josiah was resting.

"My lord king felt that it would be best if the living brought word to your king of the meeting place he has chosen lest your people strike the undead first and ask questions of their remains later."

"I am their king," Aejys replied, feeling tempted to remind them that Sharani translated the word differently and, for all her physical changes, she was still Sharani.

"I am Lugon of Three Willows village. Our king, Carliff, wishes to meet with you alone to discuss your promise and the blade you carry. He is camped near us on the eastern edge."

"I am aware of your village." Aejys considered and did what she always did – habits from other days were hard to give up – simply took wing, without informing anyone.

Soren, seeing this, shouted at her, but the king ignored her. "Where the hell is she going?"

"Our village," Lugon said, grinning at the king who was already dwindling into the distance.

Then a second being rose from the camp, white-winged and young, a jesmyrran shooting off in pursuit of her. Skelly followed in a flash of white and mauve.

"Have no fear, Skelevrathammon is near!" He roared, putting forth an effort to overtake the pair.

Soren shook her head, her lips tight in irritation. "Some one should pound that silly dragon."

Lugon shook his head, hearing his companions laughing. "It's been tried. Skelly is tougher than he appears."

The general snorted. "He ripped the gates off Sweetwillow, so I'll grant you that."

"Skelly has been our rescue worker for generations. After the curse fell and there were no longer free-ranger units doing rescue work in emergencies, Skelly obliged us. He's found children lost in the old ruins, put out forest fires and gotten climbers off cliffs. We'll miss him."

"But now you have the Valdren again."

"Yes, but we doubt they will equal Skelly's measure."

* * *

Aejys spotted Carliff's banner, heading for it when a light touch brushed her wings and Jumpfree did a loop-the-loop around her, tumbling joyfully through the sky for a moment with his wings folded. Aejys had seen nothing of King Carliff the Mad Lich, since he withdrew his undead army to the north to defend his citadel when the lines of battle were drawn lest Hoon and the sa'necari break through to seize his fount of power and had not returned – although he had sent word through a villager priest,

saying that he would remain within his gates until she left to avoid misunderstandings with her forces.

The Waejontori called him "mad" because he was sane. He and his did not feed on the living, taking sustenance from an enchantary blood-fountain in his courtyard. They existed to defend the living in their valley as expiation for an ancient crime. Only a paladin or a priest of the lineage of Rowan could release them from the curse with their forgiveness. Aejs was no longer a paladin, but if she could somehow find her way back into her god's favor, then she would finally send Carliff and his retainers to their well-earned rest as she had promised him.

"Carliff said alone!" Aejs shouted at him, watching him snap his wings out to catch the updraft.

"He won't mind us!" Jumpfree laughed. "He never does."

Aejs glanced back, certain that "us" meant Skelly.

Carliff's camp lay upon the outer east edge of the village with his banner flying over it, an argent ram on a moss green field. There were only twelve tents so he had clearly come to parley, not contend with her and did not feel in the least threatened by her army. The blood fount in his castle yard in the north provided a spell that allowed all undead to go about in the daylight here. His people fed from the enchanted fount and not from living veins to fill their needs. He was an honorable lich, although Aejs still did not feel entirely comfortable around him, even knowing all that.

They settled on the green at the edge of the camp and Carliff came to meet them there. Two of his vampires came with him in blackened armor. Except for Carliff's banner, all the old crests had been obliterated as a sign of their disgrace centuries past.

"It is good that you've come. I was not certain that you would," Carliff said. The lich's skin was the color of aging parchment and the texture of old leather drawn tight over his fleshless bones. He wore his crown and tattered velvet cloak, looking her over closely. "You've become more than I expected – or should I say a presence beyond a lich's dreams. In a sense I made you, Aejs Rowan. I chose the blood that passed into your veins through Josiah's spell."

"They did not tell me." Aejs found herself suddenly thoughtful. "I am not yet returned to my god's favor. Nor has Kalirion spoken to me."

"He waits and watches. Perhaps to know whether your acceptance of Hoon's blood was an aberration or the way you have truly chosen."

Aejs shivered. "I will never yield myself to Hoon. I – I..." Aejs went silent, remembering how empty such words would sound to this ancient undead who had

chosen to defend the living against the living and the undead. When last they spoke, he had raged at her for dishonoring herself and thereby costing thousands of lives over the past fifteen years by refusing to defy her mother and sister. He had called her filthy and evil.

"Then the gods will speak to you again in time." The gentleness of his tone suggested that she had in part redeemed herself in his eyes by retrieving the sword and destroying Hoon's city.

"I pray that is so. I fear the repercussions of that single act of blasphemy."

Carliff nodded. "Do not fear it, only fight against it. Keep your promise to me when one finally speaks to you. My people are tired of undeath. Return when you are a paladin again and forgive us so that the curse is ended."

He extended his hand to her and, although her stomach tensed at the thought of touching him, she clasped it. "You have my word. I will return and release you."

The lich smiled, which only made his face more hideous. "Skelly," he said, turning to the dragon. "You must be a good companion to her."

The dragon lifted his head from his forefeet. "Never fear, I will serve as I did for you when the sword was yours."

"Was there something about the sword you wished to say?" Aejs asked.

"I learned of all the burnings. You must stop burning them. Dancer can release the souls they carry from the rites. When you burn the sa'necari, all the pieces of their stolen souls simply pass into the earth. They can be, it is said, gathered up again, even should you destroy the Legacy of Waejonan by destroying the one who carries it, another of their lineage could gather those pieces into a new legacy. You must use the sword to kill those you catch or can reach. Only then will the shattered souls be healed to return to the wheel or pass into the light of creation. There was another object that can gather and release them. But I have heard that it was lost. The Sunfire Staff of Kalirion, which the life-mages once held."

* * *

Four proud standards flew above far flung camp as the victors licked their wounds and measured their losses: The azure rowans encircled by the ouroboros, which was Aejs Rowan's old banner; the Vehayan wolf and oak leaves, green on gold of her slain mate with a bit of azure livery ribbon flying above it; the unicorn rampant, white on crimson, of the bradae, the fighting priests of Aroana, the Compassionate Defender; and the claret and gold of the fireborn in flight of the Valdren of Vallimrah. The sun gilded the ridgepoles of the tents with white, spotted the leaves of the surrounding trees, and threw blinding pools of brightness into every exposed space it could strike.

Camped among them were also a large number of masterless myn: freeswords and paladins whose lords and houses had fallen; out of work soldiers, guardsmyn who had been dismissed from households now too impoverished by the war to maintain them. Some who had come to fight wished to win a place with Aeijys Rowan in Rowanhart; others simply had sand in their shoes and marching in the company of Aeijys Rowan for a time would give them a chance to finally see what lay beyond the borders of Shaurone. Those last insisted they would take their pay when they reached the coast and drift away – at least that was the deal they had made with Soren. A few went so far as to raise a banner with the motto "show me the sea." Soren had an idea that they would stay on and were just being hinky and hedging their bets.

The camp had shrunk by half over the two weeks since Aeijys' return from Errilyn. Most of the Valdren units had gone home. Word had arrived late that day of wagons and riders nearing the camp from the Vallimran side of Norendel. Aeijys walked out to meet them, certain that this would be the settlers and other non-combatant units that her partner, Tagalong Smith, had left behind in the village of Green Hollow before coming on to fight.

Tension threaded Aeijys as she walked, drawn irresistibly by the knowledge that her lover and ma'aramlasah – wombmother – to her children would be with them. She loved the royal firebrand, Tamlestari – more than twenty years her junior – with all of her heart just as she did Josiah. Fearing for Tamlestari's safety and that of the children she carried, Aeijys had resorted to driving the young woman off with harsh words before going on to battle her traitorous sister, Margren. Aeijys had sent letters to Tamlestari, apologizing, explaining, and praying that she could be forgiven for her words and actions. This was not the first time she had written letters to those she loved: She had written them to Brendorn and Ladonys, but never sent them. At least this time she had had the courage to see those letters to Tamlestari go out. Aeijys wanted desperately to avoid the repeating the mistakes she had made in her marriage. She had heard nothing back and, although Tagalong had kept telling her that Tamlestari understood, Aeijys still felt a strong undercurrent of trepidation as she watched the wagons and outriders nearing.

Sighing heavily, Aeijys hugged herself to stop the trembling in her body. She had changed physically; only the lines of her face remained the same.

The first dark-skinned, black-haired Sharani outrider reached her and Aeijys gave a sharp gasp of surprise. "Blackbird?"

The horse knelt on command, allowing the crippled knight to slide heavily from the saddle, dragging a near useless left leg across. She caught the limb with her hand, swinging it the last small distance to the ground. The horse was amazingly well trained, considering that the woman had just dismounted from the non-standard side. She gave it a command and the horse rose to its feet. Then she turned to Aeijys. "Do

I know you?"

Blackbird frowned, limping forward and staring hard, her thick eyebrows pulled nearly together. Their eyes met, held for an instant, and then Blackbird hurried to throw her arms around her. "Aejys! As I live and breathe! When we thought you were dead..."

"I know." Aejys drew away, holding her at arms length to get a better look at her. She had not seen Blackbird in eight years. Her heart brimmed to overflowing with a sensation of warm, remembered contentment from the better times of her childhood before her sister's madness. And then, like a snuffed candle, the pleasant feelings were gone. Her effort to cling to them foundered before that tiny flash of Margren following on their heels. She wondered if she would ever be truly free of the nightmares, then shook herself loose so that she would not ruin it for Blackbird.

"Watch this," Blackbird said eagerly, lifted her damaged right arm and wiggled the fingers. "It works. I haven't much strength in it yet, but...it works."

Blackbird had lost the use of her right hand and arm, as well as her left leg, saving Aejys' ma'aram from an assassin more than ten years ago. She was a large woman, once heavily muscled, but now going to fat, with a scarred, battered face that still had fire in it.

"You've had a miracle, it seems."

"We've both had."

"I hear you have seven kids these days."

"Yeah and you've only got..." she started to say three in a smug, sassy manner; but caught herself, Aejys' daughter Laeoli was dead, "Two. Came early, but they're healthy."

"Is Tamlestari all right?" Sharani – Tamlestari was part Sharani – rarely had trouble birthing, but it did happen if enough physical stress had been suffered by the mother beforehand, and they had all had a rough time on the journey to Shaurone with Margren throwing monsters and magic at them every inch of the way.

"Yes. She's back there with the wagons waiting to give you a serious tongue lashing."

Aejys' heart fell and she looked so unhappy that Blackbird thumped her on the shoulder. "Oh, get on over there, get it over with, kiss and make-up."

"You think she will?" Aejys sounded both hopeful and desperate.

"Gahhhh!" Blackbird gave her a shove, sending her staggering in the direction of the

wagons.

Aejys' wings fluttered as she kept herself from falling, found her stride and walked on. The first two wagons yielded no sign of the Valdren prince. Then she caught sight of her and almost lost her nerve. Her arms ached to hold her, her lips burned for a taste of her. Aejys saw that her pale golden hair had grown out at last as she traced Tamlestari's beloved features with a glance: the sweet triangle of cheekbones and small chin, the piquant nose, the slanted green eyes. She had her shirt open, giving suck to one of the twins from breasts hugely swollen with milk. The driver, sitting beside her, stared at Aejys. "Looking for someone?" he asked in first Jesmyrran, then night-elf, his mouth pulling together and his brows knitting as he tried to decide what she was. Then he repeated it in both Valdren and common, still getting no response.

Aejys heard him as from a distance, only half aware, her eyes lingering on the child in Tamlestari's arms. In a moment more the male's voice would cause the prince to lift her eyes from the child to see whom he spoke to and those green eyes would snare Aejys again. Her heart, which she thought could not possibly beat harder or race faster, felt ready to tear right out of her body.

Tamlestari's head tilted as her green eyes touched the azure of Aejys' gaze. She chewed the edge of her lip a moment, wrapped the infant up and settled him in a crib behind the seat. Then she climbed down and faced the king, measuring her in a dispassionate manner, as if she looked over a horse.

Aejys felt as if her legs would give. "I – I...uh...Stari."

Tamlestari whipped her arm back too quickly for anyone to react, her fist connected with Aejys' chin, sending the king sprawling in the dirt. Then she stood over her, hands on hips, tears streaming from her eyes. "If you ever do that again...do you hear me...ever do that again...I'll...I'll..."

"You know her, highness?" The driver asked, grinning.

Tamlestari glared at him. "She's the king."

He pointedly rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Can I get up? Or are you going to knock me down again?" Aejys asked calmly, massaging her chin. Her side hurt: despite her transformed body's surprising ability to heal, it was still sore and tender.

Tamlestari extended Aejys her hand. Aejys accepted it, getting to her feet. Tamlestari threw herself into Aejys' arms. "I love you. Oh gods, I love you."

Aejys wrapped her wings around them to hide their faces as she bent and kissed Tamlestari deeply, lingeringly. "I love you, loyal heart."

"I know," she said, her voice going soft. "I figured it out. Do you want to see the babies?"

"Yes," Aejs' face glowed at the thought and then shadowed as she remembered holding her slain daughter, Laeoli, as a child. Laeoli. She had been seven years old when Aejs abandoned her family, fleeing her sister and that deadly vow she could not keep. As Tamlestari placed the babies in her arms, tears started again from her eyes.

"You're thinking about Laeoli, aren't you?"

"Yes." Aejs sucked a breath as deeply into her body as she could, then let it out slow to master herself. "Come on, I want everyone to see them, to know they're mine."

Tamlestari beamed, following her to the center of the camp.

Aejs leaned close to Tamlestari, whispering in her ear, "Will you marry me?"

"Great grandmother will have your head on a pike." Tamlestari reminded Aejs of Queen Magdarien's threat to have Aejs executed for touching the prince last autumn. Their love affair had sparked a tremendous quarrel. This would no doubt spark another.

The Valdren, like many of the sylvan races, had a policy called "popu pryvè nahn gojyn." The dialect might change and vary the spelling or even the exact words, depending on whether you were speaking to a fae or an elf or a nordrei, but the meaning remained and they all had it more or less: it translated as "Publicly kept state secrets" and the gist of it boiled down to "do not tell the humans." Which was what Aejs ran afoul of when she fell in love with Tamlestari. Aejs would never have allowed herself to become involved with Tamlestari had she known the young woman was Magdarien's great granddaughter. At that time, Aejs had been a paladin who had fallen from favor with her god and ran a tavern in Vorgensburg. The odd thing was that Tamlestari had not known either: her ma'aram had wanted her raised Sharani by her wombmother, Geoa Odaren, Mar'ajan of Yarrendar in Shaurone and forced Magdarien to leave them alone. However, Aejs' stature and status had changed a great deal.

"So?" Aejs gave her a devil-may-care smile.

"Yes." Tamlestari gave her a look that danced with mischief. If Aejs was willing to risk it, then so was Tamlestari. She loved Aejs and when she believed her to be dead it had taken all the joy from her life.

Aejs strode forward and, spotting Tagalong, called her over. "Tag, do we have a herald?"

Clemmerick sat on the ground before the command tent. A half-ogre, he stood more than eight feet tall. The massive hostler had been injured fighting the stone trolls beside Dynarien and, although ogres had great constitutions, one huge arm still rested in a sling from where a troll had bitten into his shoulder and biceps. "Will I do? If I pitch my voice right, they will hear me at the farthest corners."

"You'll do," Aejsys grinned broadly. Everyone loitering or working straightened, several people came out of the tents, and a crowd began to gather. "Let it be known," Aejsys shouted. "That I, Aejsys Rowan, King of Rowanhart and Prince Protector of Vorgensburg declare these children, Ivander and Elynnis, to be of my blood, sired by Brendorn Amaranth of Vallimrah, wombed by Tamlestari Odaren Havenrain. I do also declare, on my honor most sacred, that Tamlestari Odaren Havenrain and I are betrothed."

"Anyone who says otherwise can be damned!" Tamlestari declared in a loud voice, adding in an aside to Aejsys, "You know, love, you're conducting this like a barbarian king of a crude frontier kingdom."

"I hate to inform you of this, but I am the barbarian king of a crude frontier kingdom. Do you have a problem with that? After all, when you met me I ran a tavern."

Tamlestari chuckled. "None whatsoever."

Aejsys turned to Clemmerick, "Now announce the news to the farthest reaches of this camp."

* * *

Josiah listened to the announcement and his chest tightened, constricting as if someone had put his heart in a vise and given the crank a solid spin. Aejsys had not declared a triading. They had been lovers since winter solstice; she told him often how much she loved him; yet she left him out. He felt hurt and desolate. Turning quietly into the command tent, he gathered his things into a rucksack and left to find someone willing to share a tent with him, which might be difficult considering his reputation as a sot.

Both Aejsys and Tamlestari were nobly born. Josiah was an orphan raised by a sailor in Vorgensburg. He had been born to nothing, raised to nothing, and had nothing to offer them. He had no right to expect anything from them. He could only become an embarrassment. Josiah had fallen in love with Aejsys when she was telling people she was just an out of work soldier never dreaming she was actually the Lion of Rowanslea. And now she had established her own kingdom of Rowanhart on the Blood Coast across Sophren Bay from Vorgensburg in the rainshadow of the South Talon. No, he had nothing to offer them.

"Where are ya goin?" Tagalong asked, seeing him emerge with his stuff. The remainder of her unruly crimson hair flared along the right side of her blunt face – all in all the outer was an honest reflection of the inner and Tagalong was hell on wheels at every opportunity. The left had been shaved and bandaged; grim reminder of the trepanning that had saved her life after a heavy blow from an undead creature knocked her from the saddle during the Battle of Errilyn. Grymlyken the pixie trailed along at her heels. The little fellow was all sharp angles, tough and nearly unsquashable, barely coming up to the dwarf's elbow. The healers and surgeons did not really want Tagalong out of bed and wandering around – they had come too close to losing her – but the dwarf was an obstinate cuss. When she became too irate at his hovering about, he simply folded his tiny cloak of invisibility about himself and continued at her side anyway.

His shoulders sagged. "She doesn't need me cluttering up her life. She has Tamlestari."

Tagalong followed him with her head tilted and frowning as he went looking for the quartermaster. Born Gaertrudin Angtraden, she gained the name Tagalong Smith with exactly this kind of behavior: following nosily after someone, asking questions. "She loves ya. I think she made the wrong decision tyin' up with ya. But love is love."

Josiah sighed heavily. "I'm not good enough for her. When my two incarnations finally merged, I thought I could beat the bottle. But I can't. I may be Josiah Abelard, but I'm still a sot. I can't access my magic without alcohol."

Tagalong fell silent for a long time, still following him. "Know whut yer sayin'. Brendorn was quality, impoverished by circumstances, but noble. Ladonys was the last of the Vehayan Dovanes. Aluintrei branch of the family ... long story. Whut are ya? So much nothin?"

"Tagalong!" Josiah said sharply. "You don't have to shove my face in it. I know what I am; I know what I'm not. I love her. More than anything in this world. I would never do anything to hurt her."

Josiah had never spoken so openly with her before. It was a surprising change and she did not know quite what to make of it. He had changed a lot since she last saw him in Shaurone, roaring drunk and frying trolls with a word. "Josiah, if there's anythin' I can do ta help, I will. Just ask."

"There isn't, but I appreciate the offer." Then he shouldered his belongings, walking quickly away.

Tagalong had discovered Josiah five years ago. She and Aejys had been living along the northwest coast for three years, mostly among the Kwaklahmyn villages before finally landing in Vorgensburg around the time their funds started to give out. Josiah, who called himself Josh then, was on the down side of a four year binge, unwashed, stinking, malnourished and half-dead, telling everyone about the giant archenwyrms

that sank his foster-father's ship just off the blowholes north of Vorgensburg and how he had washed up on shore, the only survivor. No one listened to him. No one ever listened to him. Not even when he was a child growing up in Vorgensburg – except for the shaman, Branch. One day Branch had sent Tagalong to listen to Josh. Tagalong believed the sot, took him to Aejs, and the three of them went after the beast. Since Josh was an accessory to the deed, rather than a partner, Aejs promised to take care of him for the rest of his days and she never went back on her word once it was given.

Josh was Tagalong's friend and the dwarf had a solid unbreakable, no exceptions allowed philosophy concerning her friends that ran like this: "It's okay if I mess with them, but it isn't okay if anyone else does. Period. End of story. Uh huh." Anyone breaking those rules was apt to find themselves facing the ugly end of her hammer.

* * *

"I will not allow it! I simply will not allow it!" Queen Magdarien shrieked, sending her ladies scattering. They had gathered in the west audience hall, a walnut paneled room with a comfortable throne chair before the high stained glass windows through which the westering sun threw rainbow shafts. A handful of people sat in the half dozen chairs, and her ladies, who had been hovering around Magdarien now stood along the farthest reaches of the walls in retreat from her legendary temper, which her great-granddaughter, Tamlestari, had inherited in full measure.

"What can you do about it?" asked Tehmistoclus in a rhetorical manner. The ancient, withered High Priest of Willodarus, rose from his chair to face the proud and outraged queen. He stood almost as tall as a Sharani. His sharp, penetrating eyes were a green so dark they looked black in shadow. "Set your army on hers? Start a war? She has two over thousand warriors and settlers with her. Furthermore, the Dancer has made her yuwenghau. I am forced to withdraw my previous objections to the match."

"You withdraw your objections?" Magdarien's voice lowered, softened in incredulity. Tehmistoclus had been the first to complain about Aejs' relationship with Tamlestari. Magdarien had gone so far as to threaten to execute Aejs for touching the prince. With stunning and unexpected suddenness she had been deserted by her most impassioned supporter in this matter; for months now they had ranged in mood together from angry adults "we will show that upstart Sharani noble!" to almost as playfully conspiratorial as children "then we will introduce Tamlestari to this young fireborn or that young hero and see how fast her head turns." Yet now Tehmistoclus had not only abandoned her plots, but also done so in public.

"You have not seen her, my queen. I have. She has become a wondrous creature, entirely sylvan. I did not realize there was yuwenghau blood in her lineage until now. It has been brought forth in its fullness. She is a king. And she will always be the

Lion of Rowanslea."

"Yuwenghau? Are you certain?"

"I am."

"I – I must think about this." Magdarien turned away from him. "I will withhold judgment until they arrive. I give them leave to pass through my lands on the condition that they spend a week here, in Green Haven, that I might speak with them both."

"Think long and hard, my queen, because if you misstep, the prince will defy you. She is a firebrand." He had good reason to know the last, since the prince had come storming into the temple last fall, taking him to task for his meddling in her relationships and, although he had not confessed it, had frightened him out of his wits.

* * *

"I want you to get to know Josiah, loyal heart," Aejs said when things died down. The words came without hesitation and in full confidence that what she said was visibly true and certain. "He has changed a lot. We've become lovers. If you find him acceptable now, we might consider a formal triading."

She handed Ivander to Tamlestari, and held the flap of the command tent open more so that her betrothed could enter first. A table with maps, several empty glasses, and a pitcher of beer on it stood to one side surrounded by folding stools and chairs, while a large bed with several chests at the foot of it took up most of the far side.

"He will have to have changed a great deal, Aejs," Tamlestari answered, looking thoughtful. When he had called himself Josh he had been painfully sensitive and conflicted. She had pitied him. She also knew that the drink was killing him and he probably only had a few years left – even if he stopped drinking completely, which was unlikely. She was a Reader, skilled at perceiving the workings of the body, with a borderline gift for perceiving the mage energies and, when she had seen that in Josh, he became terrified, running off with her boots on the beach. That was the image that stuck in her mind. Josh running away with her boots in terror. "He will have to have changed a very, very great deal. I cannot imagine you with him."

Aejs sat down on the bed, settling the sleeping Elynnis in the middle. She looked around the tent, then stiffened abruptly, her expression betraying surprise and uncertainty. "He's gone! All his things are gone."

"Where?" Tamlestari frowned. Josh was always running away. It seemed he still was. How could Aejs even suggest having a relationship with him? Even if he had called her back from the dead? What did it matter that he had all this power, if he

was still so emotionally damaged?

"Stay here. I'm going to find out." Aejys walked out into the camp. The central fire had been lit. Torches blazed atop poles along the paths between the lines of tents. She could not get past the emptiness invading her body. She felt hollowed out, that strange desolate stillness of a home stripped of its furnishings; her thoughts and memories echoed like the sharp click of heels in that vacancy. This was not like Josiah's previous disappearances: he had never taken his belongings before – it was as if he did not intend to come back. For the first time in years she remembered the note she had left Brendorn and Ladonys when she abandoned them in Rowanslea, now nearly nine years ago, and her steps faltered. This must be how they had felt.

* * *

Aejys woke repeatedly in the night, reaching for Josiah, but finding only Tamlestari. The fine wine of reunion now tasted like sour vinegar and felt as if it had been poured into a mouth full of sores. She slipped from bed careful not to wake Tamlestari, dressed and moved to the flap, brushing it aside and stepping outside to watch dawn spread across the distant mountains like a spiky orange-gold crown, deepening the shadows along the tree line by contrast. She wondered where he was, where he had slept. He did not have many friends, certainly not the kind that would have taken him into their tents. At least, if they had been in Vorgensburg Josiah would have had his boltholes to go to – some of those he had had since childhood. He knew all the best places to hide in Vorgensburg.

She found Clemmerick and Jumpfree sitting with Skelly. Clemmerick had his big blade out, whittling large rounds from a thick tree branch. He held the rounds in his left hand, the arm resting in a sling – a troll had taken huge bites from that bicep and torn the shoulder deeply, cracking the bones. The shoulder would heal, but never work as well again. The casual observer might not notice, but Clemmerick would feel it every time he lifted anything above shoulder height. It would worsen with age and arthritis would most likely set in, ogre or not. Aejys watched the way he moved, tiny nuances of pain he tried to suppress. Soren had asked her that day to wait for the Regent's troops who were even then breeching the south walls, but she had not wanted to wait and risk her sister escaping. Instead she sent Skelly and Clemmerick to break through into the castle yard and the keep, then into the Great Hall, slamming through every obstacle. She felt as if her rage and anger had crippled her friend as surely as the trolls he fought.

She said nothing to Clemmerick, vowing his service would be rewarded, watching him get the little wooden rounds right. Jumpfree painted them carefully either black or red and set them on a boulder to dry. Aejys watched for a moment before inquiring, "What are you doing?"

"Making checkers. Skelly size," Clemmerick replied, adding, without looking at her. "If you're seeking Josiah, let him alone. He'll come out when he's ready."

"I guess that means you know where he is?"

"Yes, we sure do!" Grymlyken poked his diminutive pixie head over the top of Clemmerick's pocket.

"I'm glad to know he's got friends," Aejs' voice turned soft as it tried not to break, watching old friends and new closing ranks to protect him from her and she did not even know what she had done. "Take good care of him."

"We will," Clemmerick promised.

* * *

"Josiah, you must tell her," Laurelyanne admonished him. The aging earthmage's sensitive affinities and perceptions were more finely tuned and wider ranging than those of the healers she worked with. She wore her heavy auburn hair braided back from her face and tied at her neck in a practical manner. White streaked it in broad patches. The weathered texture of her deeply lined skin betokened her love for the outdoors and the orderliness of her tent showed she could be just as patient with the indoors. Her almond-shaped pine green eyes regarded Josiah compassionately. Her three sons were dead and she found him slipping into that vacant space almost against her will. She ran one slender finger along the tip of her pointed ear in a thoughtful gesture, wondering what drew her to him so strongly.

She housed Josiah in her tent, although the second bed crowded it. On returning to Norendel, she had resumed living in her previous smaller spaces. She had two large chests, the beds, a folding table and two campstools. If he became any worse, they would return him to the healer's wagon. She dipped the cloth into the water, squeezed it out and bathed his face with it. Dynarien had called her attention to his worsening condition before he left. Aejs believed that the forced march to Errilyn from Norendel to attack Hoon's citadel had simply put too much stress on Josiah's wounded body. He had insisted on accompanying them and she had allowed it. He would get better for a while, stabilize and then the fever, pain and weakness would return. The healers were starting to call it a recurrent fever for lack of any other explanation.

"No."

"She has a right to know you are dying. Furthermore, with your shields deteriorating, your mind is vulnerable to any creature that walks by. I cannot protect you from everything, Josiah. I'm getting too old. Aejs has resources ... Lord Dynarien ... She could call him."

Josiah turned his face away, refusing to look at her.

"Josiah, please listen to me. You're not going to last six months. At least let me

consult the healers in Green Haven when we get to the capitol. Please."

"They ... must not ... speak to Aejys."

"I'll tell them. And Fusaaki when he arrives in the summer?"

"Same...conditions."

Laurelyanne's mouth tightened, her eyes going to the ceiling and then to her hands with a resigned tilt of her head. He had done a very foolish thing in his desperation to rescue Aejys weeks past. Wounded and exhausted, faced with a small army of undead barring his way to her after she had been taken by Lord Hoon, Josiah cast *mortgueir* . With that one a mage could bleed to death before he realized it; his body could sustain some fairly gruesome wounding and keep going until the moment of final collapse. It exhausted his magic and his life force, leaving nothing in reserve. If it had not been for Lord Dynarien, Josiah would have died there on the field when the spell faded. He knew the risks and chose to take them for Aejys. Unfortunately, the spell caused lasting damage. Had he been healthy to begin with, he could have eventually recovered to some limited extent. With this new damage, however, added to all his years of hard drinking and the rite that took the magic from him as a child, she doubted he would live until winter solstice – slightly more than six months away.

A friend of Lord Dynarien's from Imralon, Fusaaki, was supposed to meet them in Vorgensburg some time around the second month of summer. The healer was currently traveling in search of rare herbs and other substances. Lord Dynarien hoped he could help – but she seriously doubted anyone could. If only Josiah would let her tell Aejys!

Laurelyanne caught the subtle nuances, the differences in Josiah, in his voice, attitude and mannerisms that suggested his melding with Josh was not seamless. She had seen Josh nearly catatonic with depression, a frightened, troubled man who retreated from everything except his love for and devotion to Aejys. Josiah Abelard, the five hundred year old battle mage, was strong, self-assured and confident; seeing with a stunning clarity, keeping his own counsels and operating his life on a need-to-know basis. Yet he seemed to be slipping between the two in subtle ways, almost imperceptibly, as if they were moods or tiny reactions triggered by things around them. Most people would not have caught it, but Laurelyanne did and it worried her. His abandoning Aejys' tent without so much as a word in a moment of insecurity was pure Josh. Was his refusal to tell Aejys about his condition Josh? Or Josiah?

* * *

Three days after Josiah left her, Aejys saw Dree, a little calico cat, come streaking down the little rise on the northeast side of camp. She went to meet her, loosening her sword in its scabbard in case this portended trouble. Two ha'taren, paladins of Aroana, followed casually, as they always did. Soren, her general, had given those

orders: the king was never to be out of their sight, she was to be protected.

<My kittens! My kittens! I found my kittens! > Dree jumped onto Aejs' shoulder, sending wildly. The kittens were Aejs' nephews, to whom she had promised shelter and sanctuary from the dark forces trying to steal them. Dree had once been Juldrid, na'halaef to her sister, Margren. Dree was their wombmother, their 'lasah. She had become terrified of Margren and Mephistis and, after becoming catkin, fled from them with her kittens. Dree's human form had been slain by Margren; who thought to raise Dree as undead and thereby force her to lead them to the children. But Dree's soul had escaped to her liege-god, Dynarien, who sheltered her in a gem and brought her back as the calico. Dree would never be able to take human form again, so Aejs needed to find fostering for her sons, Wolff and Fauxx. Mephistis, their unholy sire, was still out there somewhere and would, with certainty, make another attempt to take them. They were mage-born, so they would need to be fostered to a mage. The first couple that sprang to mind was the sea-mage Skree and his mate Taun, both fine males in a stable relationship, having been married for over twenty years. They were Josiah's godparents. Aejs decided to ask them.

She raised her eyes and watched two score cats descending the small rise in stately procession. They ranged in color from deepest black to sandy ginger to bright marmalade. Dree was the only calico. A coal black cat, green-eyed, led the march. A pearl grey male walked just behind her, flanked by a black and ginger female. The black cat halted a few feet from Aejs, changing into a delicate cat-eyed being, four feet tall. Aejs dropped to one knee respectfully. The queen embraced her and they rubbed faces in the ritual greeting of chin marking. Dree had informed Aejs of the protocol.

"May you always have fish and mice and cream," Aejs said.

"May your table always be full," Queen Hah'nah replied in her purring voice. "You were well met indeed, King Aejs."

"And you, your majesty."

"We will dwell in your new kingdom, if you will have us."

"With a good will, you will have a place on my councils whenever you wish it." Catkin maintained a kingdom within a kingdom, dwelling unnoticed among the humans who mistook them for normal cats unless they knew how to tell the difference – or unless the catkin chose to show their true faces.

Hah'nah purred loudly in pleasure, turning to Dree who now stood beside her. "You are right, my minstrel, this king is a fine one."

Two brown cats came forward with kittens in their mouths, dropping them in front of Aejs. One was black, the other white; both had flame shaped orange patches on their chests that reminded Aejs of the symbol of the god Kalirion. It seemed odd to

see the children of two sa'necari and a human minstrel with that mark. She wondered if it could be chance or something else. The life-mages and the sa'necari were opposite sides of the same coin: the magics of life and those of death. The sa'necari had committed genocide on the life-mages of Kalirion. So far as was known, none survived. If the mark were not by chance, why would Kalirion mark two children born to his enemies?

<Wolff is the black one , > Dree sent. <Fauxx is white . >

* * *

Aejys found herself lashed to a stone bleeding table, stripped of her clothing and armor. Spellcords held her hands and arms in place, her wrists exposed as the bright arterial flow pumped through long gashes with each beat of her heart and into the basins beneath them. A chill ran through her. The stone beneath her felt cold to her bare flesh. An icy darkness shrouded the chamber and she could see nothing until Hoon's gaunt face appeared above her own, his breath blowing hot and fetid on her skin with each breath.

"You are mine," he hissed. "You were always meant to be mine. Abelard stole you from me. I have scryed him. He is dying. But he will watch you die first. And the children with him. Unless you accept my blood again."

"Never! I will destroy you!" Aejys began to thrash and struggle against her bindings, determined to break free and attack. Hoon's fangs entered her throat.

Light erupted in the chamber, white and burning like the sun. The Dancer stood as Aejys' side, swaying gracefully, her gossamer robes blowing in a private wind. "Begone, Hoon!"

Hoon lifted his face, Aejys' blood running from his lips. "No. She is mine!"

The Dancer began to stamp and spin, raising power, spinning it out like golden threads. Her voice rose in a mighty song. "You are wrong, Hoon. So long as she is worthy of the sword she bears, she is mine!"

Hoon felt the lash of her power and staggered away from Aejys. The Dancer's gold threads became thick ropes and whips, spinning and flashing and striking. Hoon faded into nothing.

The chamber changed, vanished. Aejys stood upon the shore at a place of wind-cut stone arches reaching from the cliffs into the sand and tides. The Dancer moved in a slow, almost hovering dance. "This was all in your sleeping mind. You must learn to ward your dreams. When you reach Rowanhart, speak to that shaman named Branch. Have him teach you to trance. When you have learned that, then we can speak in ways that you will remember more easily."

Aejys woke shaking and sweating in the wee hours of the morning. The tent flap had come open and flapped listlessly in the early breeze. She could not remember the dream, but she knew he had been there as she hissed his name: "Hoon."

CHAPTER FOUR

KING'S SHIELD

Aejys' first instinct, as it had been since adolescence, had been to wonder if something she had done had caused Josiah to flee her, especially seeing the way his friends had closed around him. When her sister, Margren, had turned against her, she had gone to their friends in a vain attempt to try and understand what had happened, believing that if she could understand it then she could make it better. They told her they could not take sides. Although she knew that Josiah's friends were far different from those she and her sister had shared many years ago, she chose not to trod that path again, shoving the questions and doubts into the troubles box in the bottom of her heart and closing the lid.

She felt satisfied that everything that could be done to track down and destroy the escaping remnants of Hoon's forces had been done. Her only qualms were that Hoon and Mephistis had clearly eluded her nets and gotten out of the valley. The last night before leaving, Aejys sat on the ground around the central fire near the command tent serving as sleeping quarters for herself, Tamlestari and the babies. Blackbird sat beside her, at her right hand, a spear that the crippled knight used as a walking staff laying across her lap. Tamlestari occupied Aejys' left, leaning against her, their arms and hands intertwined. Tagalong Smith sat next to Tamlestari Odaren Havenrain and Laurelyanne between Blackbird and Soren Deontamei, who was now Aejys' general.

Tomorrow they would leave for Vallimrah, whether Aejys had found Josiah or not. Although she had wanted him present when the time for answers and questions arrived, she knew that she could not wait any longer, she had been deflecting their questions for weeks. There were things she feared to ask, feared to know, and yet remained perfectly cognizant of the necessity of knowing. All of those present had known her for years, close friends, trusted advisors and comrades-in-arms – and for a king, the personal could frequently make or break whatever plans they made.

"Come on," Aejys said, rising, "we can sit around my table and I'll open some bottles of a decent vintage. Norendel has some surprisingly good wines. Once I get the northern trade routes going again, I'll import it."

Aejys led them into the tent and went to the table where she rolled up the maps and tied them, setting them aside. A small rush of pleasure went through her, remembering the miserable months when she could not use her hands – which had been shattered by her sister – and finding joy in the small things everyone else took

for granted. *Except Blackbird. Blackbird would understand completely, having received a miracle of her own. I will have to talk to her about it some time* . "So," Aeijys said, setting out bottles and glasses from her stash in a large walnut chest she had taken from the castle. "Where do we start the tale?"

"Guess I do," Blackbird said. "All of you here had dealings with Wilstryne Hornbow, so I don't need to tell you what she was?" Agreement slid around the table. Wilstryne had been, on the surface, an armsmerchant, but she had also been the assassins' guild chieftain for Shaurone and godma'aram to Aeijys' daughter Laeoli. "Our liege-god sent us, the Urchins and me, to Dragonshead to save a raven. The raven told us that Wilstryne's plan to have Laeoli run away to Doronar had been discovered by Margren. We hurried on down there, but arrived too late. Laeoli was dead, her body had fallen in the river and was swept downstream; Ladonys was down and Wilstryne dying. It turned out that Wilstryne's two eldest daughters had been murdered and replaced by shifters. That was Laeth and Sorrow."

"They must have been the ones who kept sending me messages that Laeoli and Ladonys were alive so I would not turn back," Aeijys said grimly, a knot forming beneath her ribs and in the pit of her stomach, remembering the pain of discovering that Laeoli, at least, had been dead before she even set out. Shifters capable of stealing another's form were very rare, yet some very high-echelon sa'necari possessed that ability as well. Mephistis must have brought them from Waejontor himself.

Blackbird nodded. "The raven accounted for them both, scoured the guild clean of traitors and shifters. We stirred things up in Armaten good and later in Rowan City, leaking the things about Margren that we only suspected as having been proved."

"Which is why so much civil unrest flared up," Soren Deontaramei said. The grizzled old ha'taren, paladin to Aroana, gave Blackbird a long, considering glance.

Blackbird nodded, offering nothing more.

"I guess the next piece is what happened to Ladonys," Soren said.

Aeijys turned to Soren. "Mephistis claimed he took mortgiefan from both Laeoli and Ladonys." She could not quite keep the edge of pain and horror from her voice. It was an obscene rite in which the sa'necari raped the dying to steal a piece of their souls, leaving their shattered ghosts to walk the earth in torment for eternity.

"He didn't, Aeijys," Soren said bluntly. "Trust me. Sonden would have known when he Read their bodies. Mephistis lied to hurt you."

Relief sent a light dizziness through Aeijys and she reached across the table to press Soren's thin, but still strong hand in mute thanks.

"Ladonys got better for awhile," Soren continued. "Then one morning she was just

gone. Sonden felt certain that they had murdered her, but could find no traces of how. He gave us letters of sanctuary and sent us on to the High Meadows to place what remained of Ladonys' household in safety. But we only got as far as Armaten. Baron Wrak declared martial law and closed the city. No one going in or out. So we were stuck there. She's Mar'ajan of Rowanslea now."

"That is for the best," Aejys replied. "I do not want to ever enter Shaurone again, nor for any of my family to either."

"What happened at Dragonshead?" Blackbird asked.

Aejys took a long swallow of wine and reached for her pipe, smoking for a minute. That tale was not something she could tell sober, maybe not ever: the torture, Margren shattering her hands, how close she had come to losing her soul in a rite of mortgiefan. "I died. Somehow the blade was broken. Nine ghosts came out and helped Josiah call me back..." Even muted by the Dancer's magic, the memories were almost too much to handle. She recoiled from them.

"Sonden thinks that since Margren made the blade, her death by it is what broke it," Soren said. "If all those blades were broken, think how many souls would be freed."

"There is a way," Aejys said. "Spiritdancer can break them. Should one be destroyed quickly enough, then the death-magics would be dispelled. A mon wounded by one would only have to deal with the wound and not the complicated death-magics or the threat of undeath itself."

A murmur ran around the table, mingling hope and surprise.

"Talons..." Aejys muttered abruptly, laying aside her pipe and taking another long swallow of wine. "I wonder how Talons fares. I would never have reached the sword without her. She's betrothed and seemed happy about it."

Blackbird's eyes narrowed. "Talons Trollbane? You know her?"

"I owe her my life," Aejys said, a smile spreading slowly across her face. "We all know her."

"Why do paladins all have such shitty taste in males?" Tagalong grouched, recalling the young male the hadjeeshyn paladin had introduced her to many weeks ago.

"She's the Raven I was talking about, Aejys," Blackbird said.

* * *

Laurelyanne rode to the head of the column, as they were about to march. "I've found Josiah," she said. "He's ill again. He's in the healer's wagon, has been for the last two days. He didn't want you to know, but I'm telling you."

Aejys felt her throat tighten and a weight form in her stomach. She turned to Soren. "Get them moving. I'll catch up with you." She turned her horse and followed Laurelyanne back down the line.

"There was so much he did not want you to know. So long as he improved I was willing to keep silent. When he and Talons rescued you from Hoon, he was already wounded and in bad shape."

"I know. I saw him fall and thought he was dead," Aejys said grimly. She did not add that that belief had been part of the despair and desolation that had overwhelmed her after her capture and ultimately led her to commit the act of blasphemy, which, in turn, caused her god to abandon her.

"Well, he seems to have come down with some type of recurrent fever and, since he's still weak from his wounds, it could have serious consequences. The healer thinks he may have caught the fever because the wounds had weakened him."

Aejys listened in silence as she felt the pressure of tears build behind her eyes and she fought it back. "Josiah. Are you telling me he's dying?"

"No, the healers don't think it's that bad yet. Seriously ill, yes. I'm overseeing his treatment. He wanted to keep this from you, daughter, because he knows you would worry. So many of us have warned you both that the drink was killing him as it was. I suspect he wishes to keep this secret because he has come to doubt your feelings for him since you announced your betrothal to Tamlestari."

"How can you be certain of his feelings?"

Laurelyanne gave her a bittersweet smile, "Because I have a solid maternal shoulder and little boys like to cry on it. Aejys, the rite and the drink have aged him greatly. He's only twenty-five. Despite having Josiah's memories, emotionally he's still Josh."

"I never dreamed he was so young. He was barely a man when he led us to the archenwurm five years ago and helped us kill it. I thought he'd grown old in drink."

"Well, now you know. So get back there, daughter, and set his mind straight. But don't tell him that I told you."

Aejys nodded, threw the reins of her mount to Laurelyanne and took wing. She did not understand why the animals never shied when she flew past them, landing on or around them. She suspected it was something auric. Aejys winged along the huge column to the center where the healers' wagon moved slowly along. All the most vulnerable units, such as the healers and the settlers and other family groups – all of the soldiers and paladins had brought their families since this was a permanent relocation to Rowanhart and Vorgensburg – rode in the middle, protected by warriors behind and before.

Aejys did not allow camp followers as such – no one "followed". Nor did she dump her auxiliaries at the rear to become sword-fodder. At need certain hard riding units could be broken off and sent ahead to engage the enemy or bring relief to her allies, but she moved at her own pace and on her own terms. "There are no such things as non-combatants," she always said. "the enemy is as likely to strike down a child as to engage a soldier."

Aejys landed softly, catching her hands on the roof as her feet touched the seat. The healers' ba'halaef drove. The young, soft-featured male gave her a smile of greeting, tilting his beardless Sharani face to see her better – they never had facial hair, and were smooth skinned unlike the hairy outland males. Aejys exchanged a nod with him, slid the hide flap aside and stepped in. The interior cramped her wings and she folded them tightly around her.

Josiah lay on the little bed along the left side, pale and sweating, his eyes dull. He turned his head aside as the healer, Surimee, tried to persuade him to drink a glass of brownish brew. Surimee glanced up as Aejys entered. The king extended her hand, taking the glass. "What is it?"

"An infusion of willow bark, feverfew and holadil mostly. The fever is recurrent."

Aejys nodded at the front and Surimee slipped past her to sit with her ba'halaef. "Don't act like a child, Josiah," she said sternly, sliding her arm under him and raising him cradled against her.

"Aejys?" his eyes focused on her for the first time.

"Tamlestari has agreed to consider a triading once she gets to know you better. But if you don't get well..." She put the glass to his lips and he drank it.

"Really?" Josiah brightened. "She said that?"

"Yes. But it isn't happening unless you pull yourself together." Aejys set the glass aside, took him fully into her arms, and kissed him. She settled him in bed, and then sat, holding his hand until he fell asleep.

Aejys sat for nearly an hour beside him, thinking. Taun, the little nerien healer who was part of her household in Vorgensburg, numbered Josiah's years at a handful if he kept drinking. His wounds and this fever had to make his condition worse. When they reached Vorgensburg, she would ask Taun to check him out again. Josiah looked so pale and weak it worried her. Laurelyanne had assured her that, while it was serious, it had not become life threatening yet. Could she have missed something?

If I could, even for a moment, have known so many would die because of that vow, I would never have made it. I would have killed Margren years earlier. May

Aroana, my God, forgive me. I've made so many mistakes.

* * *

Aejys dropped back along the column to the wagon where Tamlestari rode with the children as Soren signaled to make camp. Every warrior in Ladonys' livery wore a bit of blue cloth tied to their left arms as a sign that, while they had once belonged to Ladonys, they now served Aejys. When they reached Rowanhart they would all receive tabards and other symbols of allegiance. Aejys considered that perhaps they should keep their livery and banner. She would suggest that they give their allegiance to Ivander when he came of age and all the rest would go with Elynnis. That was a very unusual concept, since males in Shaurone could not inherit titles and lands, but Rowanhart was a new beginning and things could change. Unless, of course, she produced another heir.

Tamlestari was nursing Ivander as Aejys fell in beside the wagon. She could tell them apart easily, for Ivander's hair was dark brown while Elynnis' was black. Aejys rode for a long time in silence, happy to be close to them. Then a brief memory of holding Laeoli slid across her mind and her mouth tightened briefly.

Tamlestari must have noticed, because she said, "I miss her. She was one of my best friends."

"I never really knew her...what with the war and then my flight across a quarter of a continent. She was seven when I left..."*And fourteen when she died.*

"You bonded with her," Tamlestari pointed out. "She talked about you constantly. It's those first years that are the most important. It's harder to bond when we get older, but with children it's spontaneous. It just happens."

"If I had just taken them with me."

"No. Don't go down that path again, beloved. That way lays madness."

"I worry...what kind of ma'aram I will make. The gods have given me another chance...but I worry, Stari, I worry."

They found Soren waiting for them inside their tent, overseeing the young women setting everything up. One of them lingered at Soren's gesture, standing at attention. She looked familiar, and then Aejys placed both her face and the shortness of her hair: Maranya. Tamlestari, with help from a girl assigned to the healers, got the babies settled and joined them. Soren and Aejys moved to the table.

"So far, Aejys, you've been doing everything for yourselves." Soren said. "Acting like a regular frontier lord. I think it's time you started turning it into a formal court. Pages, squires and whatnot. Assign some squires to help Tamlestari manage with the heirs, young ones who can change nappies and cut throats at the same time."

"Squires... I never even considered ... a formal court... Somehow I ran right back into what I had run out of."

Tamlestari laughed and Soren gave a small chuckle.

"Soren and I can work up a list and make assignments," Tamlestari said. "When we get to Rowanhart we can add to the list and incorporate the rest of your people."

"For now, my liege, I have a squire for you personally. Maranya." she gestured at the young woman who came forward. "She was to have been knighted last spring, but life became complicated. It was delayed." Knighting was the next to last step before a young woman became a paladin and Maranya looked to be about sixteen, a year past her time. "Will you have her?"

"Of course," Aejs replied. "And when we arrive in Rowanhart I'll see that she's knighted." Then she leaned close to Soren, "Someone special?"

"My granddaughter."

"Who?" Aejs asked softly, indicating Maranya's hair.

"Ladonys was to have been my liege-lord," Maranya answered, with such an utter stillness that Aejs felt she peered into a great depth. "When she died, I shaved my head and cast my hair into the grave with the earth as we covered her."

Aejs felt drawn to her even more strongly than that first time in her pavilion, and extended her hand. Maranya dropped to one knee, taking Aejs' hand and pressing it to her lips briefly. "I am your mon, majesty."

"Rise and be welcome, Maranya Deontaramei." Aejs studied her a moment more, trying to discern what it was about the woman that cried out so strongly to her and failing.

Maranya rose with a quiet bow to her king.

* * *

Maranya stood in the shadows near the command tent, staring out into the darkness, listening to the crickets and the boom of bullfrogs in the scattered creeks. She had been certain that Aejs would see through her and reject her. The king was famous for taking her own risks; for refusing to ask others to take risks she would not take herself; for leading by example. Soren had known Aejs since the King was fourteen and felt certain it would be easier to persuade her to accept a squire to dance attendance upon her than a bodyguard to keep her alive.

Two wynderjyn nibbled grass nearby. Each of the creatures was unique in some

way, the genes never combining in precisely the same manner or to the same extent. Some had cloven hooves, some did not. Some had a horn no longer than a thumbnail; others had a horn as long as a sword blade. Some had true mind-speech, while others were like a whisper of intuition. Some were the comrade in arms you discussed strategy and tactics with, while others were that devoted, big friendly dog that would gladly bite someone's head off for messing with you. It all depended on how those random genes came out. But the bond was always true and the paladin got the match that was right for their temperament and personal needs. They were all large and strong and fast, serving equally well as both heavy and light cavalry.

Tovari wandered closer, finally dropping his blunt muzzle over Maranya's shoulder to investigate her shirt in search of a treat she sometimes carried in her pockets. She covered the soft white lips with her hands and pushed him away.

"Nothing at the moment, you rascal, but I'll get you something."

"What's a poor old mon to do?" Tovari made a sighing noise at the edge of Maranya's thoughts, which seemed to be half-heard in her ears like an echo. *"An apple would be nice. Or a bit of sugar."*

Communicating with Tovari had taken some getting used to since it never seemed clear whether she was hearing it with her ears or her mind or both or in some other fashion entirely. The priests had no word for it and called it simply the *third ear*. It was peculiar and only certain wynderjyn had it.

"You're doing it again, aren't you?" A young voice asked.

Maranya smiled, glancing to see her cousin hunkering beside her. "Bryngaryn, whatever do you mean?"

"Passing yourself off as someone younger."

"If that's what it takes to stay close to her. The Order has decided that we will not reveal ourselves before reaching Rowanhart, but the King must be protected. Deception is permitted when it will save lives." Maranya had the knack, largely through technique and attitude, combined with the slow aging of her relatively long lived race, to shift back and forth in seeming from sixteen to twenty-six, the latter being her true age. No one would have accused her of being too old for a squire, possessing that nebulous Sharani youth, unless you caught her eyes in an unguarded moment – then you realized that the fun and games and childish nonsense were all a sham and the woman had to be at least twenty five if she were a day. A paladin pretending to be a squire, Maranya knew how to play the game; and if it were humanly possible to protect Aejs from her enemies she would do so. She had been trained from childhood by her grand-ma'aram, in what proved a vain effort to protect Ladonys and Laeoli. This time she would not fail, even if it meant taking a blade for Aejs.

And always, she played the game and guarded her charge.

"Cousin, I worry."

Maranya sighed, pulled her niece into her arms and kissed the side of her face. "Don't. After all I'm not actually going to let her knight me a second time. That would be rather a demotion, wouldn't it?"

Bryngaryn giggled at her amita, "Yes, King's Shield, it would."

Bryngaryn had been confirmed into the Order two years ago against Soren's wishes. The members of the Order of the Hidden Shield worked in secret. They were the spy catchers rooting out the agents of the Hellgod, stepping into the paths of the arrows and the blades of the hidden enemies to protect their liege-lord. In time of war they formed units that were the elite of the elite, fearlessly accepting suicide missions. They tended to die young. But that was what they lived for: a glorious death.

* * *

"So I can still get in," Hoon smiled, his voice soft, seductive, sliding around her shoulders with the touch of his fingers along her back. "If I begin the dream as dominance, capture or threat it alerts the Dancer and she chases me out."

"Where are we, Hoon?" Aejs asked, rising from the table and crossing the chamber. The wall hangings showed scenes of lewd rites of death and sex magics between humans and strange creatures done in vivid colors. Her gorge rose looking at them. A huge curtained bed, spread with rumpled velvet blankets stood pressed into one corner with a small stand next to it. The center of the blankets looked wet and glistened in the flickering lights from the candles on the stand and the table. A breeze seeped through around the windows edges.

"My wife's bedroom. My son, Timon, and I killed her here. That's her blood on the sheets. We're standing in one of my memories. Slightly altered. Her body should still be lying there."

"Why?" Aejs demanded, feeling chilled and sickened. A woman murdered by her child and mate.

"Why bring you here or why show you this?"

"Both." She turned on him.

"Because in your dreams you have power, but drawing you into my memories while you sleep you do not."

"I will find a way to stop you."

"By then you may not want to stop me." He moved closer. The vampire was nearly as tall as Aeijys, yet seemed taller by his presence. He shoved Aeijys backwards onto the bed, into the blood. She had expected it to be warm, but it was cold, and jelled. It stank. Her skin crawled. It got in her wings, squished along her back.

"There were twenty one warring petty tribes with a common tongue and beliefs that became three kingdoms, Waejontor, Shaurone and Doronar. There were six of us who fled Imralon with my brother, Waejonan. We took wives here, founded cities, made children and lives. But my brother was not content with what he had. He had to have what I had also. My wife. Together they killed our children. I found Timon dying. To save him I turned him. Then we killed her here. Like this."

Aeijys screamed in terror. Hoon seemed larger. Her body smaller. Her wings were gone. She no longer felt the blood on the sheets because it was not there yet. She was now the woman in his memory. His wife. Whoever she had been. Another male held her arms, pinning her to the bed, tears of blood running down his face.

"Kill her, father, kill her. You know what she did! She called the little ones to her and held them while he killed them."

Hoon forced her legs open with his knees and, as he entered her, drew the blade across her throat.

Aeijys woke sweating and ran out of the tent. She sucked breath, after breath, after breath until she could still her shaking.

* * *

Wide green meadows stretched before them, scattered with golden flowers and small spikes of purple. Aeijys could see the smoking mountains in the distance where the fireborn bathed. Beyond them and to the north rose silent peaks in shades of purple topped by white, skirted by the deep green of pine and the spreading spring foliage of mountain ash. Deer faded into the trees at the edges, watching cautiously for the column to pass. Falcons circled, lazily riding the air currents, eyes sharp for prey flushed by the riders.

"Ya're awful quiet, Aeijys," Tagalong said finally, after hours of trying to get her talking. She wore a conservative hood and gorget, like her Iradrim cousins – whom she normally tried to distance herself from – to conceal the healing wound on the side of her head and had shorn away the rest of her crimson hair so that it did not look as strange and uneven. It would all grow out eventually, but she would have to comb it just right for the rest of her life or the scar would show. She had no memory of being knocked out of the saddle and thrown beneath the hooves of Aeijys' mount without a chance to even get a single blow in against the undead that attacked her. She had headaches, but they were becoming less frequent and less intense with time. The healers told her she should stop adventuring and think about settling down; that

if she took so much as another light tap to that side of her head it could kill her. It made her cross to think about it. Tagalong was still young and full of energy – piss and vinegar as her father called it. Just what would she do besides get incredibly bored if she settled down? What did they mean by "settle down" anyway? Find a male and spend the rest of her bloody days changing nappies and wiping noses? What kind of life was that for someone who killed a great wyrm, fought manticores, gobbies and undead? Uh uh. No way was she going to settle down. Tagalong fought off a wave of uselessness, her hand creeping along the edge of the scar. What was she supposed to do with the rest of her life? She did not need to worry about money. She had a bit of an education, but she was not the bookish type. Although, when she and Cassana had been talking about starting a school nearly a year ago, she had laid claim to all the books she had discovered in a hidden chamber of the wormhole and had them warehoused as part of her share of the hoard. If nothing else, she had a wealth of reading material and plenty of time to think about the rest of her life.

"I guess so," Aejs replied, staring out across the meadow, her eyes distant and reflective.

"Thinking about Josiah?"

"Mostly."

"Have ya asked Tamlestari yet about him?"

"Yes."

"Can't ya give me somethin' besides these short answers?" Tagalong demanded irritably.

"I haven't worked it all out in my head yet, Tag. I need to think for awhile."

"If yer thinkin' bout gettin' a kid from him, ya'd better do it soon, cause he ain't gonna last."

Aejs' mouth tightened, her lips thinned back, and she wondered who had been talking and what Tagalong might know that she did not. "What makes you say that?"

"Any fool can see it. He's sick, Aejs. Bad sick. Its worse than it was last winter."

Aejs did not answer. Tagalong was right. She could not deny the evidence of her own eyes. Taun had given him less than a handful of years if he kept drinking and, although he had now been sober for weeks, it began to look to her as if this was proving to be too little too late. If she wanted his child, it would need to be soon. But it had taken her fourteen years to get the twins after Laeoli was born. The odds were against her conceiving. Her eyes filled again, but she did not release the flood. That night she moved him into the command tent to share hers and Tamlestari's bed.

They would tend him at night themselves until his health improved – if it improved.

* * *

Aejys dismounted first, walking off with Soren as the company began to set about making camp. Josiah lingered in the saddle long after everyone else had gone, his eyes closed and his mouth tight. Laurelyanne watched him, sensing that something was wrong. The earthmage saw the way Josiah staggered and then recovered as his feet touched the ground. His mount, sensing the odd movement shied, crab-stepped away, and his hand, which had been resting on the saddle, abruptly had no support. He went to his knees, his face twisting in pain. Laurelyanne went to him, arriving in the same moment as Tamlestari. The prince reached for his wrist to Read him.

His head snapped up and he snarled at her, his eyes savage, "Don't! Don't you ever touch me like that!"

"Josiah, I was just going to Read you. Nothing more," Tamlestari said, trying to sound soothing. "I wasn't going to hurt you."

"I know what you were going to do. I forbid it."

Laurelyanne shook her head at Tamlestari, waving her off. She pulled the flask of medicine from Josiah's shirt and helped him drink. Then she held him, feeling his body ease.

* * *

Tamlestari discovered Josiah to be an interesting articulate male, gentle and skilled in bed. There was very little of the shy, frightened fellow, who had fled with her boots in Vorgensburg, left in his manner. Josiah constantly surprised her with a wealth of knowledge on various subjects that he could discuss at length as if he had been educated at the finest universities. He spoke Sharani in an odd dialect when he chose to. Aejys explained about the merging incarnations. That this was still Josh, only better. He had been sober from the first day she encountered him in camp. She liked him, but was not certain that she could love him as Aejys did. As his spirits rose in their company he started to get well faster and that pleased the young paladin and surgeon. Although only seventeen, Tamlestari had a lot of battlefield experience, caring for the wounded and dying. She could Read a body down to the molecular level if she chose to extent her awareness that deeply. She also knew herbs, medicines and various drugs that both helped and hindered healing.

The loveplay that night began between Tamlestari and Aejys with Josiah watching. Their bodies twining in sweet exploration, Tamlestari caught Josiah's eyes and indicated that he should join them. Aejys lay atop Tamlestari, kissing and licking. Josiah settled between their legs and both sets wrapped around him. He slid his hands under Tamlestari's buttocks, lifting her up a bit as he entered her, moving in a slow satisfying motion. At the same time he began to lick Aejys' well-shaped bottom.

Tamlestari dropped her Reader's shields and let her awareness sweep through both of them unnoticed. Aejs had seemed so worried about him and the evidence of her eyes alone was enough to make her wonder; and all her questions from the day he collapsed had gone unanswered. She felt certain that Laurelyanne and Josiah were keeping something from her and she suspected that it reflected a serious change in his condition from what it had been when she read him on the Vorgeni beach last summer. It was a breach of ethics to Read someone without either their knowledge or permission – at least as she was taught them in Shaurone. At that moment she did not care. The first thing she perceived was the incredible, vibrant health of Aejs and then the terrible disintegrating weakness of Josiah. He was dying and did not want anyone to know. The attacks were far worse than the simple recurrent fever which Laurelyanne labeled it. She knew then that there would not be time to discover if she could love him. She wondered briefly if Aejs knew, then the intensity of passion overwhelmed her and she lost herself.

She lay for a time, watching Aejs tease him back to hardness and then take him inside her, wrapping him in her legs, arms and wings. Her ethics as a surgeon warred with her loyalty to her mate: if Aejs did not know, it was not her place to tell her. If she told anyone, then no one would ever trust her again. They might even start wincing from physical contact with her, refusing to so much as accept the touch of her hand. She had seen it happen with others. A baby cried, followed quickly by the other. Tamlestari got up, gathered them to her and settled into the one large, comfortable chair she had brought along. She sighed deeply as she brought their small mouths to her breasts. There was so much to think about. Perhaps she should talk to a priest.

* * *

Josiah rode beside Aejs again. He carried a brew of Laurelyanne's in his breast pocket; it took away the burning sensation from his nerves and the feeling of his muscles crawling beneath his skin – residual effects of the rite that had stolen the magic from him as a child. Josiah had managed to stay sober for weeks despite the way his body and mind ached for a drink. Sober he was mage-blind and that hurt. But to drink would be to shorten still further his already terribly shortened lifespan. Aejs needed him. Mephistis and his allies and minions still hunted her. He had to hold on as long as possible to protect her. He had to keep her alive and that one thought kept him away from the bottle he carried in the pouch at his side.

Of late the pain had worsened. It felt as if lumps of iron on taut wires were being pulled slowly through all the arteries of his body from the soles of his feet through the balls of his thumbs. Sometimes when he stood still after a sudden movement the lumps seemed to jerk heavily into his forehead and lodge behind his eyes, settling with a sullen sickness. Laurelyanne now laced the medicine with pollonae, the raw herb from which pollendine was refined – pollendine, a pain-dulling drug so potentially addictive it was only given to the dying. He had not gotten so bad that

pure pollendine was required to ease him, but he suspected he would before the end. He wondered how long he would be able to hide it from Aejs. Eventually she would realize it was not some simple recurrent fever he had picked up. The last thing he ever wanted was her pity. Once she knew about his condition he would never again be certain of her love.

Even worse, how long before Mephistis and Hoon realized they could start throwing spell storms at her like Margren had that time in Vallimrah and he would not have the strength to stop them? There would be no more great magics for Josiah Abelard. If they hit him now with magic from one of the great rites he would snap like a twig. He had to hope that the only confrontations would be face to face. That he could still handle. He could still take one of them down with him.

"How are ya holdin' up?" Tagalong asked as her pony came alongside his horse.

"Fine, Tag. Just fine."

"If ya say so. But that's not what I see on yer face. Ya look sick."

Josiah gave a long, almost hissing, sigh. "It's that evident?" If Tagalong could see it, did that mean Aejs could? Was that why Tamlestari had agreed to let him share their bed? Was the whole relationship based, not on love, but pity? He felt suddenly hollow and empty; acutely bereft and desperately sad.

* * *

Aejs' company reached Greenhaven, Capitol of Vallimrah, in just under two weeks. They camped on the common near the High Temple to Willodarus in a spreading circle of oiled canvas tents. Word had run ahead of them of their approach and Queen Magdarien and her court waited on the green beneath the gigantic Oak of Sorrows to greet them. It would have taken at least ten myn, hand in hand, arms extended to even begin to encompass that ancient oak. With the burial ground fanning behind her, Magdarien, Tamlestari's great-grandmother, sat beneath the oak in a silver throne chair wrought into wondrous shapes of magical birds. Tehmistoclus stood beside her in formal robes of brown and green. Her courtiers lined the path to Magdarien in bright robes and gowns, their gaudy plumage contrasting sharply beside the muted hunter green and umber of the rangers stationed throughout their ranks.

This was holy ground, where they buried the greatest of their dead, and custom demanded that all important meetings such as this be held there so that the guardian spirits could hear and observe them. It was generally believed that the mage-smith founder of the Valdren race, Eldarion Havenrain, lay buried somewhere beneath the oak's sheltering branches, but no one knew where.

Aejs had left the others behind to make camp, while she and a handful of others – including Tamlestari, Tagalong, Laurelyanne, and her ever present squire, Maranya –

rode on to this meeting. As Aeijys dismounted with Tamlestari beside her, a rush of whispers swept the ranks.

Queen Magdarien was incredibly beautiful, straight small nose, high cheekbones in an elegant face with a full, shapely mouth. Her large, faintly slanting green eyes reminded Aeijys of both Kalestari and Tamlestari. A simple circlet of silver held her long hair in place. "There is no denying this thing, Tehmistoclus," Magdarien murmured to the High Priest. "She is magnificent." Then she sighed. "I did not wish it so, but it is. I withdraw my objections to her. My one regret is that she is not a man, for then I would steal her away."

Then the Valdren Queen rose from her seat and greeted the King of Rowanhart as an equal.

* * *

The creature watched the hated ones cross the green from their camp to the two story white house with the brown trim. There they were – the hated ones who had made It touch the blade. It had not wanted to touch the blade. The blade... It hissed at the thought of it, sound passing through Its cold lips. It was such a beautiful blade. It drew the blade, Its bloody violet eyes caressing the lines of it: the hilt of blackened bone, glazed with a transparent crimson, etched with runes of darkness that were continued along the blood groove of the glittering silver metal. It had felt both terrified and fascinated by the blade, which seemed to call to It. "Pick me up. Pick me up" And then It had. The blade had changed It and they had killed It because of it. Their nearness had awakened It from the shallow grave in which the guildsmyn left It. The blade sang to It. The old priest had not known how to destroy the blade, so he had placed it in the temple cellars in a locked box. There were many evil artifacts and demon-blades secured in chests, sealed by keys, heavy chains, and magic – things which those who made the blade coveted. The undead thing had crept through the grounds, climbed in through a window and stolen the box. A young priest had discovered It leaving the gardens. It killed the priest, dragging his body down into the woods where It sat on Its grave and ate him. The more It ate, the less rotted It became. Mostly It ate small creatures, dragging them out of their burrows, sucking the life from them and then devouring their still quivering flesh. It had eaten people, but not often. The blade told It not to, that that would bring hunters looking for It; hunters who would destroy It and take the blade. It could not bear the thought of anyone else possessing the blade...Its wondrous blade...belovèd blade.

The most hated one had changed much: she now had wings and a different coloring, but It knew her. This time It would destroy her. The blade glittered in the belt It had taken from the priest.

* * *

Aejys, Tamlestari and Josiah had elected to stay in Laurelyanne's home, politely declining Queen Magdarien's offer for them to lodge in the palace during their stay in Greenhaven. Laurelyanne's sister had tended the place in her absence and the gardens were still as lovely as they had been when she left early last fall. They crossed the green to the tall, two-story house, white with brown trim. Maranya, Tagalong and Clemmerick followed them everywhere like patient shadows, determined to keep them safe. The huge ogre threw a large shadow beneath the silvery light from the full moon, which always seemed brighter in Vallimrah. As he moved to the door, his quick ears heard a rustling in the bushes beside the house. He immediately stepped into them, hunting for the thing he had heard.

"Don't trample my flowers!" Laurelyanne shouted.

"I heard something!" The ogre replied.

Laurelyanne spun about with surprising quickness for her age. "Get them inside, now!" She ordered Maranya.

The loyal dissembler immediately shoved Aejys through the door, drew her blades and moved between Tamlestari and whatever was out there. Josiah reached for the ever-present flask of whiskey in his pocket and Laurelyanne stopped him. "We can handle it. Get inside."

Josiah obeyed, following Tamlestari into the house and closing the door.

"Did you find it?" Laurelyanne called.

Tagalong shook her head. "Naw. Try again when it's daylight."

* * *

It cursed softly as It ran. Pieces of Its rotted flesh had been left behind, caught on the bushes that Clemmerick had flushed It from – they would know what It was. It knew every hiding place through the forest city and the ogre could not catch It. As morning dawned It settled again to think on the churned earth that had been Its shallow grave.

* * *

Tagalong and some of the Valdren scouts that served Tamlestari searched the bushes around Laurelyanne's house the next day. Clemmerick posted himself on the doorstep with his halberd in the crook of his arm. Sitting down he was taller than most myn standing. They found bits of rotted flesh and cloth caught on the edges of several bushes and instantly recognized the undead spoor. Once the evidence was found, Magdarien's rangers and soldiers joined in and a thorough search ensued of the environs in and around Greenhaven. They found nothing.

Aejys chafed at being kept inside with Tamlestari and the children when she wanted to be out and looking with the rest of them. However, Tagalong had threatened mutiny if she stepped a single foot beyond the threshold of the house.

"I'll knock ya down, king or no king, tie ya up and lock ya in tha cellar. Stupid puddin' head paladin. Period. End of Story. Uh huh!"

Throughout all of it, Maranya quietly remained in the background, staying closer to Aejys than anyone, even if it meant sitting behind her chair unnoticed. When someone did take notice she would give them a look of such little girl innocence they would pass it off, never dreaming that this was a woman who had already seen more than her share of battle and death.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOLY ONE

Aejys sat on the window seat, staring at the green that was slowly filling with people. Those of her soldiers who had not spent their bonuses in Norendel were already abroad, looking to spend that gold in Greenhaven. She had not yet seen a soldier who could hold onto her pay for long. The handfasting would be held tomorrow. Aejys thought about it with an uneasy guilt. So far, she had only told Tagalong about her act of blasphemy. Tamlestari was devout. Aejys wondered how her lover would handle the fact that she had become, in truth, what she had always claimed to be: just a soldier. Yet, now she was even less. She had become a rogue without a god mere months after fighting her way back to her god's good graces. Even soldiers had liege-gods, someone to go to with their prayers. Aejys did not. She filled with shame and distress. Tamlestari meant so much to her. Yet she had to tell her, otherwise she dishonored the young woman, and that she would never do. She had dishonored her enough – hurt her enough – when she drove her from her side with harsh words last winter.

Aejys watched Tamlestari curled up in the middle of the bed with Elynnis at her breast. *Gods, how much I love her. Please don't leave me. Please, when I say this, don't leave me.*

"Since Magdarien is determined to hold the wedding here and now, there is something I must tell you." She lit her pipe again, smoking for several breaths.

Tamlestari could see the tension in her, the clutching way she held her pipe. "Nothing can be so bad that I would reject you, Aejys. I have had many lovers, but only one true love and that is you."

Aejys sucked in another long, deep breath, trying to stop her trembling. "I could give you my reasons and excuses, but in the end they change nothing. I committed a

blasphemy and my god has abandoned me. I am no longer ha'taren. I am a rogue without a god and therefore unworthy of you." There. She had said it and felt the pressing of tears at the edges of her eyes. She fought them back. If they got out, and Tamlestari saw them, then she would never be certain of her lover's feelings.

Tamlestari shifted the suckling child in her arms. "If you would wear the gray penitence scarf again, then I will tie it on your arm and marry you anyway."

"I don't think the scarf would be enough," Aejs replied, sucking at the pipe as if it were a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. "I accepted Hoon's blood."

Tamlestari was horrified, but hid it well. "Before or after you pulled the sword?" Her voice was flat, schooled into emotionlessness.

"Before. I have much to atone for. And I'm trying to."

Tamlestari settled Elynis into her crib, and then wrapped her arms around Aejs, "I still love you. You will make it right. I believe in you." Her mouth covered the older woman's, her tongue reaching in to twine with Aejs'. Aejs' loins tingled with her touch. She lifted Tamlestari and carried her to the bed. As Aejs disrobed, Tamlestari shifted position, cupped her buttocks and slithered her tongue over Aejs' clitoris and then went questing into her warm wetness.

Then the tears came free and Aejs wept in gratitude and relief as she wrapped herself around her lover.

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It had been a fine day. Aejs walked with her arm around Tamlestari's shoulders. Tehmistoclus had formally blessed them by holding the handfasting in a quiet, private chapel with only Tagalong, Josiah, Clemmerick, and Laurelyanne standing for Aejs. Queen Magdarien and a handful of nobles, most of whom Tamlestari did not know, stood witness for the prince. Aejs felt complete for the moment – a warm, solid feeling.

Laurelyanne's house beckoned to them. A servant had gone ahead and lit the lamps throughout the tall, cream and brown structure. It had four bedrooms, three of them silent reminders of her three sons, now dead; her only surviving grandchildren were Ivander and Elynis. She had happily settled Aejs and Tamlestari in the largest of the three bedrooms, the one that had belonged to her eldest son; turning Brendorn's, the children's sire's room, into a temporary nursery for the babies. She put Josiah in the third bedroom. The aging mage felt glad to see that Aejs had informally triaded again, hating the idea of her being lonely. Aejs was the kind that needed family to feel whole. That was why Laurelyanne would be giving up her house to go along to Rowanhart and see that Aejs had her as a surrogate mother.

Tagalong and Clemmerick trailed them happily, grinning and exchanging

discerningly lascivious smiles at the thought of what would be happening in Aejs and Tamlestari's bedroom that night. The two friends were a study in contrast, both physically and personally. A beaded Kwaklahmyn headband failed to contain the crusty dwarf's unruly mass of crimson hair that was starting to grow out. Eight feet tall, patient, and thoughtful, Clemmerick Poetson had straight black hair that stayed where he put it. He was not handsome, but there was an indefinable quality that made him appealing – especially to the tavern-master Becca de Wythe back home, although he did not know it. His sloe eyes and frequently bland expression – though it was anything but bland at that moment – concealed a deep philosophical mind and sharp intellect. His complexion rivaled milk in its whiteness and large triangles of bright pink marked his rounded cheeks in an otherwise broad, plain face. Tagalong's face tended to be mobile and expressive which compensated for her blunt features and exaggerated her rosy complexion.

Tagalong fleetingly considered sitting under Aejs and Tamlestari's window that night and listening. Although she never told anyone, she was an accomplished voyeur and sneak, having listened in on some of the more physical aspects of Aejs' courtship of Brendorn. Now, *that* had been passion. No doubt about it. Tagalong seriously doubted that she would ever know anything to rival it herself. There had been a brief few weeks last year when she found herself courted by an oversized human mercenary named Jeord, but he had died before anything could come of it. She would never admit it, but she missed him. She had briefly fallen in love with a young dwarf named Hanni one year when she was fifteen, while he was visiting relatives in Armaten, which resulted in a year of impassioned letters after he returned home, but nothing came of it. Other than that Tagalong's experience with love had been limited to observation and a couple of unsatisfactory one-night stands.

Tagalong vividly remembered the day that Brendorn died and that day last winter when Aejs learned of the deaths of Laeoli and Ladonys – her small family extinguished by her sister and the sa'necari Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan. Aejs had seemed so utterly broken by grief, alternately screaming and keening, that Laurelyanne had spelled her glass of whiskey to force her into sleep. Now there was finally something to be happy about.

Maranya walked reluctantly between them. Every time she tried to get intrusively close to the newly-weds, one of the stalwart pair hauled her back, making it very difficult for her to protect her liege-lord.

Laurelyanne walked last behind them, determined to give the newly handfasted couple some privacy, even if the outrageous pair in front of her would not. She missed her son, but was glad to see his beloved mate happy again at last.

"I'll take good care of her, Brendorn, I promise," she murmured softly, knowing he would want her to be happy.

Josiah walked slowly at her side, his stride faltering now and again with growing

weariness as the drugs Laurelyanne had given him earlier to shore him up for the ceremony wore off. The old mage realized he had fallen behind and waited for him. Then she slipped her arm around his waist and let him lean against her as they walked, letting it seem as if they were merely two friends moving in close companionship.

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It watched from the bushes along the side of the house, bits of its gray flesh catching on the fingers of the wealth of new spring growth. The hated one. The hated one. When that one died, It would finally be allowed to sleep until called to the wheel; the spell of the blade would be ended. Hanadi Majios, the guildsmon chieftain, had insisted that It pick up the blade, as had the hated one, knowing what would happen. The blade had told It so.

The revenant crouched lower, slipping along on Its belly with only the stolen robe preventing more of Its flesh from sloughing off upon the ground. The earth was sweet and moist to touch. To sleep beneath the ground again and this time not to rise – what peace that would mean. And the price was so small, a single death. The creature reached the edge of the house and could see them more clearly now around the corner. The taste of Its rage was such that It wanted to rush from Its hiding the moment It sensed them. Yet It had held back. Let them come closer, close enough that It could reach them before the hated one could react and stop it. A flight of birds dipped down to the bushes, sensed the revenant's presence, and veered off. It looked up and hesitated, watching to see if this had been noted, then began to crawl forward again. It had served Aeijstry's Rowan willingly and loyally, yet the hated one had allowed Hanadi to make It pick up the blade. The blade had changed It, taken control of Its body and made It a monster. They were supposed to take It to the temple to be cleansed of the blade's hold, but instead the guildsmyn had killed It; left It in a shallow grave near the river and It had slept until the nearness of the hated one awakened the blade again. The blade could not rest until It had tasted the hated one's blood, had taken her life. Then and only then would the blade allow It to rest again. *Rest. Rest. Rest.*

Aejys, walking arm in arm with Tamlestari, started down the little cobblestoned path leading up to the house. Now. It rushed out of the shadows beside the house too quickly for them to react, driving the blade deep and hard into the winged one's body between the ribs, twisting it to be certain of a kill. Aejys staggered, shoving her mate aside. The movement caused the revenant to lose the blade and It snatched at it to pull the blade free and strike again. The hated one still lived. The blade screamed in Its mind to be driven into the soft flesh again and again until the hated one no longer moved.

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Aejys caught the flash of the creature's rush in the corner of her eye as she kissed

Tamlestari's forehead. Then pain ripped through her and she shoved Tamlestari out of the way, staggering back and drawing Spiritdancer. The creature reached to pull the blade from her body and strike again. Blood spread over her white tunic and ran down her side. Adrenaline carried her past the pain. In a single smooth motion, she sprang back to get space to wield the sacred blade and severed the creature's head.

Of the companions, Maranya reacted first, arriving blades out, a heartbeat after Aejs destroyed the creature. Maranya, seeing there was nothing more to be done, sheathed her blades. Light from the house filled the yard and the paladin could see the blade lodged in her king's body. Lung wound. Her mouth tightened and she swallowed. *I should have told them to hell with it and stayed on their heels.*

Tagalong screamed and rushed in with her hammer drawn, but it was all over. The light from the windows played across the yard, glinting on the hilt of the blade in her best friend's ribs. The joy of the day vanished into stunned emptiness.

Aejys sank to her knees, her lips twisting into a grimace as she felt the death magics burn through her like venom and the drowning sensation of blood filling her lungs. She choked and then coughed hard, splattering herself and the grass with her blood. Tamlestari was at her side instantly.

"Oh gods. Oh gods," Tagalong's breath seemed to catch in her throat as she stared at it, knowing a mortal wound when she saw it.

Tamlestari recognized the blade and shivered. It was the seeking blade Hanadi had found on an orc captain last fall. It was supposed to have been locked in the temple cellars. Color faded from Aejs' face as she read her. Then she put her gloves on to protect herself from the blade's possession as she pressed one hand around the wound and drew the blade slowly from Aejs' flesh. If she could get to the wound in time, a cautery or tying it off would fix it, leaving Aejs missing half a lung, but alive.

Tamlestari started to bring Aejs to her feet, but the king shook her head. "Put it on the ground. Sword's length from me." She straightened with effort, coughing up more blood.

"Aejys, rest. Please. Let us get you inside."

"Put it on the ground!" Aejs growled through gritted teeth. "If I don't do this now, I'll die."

Maranya saw Tamlestari hesitate, drew on a glove, grabbed the blade from the prince, and laid it on the ground. Tamlestari started to protest, but Maranya pulled her aside.

Aejys raised her sword with both hands and brought it down across the seeking-blade. The blade shattered. White mist with silver motes flowed out of the hilt, forming into a glowing ghost. The ghost touched the wound and the tear in her

lung closed. "Thank you, holy one," the ghost whispered and vanished.

Color crept back into Aejs' face. She still hurt, but that was improving. The death magics had been dispelled with the destruction of the blade. There was still blood in her lungs, but no more seeped into it. The life-mage's ghost had mended it with power that had been sealed into the blade with her. Aejs doubled over coughing to bring it up. Maranya and Tamlestari supported her shaking body between them. The prince Read her again, discovering, to her amazement, that the severed lung was whole again.

"She's all right." Then Tamlestari turned to Aejs, asking, "What happened?"

Aejs leaned weakly against her; the coughing spell passed. "Life-mages ... last thirty years ... maybe more. Not just killing them ... putting their souls ... and part of their power ... on the blades ... corrupting it."

"Was that a life-mage's soul?" Tagalong asked, her eyes wide.

Aejs nodded.

"How?" Tamlestari gasped. "How did you know?"

Aejs felt shocky and cold, but it was getting easier to speak. "Josiah called me back from death...nine life-mage ghosts on the blade that killed me...mended the gut wounds to keep me alive. Destroy the blade quickly enough and the spell ends." The Dancer had aged the memories when she recreated Aejs: she no longer had nightmares and flashbacks, but she still remembered. She still had her regrets and a deep, chiseled in stone need for atonement and forgiveness from her god and from herself.

"Spiritdancer was forged to free souls from blades and the bodies of the sa'necari – destroy the tools of the enemy." The pain worsened with her effort to keep talking and Aejs fought to get past it. "Forged to...destroy Waejontor with...single blow."

Tamlestari started to shoulder Aejs' arm to help her rise and walk.

"I can walk," Aejs told her, drawing her arm back and staggering to her feet.

"I don't want you walking until I can get a better look at this wound," Tamlestari said, still sounding worried.

"I can walk," Aejs repeated obstinately.

A huge arm snaked around, pinioning her wings and shoulders as she was lifted up. "Stari says don't walk. You don't walk." Clemmerick Poetson informed her with stubborn patience, settling her in his arms. Arguing with Clemmerick was like arguing with a rock.

Aejys started to protest, caught the too serious look in Clemmerick Poetson's eyes, and laughed instead. "All right! All right."

Maranya gave a lop-sided grin at the ogre's back, trailing after them.

Laurelyanne stooped to scoop up the now harmless fragments of the seeking blade. She would talk to Tehmistoclus tomorrow, she decided. There was a large cache of captured weapons that no one knew how to destroy – until now. She heard weeping and glanced back. Josiah huddled on the ground.

"I couldn't help her," he sobbed. "I took three steps ... and fell... I couldn't get up."

Laurelyanne drew him into her arms. "It has been a long day. You're tired."

"Laurelyanne, Mephistis would simply have hit the Odaren's camp and possibly killed most of us before we even knew they were there. But my hitting Dragonshead made him nervous. The only thing holding him back now is knowing I'm Josiah Abelard. If word of my condition got out..."

The old mage understood then. There was both a Josh and a Josiah reason for the silence. "I think you could trust Aejys to keep your secret."

"I don't know. I just don't know." Josiah felt the craving for whiskey rise up "I need a drink."

"It will just make it worse."

"How can anything be worse than this?"

"It will quicken your death."

"If I can't even protect her, then what is the use of living?"

He had become fragile and vulnerable in ways he had not been before. The shields around his mind and damaged shaukras were failing and would be completely gone long before they reached Rowanhart. They would no longer prevent sways, triggers and coercions from entering him. Laurelyanne had no idea how to protect him, only that she must. Even more troubling to the old earthmage was an intuitive feeling that something waited in Rowanhart to take advantage of his disintegrating shields as if it had already touched him ... perhaps in a moment of weakness ... and caught like a festering splinter lodged too deeply to work itself out. Some nights, while he slept she had sat beside him, delicately probing for this psychic splinter with the needle of her awareness and found nothing more than an odd taste she had never encountered before.

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Clemmerick laid Aejys on the bed and then left. Tamlestari pulled Aejys' shirt and tunic off, exposing the wound. She opened her medicine satchel and began to clean away the blood, smearing an ointment on the wound before binding it up.

"I'm a target," Aejys said bitterly. "There is still so much danger ... so many blades and arrows looking for my flesh."

"We will face them together. Had I been with you that night in Rowanslea, they would never have taken you. I would not have let them."

"Or they could have killed you and the unborn babes and taken me anyway."

"I refuse to think that way. I refuse to give into despair or fear and I will not let you do so," Tamlestari said vehemently.

"I love you."

"I know."

* * *

Tamlestari climbed into the back of the wagon where she had stowed all the possessions she had brought with her from her ma'aramlasah's castle in the Yarrendar Mar'ajanate of Shaurone. She opened first one chest and then another, throwing things about, leaving them in heaps as she dug frantically. The attack on her na'halaef had left her frightened and angry, determined that no one and nothing would ever take her precious Aejys from her again. The attack had completely shattered the happiness of her handfasting day. The long, awful months of believing Aejys dead had been devastating. It seemed as if all she had done then was swing wildly between bouts of grief and anger.

Finally she opened a chest near the back, digging through silken tunics folded neatly, flinging them into more disheveled piles atop discarded mounds and found a long box. She held it for a time. It was not what she was looking for. However, it was something that evoked a memory so painful it compelled her to open it.

"Mei amita," she murmured. "If Aejys doesn't get him, I will."

Cassana Odaren, her amita, had been her surrogate ma'aram. She took an arrow for Aejys and died. Tamlestari opened the box. Inside lay a quiver and three arrows. She had dug the arrows from Cassana's body. The arrowheads were death runed. One was enough to kill with even a scratch. The heads were covered with black silk so that they could not be accidentally touched. Tamlestari had patiently mounted those arrowheads on new shafts, intending to kill Margren with them, but Aejys had destroyed her first. Mephistis, Margren's sa'necari lover, was still out there somewhere. So now the arrows were for him.

Tamlestari's throat tightened, her eyes narrowing with the threat of tears. She closed the box, setting it aside. She found what she had been searching for beneath that: a small casket containing Quadenlas, the solar disk of the fireborn, one of three linked talismans created by Eldarion Havenrain. The other two were a sword and a shield, which her ma'aram – who she had once believed dead – had not given her yet, though they were promised. Her ma'aram had lost half her soul in a rite of mortgiefan, but being of fireborn blood had risen as one of the great birds after her body was thrown into a Vallimran volcano. Kalestari could never take human form again, unless that part of her soul was returned to her. Until last year, Kalestari had considered it best that her loved ones, those who had seen her human body slain, not know about her survival so that they could get on with their lives: until Aejs gained Spiritdancer, the possibility, while still remote, of restoring her had not existed. That was another debt Tamlestari intended to pay. She lifted Quadenlas out, holding the golden disk with the image of the fireborn carved into its surface reverently in her hands for a long time before settling the chain around her neck. She slipped Quadenlas beneath her tunic, concealing it. The next time someone tried to harm her mate, she would be ready – very ready.

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"Tehmistoclus is insisting on seeing you," Tamlestari told Aejs.

Aejs immediately tried to get out of bed, but sank back at the sharp twinge of pain in her ribs. "Damn it!" She gritted between her teeth. The ghostly life-mage had had only enough power left to mend the lung, not to heal the wound entirely. Tamlestari had had a job of getting the bleeding stopped.

The prince nodded as she picked out a blue tunic and black trousers for Aejs. Then she and Maranya helped her dress. "I told you it would take a few days or even weeks for it to heal. Especially if you do your usual obstinate best to act as if you weren't hurt."

"Are you going to help me down the stairs?" Aejs asked, irritably.

"No."

"Then how the hell am I going to get down there? I refuse to have any more meetings in the bedroom like I did a year ago."

"Then you should stop getting hurt." Tamlestari poked her head out the door, gestured at someone, and stepped back. Clemmerick ducked his head to avoid banging it on the doorframe and came in. He lifted Aejs into his arms, carried her out, and settled her into the big wing chair near the silent fireplace, unneeded on such a warm morning.

Tamlestari was immediately at her elbow with a glass of wine that was liberally

spiked with an infusion of healing herbs, pressing it into Aejs' hand before taking the chair nearest to her.

Aejys knew what she had done and sighed. She sipped from it, returning it from time to time to the small end table. She smiled crookedly at her na'halaef over Maranya's shoulder as her squire snugged a soft pillow between the stuffed arm of the claw footed chair and her aching side. Maranya then stepped back to stand attendance on Aejs, as Bryngaryn arrived to serve Tamlestari in similar capacity.

Aejys liked being married to Tamlestari, having the children. They both wanted a large family. Her thoughts turned briefly to Josiah and a hint of worry came in her eyes.

Tehmistoclus, sitting across from her, wearing modest brown robes with no badges of office, misinterpreted the fleeting expression. "Your wound pains you?"

"A bit. Nothing I can't handle." Aejs abandoned the half-empty wine glass, taking out her pipe, filling and lighting it. She smoked thoughtfully. "What is it you came about?"

"Can you destroy all such works of evil as that one?" He nodded at the shards of the seeking blade on the long, low table in the middle of the room.

"Yes." This sounded promising. The more souls she could free, return to the wheel for rebirth, the better; especially since the Waejontori and their allies used only the most powerful souls.

"A large cache of such things is locked away in the temple cellars. Things that I had not the craft to destroy. Having seen one such get free, I would like to see them all destroyed. Would you consider remaining here for a few days or weeks – what ever it takes to accomplish this task – and destroy them all?"

"If you would grant me one favor, yes."

"Name it."

"Have your best healers tend to my mage, he suffers from a recurrent illness."

"Abelard?"

"Yes."

"Granted."

"Then we will begin tomorrow at dawn. I will require either a smith's anvil, or a large flat stone, or a stone table. Some hard surface to lay these things upon while I destroy them. I will also require someone of lore to explain to me what they did so

that I can recognize such if I come on it again."

"Tomorrow, then," Tehmistoclus rose with a bow and departed.

Tamlestari watched him go, and then turned to Aejs. "I sure took the wind out of his sails last time," she grinned.

Aejs nodded, sliding into less formal speech now that the ancient priest had gone. "Yes. And I'll be glad to see all that shit destroyed." She loaded her pipe again.

"Finish that first," Tamlestari ordered, sternly, with a nod at the spiked wine before she could get it lit.

Aejs rolled her eyes. "Yes, mother," she said dryly, deliberately using the common term, rather than the Sharani.

Heat rose in Tamlestari's cheeks with a hot word that went unsaid when she saw Aejs grinning.

Aejs sobered abruptly. "The more of those weapons I destroy, the more life mages will be born. Mephistis and his people killed them to put their souls on the blades, to twist their powers so that instead of giving life and healing, they give death and damnation. That was the fate of all of them."

Tamlestari shivered. "That is cruel."

"Yes." A look of ice came in her eyes. "I'm going to stop this. I believe that is why I was allowed to draw the blade." A spirit shiver ran down Aejs' arms and she knew that Kalirion had heard her and that the god smiled.

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The morning began with a cool breeze stirring the long white curtain and playing across Aejs' face. She reached for Tamlestari and found the bed empty. The aching in her ribs, as much as the cool tickle of breeze had awakened her fully. Josiah had participated in the first half of the night's festivities with them, before escaping to his own room to sleep. Somehow Aejs had ended up sleeping in the wet spot. She opened her eyes and spied a glass of something brownish with a piece of paper propped against it that read, "Aejs, drink this."

Aejs sighed and raised herself gingerly on her elbows, trying not to set off the healing wound off. She obediently drained the glass, grimacing at the taste of Tamlestari's latest concoction, and then laid back down to let it take effect. "You would think she'd at least put some honey in it or leave me a chaser," Aejs muttered. One of the drawbacks to being married to a paladin surgeon was that she could get away with subjecting Aejs to some continual and hovering harassment. Tamlestari had forced her to wait a week longer before starting this

chore, to prevent the wound opening up again with the exertion. She had wanted Aejs to wait two weeks; they had argued and then compromised. The aching in her ribs eased gradually with the spreading warmth from the herbs.

She eased herself out of bed and dressed slowly. Tamlestari was probably in the nursery. Aejs struggled into her hardened leather armor. Tamlestari had forbidden her the chain, saying it would chafe the wound. She was probably right. Then Aejs pulled her blue surcoat on and buckled her sword belt over it. At least they were letting her dress herself – she resented being coddled. Halfway down the stairs, Clemmerick ambushed her, plunking her into her usual chair in the sitting room.

"I am not – I repeat – not getting carried to the green!" Aejs declared in the sternest tone she could manage without actual anger. Then she caught sight of Maranya leaning against a wall in the entryway, arms folded, watching her, and sharing a sly grin with Tagalong. The dwarf seemed to be seriously taken with the youth.

"If Stari says so," Clemmerick replied quietly.

"I'm the king, damn it!"

Clemmerick grinned. "And she's your mate. That means she ranks you."

Aejs decided to try another tact before Tamlestari arrived and took matters out of her hands. "I would feel humiliated being carried to the green. You can walk alongside me and pick me up if I fall down. But that's not going to happen."

Clemmerick considered that. "If you're going to escape, you had better do it now, because I can hear her on the stairs."

She stood up and, this time, Clemmerick let her pass. He fell into step beside her, Maranya and Tagalong bringing up the rear. "She's going to be very unhappy with you," he pointed out as they heard her shouting from a window.

Aejs grinned. "We'll kiss and make up. She needs to let me have my pride."

"She did not have a problem with that before Dragonshead," Clemmerick told her. "Seeing you..." His ugly face tightened for a moment. "You need to allow us to be protective. We don't want to lose you again."

Aejs grasped his hand, squeezing it briefly. "My friend. My very good friend."

Grymlyken took that as a sign that it was safe to climb out of Clemmerick's pocket and the little pixie moved to sit on the ogre's shoulder, holding onto his collar. He did not like watching them argue, it made him wince and cover his ears. Back in the tavern he'd led Aejs' cohort of bouncers and bad language from strangers did not bother him one whit. However, listening to his friends go at it did. Every day he

promised himself that once he returned to the Cock and Boar he would never leave the tavern again. Ever.

Although only a little past dawn, crowds were already forming. Tehmistoclus had decided that the appropriate place to set up was the Heroes Field beneath the far spread branches of the Oak of Sorrows, since most, and possibly all, of the weapons to be destroyed were forged with captive souls that would soon be freed. Magdarien watched, sitting on the green beneath the Oak of Sorrows in the throne chair her servants had brought out for her. The smith and his apprentice settled the anvil in the middle of the path where the queen could see it clearly. Then six chests were brought forth by Tehmistoclus' priests and set in a line to the right of the anvil. Aejs would stand with the anvil between her and Magdarien so as not to block the queen's view. The crowd fanned out behind Aejs.

Aejs saw Tamlestari arrive, followed by a nurse with the babies and two Sharani squires – the presence of squires as opposed to "ladies," even female ones, confounded the sensibilities of the Valdren nobility, which in turn delighted Tamlestari. Tamlestari started toward her, only to be taken aside by Clemmerick. They talked quietly for a while and Aejs wished she could have heard what they said.

Then they laid the first blade on the anvil and it began. By midday, Aejs' hands and arms ached, and especially her wound. It caught painfully when she raised the sword and brought it crashing down on the weapons placed one by one, on the smith's anvil. Souls poured out of the blades, touched her briefly in thanks, and vanished. Some lingered long enough to exchange last words with the loved ones they had left behind when the sa'necari took them. There was weeping as well as rejoicing. The Valdren Queen recognized some of the freed souls, people who had gone missing or were found slain in unholy rites. It both comforted and grieved her, because, while it was good that they were freed at last, some souls were of people she had desperately hoped still lived.

Aejs smashed a long ugly sword and a man's ghost came free. He touched her briefly as the others had and then went to the sorrowing queen. Magdarien stood, shaking like an aspen in a storm, tears flowing freely down her proud face. "Lynkeios," she cried softly, "My husband ... are you at peace?"

The ghost's white lips brushed hers. "Yes. Now, I wait for you on the other side." His form misted away to nothing.

Magdarien stumbled, waved her servants and rangers aside when they came to steady her. She walked on. When she reached Aejs' side she went to her knees, wrapping herself around Aejs' legs, weeping harder. "I knew they had taken him ... I knew... We never found his body. You have freed him. I am ... in your debt." She mastered herself, sitting now at Aejs' feet. "Should you ever have need of my people or the fireborn themselves ... I will send them to you, holy one."

Aejys shivered. Holy one. They kept calling her that, yet she was still a rogue without a god. How could she be holy? Perhaps this was atonement for the mistakes of her past. The aching of the wound worsened into outright pain and she grew pale, fighting it back as she gripped Magdarien's shoulders, raising the proud queen to her feet. "Do not kneel to me. I am but an unworthy soldier. I promise you, that should you ever need me, I will come to your aid. And I will fight and destroy the scions of darkness so long as I have breath."

"This is enough for today," Tehmistoclus said, signing his priests to remove the remaining weapons to the temple and the shards with them. He offered Aejys his arm. "Let us go back to Laurelyanne's and let you rest." Maranya stepped forward, linking arms with her liege in discreet support, reluctant to allow others to note her weakness.

* * *

The wide terrace overlooked the sea, set on a wind-swept bluff. A pair of glass doors opened into an elegant building to her right. Aejys stood, feeling the cool flagstones beneath her bare feet; the soft patterns of beige and ivory swirled into pale oranges against the sandstone. She walked to the wrought iron railing, folding her arms upon it as she leaned to watch the gulls sailing in languid patterns across the sky. The briny air teased her senses. His fingers traced the lines of her back, along the curve of her buttocks. He licked her neck. She shivered, her body reacting to his touch against her will. Then she realized she had no wings.

"What do you want, Hoon?" She refused to turn and face him. Her loins grew wet.

"To talk to you. To make love to you," he said softly, stroking her.

"I do not want you, Hoon. I do not love you."

"You want me. You have wanted me and only me since we made love in Norendel."

"That was not love, Hoon. Besides, you lied to me. All newborns mistake appetite for love. I would have killed my loved ones."

"Not all!" Hoon snarled. "I have killed my wives. I have beaten them. I have raped them. But I have never eaten them. I have never turned them. I have never tasted their blood. Not even after they were dead. Nor have I done that to my children. Had I not found Timon already dying I would never have turned him. He was all I had left. There was nothing else I could do. You are strong. You will be like me."

Aejys walked around him, moving toward the doors.

"Do not go there," he warned. "And do not make me angry."

"If I go through that door?" Aejys demanded. "Will I see the bed and her blood pooling in the middle?"

"That is her bedroom." Hoon turned his back to her. There was now a small table with two chairs. He sat down. "This is the morning I killed her. Make me angry, and I will force you through those doors. You will find yourself inside her body again."

"And did Timon taste her blood?" Aejys shuddered at the thought of being forced to relive his wife's death, but she would not retreat. She would find some leverage to use against Hoon.

"No. Timon never ate his loved ones either. He did not have any left alive when I turned him. His mother and my brother had murdered them all. By the time he fell in love again he had outgrown that confusion of love and appetite."

For a moment she almost pitied, almost understood him. She had seen accepting his blood that day as way to vengeance against her sister. "Where are we?"

"You see Sophren Bay. I see Torment Lake. My brother named it. He liked to hold his summer rites on the shores."

"What was her name?"

"Amalthea." Hoon answered. "Her sister was one of your ancestors. Amalthea was very beautiful. I loved her... In those days this existence was a horror to me... she wanted immortality... eternal youth... she did not understand the price... the discipline it requires... she fed my children to my brother in return for becoming sa'necari when I refused to turn her. Your sister was unstable. Had you not destroyed her, I would have. Amalthea was unstable."

"Let me go, Hoon. Let me go." It was the wrong thing to say and she knew it the moment the words were out of her mouth.

"You are not unstable. You will be everything they were not." He erupted suddenly from the chair, knocking her through the doors.

Aejys found herself clutching a dagger, poised to strike. She stood barely to Hoon's shoulder. They were back in Amalthea's bedroom. The curtains were half drawn about the bed and bulged slightly near the foot. Aejys realized that Timon lurked there waiting to seize his mother and help his father murder her. Hoon grabbed her wrist as she tried to cut him, wrestling her backwards, forcing her onto the bed. Timon sprang forward, pinning her arms.

"Kill her, father, kill her!"

Aejys sat up in bed, shaking. At least she had managed to get some control over it in the middle. If only she had been able to break free entirely or turn it back on him. She drew on her clothes and stepped outside to pace.

* * *

Aejys sat in the little garden in the middle of the houses of healing, staring at the bright yellow centers of the feverfew growing in the sunny middle. The stone bench felt cool through her lightweight pants. Her wings spread behind her. Sometimes she forgot about them, especially indoors and bumped things with them. As much as she enjoyed them, their awkwardness bothered her. She was slowly learning to fold them up tight against her back without thinking about it.

The longer she sat, the more she worried. The senior healer had agreed to talk with her concerning Josiah. Laurelyanne had already spoken with the man, and told Aejys that there was no purpose to her speaking with him also. Yet she felt compelled to do so. In a small, desperate corner of her heart, she hoped that maybe something had been overlooked. It had been difficult to elude Maranya long enough to come here alone. The youth was determined, in light of the attack, to stay at her side with the fanatic vigilance of a devoted hound. Aejys suspected she slept in the garden.

The man should already have arrived for this conference and still she sat. Noon had come and gone. She was at the point of going in search of him when the slender sylvan arrived at last. He was an old, gray-haired man in pale turquoise robes, his face lined and worn by the centuries in this place.

"Holy one," he said politely and Aejys winced inwardly at the title. "My news is not good."

"Just tell me." Aejys' eyes went distant as she tried to control her fears.

"There is little we can do for your mage. I have made some medicines to control the recurrent fevers." He patted her hand comfortingly, settling on the bench beside her.

"You are not telling me all of it," she accused. "I can see how weak he is getting. He keeps having these attacks. They're hurting him. I'm afraid he's dying."

The healer tensed and Aejys saw the way he wavered in his eyes. "Majesty, there is no question that any recurrent and prolonged illness will eventually become life-threatening. However, I do not believe you should allow yourself to worry."

"You have not answered my question."

"I am not at liberty to answer your question. Talk to Laurelyanne and Josiah."

"Then he is dying."

"I did not say that. What I said was..."

"I know what you said!" She stepped away from him, spread her wings, and flew hard across the valley, losing herself in flight. She heard the "whoosh" of gigantic wings before she saw him. Skelly flew past her and circled. The dragon's white feathers with pastel tips in blue and mauve, glowed softly in the gathering twilight, catching the last, fleeting rays of sun and reflecting them.

"Have no fear! Skelevrathammon is here!" He roared happily, his long neck snaking around to grin toothily at her. It was a war cry of sorts, meant to encourage those he sought to protect. Skelly, a companion of the sword, viewed himself as a knight-errant, and had a serious penchant for dealing with and protecting children. Aeijys had laughed until her sides hurt the first day she watched him with the company's children climbing all over him, his eyes heavy-lidded in bliss. Skelly had helped Aeijys and Talons escape from Mt. Kaliridonna with the sword when the Jesmyrran, Firefinder, exploded the dormant volcano to destroy Hoon's army. Only a single Jesmyrran had continued on with the company, the others having remained to rebuild their shrine to Kalirion: Jumpfree, Skelly's buddy, was a teleporter who could move whole armies in a single bound. The more folk he jumped at a time, however, the shorter the jumps he could take. Jumpfree, a rather naive young adult, had taken Aeijys' army to the gates of Hoon's castle after Firefinder accidentally sealed the pass leading into it.

Aeijys started from her thoughts as fingers brushed lightly along her wings in flight. She heeled over and leveled out again, shaking her head. Where Skelly goes, can Jumpfree ever be far behind? Definitely not. A small smile formed at the edges of her mouth as Jumpfree shouted, "Race you to camp!"

Aeijys shot off. She had not won a race yet, but was too stubborn not to keep trying. The camp hove rapidly into view. The center was a wide circle, deliberately set up to allow for Skelly. She landed last. Jumpfree sidled up to her and gave her wings three shy strokes. Her wings fascinated him, having no idea how she could have gotten them since his kind did not mate outside their own, and whether they made her Jesmyrran or not. Jumpfree watched her walk away without another word, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side. "The king is not happy," he observed quietly to Skelly.

"The race?" Skelly laid his head on his front claws, curling up.

Jumpfree nestled against Skelly's side. "No. I see it in her eyes a lot.....and the edges of her mouth. The king is sad and I don't know why."

* * *

They made camp at dusk on a broad meadow scattered with golden flowers on tall stems that nodded in the evening breeze. Tomorrow they would enter the mountains

near St. Tarmus Ardren pass. In three days, if the weather held, they would reach the Monastery of St. Tarmus at Lorendon Crossing. Aejys had already briefed everyone in the column that they would be watched from the moment they entered the mountains. Flights of blue gryphons and the enormous blood bears of Willodarus protected the Monastery. The pass through the mountains was sacred ground and a truce between all living creatures was maintained along the road. There would be no hunting and no harm to the smallest creatures, even if they stole from people's packs and tents. No living creatures, no matter how large or small, were to be molested. Some of Aejys' folk understood this well, having come with her from Vorgensburg and crossed these mountains coming out. The Sharani in the van were too well disciplined to question her orders, and the Valdren knew about these mountains and the rules that governed them.

Returning to Vorgensburg and then on to Rowanhart was proving to be a far more peaceful journey than the ride to Shaurone had been with Margren throwing demons, monsters, and armies at them. The only thing ruining it was Josiah's health. Tamlestari sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed with her tunic off, the babies suckling her breasts hungrily. Aejys sat in one of the camp chairs, pulling her boots off. Josiah had not yet joined them.

"Aejys," Tamlestari said. "I've made up my mind about Josiah."

Aejys looked up from massaging her toes. A tremor of worry shivered through her. "And?"

"I will accept a triad with him. If either of us can get a child from him, I will carry it."

"Why?" What did Tamlestari know? There was an odd quality to her voice, a suggestion of sadness.

"He is the last of the Abelards. I would not see that lineage – that heritage of magic pass from this world."

"Is that your only reason? Don't you care for him?"

"If you mean love, beloved, the answer is no. But I do care for him in a way...and...and, oh sweet gods, he's dying. I read him. A month or so ago when we made love, I read him." Tears started in the young paladin's eyes.

Aejys went and embraced her na'halaef and their children, her own tears mingling with Tamlestari's. "How much longer does he have?"

"I didn't get a good clear Reading. A matter of months. No more. That much I'm certain. I'll probably not get another opportunity. I became suspicious—" Tamlestari began to explain and then the whole incident poured out. "I think we should try and get a child from him before he dies."

"It isn't as easy as it sounds, getting a child. It was fourteen years between Laeoli and the twins."

Tamlestari sucked in a deep breath, stilling the catch in her voice. "Seven of those years you were celibate. They don't count."

"He doesn't have seven years."

"It's too bad neither of us is bi-kyndi. Then we could just make it happen."

"I want to hold onto something from him. I don't want him to simply be gone from my life. I love him, Stari."

"I know." Tamlestari rose and settled the now sleeping babies into their cribs. "Some bi-kyndi can trigger ovulation in another woman with a touch of their hands. Surely in a company as large as this..."

"I'll discreetly ask around."

CHAPTER SIX

THE LETTER

Haig rode alongside a lycan named Olin who happened to be at the Chieftain, Claw Redhand's home at the time. It had required more than a little arguing to convince them to allow Haig to deliver the letter personally. They had initially greeted him politely and even allowed him to refresh himself with two of their nibari. Yet when he had produced the letter and asked about Isranon, all their faces had gone closed and expressionless.

They left the road at mid-day and struck a hunter's trace. Olin had two packhorses of supplies in addition to his mount and Haig suspected that the lycan had been headed for Isranon's camp to begin with. Possibly re-supplying it. The cool shadows beneath the oak and tamarack, sprinkled through with hemlock and shivering aspens, relieved some of the discomfort that arrived with summer. Although sunlight held no dangers for Haig, once the heat of summer arrived he always found his limits tested by it. It was the reason that their kind on the southern continent of Jedrua were almost entirely nocturnal.

"This reluctance to speak of the mon," Haig began and hesitated, catching the skeptical look Olin gave him. "Damn it, mon! I did not come here to harm him. I am delivering a letter. A letter from his prince."

Olin considered that and nodded. "There are those among his prince's myn who would harm Isranon. He is clan-brother. More to my cousin and myself. We have

many words for it. Fur-brother, spirit-brother, but always brother. Can you understand that?"

Haig shook his head. He could not get his mind around the fact that a lycan clan had adopted a filthy sa'necari. Lycans generally had an even greater dislike of the sa'necari they dealt with than the vampires. "No," he answered honestly. "I cannot imagine this thing."

Olin's head lowered and he gave a quick, reflective nod. "Perhaps when you have met him, then you will understand. He is not like the others."

They came into the open ground of a small meadow, which spread to the left and covered a small slope into more forest. To Haig's right, which he had not been able to see because of the thick trees and underbrush, stood a rocky boot of the mountain and a cave mouth. The things in front of the mouth and almost directly in front of Haig made his stomach tighten and reminded him of why so many of his kind disliked the sa'necari: it was a stone bleeding table, with eyes for the binding ropes and grooves to take the blood of their victims into basins. A tool table stood beside it. He could smell old death here, but nothing recent. Haig bit back a snarled remark seeing them.

A scar-faced lycan emerged from the trees with an axe hanging from his belt and a bundle of wood under his arms. His nostrils flared and he sniffed in their direction as he walked toward them. "Who is this, Olin?"

"Haig, once of Oakleigh, a vampire with a letter for Isranon. From his prince."

"Mephistis?" Nevin walked past them and laid the wood beside the entrance to the cave, before calling into it, "Isranon."

The lycan then moved to place himself between Haig and the cave. The vampire had never seen a lycan so heavily scarred, his nose looked like it had been broken twice and a slash crossed between his eyes and his upper lip. It had never healed properly and the lip was still half split. Only runed silver or kenda'ryl could have made those injuries. Lycans either died quickly or survived without a mark. They were on the bottom rungs of creatures that regenerated to some extent, but they still healed amazingly. Nevin dropped his hand to his axe as he moved closer to Haig. The vampire could tell that this one would have been more at home in a battle clan than among these farmers and shepherds. Haig would walk softly around Nevin.

"Give me the letter." Nevin extended his off hand to Haig. "I will pass it to Isranon. If you have treachery in your heart, you'll fight the whole clan, starting with us."

Haig dismounted slowly, keeping his hands away from his sword and dagger. "I'm getting the letter out now." He reached inside a pocket of his cloak's lining and pulled the letter out, passing it to Olin who carried it to Nevin.

Isranon appeared. Haig blinked. This boy was the dreaded half-a-man Bodramet was always bitching about? From where Haig stood he could not catch the scent of sa'necari upon him. Most sa'necari reeked of it to Haig's nostrils. A flute case hung from Isranon's neck, increasing his strangeness: sa'necari hated the sound of a flute. Isranon would be nearly as broad and heavy through the shoulders and chest as Haig when he finished his growth, which would make him a physically powerful male. He was dark like all Waejontori, but with none of the slender sensuality that Haig had come to expect among the sa'necari.

The youth glanced from one to the other. "A letter?" His eyes lit on the white envelope with Mephistis' black and crimson wax seal upon it. He reached out. Nevin stepped back to place the letter in his hand, and then forward again to stay between Haig and the youth.

Isranon's face grew distressed and when he raised it from the page to look at Haig, he asked, "Would you consider allowing me to return with you? My prince has need of me."

Haig smiled at him, flashing fangs. "My master, Prince Timon has said that any who wished to come to the Prince Mephistis' aid are very welcome at his estate near Minnoras. However, we are a cautious people and you must agree to our rules. The servants there are nibari only and not full meals."

Isranon nodded. "I can abide by that."

"Then gather your things and come." Dane had been right. This sa'necari was odd and that intrigued Haig. He seemed almost relieved when Haig explained that no lives were casually taken at the Minnorian estate.

Isranon crossed to Haig and extended his hand. Haig accepted it with a quick shake. It told Haig in their brief contact that the young male was indeed sa'necari, but so different. Haig scratched around his beard, wondering at what it was about him. Well, if Dane Jayce had figured the youth out, then so could Haig. Although Haig knew he was nowhere near in Dane's league when it came to power, he was keen in his ability to observe and notice things.

"You are not leaving without us," Nevin told Isranon, catching his arm.

Isranon smiled to them with a nod, "I'll have you. It is permissible with you?" He added, glancing at Haig.

"Of course, they can come." the vampire arched an eyebrow. "Clan-brother?"

The youth smiled guilelessly, as open as a book. "It is a long story."

Haig found himself warming to the youth in spite of himself. "I would like to hear it."

Isranon grinned at Nevin. "Shall we tell it?"

Nevin shrugged. "No reason not to," he said in that hoarse growly voice.

"Let us get our gear together and we'll tell it as we ride," Isranon answered.

* * *

Hoon stood in his study in Minnoras before the silent fireplace, his gaze fixed upon a tall mirror's gray surface across the room. He reached out to the mirror with his awareness, altering it. The surface turned black, developed a pattern of swirling motes of silver that slowly coalesced and cleared. Now the image reflected a woman with nut-brown skin and blue-black hair in a scarlet gown that left nothing to the imagination. She had delicately pointed ears and sat before the mirror in her own distant chambers in Creeya upon a dressing table stool. Hoon had dressed impeccably for this meeting in black velvet and blue silk. Command of the mirror magic was rare, but both Hoon and the woman possessed it.

Gylorean Galee, Queen Mother of the Blood to the Lemyari and creator of the sa'necari, gave him a thin smile. She spied Mephistis sitting in a chair to Hoon's right and acknowledged him with a tiny nod. Hoon had not approached her in tens of centuries.

"You come to me, at last, Hoon? But not on your knees? I know about the fall of your citadel. Many of your allies have fled to me. Granted they are mostly lesser bloods, but I am putting them to good use taking Creeya. I am busy destroying the guild. Can you say as much?"

Hoon 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."

"Do not waste my time on pleasantries, Hoon," Galee snapped. "I recognize the blood of my first student in him. Get on with it, why have you called me?"

Hoon straightened. He no longer remembered the pain of her fangs in his throat, but sometimes when he slept, he dreamed of the terror. It had been the same day his youngest brother, Waejonan, murdered their middle brother, Isranon the Dawnhand. From nightmare into nightmare. That was always the way it had been with Galee and was the reason they eventually parted. "A puzzle, Galee. 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."

Galee's laugh grew louder, more insulting. "Check the vaults, Hoon. That idiot god, Dynanna, has been raiding them."

Raiding the vaults? Did she get the one at Dragonshead? How many dangerous souls had she unleashed? "Galee, another thing. My prince suffers from deijanrael. He needs a greater death."

Mephistis would wither away to nothing unless he reclaimed his victim or took another of greater power. It would have to be a greater death for Mephistis, since Hoon had no intention of yielding Rowan to him once he caught her. No. She must be his and his alone. He had gathered all the spell components to create a death angel, a nekaryiane, the greatest undead of them all, and the only thing he lacked was Aejs Rowan or her blood. Only a very powerful individual could be successfully transformed into a nekaryiane according to the texts Galee had given him.

Hoon saw 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 – and then it was usually another sa'necari prince.

"Who stole it?"

"Abelard. The meal was Aejs Rowan."

"Was there a mortgiefan link? Why doesn't he kill her through the link?"

"It was severed when she drew the Spiritdancer from the altar."

Galee's eyes blazed. "You are fools! Both of you. That blade must not be brought into play. The wielder must die."

"We cannot achieve that goal until my prince is healed. To do that we require your aid and wisdom."

"You wish to kill a yuwenghau, don't you? I will expect favors, Hoon. Two favors from each of you."

Hoon glanced at Mephistis, who nodded wearily. The Waejontori prince was now in nearly constant pain, his powers fraying to almost nothing. "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 cached weapons from before the Renewal, when I knew 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 by way of the Master of Blood. Pay especial attention to a small box that says it cannot be opened except at my destruction. It is my legacy to you, Hoon, as my first born."

* * *

"How is it you have no nibari of your own?" Haig asked when they returned to Claw's farm.

"I am of very low rank," Isranon explained. "And of very little power."

"And that's why you ride with a pair of matched knives on your hips and a sword at your back? I've seen no sa'necari like you."

Haig dismounted and tied his horse at the rail by the water trough. Isranon and the others followed him into the house.

Nevin looked at Isranon curiously and then shrugged. They found Haig and Claw already deep in an agitated discussion.

"I don't sell my nibari to vampires and sa'necari. Horses yes, nibari no," Claw growled.

"It is for Isranon. This is a long journey. Several weeks. He should have one in case the bottles give out," Haig argued.

Claw stared over Haig's shoulder and the vampire glanced back. "I will sell one to Isranon, but Isranon only."

"You don't need to do this, Claw," Isranon said. "I ask no favors and I will not take one unwilling."

Claw laughed hard at that. "Unwilling is not the problem, I will have to put up with fights and pouting here for weeks because I would only sell one of them."

Isranon flushed and looked away.

"Do you have a favorite, Isranon?"

"Eustyn."

"You always did like both flavors, Isranon." Claws' eyes got an odd gleam that Haig could not quite decipher as he went upstairs. The chieftain returned with a young male, slender and around Isranon's age, chestnut haired. "Eustyn is yours." Claw handed the papers on Eustyn to Isranon. "Ownership documents, bloodlines, all his records."

Isranon looked up as Eustyn moved to his side and stroked his arm. The nibari had turned his head to expose his neck in the proper attitude to show his training. Isranon's flush deepened. "I've never owned one before..."

"We'll need to buy a horse and saddle for Eustyn," Haig interrupted them, sparing Isranon more embarrassment.

Then they settled down to a little haggling.

* * *

Hoon brooded for days after his conversation with Galee. He had betrayed Mephistis in Norendel, although the prince did not know it, by trying to take Aejs Rowan for himself. In a moment of despair she had accepted his blood and her god abandoned her. He had to reach her before another of the greater gods, the Nine, the rulers of the Great Pantheon, chose and marked her. That or stain her mind and soul, seduce her to his side. He had been inside her both as a man and as a monster while she lay bound upon Mephistis' bleeding table. Hoon, rather than giving her to him, had attempted to turn her instead. Abelard and Dynarien had stolen her from his grasp and somehow she has gotten the sword. If he could reach her before a god marked her, then he could still turn her, willing or not. Hoon had scryed her new form: She would make a nekaryiane, death-angel, a being that had not been seen in millennia – the last one having been destroyed by Kalirion at the end of the godwar that preceded the Age of Renewal. If he could not turn her, then he would use her blood to make a death-angel of someone else – but it would have to be a being of power for the transformation to work.

Hoon rose from his chair, stalking across his study with his brows knit. First he had to get that greater death for Prince Mephistis. Hoon suspected that the prince carried the Legacy of Waejonan. If Aejs managed to destroy the prince with the Spiritdancer or should a life-mage – if any still survived and he suspected they did – do so with his arts, then the magic at the core of the dark realm would die with him and the last remnants of Waejontor would fall. Hoon could not allow that to happen.

He wondered also at this legacy Galee promised him. She had tantalized him with it, giving him no specifics, but promising him that it would lead him to great power if he invoked it at the proper time and in the proper way. Already an obsession was forming. He recognized it, but could not stop it. Galee knew him well. Too well. He would not be able to stop himself from picking the box up just to see what it was. Hoon was a gambler if the stakes were high enough.

Hoon gathered what few things he felt he would need from the shelves and prepared to depart for Charas.

* * *

A backlash of power hit the prince as Mephistis and Hoon walked the corridor leading to the shrine of the Hellgod beneath the cellars. Mephistis screamed. "The blade! Aejs destroyed the blade." Then he dropped to his knees, cold sweat breaking from his face. He shivered, doubling over and holding himself as pain

roared through him.

"My prince?" Hoon gripped him hard. "What blade?" he demanded, concerned as much by what this could mean as by what was happening to the prince.

"Seeking blade. I forged it...uh...uh..." he gasped, falling onto his side.

Hoon lifted the prince, carrying him through the stone corridor. The damp stones, moss, and algae creeping along the base of the walls smelled slightly acrid. They turned into a room, the last one before the stairs leading down into the shrine. A bleeding table stood in the center, blood grooved with spouts poised above basins. A stone table stood close by, flanked with cabinets and topped with blades, tongs, and other implements of death magic and torture. Hoon lowered the prince into the only chair and went to the nearest cabinet, taking out a preserving bottle containing Sanguine Rose, poured a large quantity into a glass and pressed it into Mephistis' hands. Sanguine rose was a heady mixture of fire poppy and other herbs and chemicals in a troll's blood base – an incredibly addictive cocktail, but the only thing strong enough to ease the prince.

Mephistis drank it down. The pain receded. "She's killing me."

"I can delay no longer. I must go and retrieve the weapons from Galee's cache. My people will care for you here." *And the box. There was always the possibility of treachery when dealing with Galee. And yet, when it served her or the Hellgod, they also played true. The promise of the box called strangely. At the very least he would see it. So far he had proved her equal. What a game we have played, my mentor. What a game. Though I still don't understand why we play it.*

* * *

The estate of Lord Hoon lay concealed in a sweep of deep forest with the trees and brush growing almost to the walls in a veiling tangle. There were no guards in evidence upon those walls, yet Isranon felt certain they were there. The gates were closed, but Haig hailed the gates and they were opened. Eustyn cantered his horse to get as close to Isranon as he could, clearly disturbed by this place so different from the safety he had known with the lycan clan.

Isranon guessed that the walled estate must be huge. They passed barns and other small buildings set off from the long path that wound through a cleared area, lightly sprinkled with poplars and sugar maples, to reach the manor house. The house was very different from the brooding dark stone and brick habitations of the upper echelons and ruling classes of Waejontor. Its three stories of pale stone, mottled in shades of white and gray, boasted a lush roof-top garden and another story at the back that crossed the end like the stroke of a bold 'T', while the front was an ell. Towers rose from the four outermost ends. While the rear, which he caught small glimpses of, was a lush, wild garden, thick with trees, bushes and flowering plants. The entrance to the manor lay close to the right tower, which was where Mephistis

waited standing beside two tall vampires, royals by the look of them.

Isranon swung down out of the saddle. He felt an eagerness and joy at being back with the single mon who would never judge or question his actions as Claw had at the end. Even while he experienced a dread mingled with misgivings about finding himself once more among his own kind, a monster among monsters. He went to his prince, dropping to one knee and took his hand, pressing it to his forehead.

"My Prince."

"Isranon." Mephistis raised and impulsively embraced him. "My loyal, devoted Isranon."

The two royals exchanged glances at this, for they had not seen the sa'necari prince greet any of his people this way.

Isranon caught the edge of that glance, wondering what it meant, certain that this must be Lord Hoon and Prince Timon. It was nothing like what he got from the sa'necari, which was always spiked with jealousy and malice, at Mephistis' open warmth toward him. The glance was more questioning.

The vampires looked enough alike to be father and son; furthermore they reminded him of Mephistis, especially the younger one. Isranon might have thought the two men cousins, had he not known that he looked upon very ancient undead.

Isranon stepped back, indicating the two tall lycans standing behind him. "My prince, I would like to present to you my clan brothers of the Red Wolf Clan, Nevin and his cousin Olin."

"Clan brothers?" Mephistis murmured, smiling in surprise. "I hear a tale in this, my Isranon."

The lycans stepped forward and bowed.

"Olin and Nevin, I present to you, Prince Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, Prince of Waejontor. And this is my nibari, Eustyn, a gift from Claw and Haig."

Eustyn dropped to his knees in proper offering. Isranon flushed and drew him to his feet.

Again the two vampire royals exchanged glances at all this ceremony. This one was very different. He deferred to the prince. He smelled sa'necari, but showed none of their arrogance – pride yes, but not arrogance.

<How odd, father , > Timon sent. *<The others scarcely stood still for this. >*

<Keep an eye on him. I sense a game being played here. > Hoon sent back. His

mind-speech was limited in range and only reached to those he held close to his heart or had placed coercions within for purposes of summoning. *<His name alone is cause for suspicion. No sa'necari in their right mind would name a son for traitor to their cause. >*

<I will. >

"This is Lord Hoon and his son Timon," Mephistis said.

"Prince Timon?" Isranon asked.

Timon grinned, flashing his impressive fangs. "Some of the royals insist on that title, but I have never been a prince, in truth. Merely Timon." Timon gestured at the doors and preceded them inside. "I am certain that you must be famished by now. Blood or roast boar? We've recently brought in a supply of slaves, so if you absolutely must, you can have a full meal, although we don't like doing that often."

Isranon tensed, his stomach roiling in revulsion. "I don't take full meals."

Timon faltered in his stride and then started walking again. "Why not?"

Isranon did not answer. "If you would send me two nibblets so that I do not overtax them, I would find that pleasurable. Afterward some of that roast boar and a little wine, perhaps?"

Timon inclined his head, regarding him from the corners of his eyes. This one was odd. Isranon's name made him uncomfortable. He felt an immediate ambivalence toward him: attraction and revulsion. "It will be as you wish, you are our guest."

The vampire watched Isranon walk away with some of the nibari servants. His shoulders twitched suddenly with an odd touch of chill. *Yes, that one needs watching.*

* * *

A servant showed Isranon to his rooms, which were a large bedroom with a small parlor for receiving guests. He explained to the servant that Nevin and Olin would be nesting with him. Until then it seemed to be assumed that the lycans would either wish to have their own rooms or that they might choose to nest with the rest of the lycans on the estate. The servant appeared startled when Isranon informed him of the living arrangements, never having encountered a sa'necari that nested with the *wiros* – were-creatures – before. Mephistis arrived to speak with Isranon shortly after he had finished with Eustyn, leaving them drowsing from his feeding in the bedroom while he ate with Nevin and Olin in the parlor. There would be a large common herd here and Isranon felt relieved to know he would not have to tire Eustyn as much with his too frequent feedings. Isranon had not liked seeing Eustyn looking tired but game each time he reached for him.

"Alone," Mephistis said.

Isranon shook his head. "My brothers and I have no secrets. This is the same Nevin who mentored me when my father would leave me with the clan during his searches for new hiding places."

Mephistis' eyes slipped across Nevin's scarred face, finding himself drawn to it especially. "Kenda'ryl?"

"Yes," Nevin responded, his voice lisping slightly around the thickened scar tissue of the partially split lip.

Mephistis nodded absently, taking his flask of Sanguine Rose from his pocket and sipping absently at it. "So be it, Isranon. I wish you had not come to me. You were safer at the farm. My powers are fraying due to deijanrael and I am no longer certain how well I can protect you."

"I came because I felt you needed me, Mephistis," Isranon said, his brown eyes guileless and open.

"We will protect him," Nevin growled.

Mephistis gave Nevin a hard look. "From sa'necari? Bodramet and Gareth are here. Yoris also. And others. Already the talk has begun." This far from Waejontor he could rule his followers by power alone and he had seen the speculation in their eyes, the arrogance with which they had greeted him.

"I do not fear it." Isranon's head and shoulders took on that familiar turn of pride and defiance.

"Bodramet began to test me after Dragonshead fell. I threw him across a room by my power alone. I am not certain I can do that again."

"I am your man. My honor would be a small thing if I had not come."

Mephistis sensed a different edge in Isranon's voice, guessing at its meaning. "What happened with Troyes?"

Isranon went very still. "I killed him."

"Why?"

Isranon did not reply, retreating into a stony silence.

"Why?" Mephistis turned now to the lycans.

"Because he did not move on as you ordered him," Nevin replied, giving Mephistis the same edited account they had given the vampire royal on their ride to this estate; a collection of facts with few details – none of them intimate. Isranon remained silent throughout it.

"You are not simply my sworn man, Isranon. I swore to protect you from my own kind when I learned your secret. And from others as well. You are the only true friend I have."

"That is why I came, My Prince."

Mephistis' expression softened with resignation. "My Isranon. As ever...devoted." The Prince rose, walking to the door where he paused for a moment. "Walk softly, Isranon."

* * *

"I had originally intended on taking you with me, Timon," Hoon said, settling his carrying crystal into the pouch at his side. The vampire's face was set in hard, angry lines. "However, one of that idiot prince's little snares came within a hair's breath of killing Rowan a few nights ago. It was a leftover from his and Margren's campaign against her last year. A seeking blade that roused a revenant. Rowan is mine. I want all of Mephistis' little toys and agents identified, located, and collected. Put Anksha onto him. Once he's healed and of use to me again, I don't wish him slipping my leash. Handle the rest of it at your discretion."

Timon grinned, flashing his fangs broadly. "Yes, father. I imagine I shall rather enjoy this."

Hoon chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. "I imagine you shall."

* * *

Mephistis wandered the grounds, brooding as he did each day on the destruction of his beloved Margren by her sister. He had failed with her somehow. She had not been strong enough to handle the undead state. She had been too fragile. It had brought forth her wildness and insecurities to a degree he had not expected. The very things that caused him to treasure her in life, had led her to turn on him and refuse to trust him. Had she trusted him she would never have gone into the garden that last time and he would have been able to bring her out to safety. He should have taken her mind as he had Linden and Quelyn's in Dovane City. But he had never done more than an initial small binding to keep his love from eating his sa'necari until she emerged from her initial animalistic state into full consciousness as undead necari.

Laughter drew him from his thoughts. Mephistis heard splashing in the fountain and female voices. He stole silently to the bushes, parting them with long fingers. Gowns

and robes hung upon the lowest branches of the trees. Six sleek nude bodies, glistening wetly in the sunlight, swam and played among the carp in the artificial pool. The full range of possibility in the female form greeted his eyes: thick, heavy-boned and sturdy without being fleshy, round full breasts; impossibly lean and tall with angular sharply pointed breasts; an hour-glass, wasp-waisted, voluptuous buttocks and breasts; and a single tiny, fragile creature of such perfection that she took his took his breath away until she turned and Mephistis saw, tightly curled between the sweetly rounded apples of her buttocks, a tail! He gasped aloud in shocked surprise and longing, and then slipped his finger into the little circle it made.

The female creature squealed, leaped out of the water, spun, and slapped his face. The others fled, grabbing up their clothing and running for the house. She advanced on him indignantly, shaking her wet black hair from her delicate eyes, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "None of that, Oh randy prince, my tail is my own!"

Mephistis retreated through the bushes the way he had come, embarrassment written large on his face. She did not bother to get her clothes before coming after him, emerging through the bushes with twigs and leaves clinging to her nude body, making her look like a wild woodland godling. She spoke rapidly, almost running her words together as she scolded, her fangs flashing, her wet body glistening each time she stepped into a patch of sunlight.

The prince apologized profusely, thrown into utter confusion. Eventually she seemed to calm.

"Please, what is your name?" Mephistis begged.

She inclined her head, smiling. "Anksha. I'm Anksha."

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANKSHA

Mephistis asked everyone in those parts of the household he was allowed access, where to find Anksha and what she was. Most of them just shrugged. Even Timon appeared to be at a loss for words when it came to explaining the mysterious Anksha. The best Mephistis could discover was that she appeared to be some kind of pet, which Lord Hoon, who was far more widely traveled than Mephistis had ever dreamed possible, had found on a island, one of kind. The prince never noticed when he stopped thinking obsessively about Margren and started thinking with equal obsession about Anksha. He spent every moment haunting the grounds around the fountain, sipping from the flask of Sanguine Rose as he became progressively more dependant upon the incredibly potent drugs and blood, and several times heard her splashing and laughter. However, by the time he arrived, no matter how stealthily he approached, she was always gone.

He had almost given up when he heard digging near the wall and stole close to see what it was. Crouched low, just barely visible beneath a bush were two delightfully rounded buttocks and a tightly curled tail. Three possible approaches flashed through his mind: he could stroke her and probably get slapped again, he could grab her, or he could try to talk to her. Had his powers been less frayed by deijanrael and his awareness blunted by drugs, or had he met her in the wilds and she not been Hoon's pet, he might have simply tried to subdue her – that was not an option under his present circumstances. She tugged at his memories. Mephistis was certain he had seen her depicted somewhere. Could it have been upon the tapestries on Hoon's wall in the City of the Dead?

"Anksha," he sighed her name, half a plea.

"Don't touch it! My tail is my own." She cried, spinning and leaping over him in a single smooth bound that startled him.

Mephistis found his eyes drawn to her dark nipples as she bounced on the balls of her feet in front of him. His manhood reacted.

"Oh, so you like them do you, oh randy prince?" Anksha taunted him. "Well, those are mine, too."

Mephistis reached into his robes, bringing out a string of lapis lazuli. He had had to tell Timon about some of his agents in order to get gold sent to him from Waejontor so that he could purchase baubles for Anksha in hopes of luring her within reach. Timon had told him how she loved "pretties," as she called them. Ordinarily he would have been more cautious, but all he could think about was finding ways to get closer to the strange she-creature. She drew him like a moth to a candle flame and he could neither resist nor turn away from her.

She inclined her head, settling on her haunches to regard the necklace, reaching for it. "Pretties."

Mephistis sat down next to her, letting her take the necklace from his hands. He stroked her back while she played with it, discovering for the first time that Anksha was covered from the base of her throat to wrists and ankles in fur so short and colored so perfectly as to be indistinguishable from skin at a distance. She felt like silk. An electric charge rose from her skin, run up his fingers, along his arm and center in his loins. "You're so soft," he sighed.

Anksha smiled at him, flashing fangs.

"Are you alive?" Mephistis asked, unable to read anything about her in that touch. "Undead?"

"I am Anksha," she teased, lowering her face and watching him from the sides of

her eyes as if hiding her expression.

He pressed his lips to her shoulder and she slapped him.

"No nibble games. If I cannot bite you, you cannot bite me." Then she scampered away with the necklace.

* * *

Mephistis stormed through the garden followed by the three fluttering love-slaves Timon had purchased for him three weeks ago. They must have guessed what had happened to the last ones – only a complete idiot would not have discovered quickly that this estate belonged to the undead. He had touched neither of them since the day he placed that first necklace in Anksha's hands and ran his fingers down the incredible softness of her back.

He had dreamed all night of Anksha only to awaken to find all three of them naked in his bed. Apparently they hoped that when he woke to find them there he would respond to their presence. Instead he had ordered them from his chambers, but they fell to pleading and begging. He responded with blows, finally dressing and going out with them following. Mephistis became increasingly enraged. When he reached a secluded section of the garden he turned on the three women, ripped through their minds with a savage slice of power and singled one out. He tore away her clothes, forced her down and drew his belt knife. By then he was in an unthinking rage. He stabbed, cut and sliced until she was no longer recognizable, not even noticing the moment of her death.

"So," hissed a familiar voice. "If you do not want them, oh randy prince, at least do not waste them."

"Anksha!" Mephistis dropped the blade, turning slowly. Timon had made it clear that his father disapproved of violent displays in this place.

She crouched in the bushes, grinning at him toothily, then bounced close, pushing him aside to roll like a dog over the body until her nakedness was coated in the blood. "Did you bring me pretties?" She lolled her long tongue at him, flicking the pointed tip suggestively.

Mephistis inhaled sharply, reaching into his robes to bring out three strings of blood red carnelians. He swung them at her. She took them flicking her tongue and grinning. She sat still, letting him stroke her. This time his hands came around, trailing down her chest and teased her nipples. She leaned in and flicked her tongue across his lips. He gasped at the intense sensation. She rubbed against him like a cat.

"I want you, Anksha. Only you."

"You can't have me. I only want those I can bite." She scooped the "pretties" and

disappeared into the bushes, calling back from hiding, "Give those others away."

"I will. I promise. Anksha!" He called after her. "Anksha, you can bite me. We can play nibble games."

A throaty laugh emerged from the green concealment. "I don't play nibble games. When I bite someone, it's serious." Then she laughed at him and was gone.

Mephistis wondered what she meant by that.

* * *

"If you had to make a mess of it, you should have had the good manners to do it in the ritual chambers, not the gardens." Timon seethed. "The nibblets are all terrified!"

"I lost my head! It will not happen again, I swear," Mephistis said, bowing his head. "I can't explain it."

Timon sighed. "My father will return soon. Give me some time alone. I need to consider how to explain it. After all, I will take the blame if the household is in an uproar when he arrives."

Mephistis left, closing the door softly behind him. Timon leaned back in his chair, smiling smugly as a secret panel opened and Anksha entered.

"You're doing nicely, my pet," Timon said, stroking her head as she curled up at his knee.

"Anksha gets a treat?" she asked, slipping into the dialect of her childhood.

"Yes, Anksha. Go down to the cellars and take your pick. I'm afraid there's only one demon left. But we'll get you some more soon. I promise."

Anksha slipped back through the panel and disappeared. Timon shook his head, wondering again just what she was. His father has found her as a baby and reared her, having discovered her and her dying mother on an island. He killed the monstrous thing that attacked them. All they knew was that her name was Anksha.

* * *

"To His Majesty Baaltrystan,

King of Waejontor,

Holy Scion of the House of Waejonan.

Majesty,

This is to inform you, if you are not already aware, that your brother, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan is solely to blame for the recent coup attempt against Shaurone. He is further guilty of the murder of Meredouyn Dovane in the course of his flight to Hoon's Valley. He is a renegade and a traitor, acting without any cognizance or support from your majesty. Should you need to make this case with the Sharani Saer'ajan in order to prevent any further retribution being sought against our people I believe the attached documents should prove helpful. It should also be noted that Mephistis Waejonan is still accessing his accounts in our kingdom and I feel it would be in your best interest to seize his holdings and sever all connections with him for the sake of peace. I feel that such actions would go far toward mollifying the Saer'ajan and prevent another disastrous war.

Lord Martanni

Timon sanded the letter to dry it, then sealed it with the signet of his alias and handed it to the courier to be discreetly smuggled into Waejontor. Their guest was about to have all kinds of problems. Timon had just given Baaltrystan what he needed to make his brother the scapegoat for last year's little dust up with the Sharanis. Anksha would require many special treats soon. He wondered what his father intended to do with Mephistis in the end.

* * *

Timon heard the cluster of nibari arguing heatedly in a corner of the main hall, three females, and four males. He noted that they were all from the group that fed the sa'necari. Timon despised sa'necari. He could not imagine the nibari finding anything worth arguing over that involved them, unless it was ill treatment. So he went to investigate.

"What is going on here?"

A slender male, Auclos, immediately spoke up, "Jules and Eilwen are monopolizing Isranon. None of the rest of us is getting a turn."

"Does he ask for them?"

"No," said a dark-skinned girl, a nibari from Treth with a kinky cab of black hair she wore trimmed short. "We asked him. He said he would be glad to take each of us in turn. Yet when the list is posted it is always Jules and Eilwen."

"Why should you want Isranon so much? He's just another filthy sa'necari," Timon snarled suddenly. They were the filthiest feeders on death that existed. Once he had hated them all; but he had mellowed with the centuries to the point where he could tolerate them – a necessary adjustment since his father had uses for them. Now he only hated the memory of a single sa'necari – the one that left him for dead, forcing his father to turn him to save him.

"Because he's gentle," Auclos said. "He doesn't treat us like cattle. He's better to us even than you royals. He makes love to us."

Timon halted in mid-thought. The more he heard about Isranon, the more of an enigma this sa'necari became. "I will have a talk with Isranon and if his preferences are as you say, then I will see that the rotation is adjusted."

The rosters were posted in the kitchen. The nibari, like their masters, were literate. It was a Sharani custom, which Timon had adopted. All children learned to read by painstakingly copying books. It made his household run smoother than most, since they could post rosters for duties even among the kitchen nibari. Even more fortuitously, the best of the copied books could be sold and by age ten the nibari could copy as well as a monk.

Everyone looked happy except Jules and Eilwen.

* * *

Isranon found Mephistis wandering the gardens with a string of garnet in his hands, poking under bushes and around trees, calling "Anksha." He wondered what kind of a mon would be hiding in the bushes. Much less be interesting enough to draw his prince to this kind of effort.

"Who are you looking for?"

Mephistis glanced up, startlement followed by embarrassment rushing across his face in a manner Isranon had never seen before. "A little she-creature. She has a tail that curls up just so," the prince explained. "A charming thing, I found her splashing in the fountain and now I can't get her out of my mind." He laughed. "If you see her, would you tell I have some pretties for her?"

"Certainly."

Isranon wandered further until he found a place apart and took out his flute. The music soothed and eased him. For a little while he stopped feeling like a monster among monsters. He remembered his sister's delicate face, looking up at him the way she once did while sitting at his feet as he played. The music faltered a moment, then Isranon played his path through the sorrow and out again. He had felt a deep unhappiness, which he never mentioned to anyone, after Claw assumed he had committed mortgiefan upon Troyes. That single moment had played to his own inner fears and misgivings, for he always wondered if there might come a time when he could not resist the allure of the rites. His sister had been forced into them by a group of sa'necari, whose names she never betrayed, and discovered the hunger for more would not leave. In the end she built herself a pyre and walked into the middle of it. Isranon would always suspect that Bodramet, Gareth, and Yoris had been among them. He also felt certain that Troyes' murder of the little nibari he had fallen

in love with at seventeen had been instigated by those same sa'necari. He played his flute stronger, getting past his self-doubts.

A large furry form wrapped around his ankles, settling around his legs. He paused long enough to scratch around its ears. Since Mephistis' warnings, the two lycans rarely let him escape them for long. "Hello, Nevin." He began to play again.

"Isranon."

He glanced and saw Timon.

"Yes?" He tried not to sigh. It would have been nice to play uninterrupted. To deal with his feelings in private. He had looked a long time for this spot. Isranon put the flute away.

Timon's eyes followed the flute into its case. He liked the sound of flutes as much as sa'necari disliked them; many believed that the sweet notes of a flute reflected the sounds of life – which only furthered this image of Isranon as enigma. "I would like to talk to you about the nibari."

"Have I ill used them? I could use my own Eustyn more, but I don't want to overtax him."

"No, not at all. Perhaps you've been too good to them," Timon smiled uncomfortably. Isranon affected him oddly. He had to remind himself that the man was sa'necari even while he could smell it on him. He resented the fact that he had to work hard to keep his guard up around the man. Was it magic? A spell? Or the mere fact that this filthy sa'necari had had the audacity to take the name of a fine man as his own? Certainly no sa'necari in his own mind would have named his son for someone they all regarded as a traitor: Isranon Dawnhand, his father's middle brother.

* * *

Timon summoned Haig to him the next day in his study. Haig's shaggy brown hair was almost as coarse as the bearskin about his massive shoulders. The backs of the male's hands were thick with black hair, a few shades darker than his mane.

"What did you learn of this Isranon on your journey here?" Timon closed the ledger book on his desk. The furniture was black in a whitewashed room. A huge well cared for two-handed sword sat on pegs above the vampire lord.

"He's decidedly odd," Haig answered, straddling a chair. "Although we stayed at waystations until we ran out of them, he never once took a depnane. He was very gentle with his nibari. I bought it as a gift for him to see how he interacted with one."

"You are quite certain of this?"

"Yes. I watched him and his wolves closely. The nibari he took were treated gently. Furthermore, he seemed content with the bottles on the days that Eustyn was feeling the strain of feeding him. Never once demanded we stop to let him eat lives."

Timon leaned back in his chair, arms folded. "You are the only one who has had this to say of their charges."

"He is decidedly odd."

"He makes me uneasy."

"I have no problem with him, Timon. In fact, I like the mon and his wolves." Then Haig gave Timon the tale, as Isranon had given him, of how this odd sa'necari had become adopted into a lycan clan.

"Get close to him, Haig, and stay close. If you can."

"I will. I thought Dane was supposed to be here."

"He was here for three weeks. Dane said he could not wait any longer. Your herd has been bred. Dane left one of his people here with that stud you wanted to borrow."

"Nainee?"

Timon gave Haig a broad smile. "Pregnant and doing fine. If the child is male, I may try to barter you for it."

Haig shook his head. "I promised Nainee she could keep this one."

* * *

Hoon 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. Hoon 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, and slashed 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. Hoon 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 the ancient monster's statement 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 blades to her needs and requirements. She also tended to break her tools when she no longer needed them – especially when they were mortal. Hoon'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 ignored 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. Hoon cut his palm, pressed the bleeding wound to the doors and they opened. He smiled broadly, showing his large teeth and long fangs. He found a room of bladed weapons of all descriptions with strange, unreadable runes on both blade and hilt. Hoon 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. Hoon 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, Hoon 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. His blood rushed. That had to be the box. The sight of it made him hungry. Hoon 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. Hoon 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 Hoon's imagining, his image shifting and demonic. And then Hoon 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 Hoon 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.

"Of course."

"It contains the wisdom of the ages past. Should something 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?" Hoon 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, Hoon," 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."

* * *

Mephistis treated the nibari respectfully, gently. He no longer demanded lives or mortgiefan; although his followers, with the exception of Isranon, were still dining from the slave markets. Isranon did not eat lives and never had, which made him a very strange man for one who had been born sa'necari. Mephistis had pointedly asked him not to join him here, yet the devoted Isranon had come anyway.

The two love-slaves had disappeared. He did not ask who had eaten them, but he assumed they had been. He haunted the garden with his pockets full of "pretties." He heard Anksha's laughter but did not find her. The moon waxed. One night he lay awake, staring at its bright orb through the window from his bed. It was very hot. A faint breeze came through. He lay nude, struggling to deal with the humid heat.

Earlier, Mephistis had poured himself half a glass of Sanguine Rose, more than twice as much as he was supposed to drink at one time, and chugged it down. The room darkened as something passed between the moon and his window. Soft movement on the ledge. He turned on his side and saw her.

"Anksha!"

"So, randy prince, do you dream?"

"Of you, Anksha. Only of you." His body reacted to her nearness as she crept to the bed. He started to rise, but she sprang on top of him, straddling him, pinning his arms so that he could not touch her even as she settled her warm wetness over his shaft and rode him to completion. Then she jumped off and was gone before he could move.

Mephistis staggered to his feet and went to the window. "Anksha! Anksha, come back. Please, come back. The drawer is full of pretties, please come back."

* * *

Three sa'necari who had been with Mephistis at Dragonshead and four who had been with him at Hoon's Valley in Waejontor arrived at the estate accompanied by two royals who had acted as their guides. Mephistis' surviving acolytes and followers had scattered widely after his two defeats and were only now beginning to find their way to him through the efforts of a pair of Sharani traitors named Lynden and Quellyn in Dovane City. That brought the total to twenty, which was the most that Timon would allow, the rest would be sent to the other holdings. Enough to make trouble, but not enough to get away with it. Certainly not enough to interfere with Anksha's plans for their prince, she thought as she watched them dismount. She lay on her belly, naked, hidden among the ferns and ivy gathered in a thick web between a mossy oak and the dank stone wall of the house.

* * *

"I have not seen Lord Hoon in days," Isranon remarked, sitting in the garden with Mephistis who played distractedly with a string of lapis.

"He has gone to collect a cache of weapons." Mephistis answered without lifting his eyes from the stones. "Godwar weapons. We will need them to take the yuwenghau to restore me."

Isranon shivered at the thought of what those could do. "A yuwenghau?" The yuwenghau were young gods and demi-gods that served as divine knights errant; powerful and hard to kill, they sought out the strongest of the hellgods' minions and monsters, holding the darkness at bay with their deeds. Sometimes they meddled in the affairs of mortals. Hoon was audacious if he thought to take one of them.

"Yes. That is exactly what he intends. I will not tell you yet which one, but you will know when the time comes."

"I did not see Lord Hoon leave."

"No one sees him leave. He simply vanishes into the night on most errands. No one knows how, least of all me." Mephistis shifted impatiently. "Enough of this, I must try to find Anksha." He rose and left, entering the deepest part of the garden, which was left half wild. Isranon stared after him, reaching down to catch Nevin by the ruff where he lay by his feet.

"Have you seen this Anksha, Nevin?"

The lycan changed, moving to sit beside him on the bench. "No, my brother, I have not. There are weird scents in the gardens. They stir my memories, but I cannot lay hold of them."

"You will tell me when you know?"

"Yes."

Mephistis' growing obsession with this Anksha troubled Isranon. He did not trust the vampires and wondered if they had deliberately introduced Mephistis to her for some dark purpose of their own. Isranon tried to work his way through his feelings. Mephistis was his only measure of safety among his own kind. *They are not my own kind. They are not my own kind. I am not like them* . Then feelings of defiance rose in place of that brief panic. *I am his sworn man. If I must lay down my life in his defense, then I shall. And should the others take me, then I shall die like my father, with courage and trust in my prince to avenge me. But I am not my father either. He never chose to fight, never carried a blade of any kind, while I have. Am I truly a Dark Brother or have I become something else? If any gods listen to the pariahs and outcasts of the Darkness, hear me and give me strength.*

Then he took out his flute and began to play. At first it was a melancholy air, but gradually it changed and his heart was eased.

* * *

Anksha reclined beneath the honeysuckle on the rooftop garden, barely visible, even to Timon's sharp eyes. She ran her tongue over her fangs, her eyes languid. "A few more days of this, Timon," she murmured, her voice throatily sensual and very different from her usual playfulness. "And he'll beg me to bite him."

Timon squatted and tousled her hair affectionately. "You're a good girl, Anksha. What would you like as a treat, my pet?"

"Can I eat the littlest troll?"

"Of course, Anksha. And maybe we should catch you some demons or some imps? Would you like that?"

"Oh yes, Timon! Yes, yes, yes. Oh, and throw me a nibblet party. I want to meet all these sa'necari. I might have an appetite for more once I've taken their prince."

Timon laughed. "I'll arrange it. It will take a week or more, as I will want to purchase some full meals from the slave market and have only the most stalwart nibari present to serve at the tables and as nibblets. This kind of thing makes the nibari nervous, but your presence will reassure them. They know you'll protect them." *So tiny and so dangerous, my pet .*

* * *

Mephistis stirred uneasily in his sleep. He hurt and the pain woke him. The bottle of Sanguine Rose sat on the table. Timon no longer parceled it out to him. He needed it too often and in too great a quantity now. Mephistis filled the glass and downed it. He wondered how high he could get on it, how far removed from the chains of his body. His body filled with warmth and eased. Then he put the bottle to his mouth and drank half of it. Bliss spread through him. If he knew where the trolls were he would simply go and drain one. The troll's blood, which was the base of the brew, called to him. He lay back, feeling as if he floated in a sweet, comforting sea. He vaguely heard the window open and turned on his side. The curtains blew around her as she crouched there watching him. Leaves clung to her hair and mud clothed her body. She smiled at him, showing her impressive fangs, tearing fangs.

Mephistis' body reacted to the sight of her with hunger, both his loins and his lips. "What are you?"

"I am Anksha. I am the troll tamer, the demon eater." She sprang down from the window, bouncing around the room like a cat, coming finally to crouch on the bed beside him. She opened his garments and rubbed herself against him like an animal. "I am a law unto myself."

Mephistis knew then where he had seen her image: she was a demon-eater like the one depicted on Hoon's walls hangings back in his fallen castle. He wanted roust himself, but he had drunk too much Sanguine Rose and could not but only lie back and let her play with him.

"How badly do you want me, randy prince?" She asked, the cold wet mud gliding onto his body as she rubbed along him.

"More than anything in this world," he gasped.

"Enough to let me taste you? To let your blood slide down my throat?"

"Yes, Anksha. You may have anything you want."

"To let me drain you dry if that is what I want?"

"Yes, Anksha." He turned his head, offering her his throat in the proper nibari position.

Anksha grinned and she took him hard.

Mephistis screamed.

* * *

Timon heard the scream just as his lover's lips closed around his hardness and came immediately in response to it. The lycan swallowed the salty fluid and looked a little disappointed because Timon usually took longer.

"What was that?" the lycan asked. Ephry was pale; almost translucently white with cornsilk hair falling about his shoulders in stark contrast to Timon's hard, dark pelvis he pressed his face against.

"Anksha. We will have no further problems with our guest."

"Did she kill him?" Ephry asked casually, unconcerned and only mildly curious as he began to lick around the base of Timon's shaft again hopefully.

"No. But no matter how powerful he becomes, she will always be his master. She has made him her blood-slave. I am grateful that my taste runs to males." Then he pressed the lycan's handsome face into his thick black thatch to take the rising spear as deeply as he could get it.

* * *

A pounding came at Mephistis' door. He heard three voices demanding to know it he was all right: Bodramet, Isranon and Gareth. Anksha lay beside him, curled against his chest, licking at the wound she had given him. The terror had abated, but he felt her now as a roaring presence in his mind and knew he had been taken, completely and utterly, in ways he had never dreamed existed in the realm of possibility. Part of him seethed with anger and resentment, while other parts wanted only to touch her, to hold her, to open his veins to her.

"I must answer it," he told her. She scampered to the window, disappearing before he reached the door.

Mephistis opened it, looking pale and weak, clutching a shirt at the wound in his neck. He leaned against the wall, breathing hard, finding even that small exertion too much. "A nibble game...too rough."

Isranon shouldered the prince and helped him to a chair. Then Isranon pushed his sleeve up and cut his wrist, offering the bleeding wound to Mephistis.

The sa'necari prince drank and then, when his strength began to return, searched his face a moment. "You are the least of us, yet you are always the first to offer."

"Least in power, but not in strength. I have it to give."

"You are an enigma." *Like Anksha* .

Isranon inclined his head. "I am whatever it is I am."

"Where is she?" Bodramet, a tall man with jet-black hair slicked down to a dozen black braids at the base of his skull, stalked about the room with Gareth at his heels. Of all Mephistis' sa'necari, Bodramet came closest to him in power. And after him, Gareth.

"Gone," Mephistis said, his voice going distant, reflective. *Anksha. Did I simply meet you? Or did they send you to me ?* Then he knew. *Gods in Hell, what have they done to me?*

"I don't know why you tolerate a half-a-man who will not step into the dark," Bodramet growled, passing closely to Isranon. The young man's lips tightened, yet he neither moved nor responded.

"That is enough," Mephistis growled. He could feel the prickling rise of Bodramet's power. Bodramet had tested him before and Mephistis had slammed him across a room. He was only as loyal as Mephistis' strength made him. With his powers frayed by deijanrael, Mephistis doubted he could beat him again. It had long been an object of speculation among certain factions of the sa'necari as to whether the Legacy could be assumed through mortgiefan by one who was not of Waejonan's blood. Mephistis suspected that Bodramet might wish to test that theory. He bore watching. The only sa'necari that Mephistis actually trusted was Isranon and his strange ethics.

"She did not pass us on the stairs." Gareth said.

"She went out the window."

Bodramet frowned. "You're coupling with vampires?"

Mephistis laughed. "You should know me better." Or should he? He remembered his lovely, undead Margren. Then he thought of Anksha and Margren's memory paled, an overwhelming craving rose in his mind and body, sweeping everything before it. "It was the only one on this entire estate worth having. Even if she is a bit rough." *What am I saying? I can't feel this way. Anksha! Anksha. Damn them! Damn them all. Anksha.*

"Who is she?" Isranon asked. "Have we met her?"

Mephistis shook his head. "Anksha. You will all meet her tomorrow. Timon has planned a party."

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOME HAS A PRICE

"Laurelyanne?" Aejs stepped into the mage's tent as the camp settled down for the night. The king sat on one of the folding stools at the small table.

"Yes?" The mage looked up from her prayers before a small gathering of symbolic objects sitting on the ground. She wrapped them in black silk to seal the outside vibrations from them, placed the objects in a small chest and that in a larger one before turning to Aejs. "What is it?"

"I've come to talk about Josiah."

"There's nothing more I can tell you." Laurelyanne joined her at the table.

"Well there's something I can tell you. A month ago Tamlestari Read him – a brief Reading done in the middle of love play. We know he's dying, but no specifics."

"I can't give you any, daughter. I promised Josiah."

"I understand. I want to make you a deal. I will place all my resources at your disposal. I'll ask no questions. Just do your best. I want you to tell me if there is any improvement. Just that, improvement. I will see to it that no one attempts to Read him again, including Tamlestari, without your consent. I think you should consult with Father Keikero when we reach the Monastery of St. Tarmus. The abbot is quite skilled."

"I'll do that, daughter. Josiah has already consented to that much."

"Thank you. We'll pick up supplies there, herbs and medicines. You're in charge. Another thing. I want a child from him. But I think ... I think there's something wrong with me."

"With you, daughter?" Laurelyanne frowned.

"Brendorn and I... Your son and I ... we wanted more children ... yet it took us fourteen years to get the twins after Laeoli."

Laurelyanne patted her knee. "If there were, the Dancer would have fixed it."

Aejys bowed her head. "I've been trying ... and he's..."

Laurelyanne nodded. She rose from her chair, going to stand behind Aejys, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. "It has not been that long, but I understand your urgency. When we reach the monastery I will put something together that might help you. Josiah has found a place in my old heart that has been vacant since the deaths of my sons – a child from him would be like another grandchild to me."

* * *

The trees grew sparser as the company moved more deeply into the craggy mountains: Spruce and mountain ash, rowan and laurel, twisted pines that grew straight out of the mountain's gray brown sides and then curved their trunks directly upward to catch the sun. Plateaus and hidden valleys beckoned from time to time, but Aejys did not allow them to turn aside from the trail. They camped in the wide spaces, nooks and crannies of the mountain, places that could be most easily secured against attack. Aejys remembered only too well the lessons her sister had taught her by throwing armies and monstrous creatures at her. Too many had died on the outbound trails. The weather held and Aejys' company arrived at the Monastery of St. Tarmus as the month waned.

The column drew rein before the monastery gates. Sturdy walls surrounded it, their crenellations filled with the drooping twiggy layers of bird nests – undisturbed for centuries – looked like short blunt teeth with the messy remains of breakfast caught between them. The heavy oaken gates stood open; they were rarely closed. A dozen brothers in plain robes of dusty brown, their cowls settled back upon their slender shoulders stood before their open gates to greet Aejys and her column. The abbot leaned upon his crosier, a staff of black ash intertwined with delicately wrought silver leaves and topped with the bear rune of Willodarus. Ancient, even for one of the sylvan races, his ivory face was a study in yellow lines and folds of age. He wore his black hair trimmed close to his head. His cobalt eyes, sharp with intelligence, regarded them. As Aejys and her lieutenants dismounted, the abbot came forward, smiling. He limped, listing a little to one side and then the other. The ancient sylvan wore braces on both legs, which were concealed by his long robes, yet he moved with the comfortable acceptance of one who had long ago made peace with the childhood misfortune that necessitated them. In fact he tended to forget about them except when faced with something he could not do.

Father Keikero embraced Aejys before she could speak, recognizing her instantly.

"Thank god you're alive," he said, holding onto her, speaking softly in low tones, for her ears only. "First the small creatures tell me you have died and then word reached me of your transformation. Thank the gods. I have a warning for you. The poor little bird that brought it was half dead when he got here. Hoon pursues you."

Aejys' stomach tightened and she felt rocks gathering in it. Nonetheless, she

recovered her courtier's manners, dropping to one knee to take his gnarled, withered hand and kiss the rune of Willodarus on his ring. "We can speak of this later, in private," she answered, matching her tone to his, nodding at her company. "Is there room for all of us in your courtyards, Father?"

"Yes, of course. If we spread you in a half circle you should all fit nicely." His eyes went to Maranya, who, alone of the company, had dismounted without waiting for permission, standing four paces behind Aejs. Except for her it all seemed so formal, like a king's riding; even Tagalong was still mounted. Keikero pondered the significance of Maranya with a discreet Reading of her aura, which he found a brilliant white, as Aejs gave a dismount signal with a flick of her hand.

Aejs' officers and inner circle joined her and Maranya with Father Keikero for introductions as the company proceeded around them into the courtyards.

"Allow me to introduce Father Keikero, Abbot of St. Tarmus. Father Abbot, some of my staff, you know. Tamlestari Odaren Havenrain, Prince and heir of Vallimrah, my na'halaef, we married in Vallimrah."

"Ahhh! Congratulations, highness. And the baby?"

Tamlestari smiled, "Babies. Twins. Ivander and Elynnis. In the wagons."

"Laurelyanne Amaranth, my spiritmother. Lord Soren Deontaramei, my general and her granddaughter Maranya, my squire."

They bowed to the abbot. Keikero's eyes met Maranya's and a flicker of recognition – he knew both who and what she was in that instant – and tacit agreement to keep her secret passed between them. Keikero caught Maranya's hand, pulling her to him, touching her forehead in blessing. "Come to my private chapel after matins tomorrow, King's Shield. One of the brother's can direct you," he whispered in her ear, then stood back with a secret smile.

As Aejs finished with the introductions, Father Keikero realized, the entire company having passed, and Clemmerick having joined them, that one very conspicuous face was missing. "Grawl, where is Grawl. Is he not with you?" Grawl was the high shaman of the monastery's blood bears who had left last fall with them.

In reply Tagalong began to whistle uncomfortably. The ogre blushed. Aejs looked at them both. Grawl had not been with them when the company reached Norendel, so Grawl's absence was as much a mystery to Aejs as to the good abbot.

"Is that my answer? What does it mean?"

"It's an old bawdy from the coast," Aejs said. "Well, Tag, you can tell him or I can order you to sing it."

Tagalong blushed and recited.

"He met a lady,

Very fair,

She rubbed him here,

He rubbed her there,

They were a pair,

They're now a..."

The abbot blushed. "I understand. They'll be along eventually."

Aejys turned to her company, issued the command to make camp in the courtyard and then she followed Father Keikero into the monastery. They entered the sunny ambulatory, taking the corridor to the left. Brothers greeted them politely as they passed. This was a sylvan monastery: there were no humans here except for the occasional trader and traveler passing through.

To those who thought all sylvals looked much the same, they did. They shared many features in common: slanted eyes and fair skin, narrow features and full lips, high delicate cheekbones and, most conspicuous of all, pointed ears. But there were racial differences that those who really looked at them could discern. Three races predominated at the monastery: the Valdren, the elves, and the nordrei. The nordrei were the tallest, a very few were as tall as Aejys. There was a ruddy, pink undertone to their fair skin and their eyes were the most nearly round. Their eyebrows though slanted tended to feather out at the tips. Their hair tended to be shades of brown and black. The Elvar, whom many called elves, had the narrowest, most deeply slanted eyes and their skin was like aged ivory. They were smaller than the others, almost halflings. Their eyes were all the shades of blue imaginable, from the palest cornflower to the deepest midnight. And their hair ranged from ice white to deep yellow. The Valdren were blondes and redheads: their cheekbones were wide and their faces angular; and, though not as tall as the nordrei, they were strongly built – broad through the shoulders and narrow hiped. The Badree Nym came in all colors, shapes and sizes, but, as the pariahs of the sylvan peoples, would never be found at the monastery. Even the compassionate Father Keikero would have turned them away; their chaotic, immature natures coupled with tremendous magical powers, however well intentioned, always created havoc.

Father Keikero's private library served also as his study. Tapestries covered the walls behind his large desk and the long couch piled with embroidered pillows. Three large well-stuffed chairs framed the desk. As the evening breezes picked up a fire had been lit in the small hearth to warm the cozy room. Bookcases lined one wall that extended into a nook with four freestanding bookcases filling it. The brothers,

out of love for the old abbot, had made every tapestry, pillow, and piece of furniture in the room.

Aejys waited for the abbot to seat himself first, then settled into a chair, spreading her wings comfortably behind her. "You have become a thing of wonder, old friend," Keikero said, his eyes tracing the lines of her wings.

"So I'm told," Aejys responded dryly, "and if one more mon addresses me as 'holy one' I will kick their ass."

Keikero chuckled, knowing full well she would do nothing of the kind. "Tell me all that has happened since I saw you last autumn." She did so and he listened closely, without interruption. "Does Tamlestari know that your god has abandoned you?"

"Yes," Aejys said, a tired edge creeping into her voice. "I would never have let her marry me without knowing."

A knock at the door preceded the entrance of two brothers with a small table, a basket of food and wine. They set the table between Aejys and their abbot, setting out plates and filling glasses. Then they quietly withdrew.

"Is that why you find the title of 'holy one' so discomfiting?" he asked, picking up the threads of their conversation.

"I feel anything but holy." Her voice grew a little more tired, a little sadder. Then she told him about Josiah.

"I will take a look at him," Keikero promised. "However, it sounds as if there is very little that I can do."

Aejys ate slowly, sipping at the dry white wine. "What is this warning you have?"

"Hoon wishes to catch you before a god can mark you. He has assembled most of the components to create a death angel, a nekaryiane. He wants it to be you. But if you cannot be turned, then he will take you and use your blood to make the death-angel."

Aejys listened, feeling chill. "Death-angel ... there have been none since the last godwar. Badonth and Kalirion destroyed the last of them."

The crippled abbot spoke in an agitated, worried manner, squeezing the words out rapidly. "If you cannot be turned, then he will need your blood. The rite is very specific. He would chain you to the altar and take your blood very slowly; the blood needs to come directly from living veins into the preserving bottles if it is intended for this spell. He cannot simply slash your throat and drain your dead body as they usually do.

"You dare not try to stand against Hoon without a liege-god and especially without having been marked by one. The Nine have not marked their paladins for centuries, but the time is coming when they will be forced to again. I could intercede with Willodarus on your behalf. Then at least your soul would be safe."

Aejys shook her head slowly, caught between her needs and her memories. "No. I have no desire to walk the Willodarian path."

"Aroana again?"

"If she will forgive me. If not, then the one whose sword I bear."

"May one of them decide quickly, my friend. I fear for you. But even more, I fear for the rest of us should Hoon succeed in taking you."

Aejys sat in silence for a long time. She had been caught twice and barely escaped with her life and soul each time. Third time was usually a charm or a curse depending on how the first two had fallen out. A chill crept up her spine, standing the hairs on her neck on end.

Keikero rose heavily, moving to his desk. He opened a drawer, took something out, and brought it to her. A slender chain of braided silver slithered between his fingers as he opened his hand. In it lay the Willodarian rune carved from a bit of moose antler. He balanced himself carefully on his damaged legs, locking his knees, swaying slightly, and settled the chain around her neck. "He will not be able to scry you. Do not become over-confident. As Willodarus is not your liege-god, Hoon will still be able to reach for you in your dreams, to try to persuade you to take it off."

* * *

"Have you breakfasted, young one?" Keikero asked as Maranya entered the little chapel the next morning.

"No," she answered, her eyes drawn to his legs by the listing way he walked.

The abbot pulled his robes up just enough to reveal the lower part of his braces, taking no offense at her curiosity in his infinite patience. "Then come along and breakfast with me."

Maranya shook her head. "I don't like being away from her that long."

"She is safe here."

"She was attacked by demons here last year."

"Tut. Tut. You're forgetting, young one. We now have blue gryphons, two prides of maned hunting cats as well as blood bears and striped ones."

Maranya nodded. "Then you are well-defended. What is it you wish to talk about?" She followed him from the chapel to his study where he already had a nice breakfast set out on covered trays to keep warm. Heat rose from the buns and biscuits and the butter was melting in the little cups. Honey and a variety of jams and jellies surrounded it. Maranya moved several of everything onto a plate. Just looking at it made her mouth water.

"I have known Aejs for nine years," Keikero said. "Mostly a long correspondence. For all of her faith, she puts very little store in prophecy."

"Prophecy is an inexact science," Maranya replied, smearing honey over melted butter on a hot biscuit.

"Because it is a subjective science. Each god has prophets; each prophet interprets the observable omens and phenomena according to their affinities and perceptions. The further something is away the more it tends to fray around the edges with time and the intertwining of linked possibilities. Prophecy and magic are very literal and because they are literal they are unstable because words are unstable, language is fluid. Things that are written in stone crumble."

"Where is all this going?" Maranya's face lit at the taste of the honey. "Hmmm. That's the best honey."

Keikero smiled. "I'll send several jars with you. Now, you may not be aware yet, but your order is establishing a faithhome in Rowanhart because of a prophecy."

"How is it a Willodarian knows so much about Aroanan prophecies?" Maranya asked suspiciously, smearing more honey on her biscuits.

"We are an order of herb healers and yet we live isolated lives in the middle of a remote wilderness, devoting our lives to study and prayer. People pass through and never ask the right questions and you, most suspicious of paladins, do not ask the right questions. This monastery is built into the side of a mountain. The mountain is filled with wondrous caverns and the caverns are filled with books and scrolls and things of wondrous magics. I am the loremaster of Willodarus. My specialty is comparative prophecy. All the gods, even the most minor of them, have prophecies concerning the Abominant King and the Twisted Child."

"Aejs is not an abomination!" Maranya snarled, almost dropping her biscuit.

Keikero laughed. "Not to you or I. But to the Hellgod and his followers she soon will be. Assuming she lives that long. You must keep her alive."

Maranya lowered the biscuit to the plate, closing her eyes and turning inward. "I live to die. My body is the King's shield. I place my life between hers and the blades of the unseen foe." She shook herself loose with a sigh. "And the Twisted Child? Who

is she?"

"The child born with both sides of the gift, sa'necari and life mage, descended of both Waejonan and Kalirion, reared by those who do not breathe as others do. If you find the child, someone from the order should be assigned to protect her. While the king can destroy the mightiest of the minions, only the child can destroy the queen. Here is an excellent example of where language confuses prophecy. We have all expected the king to be a man, a male. But your people translate king as a neuter word, applying it equally to both male and female. And so the prophecy is confounded. The king in the prophecy may actually be a woman. Aeijstrys. Now, as to this child. Of all the Children of the Risen Dead, this child is the greatest of them all."

"The Children of the Risen Dead? Who or what are they?"

"I don't know yet. When I do, I will send word to your abbot in Rowanhart. The first of the swan-mays will be arriving here in mid-summer. My liege-god is sending me paladin-couriers."

"Have you any clue at all?" Maranya pressed.

"Actually, yes. I believe that the Unholy Queen of the Undead, founder of one of the royal lineages, whom Willodarus imprisoned and left to perish millennia ago, in fact escaped. It might refer to living persons or children whose parents or ancestors were turned by those of her lineage or by other undead in general. It could be either. But that is enough. I am tired. Maranya, forgive me. Let us talk of other things. Like the honey. We blend it special."

"One last thing. What is her name?"

"Gylorean Galee. I found it two weeks ago. A single reference. Deeply hidden. But she isn't the queen from the prophecy. They are linked somehow. But I am fairly certain they are not the same."

"You're certain of that?"

"Yes. The queen from the prophecy is a death angel. Hoon wants to make Aeijys the death angel."

"But..."

"If you ask another question, I will leave. The subject depresses me and that makes me tired. If it were not so important I would not have told you what I have. Please, I've told you what I know. We'll just be going round and round. Let's enjoy our breakfast? Please?"

"So you're giving me lots of honey?"

"Lots."

* * *

Keikero's examination of Josiah proved as fruitless as the others had been. After a week, the company moved on. Birdie's children arrived as they descended into the foothills skirting Cherdon'datar; a boy and a girl. She named them Elydar and Melisyn. Blackbird strutted and swaggered at having her first two grandchildren, talking of nothing else. Aejys tried hard to be a proper friend about it with toasts and blessings at dinner, but the arrival of these children simply stirred sadness in her core, reminding her of how much she wanted a child from Josiah before he died.

She felt more and more certain that his condition had been caused in some way by the wounds he had suffered defending and later rescuing her in Norendel. On the one hand she felt responsible, since it had been her decision to try and steal into Norendel with only a small party, hoping to escape Hoon's notice while going after the sword. On the other hand, it had really been the best decision that could be made, considering that eventually Hoon and Mephistis would have come after them anyway. Without Spiritdancer to challenge their arcane power, she and her people would have small chance against them in the long run – the same as her ancestors. And she would still be unable to use her hands, unable to lift a sword in her own and her people's defense. Aejys was a good commander. She worked hard to preserve the lives of her myn; to spend those lives wisely and well; not carelessly; and she wept for them; but she did not hesitate to send them in when she had to. The only difference was that Josiah was her lover.

* * *

Maranya rode beside Aejys as the company finally came down out of the Ardren Mountains onto the flat lands and into the forest of spruce and white fir marking the last leg of their journey to the coast.

"So where did you grow up?" Aejys asked her.

"Western spur of the Iradrim Mountains for the most part. As you know, the Deontaramei, while noble, are an impoverished clan. We serve other houses. Some of them, not much better off than we are, like your Ladonys. My ma'aram died the night I was born. Waejontori hit the castle. Ma'aram took a blade for her liege. Lasah had gone to childbed. They put them in bed together..." Maranya's voice took on a hollow tone. "Held hands in that last moment...I was born as that last breath left her." She shook herself. "I don't know why I told you that. I apologize."

"Jaqui of Treth told me we all have our scars; just some of us wear them on the inside. They are nothing to be ashamed of."

"Some have more than others."

"I could do with a few less myself," Aejs said with a rueful laugh. "I wonder what you'd look like in feathers, buckskins and war paint?"

"In what?"

"I could never talk Tamlestari into it, but I bet I could you. And Tagalong loves it. When we get settled I'll take you to a tribal dance up the coast. I'll bet I've got a set of buckskins that would fit you, you're not that much taller than I am." Then Aejs proceeded to tell her about the Kwaklahmyn tribes.

* * *

Tagalong moved her pony alongside Aejs and Maranya, riding more often with them. The column had taken on a subtle informality of late. Soren remained with the officers, disapproving with glances alone. Josiah rode with Laurelyanne, concealing his condition as much as possible during the daylight. Tamlestari remained with the wagons and the children. Jaqui now had co-leadership of the scouts since Borian had never been to the coast before.

Aejs and Tagalong regaled Maranya with tales of their adventures along the Blood Coast, especially among the Kwaklahmyn, and nearly caused a panic when they impulsively taught her some wild native war cries at midday and for a moment the column thought they'd been attacked. Soren read the king and companions out at great length and in surprisingly colorful language to the amusement of the officers. They all looked suitably chastened until the column got underway again.

Maranya gave Aejs a sheepish look, saying in a small voice, "I think grandma'aram was not happy with us."

Tagalong snickered. Aejs laughed and Maranya roared. That cemented the bond still further.

* * *

They stood on the wide terrace again, overlooking the lake. The scents were sweet. The banks below were a rich brown, lined with trees and flowering bushes. Aejs walked to the wrought iron railing, folding her arms upon it as she leaned to watch the hawks wheeling across the sky. His fingers traced the lines of her bare back as they always did. Still no wings; which meant she must be wearing Amalthea's form. He caressed the curve of her buttocks. He licked her neck. She shivered, her body reacting to his touch against her will.

"Unless you make me very angry, this is the last time I will bring you here."

"I am not afraid of you, Hoon."

"You should be. You are a betrayer. You have betrayed those who loved you. Again and again. You have left them to die. You knew that unstable sister of yours would kill them, yet you saved your own skin and abandoned them. I have been betrayed and I have avenged my betrayals. But I have never betrayed those who loved me."

Aejys stiffened. Grief and guilt took her in the throat and chest. She could not speak or react. What he said was true. She had abandoned Brendorn, Ladonys, and Laeoli. They would all be alive if she had taken them with her. Aejys staggered away from him, falling to her knees and Hoon followed her.

Then she was in Amalthea's bedroom. Hands seized her, carrying her backwards toward the bed. She looked up, expecting to see Hoon's face, but it was not. The face, twisted with rage, was fair skinned and auburn haired, curling about the delicate pointed ears. She had loved him so much. Her heart broke.

"You killed us! And you killed our child! How could you do that? We loved you. We trusted you. You abandoned us. You left us to die. If you had been where you were supposed to be Farendarc would not have killed me. It hurt to die."

Brendorn shoved her onto the bed, forced her legs apart with his knees and entered her. She looked up as Ladonys grabbed her shoulders, pinning her down.

"The bears ripped me open, Aejys. Then a sa'necari sucked my soul out while I lay sleeping, wounded. It hurt. Why didn't you take us with you? You betrayed us, Aejys. Kill her, Brendorn. Kill her."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Brendorn cut her throat.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Aejys woke still repeating the words, tears of terror, guilt, and shame running down her face. She glanced at Josiah and Tamlestari sleeping beside her, eased out of bed and walked into the cool air of the early morning hours, rubbing her temples.

"Are you all right?"

Aejys started from her thoughts and saw Maranya. "No. No, I'm not all right." And then for reasons she did not fully understand she poured it all out into the squire's young ears. The woman seemed much older sometimes. When Maranya had let Aejys talk herself out, she drew her sword, shoved the blade into the earth so that they could face the sacred rune, and led her in a prayer of cleansing to their god Aroana the Compassionate Defender, which eased Aejys' heart.

CHAPTER NINE

SEIRYN SONGS

The office above the kitchen tended to get a bit too warm in the summer until late afternoon when the cool breezes came in off the ocean. The four hottest weeks of summer still lay ahead and Becca – technically Prince Becca since Aejys had formally adopted her – half-seriously considered taking her ledger book onto the roof. Instead she tried to do most of her work in the evenings with the windows thrown open. She ran Vorgensburg and Rowanhart in Aejys' name from this back room office in the second story of the Cock and Boar. The former prostitute and serving woman simply did not feel comfortable living in any of the fancy houses that Aejys owned in that city – most of them seized from the late Thomas Cedarbird as recompense for his attack upon her holdings, which had cost several lives. Cedarbird, himself, was dead – slain by Josiah.

Freshly cut roses stood in a vase at the center, another present from Darlbret, her assistant. He was courting her in a sly, shy fashion and she had not yet had the heart to tell him that she waited for someone else – someone who never seemed to notice her. She guessed she must have been getting soft. One day he had come in early and changed all the mismatched knobs on the drawers of her worn desk. She had thrown a fit, demanding that he put the old knobs back on. That had required him digging through the trash. He never found them all and that left Becca feeling sore at him for weeks afterward.

Every inch of that old desk had meaning for her. The varnish on the top was missing in the middle and rubbed nearly gone across the rest, except for the edges among the leafy whorls. There was nothing special about it as far as the eye could see. Long before Aejys and Tagalong arrived and bought the Cock and Boar, the place had been owned and run by a lecherous old goat who had required Becca to open her legs to him on that desk just to get the job of waiting tables and turning tricks in the place. Now she not only had his job, she had his desk and felt quietly smug about the whole thing. She had gone along with Darlbret's efforts to make a lady out of her at first, but she had begun to find them irritating.

Becca looked up from her books at the sound of her door slamming open. A tousled head appeared. Zacham had grown four inches since winter solstice. His face was bright with excitement, his black hair an unkempt, half-combed mess.

"They're here!" He spun, stomping a little wardance of exultation. "They're here!" he repeated again.

Becca jumped to her feet, nearly overturning her chair. "You mean Aejys?"

"Yes! Her banner has been sighted from the walls." Then he went back to his chant of "They're here!" and rushed out.

Becca dashed out behind him, taking the stairs two at a time. She scarcely realized when big, red-haired Omer Wheeler, Captain of the City Guard, fell into step behind her. A crowd had already formed when she reached the gates and then the green beyond it. Becca caught a glimpse of Omer from the corner of her eye and turned to him, frustrated by the people blocking her view. "Is Clemmerick with them? Can you see him?" Becca rose on the tips of her toes and still could not make anything out.

Omer laughed and hoisted her onto his shoulder "Can you see now?"

"Yes. I see Clemmerick and...and what the hell is that?" She pointed at Skelly walking alongside a black-skinned woman with white hair and wings. The creature looked curiously like a dragon, except that dragons did not have feathers. They were talking together.

"Looks like a dragon with feathers, Becca. I don't know what it is."

Then the column reached them, the crowd opened and Aejs Rowan led the company in. People were calling to those they knew. Families rushed forward to embrace their returning members who were quickly dismounting to reach them. Others looked in vain for missing faces, their expressions clouding with sorrow as people they knew left the column to tell them what had happened.

"Oh my gods," Becca hissed. "that's Aejs ... when Josiah said the sword would change her I never expected wings." Then she pushed at Omer to let her down. As soon as Becca's feet touched the ground, she ran for the ogre. Clemmerick was grinning when he saw her coming. She stopped in front of him, grabbed his ears, and pulled his face down to hers. "You big, ugly lout," she murmured and kissed him soundly on the mouth.

Clemmerick flushed, looking embarrassed and confused. Around him people were laughing.

"Don't just stand there, pick me up," Becca said.

Clemmerick did so and Becca released his ears. He had wanted Becca for years and was very afraid that this did not mean what he thought it did. "Becca?"

"I love you, you idiot."

Clemmerick's flush deepened two shades. "I love you, Becca. Always have. You're a fine looking woman."

"Make something of it," she challenged, rolling her hip suggestively against him.

"Tonight?" His body reacted, coming to attention and tenting his trousers. He had never dreamed in his most cherished fantasies that the exquisite tavern master, who had once beaten him with a broom, would ever want him in that way. Clemmerick,

however, dreamed of far more substantial things and would go shopping for a ring as soon as he pulled his pay.

"Promise? My rooms?" Becca rubbed against him once more, shamelessly.

"Yes."

* * *

Darlbret squeezed through the crowd, watching for his nephew. He was a small, matchstick of a man, resembling nothing so much as an overgrown pixie, clad in tasteful shades of green and very well-tailored. The diminutive clerk had meticulously groomed, mousy brown hair, and an angular face with a long, thin pointy nose, which ended in a tiny up-turned knob. He spotted the strapping youth, walking slowly, reins in hand beside a hard muscled black woman with a spear. "Briarmottë! Oh thanks heavens you've returned. Your mother was so worried..." He embraced his nephew, who lifted the little man clear off the ground in a strong hug.

Briarmottë grinned and remembered his manners. "Uncle Darlbret, this is my very good friend, Jaqui of Treth." He did not say lover, though they were, knowing well his uncle's intense sense of propriety.

Darlbret saw Becca kiss Clemmerick, though he did not hear the words, as he walked away with his nephew and Jaqui. He understood, at last, why Becca had never responded to his courting. A hollow pang opened inside him and he felt as if someone had driven a sharp chisel through his heart. But he said nothing, not wanting to blight his sister's joy at seeing her son, Briarmottë again.

Briarmottë had one arm around Florry, his mother, and the other around Jaqui, his lover, as they walked. Darlbret kept falling behind and then having to trot to keep up, scuffing his feet in the dirt and dust of the street. They paused at the door to the home that Darlbret shared with his sister and Florry glanced back.

"Are you all right?" His sister asked.

Darlbret jolted from his brooding, "Oh yes. Quite. My mind had drifted to business for a moment." He forced a smile. "There's always so much business, you know."

"Well, let it be! We don't often see Briarmottë come home again after a glorious adventure."

Briarmottë winced. Then his mother had the door open and they all went inside.

* * *

When Zyne first came to Vorgensburg she drew the eye of every mon she passed. Then the novelty wore off, and now they all ignored her. With the increasing

numbers of tritons and neriens, she had become just one more seamon among many, dressed in sealskins with her green hair tied back and her halberd to hand. Tritons preferred the trident – she did not. The seiryn had been passing as a triton for last year had dwelled among them, at first in Vorgensburg and then Rowanhart. Zyne watched for a long time as the column wound its way into the city and Becca dispersed them to Aeijys' various houses and holdings throughout Vorgensburg. Since the destruction of Thomas Cedarbird and the seizure of his properties, Aeijys owned half of the city as well as being Prince Protector of Vorgensburg. Zyne trailed after Aeijys and Josiah, watching them closely. Especially him. Her sharp green eyes filled with envy and malice. *Josiah Abelard. Last of the Abelards. Mine. Mine. Mine*. She flicked her green hair back from her face and the lace work of gills in her throat, turning with a haughty stride toward the docks. She slipped into the alleys to travel unnoticed and unnoted. When she reached the bay, she stripped to a loincloth, wrapped her clothes in an oiled sealskin bag, and dove into the waters, swimming strongly. Crossing the bay, she wondered how much of her hold over Josiah remained. She would test it that night by singing him to her cottage. She felt certain that the three of them would spend their first night back in Rowanhart.

Zyne felt a thrill of triumph when she learned that she had been right: they had crossing the bay in a boat as soon as they had gotten the company settled. Zyne waited until the hours before dawn when people slept the soundest, then she built the fire in her hearth, throwing incense, spices, and cedar chips into the flames. Pungent odors, sweet, sharp, and salt blended to wreath her head with the fragrant smoke. She wrote his name on a bit of bark, singing over it for a time, in a voice like the soft sighing of a breeze across the sea on a nearly still night. Magic carried the song, pitched so low that not even a mouse listening beneath the door could hear it, but the one to whom it sang would feel its touch.

* * *

"Zyne?" Josiah knocked and then opened the door, standing there in confusion and uncertainty. Tired and hurting, it had taken every bit of strength he could muster just to walk from the keep to her cottage. He leaned against the doorframe, breathing hard, having no idea why he had come; only that he had awakened in Aeijys' bed with an overpowering desire to see Zyne. His eyes scanned the cottage. It was a single room, with a bed in one corner, and a deep hearth in the other. Shelves, cabinets, and two chests lined the walls. Her halberd rested on pegs above the bed in easy reach lest trouble awaken she in the night. Josiah knew that Zyne was a strong, sensual, and passionate woman; his body quivered with illicit anticipation for things he should not taste.

Zyne rose from the hearth and he saw that she was nude. Her green, silken-scaled body had no loin hair, looking almost innocent and beckoning, drawing his eye immediately. The sight of her filled him with both overwhelming desire and unreasoning, inexplicable fear. Only her lips, full and sweet, the palms of her hands and tips of her long tapering fingers, and the large, pointed nipples, round and dark,

lacked scales. The seawoman was taller than Josiah, almost as tall as Aejs.

Josiah's body reacted to her nudity as she glided closer, pressure building in his loins with a need to find himself within her. He sucked in a deep breath, letting it out slowly, trying to control his reactions, and failing. He knew he should leave; Aejs would wake wondering where he was and she was the only woman he truly loved, although he had grown to care for Tamlestari with deep and abiding affection. Yet something held him there, like a small creature trapped by the hypnotic eye of the cobra and he could not leave, no matter how many reasons he gave himself to do so.

Zyne wrapped around him, opening his shirt. He caught her hands in a feeble gesture of resistance. "I ... I don't love you. This is not right... Aejs—"

Zyne pressed her cheek to his, humming softly in his ear. It meant something, but in his damaged state he could not think and did not recognize it as a spell because of its soft subtlety. The song wound itself through his mind and heart, like a serpent made of silver chains that locked themselves within him and he could not get them out. He had never had contact with the seafolk in his past life and had nothing to measure it against. He did not know that she had chained him with the melancholy melody that had cried out her need to possess him totally. A sigh of resignation and surrender shuddered through him. Josiah released her hands, letting her remove his shirt and open his pants. Almost of their own accord, his fingers probed the soft lips between her legs. She drew him to the bed, laid him back, and straddled him, sliding her wet sheath over his shaft until he firmly fit inside her body. Then she rode him to completion. As she rolled off him, onto her side, Zyne began to sing softly in that odd language of the sea. She stroked him to hardness and began again.

* * *

Aejs woke that morning to find Josiah gone. She wondered at it, and then remembered how much he liked to wander the beaches in the early hours and let it go. After all they had been gone for months and he must have missed the lonely strands. She was, herself a creature of the dawn, sorting her own issues out before the full light of morning. So she understood the hour's lure. She dressed and went out.

Aejs quickly discovered that Rowanhart, as it had grown up in her absence, was a rough mannered frontier kingdom where half the people still called her by her first name, king or not, in public and the other half referred to her simply as "lord." Not yet a year old, Rowanhart was already a substantial city-state in terms of size and population, especially with the additional nearly three thousand she had brought with her: a full company of masterless ha'taren – paladins of Aroana – and their knights and families; a colony of Valdren, including two hundred rangers; various Sharani settlers; a company of bradae, the fighting priests of Aroana, who wished to build a new temple. A palisade surrounded it on two sides; the mountain, whose rainshadow sheltered them from the worst of the winter storms, made the third side and the bay

the fourth. When she left they had but the beginning of the keep and a scattering of houses. Now they had inns, taverns, and shops; quays, docks, and ships at anchor. The shell and parts of the interior of the keep was finished and Becca, remembering her encounter with the sa'necari, Dinger, had insisted on having secure dungeons beneath it in case she found someone to put in them. Becca had spent well, hiring every laborer she could get from as far north as the Kwaklahmyn villages and as far south as Ocealay. The town bustled with people, houses, and businesses going up in all directions. By using the mountain and the bay for two thirds of their boundaries, Becca had then sealed off twice as much land as lay within the walls of the largest city on the continent. A triton trading enclave had sprung up, sharing the bay with the docks and a Kwaklahmyn fishing village. They were all strong, capable folk. With Becca handling the details of getting the rest of Aeijys' company and the settlers to Rowanhart, Aeijys was free to take care of such business as she felt required a special touch.

Since her nephews, Wolff and Fauxx, needed parents – mage parents – and a cat could not raise them, even if the cat was their mother, her first order of business was to talk to Taun and Skree about taking them in. She asked directions a few times, discovering as she did that people had already figured out who she was, although they spent more time staring at her wings than at her face.

She found their house easily, a two-story stone structure, which sat upon a rocky ledge overlooking the sea, securely above the high-tide mark. Taun answered her knock. The little nerien healer was already dressed, with his medicine satchel hanging from his shoulder in preparation for making his rounds. His green eyes took her in curiously, wondering who and what she was, and then widened as the lines of her face registered. "Aeijys!" The usually shy healer threw his arms around her and hugged her. He remembered his manners, stepping back and waving her inside, one did not keep a king standing on the doorstep.

Aeijys folded her wings tightly and entered the cozy house. The kitchen branched off the entryway to her left, the stairs to the bedrooms on her right and directly ahead of her lay the sitting room. Woven cedar mats, painted in bright colors, covered the floor. Wall hangings in geometrical patterns added color to the walls and helped to hold in the heat from the hearth in the winter. Skree rose from the comfortably stuffed couch and greeted her in his customarily blunt fashion. "You drew the sword."

"It's good to see you, too, Skree," Aeijys grinned, not at all put off by his manner.

In nearly every way, except their maleness, the young couple were opposites. Taun was small, brown-skinned, black-haired, and blunt faced – legacies of his Kwaklahmyn sire – and green-eyed like his nerien mother with small pouchy gills in his neck. Skree was tall and aristocratic – taller than Aeijys who verged on six three – green-scaled and haired, a lace work of gills along his throat. Where Taun was shy, the triton sea-mage was arrogant and hard-edged.

Skree returned to the couch. A book lay open on the long low table before it. Aeajys sat down in the chair closest to the couch, drawing one booted foot up to rest on her opposite knee as she pulled out her pipe and began to smoke. Taun drew another chair over beside hers and took her hands, rubbing them in wonder: the last time he had seen her they had been hopelessly crippled despite his best efforts to mend them.

"You can Read them later, Taun," Aeajys said, taking her hands back. "I have come to ask a favor."

"Ask," Skree said, his manner so arrogant one would have thought that he was the king and not Aeajys.

"I have two mage-born infants. Orphans in need of a home and parents."

"You mean us?" Taun sounded excited. His only regret about his sexual preferences was the impossibility of children. Taun loved children; their innocence, insatiable curiosity, and willingness to accept another without question had always touched him deeply. To be entrusted with a child was something so very precious.

"Wait and hear me out before you say yes," Aeajys cautioned, turning to Skree. "They are my nephews. You know what my sister and her lover were."

"Sa'necari. Were either of them born sa'necari?" Skree's eyes had gone hard.

"No. Not that anyone can tell me. Laurelyanne, an earth-mage, thinks one of them might have been born life-mage. However, there's more. Their 'lasah is Dree. You remember Dree?"

Skree nodded. "The sad little catkin."

"I destroyed Margren, but Mephistis may still try to take the children. That must not be allowed to happen. He would turn them to the service of the hellgod. That would break Dree's heart. Margren murdered Dree."

"That is sad," Taun said, remembering the bittersweet songs the minstrel had sung that pierced his heart at times and brought tears to his eyes.

"Did anyone try to bring Dree back?" Skree asked. "That can sometimes be done with catkin."

"Dynarien brought her back, but as a cat – her human form was destroyed – she cannot raise two children." Aeajys spread her hands. "I do not want them in the keep. That is the first place Mephistis will look for them."

Skree fell silent, thoughtful. Finally he said, "I will come to the keep and Read them."

If there is no sa'necari taint, then we will become their parents and Dree can come live with us. My people and I are well able to defend them."

* * *

The wide terrace overlooked the sea, set on a wind-swept bluff. Aejys stood, feeling the cool flagstones beneath her bare feet; the soft patterns of beige and ivory swirled into pale oranges against the sandstone. She walked to the wrought iron railing, folding her arms upon it as she leaned to watch the gulls sailing in languid patterns across the sky. The briny air teased her senses. His fingers traced the lines of her back, trailing between her wings, along the curve of her buttocks. He licked her neck. She shivered, her body reacting to his touch against her will.

"I don't want you," she said, refusing to turn and face him, even as her loins grew wet. Panic rose up and it wore Brendorn and Ladonys' faces. Hoon had finally hit a nerve. "Please, not again, so soon. Please."

"I have more lessons to teach you. Now that we understand which of us is honorable and which of us is not. It is nearly time to talk of love. My decadence is supported by discipline. My excesses are measured ones, paid for in advance and never on credit. I am willing to fast for centuries in order to feast on my chosen delicacies."

"Please, Hoon... Answer me a question."

He paused, his fingers on her shoulders. "Ask."

"Amalthea's sister. What was her name?"

"Don't make me angry."

"Please, her name!" Aejys felt desperate, frightened, trying to delay the inevitable and yet not yield. Some strange, vague feeling whispered through her thoughts. Could this be the voice of the Dancer?

Hoon laughed. "Aejystrys Mohandys Rowan. Your ancestor who fled, escaping our nets."

Margren? Is it in our blood ... this madness? Or were you touched at birth by Amalthea? Her legacy? Once there were three brothers and three Sharani lords, all female. Brandrahoon, Waejonan, and the lost lineage of Isranon pitted against Rowan, Asharen; and Danae. Oh dear my gods, I was born into this. It all makes sense now.

"You're a traitorous bitch. You know it." His arms reached around her, his hands cupping her breasts. "I cannot give you a child, but I can give you a far greater love than you will ever know with Abelard."

"I don't want you."

Hoon shoved roughly into her, grabbed her hair, and twisted her head back as he rode her. "Do you still say you do not want me?" he demanded when he finished.

"I don't want you."

Amalthea's bedroom. Brendorn grabbed her, screaming, forcing her onto the bed, and cutting her throat.

Aejys woke screaming. Tamlestari and Josiah reached for her as Maranya burst into the room, swords drawn. Aejys shoved them aside, grabbed a robe and her sword, dressed and armed, then walked outside with Maranya.

"What I said about scars?" Aejys said, squatting down several paces from the hearth and watching the embers glowing. She took out her pipe, filled, and lit it, smoking for a time.

"Yes?"

"Tamlestari doesn't have any. I'm not comfortable talking to Josiah. I have in a pinch ... but he's not..."

"Sharani?"

Aejys nodded. "We look at things differently."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Yes."

At first they talked and Maranya listened. Then they prayed. When that was done, Maranya talked and Aejys listened. Margren had not immediately turned on her family. That had come later. Kaethreyn would never have allowed Aejys to escape Rowanslea with her family. The mar'ajan would have gone after them, rather than lose both of her heirs. At first Aejys' decision to leave them behind had, indeed, been a good one, but it had gone sour over time. There had been no way for Aejys to know it would. Gradually, Maranya, with wisdom surprising for one of her apparent years, took some of the burden of guilt from Aejys' shoulders. When full dawn arrived Maranya took Aejys in search of Meenaleigh, the Bradae high priest, and had her guilt in the loss of her mates and child formally absolved and lifted from her shoulders. Aejys vowed to make offerings in Brendorn's, Ladonys and Laeoli's names for the peace and comfort of their spirits when the first stones were laid for the temple.

* * *

Soren sat with Aejs in the king's study, wrapping her tongue around her first taste of a popular Blood Coast liquor called rum. "I want you to understand some things, Aejs. You may be king, but I have grand children older than you and I've seen more royal courts than you ever will."

"Granted," Aejs propped her feet up on another chair. The chair was massive, heavy, claw armed and footed, but padded only at the seat and back. "My only complaint is that these chairs do not have enough padding. Find a servant and get that changed. I have this dreadful suspicion that I'll be spending too much time sitting in them." She had spent the morning prowling the keep, examining most of the rooms on this end and deciding she liked the way Becca's architect had designed and executed it. The side door let out on a wondrous parapet with battlements and wide walls with deep crenellations that looked out over the bay. If she put something up on one or both of the islands she could create one hell of a killing field to trap and sink anything trying to sail into the bay in a deadly cross fire. The pirates of Brunstrat would not be troubling Rowanhart or Vorgensburg. Maranya refilled her glass. Bryngaryn sat beside her great grandma'aram and her ma'aram, Maranya's amita, Laelyn. "So where is this going?"

"Up to this point, you have been de facto king. I want to make you king in a de jure sense with some pomp and circumstance. A coronation. Invite all the rulers of nearby realms. Let them see that you have a sizable army, a dragon. It will make them think twice before troubling us. It will also open communication, trade, diplomacy. Then I want to have a large fealty ceremony. I want all the paladins, nobles, and knights who have come here with us to swear fealty to you so that their allegiances are firmly lodged in their heads."

Aejs sighed. "So be it."

"Good. Now here's the worst part."

"There's more? You've already complicated my life enough, old friend."

Soren chuckled. "Hoof and Horn, Willow, Axe and Shield."

Aejs started. Within the ranks of the ha'taren were five small, highly specialized orders, the elite of the elite. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that for the first time in history, one of the Orders has established a faithhome within a new temple in a foreign land and taken up its god-given duties. And the others are coming. Our god favors a certain king and for that reason, Shield has come to Rowanhart."

Before Aejs could respond, Maranya had dropped to one knee before her, taken her hand and began to speak.

"My body is the King's Shield. I, Maranya Deontaramei, live to die in her service; to stand between her and the hidden blades of the unseen foe."

Aejys felt very strange as she realized that Maranya was not the young squire she had believed her to be these past months, but a mature woman with a grim philosophy. She scarcely heard her complete the words. Prodded by silence, Aejys made her response to the vow. "Rise, King's Shield. I swear to treat you and yours with all honor and fairness." Then she kissed Maranya's cheeks.

It was said that all the paladins of the Order of the Hidden Shield were fey. Looking at Maranya, Aejys simply could not see it.

"Damn!" Aejys exploded as the enormity of it all hit her. It had all seemed so simple last winter solstice, founding a city with a few caravan guards, drivers, servants, and scattering of others, until Tagalong had showed up with an army. "Suddenly I've got an army, two cities, the rudiments of a navy and a royal guard. And a spymaster with agents from one end of the coast to the other." *And just how do I explain Janine to Soren?* "You're right, Soren. I've got to convince them of our legitimacy or they'll be testing our borders every few months for the next ten generations. We have enough problems without that. First off, I need a seneschal."

"I could suggest..."

"No. I need someone who knows the coast." Aejys thought a moment. "Now that Becca has Clemmerick back, I know a certain wussy little amanuensis." Aejys picked her glass of wine up, carrying it to her desk, rummaging in the drawer for paper. She scribbled. "Find someone to take this to Becca, I'm requisitioning Darlbret as my seneschal for Rowanhart. She can keep Clemmerick, but she can't have them both. Seals and rings and kings and things ... get me six locals and an equal number of Sharani. Pair them off to run errands." Bryngaryn ducked out to get them. "That will teach the Sharani the city. We all need to learn it, so assign leave time for everyone in staggered order. Late fall coronation, after the harvests are in."

"Isn't weather a factor?" Soren asked.

Aejys shook her head. "They'll come by boat. It doesn't get as rough on the coast as it does inland. The staunchest allies we can have are the Kwaklahmyn tribes to the north. They're fisherfolk, but their warriors keep the goblins and orcs from raiding south. I've had trading agreements with them for years. I'll have to renegotiate our pacts now that I've founded Rowanhart and destroyed Cedarbird."

Aejys glanced up as Bryngaryn returned with the twelve guardsmyn. She scribbled another note. "Get me a jeweler and a silversmith. I'll need to get some new seals made. Someone find Tag, I'll need some special chests from the wyrm's hoard." She sent two pairs on their way.

Bryngaryn settled into a chair beside the king, her eyes wide. "There really is a

wyrm's hoard?"

Aejys gave her an evil grin. "Yes, little paladin, there really is a wyrm's hoard. Tagalong, Josiah, and I killed a great wyrm and took its hoard. I broke my damned leg getting it and nearly drowned in wyrm brains. I have more wealth than any ten kingdoms combined. We don't even know the full extent of it yet because we keep finding new chambers that the old wyrm had sealed off." She leaned close to hiss in Maranya's ear, "And you, King's Shield, are going to have a devil's own time keeping up with me."

Aejys stood and gestured to Maranya. "Would you step out onto the parapet with me for a moment?"

Maryanya followed Aejys out and the king stood leaning on the wall. "As long as I thought you were younger, I was not going to ask this. Now that I know the truth—"

"Have I suddenly become a stranger, majesty?"

"None of that!" Aejys jabbed a finger at her. "No formality! I ... I never took a shield-sister. I've never had a sister of any kind really. I would be honored if you would ... I've become very close to you..."

Maranya pulled her dagger and cut her forearm, extending it to Aejys. The king cut her own and they pressed them together.

* * *

Aejys went looking for Josiah as soon as she got matters squared away at the keep. Maranya accompanied her. They found him sitting on a rock, watching the waves roll in and digging sand from a large whorled shell he had picked up. At Aejys' nod, Maranya withdrew a discreet distance to give them some privacy and watched while pretending not to. Aejys sat beside him, slid her arm around his shoulders, and kissed him. He turned away from her with a sigh, digging more determinedly at the shell, seeming more Josh than Josiah at that moment. For reasons Aejys could not articulate, it troubled her. She saw the pensiveness in his eyes, the lines of tiredness that should not have been there so soon after waking.

He pulled bottle of medicine from his pocket and took a long pull. These days he frequently did not bother to measure it. At least it was not whiskey. He had been sober the entire journey, even with others drinking around him. Josiah had spent the morning in the waves, trying to wash his body and heart clean of Zyne's taint to no avail. He did not understand what was happening to him and he felt too stained to touch her.

She frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No." He shook his head, refusing to look at her.

"I intend to announce the triading today, as I promised. That is, if you still love us. Are you having second thoughts? Is that what is wrong?"

"I love you both. Especially you. It's just that—" He did not understand it and he could not say it, but the word was "Zyne."

"What? Whatever it is, I'll understand. I promise," she said, trying to gently coax it from him. Was it his health? Was he finally going to tell her what she already knew but had not told him so?

Josiah shook his head again. "Nothing." He kissed her, and then pressed his face into her hair to hide the sudden, troubled tears.

"Then I'll announce it?"

"Yes."

* * *

Darlbret's feet dragged and he could not keep his chin up. He shuffled along, sending little swirls of dust in his face, which caused him to punctuate his shuddering unhappy sighs with profound fits of sneezing. He dreaded seeing Becca, certain that his already broken heart would break all over again. Why, why, why hadn't she told him about Clemmerick? Why had she let him make such a fool of himself?

In that wise he soon found himself standing before the door to the Cock and Boar. His hand trembled so badly he almost could not get the door open and suspected he would not be able to hold a pen steady enough to make legible entries in the ledger books. Maybe he should complain of a headache and go home. The noise in the common room startled him. It was louder than usual at this hour. He lifted his head to see and discovered it was full of – women? Large, big-boned – not a one of them less than six feet – bronze-skinned, black-haired women, clad in dark leathers with swords and daggers prominently displayed... Darlbret froze and his very inaction drew every eye. One laughed. Another chuckled. Darlbret flushed a bright red.

One tilted her head, peering at him curiously around a pint of ale. "What a cute little male. He looks sort of like a pixie."

"Come over here," her companion called.

"Who me?" Darlbret squeaked.

"Yeah, you. Can I buy you something? I just drew my pay," she said.

Darlbret was seized by a moment of indecision, which was ended by a crook of her finger. He walked over to her and she pulled him onto her lap.

"What's your name?" she asked with genuine interest. "I'm Neioreth. This is Barda, my na'halaef. You understand the term?"

Darlbret shook his head.

"Then let me explain it. It means we're partnered, but Sharani triad. So we're available. Are you married, little male?"

Darlbret flushed. "No."

When Becca finally came looking for him, she found him beaming and laughing. "Darlbret!"

He flinched, glancing to where she stood on the stairs.

"Take the day off," Becca smiled and assuaged her guilt a trifle at not having told him about Clemmerick. Then she returned to her oge. She had barely gotten back into bed with him when a knock came at the door. Becca threw on a dressing robe and answered. A pair of messengers stood there. She accepted the paper and opened it. She dismissed them and dressed quickly, then went downstairs, followed closely by Clemmerick.

"Darlbret, get your things together, I've got to cancel your day off."

"What? What did I do? My things?" His face clouded. "Are you firing me?"

Becca grinned. "Not exactly. Aejys just drafted you. You're now the seneschal of Rowanhart." She turned to the Sharani pair playing with him, "Would you, kind sirs, see this gentlemon to Rowanhart and the king for me?"

When they agreed, Becca went back upstairs to quickly write out an order to get them a boat across the bay immediately.

* * *

Zyne listened, her lips drawn taut with anger, her fists clenched so tightly at her sides that the knuckles paled, as the herald announced Josiah's triading to Aejys and Tamlestari, the ceremony to take place a week from that day. He wore Aejys' light blue livery, standing on a wooden dais raised in the center of the Market Square for the purpose. Two ha'taren, also in her colors, flanked him, their faces impassive, and their backs straight at attention. People turned from their shopping to listen and watch. When the herald finished, a cheer went up from the crowd.

Zyne seethed. Gods, how she hated landsmyn and their silly pomp and rituals. She hated Aejys and Tamlestari even more, burning inside with a desire to be rid of them. No one took a seiryn's chosen male in marriage, stole the meat and blood from her

bed. Never before had she been balked, the power of her songs defied by such a puny sick thing as Josiah. He was hers and he would learn it – and learn it well. She wondered if either of them could be with child. If they were, then she would kill them, rip the child from their bellies, and shove it in their dying faces. There would be no more Abelards, except among the seiryn. Then she rushed back to her cottage. It was a hot day, but she built up the fire to blazing in the hearth. She wrote his name on a cedar chip, tossed it into the fire and sang him to her. She felt sorely tempted to beat him senseless.

* * *

Aejys used the small dining room in the northwest wing for the gathering, the tables shifted around to make it more like a comfortable parlor. She insisted on gathering only the most over-stuffed chairs she could find in the entire keep and that took some doing. The chairs proved to be her only complaint with Becca's decorating: everything looked royal and sat stiff. The only people she called to this meeting with Taun and Skree were Tagalong, Tamlestari, Laurelyanne, Josiah, Dree, and Maranya. Four children played on the floor on blankets: her own two and her nephews.

Josiah sat stiffly in the chair farthest from the door facing it with Laurelyanne beside him. He stiffened when Skree and Taun entered and pinned the little nerien with a glance, saying before they could even acknowledge him. "Right now, I want something understood. Neither of you are to Read me for any reason. I will not have my privacy casually intruded upon." Then he got to his feet and swept past them, fleeing the room. Laurelyanne started to go after him, as did Taun.

"Stop," Aejys said. "Both of you. Let him go."

Skree turned to her. "What is wrong with my godson?"

"He contracted a recurrent fever in Norendel. Laurelyanne," she indicated her, "is a healer and earth-mage, she's taking care of him. I have an expert coming from Imralon. Let's meet the children and then I'll introduce the adults. Two of them are mine, Taun. Can you figure out which two? I mean they're all Sharani."

Taun smiled, his face suffused with such happiness that Josiah was clearly forgotten in a flash. He sat down in the middle of the floor and looked at the four infants. "Their lasah is catkin. So it has to be that the two with the catkin eyes are hers. So these two are yours."

Skree smiled at the evident delight in his mate's face and said a small prayer to his stern deity, Nerindalori of the Waves, as he lifted a green-eyed black-haired boy into his arms and Read the child. The boy was clearly mage-born and clean of all dark powers. Skree placed him in Taun's arms. "You can keep him, my love."

Taun laughed with joy. "What is his name?"

Dree wrapped around Taun, purring. *<Wolff, for the spirit guide who leads the lost to enlightenment . >* She sent into the little nerien's startled mind.

"You can talk to me!"

<Did you think I needed to be a fish ? >

Taun flushed.

Skree lifted the white-haired blue-eyed boy next and Read him. "We will keep both of them. And you as well, Dree."

<Fauxx is strong to protect his brother. He is the trickster . >

"Wolff and Fauxx. Fine names." Skree said.

"I would prefer that no one outside this room knows that Wolff and Fauxx are my nephews." Aejys said. "Should Mephistis come after them, he will come directly to the keep, expecting to find them here. The triton enclave will defend them because they belong to Skree and Taun. Thus they will have both arms and subterfuge to defend them. Now, introductions."

When the introductions had been made, Aejys went to a table and rang a bell to summon the servants to bring dinner. "Taun, we have a lot to discuss. In addition to finding yourself a father, you are going to be very, very busy. I have brought many healers and Readers from Shaurone and Vallimrah. Including a talented young male named Lizard. I am putting you in charge of establishing some kind of organization to coordinate all these healers and Readers. You'll need to figure out what we have and what we need. You are in charge. Do not let anyone intimidate you. You are senior healer for all of Rowanhart. No one works in this kingdom without your permission."

Skree chuckled at the astonished look on his mate's face.

Laurelyanne smiled and put a motherly hand on his arm. "It took me two hundred years to learn to be firm with pushy people, so if you ever need to talk about it, I'll be glad to listen. Josiah is the only mon I'll be working with in a healing capacity. I'm far too old and worn out to handle more than that. Until he came along, I was retired. But if you need some motherly advice or a shoulder, I'm here, young one."

Taun nodded. "Thank you."

* * *

"Well, this is it," Blackbird said, gesturing at the trees. "Aejys has granted us these three acres. Where do you want to put the house? Where do you want to put the temple?" She was a large, broad woman once heavily muscled, but now going to fat.

Her scarred face had a battered look, but her eyes still had fire. She limped across to a stone and sat down on it.

Birdie handed the babies to Lizard and Paunys, and then climbed down from the wagon. Her eyes gleamed with a perpetual spark of defiance, which was a holdover from her childhood growing up on the streets of Armaten. The sun had streaked her dark, curling hair to a sparrow's wing brown. At fourteen, she was already both a mother and a priest to Dynanna. Because of her relationship to their divine benefactor she was gradually taking the leadership of both her family and the twenty war-orphans that lived with them.

Zarim, her sire, came next and tied the wagon up, then went to help the children with the last two wagons and the ten additional horses some of the children had ridden in on. He was a black-skinned, nappy haired man from Jedrua, whom Blackbird and Paunys had purchased as a love slave on the basis of his people's bedroom reputation. But they had fallen in love with him and taken a chance by freeing him. Zarim had immediately moved into the largest bedroom and made them court him in standard Sharani fashion. The result had been Birdie, followed quickly by six more children.

"We will put the house up first. We can always set aside a room for the chapel. I don't want to spend the summer camping out."

The young priest regarded all the huge spruce trees and the smaller cedars. "At least we have plenty of building materials," Birdie said. "I want a tower room again, but larger." She had kept the altar in her bedroom at Armaten, where she had been a cutpurse and the leader of the Market Street Urchins, a kid gang that had helped save Shaurone from Margren. This time they would have a real temple. All of the Urchins, who were mostly war-orphans, had come with them. They were twenty odd children and Birdie was the oldest. Lizard, who had been part of the gang, was now sixteen and married to Birdie. She turned to the children, "All right, find the biggest tree on the place, and we'll put the house next to it."

The children erupted into loud yells of enthusiasm and rushed across the acreage. Lizard smiled, slipping his arm around her shoulders and leaning his head against hers. His face was typically Sharani bronze-skinned, with a wide forehead and high, broad cheekbones, tapering down a delicate jawline to a small, dimpled chin, and not a sign of facial hair. Lizard got his name from an ability to climb almost everything. A Reader, he had gotten some training from an itinerant herb-healer who had begged Blackbird to give Lizard to her as her apprentice. Lizard had refused and Blackbird accepted that: he wanted to remain with the Urchins and Birdie. He became the main healer to the ills that periodically afflicted the Urchins. On the journey to Rowanhart, Lizard had gotten more training from Laurelyanne and Tamlestari, who discovered that he was the most sensitively attuned Reader they had yet encountered. It all felt very good.

"I like this place, Birdie," he told her. "It feels right to be here."

"So do I and yes it does."

* * *

"It goes on forever, doesn't it?" Maranya remarked, gazing out at the water. The three of them, Tagalong, Aejys, and Maranya, sat on blankets, watching the sun sink in blazing oranges and reds against the darkling ocean. Their nude bodies glistened with water.

"It just seems that way," Aejys told her. "There are unexplored continents, islands. All kinds of things out there. The uncleansed lands. Places the gods don't want us to go yet."

"I never thought the ocean would be like this. Swimming out there is a lot different than in the lakes and rivers. Rougher."

"But ya liked it, didn't ya?" Tagalong challenged.

"Yes. It's an interesting land you've chosen to settle in, Aejys."

"It's a dangerous land. There are fish out there that eat people. They get over fourteen feet long, you can't hear them coming. There are a lot of things like that along the Blood Coast and some of them are human. Tagalong and I have been watching each other's backs for thirty years."

Tagalong's eyes dropped. "I didn't do such good job of it in Rowanslea."

Aejys' hand went to Tagalong's shoulder. "None of us did. No one expected what happened. In the end it was for the best."

"What she did ta ya!"

"Tag," Aejys squeezed her shoulder. "I want you to tell the whole story to Maranya over the next few days, even if you have to get roaring drunk to do it. It's important, get some others to tell the parts that you weren't there for."

"This is important?" Maranya asked, quietly intruding on their emotions.

"Yes, King's Shield. Very."

Tagalong's eyes widened and her head came up. "The Order's in Rowanhart?"

It was Maranya's turn to look surprised. "She knows about the Order?"

"She couldn't be my shield-sister because she's not ha'taren. But we swore

blood-sisterhood at twelve as you and I did a week ago. She knows everything that I do. You'll find that certain initiates of other faiths know about the secret orders also. I need both of you, working together, if we are going to survive. If Rowanhart is going to survive. As King, I can't take to the streets any longer as I used to do. And with these wings, I'm rather conspicuous. Tagalong, I want you to teach Maranya to play the game as it's played on the Blood Coast. When you've taught her as much as you can, send her on to Janine. Janine is my chief of intelligence in Vorgensburg. Becca set that up and Becca is very good."

"Your adopted daughter?"

Aejys and Tagalong glanced at each other and burst out laughing. Maranya looked thoroughly confused.

"That's a long story. I adopted Becca to protect myself from a particularly dangerous merchant who eventually tried to kill me and it worked out so well, that I decided to let things stand. So let's get dressed and I'll tell you the story on the walk back – unless you want to take one more swim first?"

"Those fish with the teeth?"

Aejys shook her head. "Skree has dolphins guarding. But I'll have him show you one in the next few days. Tritons like to eat them."

"Another swim, then."

* * *

Maranya dressed for a round of tavern-dancing as Tagalong called it. Rowanhart, Tagalong had informed her, was a lot randier and rowdier than Shaurone. So were all the Cities of the Blood Coast. The game was played different out here. The Sharani openness about sexuality was innocently playful, not like the attitude of the coast which was often snatch and grab; where a flirtatious word or look could be construed as a right to commit rape. That would change as males got their noses broken by irate Sharani females or found themselves in the position of prey more often than predator. Most of her clothing was austere. That would have to change. The best she could do was hunter green leather pants and vest with a pale green wool shirt, deep sleeved with laced cuffs. She laced them loosely so that she could get at the stilettos in their arm sheaths. She wore a pair of utilitarian swords totally without ornamentation, unlike the Aroanan rune-swords she normally carried as a paladin. She dropped the Aroanan rune on its heavy chain of braided silver down the front of her shirt where it would not be seen.

"Sharani have an attitude about sex called 'have a good time' and there's no such thing about underage fer them. However, rest of the folks don't have tha kyndi ta protect their young ones, so they get defensive and have rules. Most people can't tell one dark-skinned woman from another, so they tend ta assume yer not Sharani

unless ya tell them different. Also males in these lands can get dangerously predatory. Keep that in mind before ya try taking one of them between yer legs."

Tagalong lectured her about the differences between Sharani mores and those of the coast all the way to the Blue Bull where they took a table and ordered a round.

"Now, I'm gonna give ya the best piece of advice there is when yer in Rowanhart or Vorgensburg. Ya find yerself in serious trouble, ya go ta tha gaffer. I can't tell ya why. Just trust me. Go ta tha gaffer."

"When do I meet him?"

"When I think yer ready. Ya need ta learn how ta handle things first. Otherwise ya'll be shovin' a male's face in every five minutes around here. There's a certain crude etiquette."

* * *

Aejys spread maps out over the table in the small audience chamber – small only in the sense that it was smaller than the great hall though it still easily held sixty people – dropping ornate stone paperweights on the corners. Omer, Raim, and other officers drawn from her local units would know the material she would be going over with Soren and the Sharani and Valdren officers. In some ways, holding a coronation was throwing a gauntlet in some people's faces. They needed to understand the stakes, attitudes, and the lay of the lands.

"There," she said, pointing to a peninsula dangling above and west of the Kwaklahmyn lands north of Vorgensburg. "That's Brunstrat. They're pirates and slavers. They're not invited. I've sunk three of their ships since I came to Vorgensburg five years ago. I would not put it past them to try and attack during the coronation. However, I have four triton high lords attending and their fleet will be sailing these waters against such an eventuality until early winter. Questions?"

There were none, so Aejys moved on. "Timbren is the next closest to us to the south. There are scattered independent towns and villages in between. Timbren is a small city-state ruled by a Willodarian priest-king. Vorgensburg has never had a problem with them. I doubt we will. Ildyrsetts, south of that, is a kingdom with two duchies and a couple or three baronies, minds its own business. Ocealay, which is beyond that, however, is ruled by the Five Captains, mercenaries. They'll be sending representatives to the coronation in part to collect a debt I owe them. One of their primary captains, Johannes Redbeard rode with me to Shaurone a year ago and died at the Valdren border when we were attacked by orcs. They, as do I, have copies of the contracts and I will make good on them at that time. I don't expect trouble; however, I do expect them to get nosy. You will be briefed on how I expect you to handle this when the time comes. Dismissed, gentlemyn."

Aejys rotated her neck and shoulders, squeezing at them.

Maranya moved to Aejs' side as the others filtered out. "You look like you could use a neck rub, majesty." They alternated between the formal and the informal modes of address as mood and circumstance demanded, sometimes drawing closer and sometimes pushing farther apart. As King's Shield, Maranya was expected to lay down her life for Aejs; it could never be the other way around, because too many lives depended upon the king's. It was an unequal relationship. While that did not bother Maranya, it troubled Aejs. When Maranya sensed that distress in her shield-sister, she pulled back from her and gave her space through formality.

Aejs nodded.

"Move the wings?"

Aejs chuckled softly, extending them out sideways and then sighing as the paladin's strong fingers dug deeply into the tight muscles. "I never liked these sessions."

"You'd never guess it to listen to you."

"I did too many of them during the war."

"You had quite a reputation."

"There are those who had better." Aejs found herself thinking of all who had died ... or vanished.

"But not and lived."

"Taking out so many monsters, armies, impossible odds. There are old warriors and bold warriors, but no old, bold warriors."

"That's why I'm here, my liege. So you can grow old."

Aejs stiffened. "I'm tired of people dying for me." The king sprang to her feet and shoved Maranya aside, stalking from the room.

Maranya shook her head, and then followed after her. King's Shield overtook her liege on the battlements overlooking the bay. Aejs leaned between the merlons watching a pair of small boats tack toward an island in the middle.

"I've lost too many friends, too many loved ones ... seen too many people die," Aejs said, without turning. "I know a stand must be made, but when I look at the price in lives – especially lives lost for nothing more than keeping myself alive – I am forced to ask if it can possibly be worth it."

"You would be a poor and unworthy king if you did not."

"How long have you belonged to the order?"

"I was pledged at birth, knighted and confirmed at fourteen."

"Have you ever regretted it?"

"No. I've never wanted to grow old. All I've ever wanted out of life was to die well and in service to a just cause as my Order demands."

"I have been told that all members of your order are fey."

Maranya's laughter came bellowing out of her stomach and lungs, continuing until she bent double, clutching her sides while tears ran from her eyes. "Uh...uh..." she sobbed for breath and gradually mastered herself. "That, my sister," she said, wagging a finger at Aejs, "is a gross oversimplification of the ignorant. Yes, we're a melancholy lot at times. We live to die and therefore we live more fully than people who live in fear of death. If by 'fey', you mean suicidal, not hardly. We're damned hard to kill and we sell our lives dearly. To do otherwise would dishonor our god. We're not going to throw ourselves on the blades of the enemy unless that's the only way to keep them from reaching you and then that's ... exactly what ... we will ... do." Maranya's voice slowed and hesitated as she saw the look coming over the king's face. "Someone did that for you, didn't they? Someone you cared about?"

Aejs closed her eyes tight against the memory, gritting out a name between her teeth, "Cassana Odaren."

* * *

Josiah lay awake, staring at Aejs' hair, bright with moonlight. Tamlestari curled up against him and Aejs spooned around him. Tomorrow he would marry them and yet all he could think about was Zyne. He loved them. He knew he loved them. What could possibly be drawing him back to her? Josiah slipped out of bed, dressed, and went out. It was almost as if he could hear her calling, but that made no sense, unless there was some bond between them that allowed him to sense her need for him.

He walked through the city to her cottage. It was a better night than some and he managed to arrive in less pain than usual, his head less clouded by it. She stood in the doorway waiting for him. How could she have known he was coming? For an instant he almost knew, then a chill ran down his spine and his mind slid away from the knowledge.

"You cannot marry them," she said angrily, dragging him into the house.

"I love them," Josiah protested. Again that instant of almost knowing.

"Are they with child?"

"No, I don't think so." Why did she ask that? He felt a trembling of fear for Aeijys and Tamlestari, sensing a threat in her tone, yet feeling totally helpless to address it. Would she hurt them?

Zyne pulled him to the small table, set out with a bottle of whiskey and a single glass. She poured him a drink, pressing it into his hands as she began to sing. He stared at the cup. It beckoned to him. His throat felt a tickle of longing that grew into an intense craving. He remembered the soft heat it would send through his veins, the way it would feel in his stomach, and the ease it could give him. Why did she want him to drink? She had never offered him the cup before. He did not even know if she actually kept it around. Had she gotten it deliberately for this single night? Gods, how he wanted it. He had been sober for months, the entire time it had taken them to reach Rowanhart from Norendel. If he took one, then he would take another. If he got drunk, there would be no wedding tomorrow. He would ruin it for them. He loved them.

"Drink it," she hissed, pausing in the song, which was wrapping more chains around his heart and mind.

"No." He smashed the cup aside, startling Zyne. Josiah grabbed the bottle, throwing it hard against the headboard of the bed where it shattered, filling the bedclothes with shards of glass and the stench of alcohol. "No! I will not hurt them that way."

Josiah stood up and started for the door. Zyne could feel the strength of his mind, fighting her on an instinctual level. She had pushed for too much too soon. She sang and her voice wrapped around him, pulling him back. He fought her harder, his body stiffening with the effort to go through the door. She continued to sing, opening her clothing. She wrapped herself around him, soothing, pleading.

"No," Josiah said, tears starting in his eyes. "Aeijys. Stari. I love you."

"You love me."

"I don't love you. I don't want you. Please, Zyne."

She opened his pants, stroking his hardness. "I love you, Josiah. Only you."

Josiah tried to turn away as she sang in his ear. She pulled him down onto the floor. He shivered and wept as he entered her, but could not stop himself. When he finished, she sang him home and took the memories from him of this one night because at last he had known what she was: Tomorrow he would not.

* * *

Aeijys went to their quarters and found Tamlestari sitting on the floor with the babies crawling about, the intervening door between their sleeping chambers stood open as did the one of the far side where Josiah slept. Aeijys squatted, slipping an arm around

Tamlestari and kissed her deeply. It had been years since she had felt this happy and content. She had family again. She was determined to take each day one at a time, and hold Josiah tightly to her for as long as she could. That Imraloni healer would arrive in a few weeks. If anyone could help Josiah, it would be he.

"Are you still certain you wish to triad with Josiah today?" Aejs asked, pulling back from her.

"Yes," Tamlestari told her, green eyes sparkling. "He's good with the children. He's gentle in bed." Then she giggled like a schoolgirl, gave a lascivious grin, and said, "And he's hung like a horse." She grew serious again. "I still don't love him, Aejs, but I do care for him enough to do this."

"Then let's do it."

* * *

Josiah emerged from his bedroom, looking rested and happy for the first time since they reached Rowanhart. Aejs folded her wings and he slid an arm around her shoulders as he kissed her.

"So, we're really going to do it today?" He felt better than he had in weeks, although he did not know why.

"Yes," Aejs responded. "As soon as you're dressed. Tamlestari will meet us at precisely three bells at the Temple of the Waves."

"So, you're making an honest man of me at last," Josiah teased, but he smiled with his lips and not quite his eyes. They would not have much time together, but they could treasure what they did have.

"I had to test the equipment first," she grinned, settling in a chair. She took her pipe out, filled it, and smoked. He did not want her to know how few his days were numbered by. She suspected it could be no more than a matter of months. So far as anyone was supposed to know, he had merely a recurring illness, something that, while draining, was not dangerous. The whole charade hurt.

Josiah flushed and that made her smile. There was still much of Josh in Josiah: a sweet vulnerability that manifested at odd times. He walked the beaches, finding the odd shells and an occasional starfish to leave on her desk. He kept a piece of scrimshaw going. Otherwise, he was very much Josiah Abelard: the battlemage whose powers had been so all-encompassing that, by the end of his last incarnation, he had been called the mage-master. Josiah had the memories from both incarnations. He was a strong, compassionate, confident man, gentle with his friends and a terror to his enemies. Aejs could never have survived those months of struggling through the assaults by Mephistis and his allies, especially when her hands were crippled, without Josiah's strength. He had been there for her, fighting them off,

destroying Cedarbird and Dinger, rescuing her from Hoon, buying her time to reach the sword that healed her hands and soul.

* * *

Zyne brooded. They had triaded – married. Despite the force of her songs, she had been unable to compel him to refuse them. The situation was intolerable. She would punish them. Punish them all. His body was weak, but his will was strong. There had never been someone before that she could not break. One way or another, she would break him yet. Her attempt to force him to reject them or to take a drink and ruin the occasion with his drunkenness had resulted in his nearly breaking free of her spells. If she could not steal him away, then she would be forced to kill him. Or them. Could she kill them? What would it take to kill a yuwenghau like Aejs? So powerful, so skilled. What would it take? A poisoned blade? There were fish in the sea that produced a poison so deadly it killed even the strongest in seconds. It would mean a long swim to warmer waters to find a scorpion fish or a blue-ringed octopus. It would be worth it. But did she dare leave Josiah that long? Would her spells come undone in her absence?

* * *

"You should not have married him when you want me," Hoon said, his voice softly vehement. They stood on the terrace again. The wind blew strongly, whipping the small remaining strings of her white hair in her face. She folded her wings tight to her body. If she had not feared becoming lost in Hoon's memories, perhaps never to awaken from them, far more than what lay in that room, she would have spread her wings and fled him.

"I don't want you." She walked to the doors and into the bedroom, the plush carpets tickling her bare feet. If he was going to force her through Amalthea's death again he might as well get it over with. She felt detached and resigned.

Hoon followed her, staring uneasily. She had never gone voluntarily through that door before. "What are you doing?"

"I will seek atonement and forgiveness in my own way, Hoon. Not in the way you would force upon me. I do not deny that what I did was wrong. But I am not Amalthea." It felt good to be out of the wind. She glanced around for her clothing and not seeing it, snatched the scarlet and ebony bedspread up, wrapping it around her body.

"I love you."

"No. You hunger for me. You confuse love with appetite. All vampires do. When you have consumed me, you will no longer love me."

"That is not true."

"Then why? In all of these dreams ... do you cut my throat?"

Hoon snarled, snatched the bedspread away, and knocked her down onto the bed. "Because if I cannot have your love, then I will have your death."

Aejys simply lay there looking up at him unflinching. "Your love, Hoon, is death and worse than death. So what is the difference? I do not see it. Get this atrocity over with and let me wake."

Then Hoon saw that the long white hair had been shorn almost to nothing and he understood. He could not address her indifference and turned away from her in defeat.

CHAPTER TEN

JOURNEY INTO HELL

The nibari moved about the main hall with wine for both their masters and the sa'necari, as well as treats for the necromancers that only living myn could enjoy. Timon had deliberately dressed them in the most provocative clothing, dancer's silks that displayed their charms. Anksha singled out each of the sa'necari for attention, taking their measure, while flirting outrageously. The creature was cute in her silks and jewels, her build was a delicate perfection of winsome femininity with a small perfectly curled tail at her back, fair skinned and dark haired – a striking contrast – and Isranon could see how Mephistis could be attracted enough to her to allow such rough nibble games. The single time she came sufficiently close for Isranon to see, he realized that she was covered – except for her face and the palms of her hands – in velvety fur. She was so small that she did not come quite to his chin. Doubtless she took Mephistis' mind off his lost Margren. Any female, to Isranon's mind, was preferable to Margren.

Bodramet wandered across the room to Isranon. "I've watched you working with your sword and blades, Isranon. You've a fine body despite the scars."

Isranon moved away from him, disliking the closeness. Bodramet smelled like Troyes, whom he had slain to save Merissa, Claw's daughter. He experienced a flash of memory, Bodramet standing at the far side of the hall with his beloved Rose shoved to her knees as the price of his cooperation – the bait to force him to walk the ranks of the gauntlet. One of them had murdered Rose after he collapsed wounded at Bodramet's feet. By all rights, since he had made it across the room alive, the sa'necari should have released her. Isranon walked further away from Bodramet, trying to keep some distance between them. Yet the sa'necari simply followed him.

"Is there a reason those scars won't leave? What made them?" Bodramet slid a hand onto his shoulder. "Do you play nibble games?"

Isranon had been refusing Bodramet for four years – Bodramet already knew the answer. The youth felt bile rise burning from his stomach into his throat. He wanted to fall to his knees, vomiting. "Don't touch me!" He felt again his terror and anguish as Troyes shoved into his body. Isranon pulled away from Bodramet.

"Am I not good enough for you?" Bodramet grabbed his arm and Isranon knocked him aside, striding quickly across the hall into the corridor. Mephistis saw him go and followed him out.

Isranon leaned against the wall, breathing hard, sweating running in rivulets down his face, his body shaking.

"Isranon? Tell me about it?"

Isranon shook his head, but said it anyway. "I nearly died... I nearly died in the rite. Troyes. He said he killed Rose ... that he had planned all along to take me."

Mephistis bowed his head and shoulders for a moment, and then slipped his arm around his only friend. "Let's talk about it in your rooms."

* * *

Timon watched Isranon flee the party. It had been flight, although his stride had been steady, determined – it had still been flight. *Flight*. The word echoed in Timon's mind. That one had pride, but also hurts – and not just those that had left the scars on his body, which was another enigma. The more he learned of Isranon, the less he understood. Timon wanted to follow, but saw the prince go after him and held back. Timon would be glad when there were no sa'necari at all on the estate. He had hated being summoned to Waejontor when his father needed him to take charge of the defenses of his citadel, resented being away from this little island of symbiotic calm, which he had made for himself.

His father called him the "military man in the family" without comprehending what it implied. Hoon was a warrior; Timon a soldier. The difference was profound. Timon did not waste lives. He had taken no lives out of appetite and held himself in tight rein, with an iron will and discipline. The few times he had been driven to the darker rites of magic for the sake of his people's survival he had used criminals already slated for execution in the various kingdoms and he never did anything that would harm their souls only their bodies. Souls were sacrosanct. The few turnings he had done in his existence had been to save his few mortal friends – his father thought that a weakness and he wondered if Hoon had friends. He must have. His royals were devoted to him.

"You're obsessing on that sa'necari," Ephry slid his arm around Timon's waist,

propping his chin on the vampire's shoulder. The lycan's white hair veiled loose around his lean shoulders, pale against the black tunic. The lovers were a study in contrast, dark Timon and translucently fair Ephry. Ephry came of a western clan dwelling in Darr, where Timon had met him.

Timon shook his head. "He's strange, that's all. I'm bloody well not attracted to a sa'necari." He kissed Ephry.

* * *

"I will never be a monster," Isranon said stubbornly. "Never."

They were alone in the parlor of Isranon's suite of apartments. Nevin and Olin were not there when they arrived. Doubtless, since the lycans had been excluded from the party, they had found or made one of their own. Isranon had given Mephistis the entire story of what had happened with Troyes. Mephistis listened, first sitting and then standing, pacing at times in a troubled fashion.

"One day the monsters will kill you. That is why I did not want you here."

"Then they will kill me." He held his head up, that proud tilt, not looking at Mephistis, closing him out, closing the horrors out, building that castle in his mind again. Mephistis could see it.

"Isranon, look at me," Mephistis commanded, turning Isranon's face toward him. "If those sa'necari are monsters, then I am a monster. In fact, I am the monster of monsters because I carry the Legacy."

"You are my prince. I am your sworn man. That is all that matters. I understand you. I was born into a world I have no power to affect. No power to change. I must live with it. But I will live my own life by my own rules. Even if I must die for it. And I understand this world, this life, you."

"Then you understand something I don't." Mephistis released him, stepped to the window and stood looking out, his hands tightening on the sill until his knuckles whitened. "You and your sister have been the only incorruptible things in my life. Margren was so sweet. But I corrupted her. I enjoyed doing it. I loved the way her eyes lit up with each new thing I taught her."

"You are sa'necari. It is the way you are. Ask the lions of the forest why they kill. Because it is their nature. You cannot deny them their nature."

"You were born sa'necari."

"I am a descendant of the Dawnhand."

Mephistis turned, startling Isranon with the tears in his eyes. "I swear to you,

Isranon, so long as I survive, the others shall not again lay hands upon you. You are under my protection."

* * *

Haig sat upon a bench in the gardens with his arm around Nainee. She leaned against his shoulder while another nibari, a young female not yet old enough for breeding, which the vampire had been feeding upon, knelt between his knees still waiting to be dismissed. Haig tousled the youngster's head. "Off with you, Uta. I've taken enough."

She glanced at him to be certain and then departed with a dazed look upon her face. This was only Uta's second time in her life to feed a vampire and Haig prided himself on breaking his stock in gently. The nibari had been specifically bred for forty centuries to tolerate more frequent and larger blood losses than normal humans. Their blood replenished itself faster. And they tended toward a general docility. However, that could change when they bonded firmly with a certain type of master, like Haig or Dane Jayce. Dane's nibari had risen to the vampire's defense when they thought Bodramet posed their master a threat the day the latter exchanged hands. Haig was well aware of this and cultivated it.

Nainee leaned deeper into his broad shoulder, nestling tight to him. "That one is odd." She nodded at Isranon as he passed. "The nibari speak constantly of him. He told me I was lovely, but did not try to touch me or taste me."

Haig kissed the side of her head. "You're a good girl, Nainee. Keep gathering the gossip for me."

"He feeds less than the others. And he plays that flute. He spends many hours in the farthest parts of the gardens with his flute, where no one can hear him. Those lycans of his have stopped us from following after him several times, but we get around them. Some of us have been teasing them and making a game of it to put them off their guard. They are very protective, Haig. Very, very protective. I cannot stress this enough."

"They were like that on the road here, Nainee. When we stopped at waystations, one of them always entered a room ahead of him as if he were the prince. Yet, he is simply some very minor sa'necari."

Nainee sighed. "He has almost no scent."

Haig's head came up with a sudden jerk and he set her aside. "What's this?"

Nainee followed his gaze. "I think there's about to be a fight."

They were staring at Mephistis stalking toward Bodramet. Rage literally rose in shimmers from the prince. Haig stood up, nodding for Nainee to get as far from the

area as possible.

* * *

Mephistis found Bodramet in the garden sitting with three of the other sa'necari. The prince strode quickly over to Bodramet in time to hear one of them say something he could not quite catch about Isranon. He seized Bodramet by the throat, slamming him hard against a tree with both hand and power. It hurt to expend his fraying energies so heavily, but the point had to be made that he could still do it. Sa'necari respected power more than anything else.

"Don't you ever, ever lay hands upon my Isranon. What is mine is mine alone!"

The other sa'necari drew away from them.

Timon and Anksha watched interestedly from a short distance, as yet unnoticed by the sa'necari. "Observe them, my pet, and see that they do not damage the prince." Timon walked away as Anksha slithered into the underbrush on her belly.

"No one damages my blood-slaves except me," she snarled too softly to be heard.

Bodramet growled low in his throat, sensing weakness in the fraying edges of Mephistis' powers. "The half-a-man is meat to any who can take him." He shoved upwards with a lance of death, feeling a crack and then a split widen in Mephistis' shields. The prince's grip on Bodramet's throat loosened. Bodramet pressed his attack, only to shriek suddenly, dropping to his knees, clutching his bleeding side. Anksha rocked on the balls of her feet, grinning and licking her claws.

"Try that again, oh silly sa'necari, and I'll call the guards. Bad manners! Such bad manners, you have, attacking your prince. We have rules here."

Mephistis stepped to her side, brushing the leaves and twigs from her hair. She nearly always had bits of debris in her hair, clinging to her clothing – when she bothered with clothing, preferring to creep naked through the underbrush like a cat or leap through the treetops with joyous abandon.

"The rules are: do not touch My Prince. Do not touch anyone else who does not want to be touched. Is that understood?"

Bodramet glared at her. "I am sa'necari."

"And I am Anksha, the troll-tamer, the demon-eater. I am a law unto myself." She flexed her claws and swiped him across the face. Bodramet threw a lance of power at her. Someone screamed, "fight." Anksha leaped high, landing one hand on his head as she somersaulted over him and caught him in the ribs. Bodramet screamed, twisting to find her. She raked him again, this time across the back. He could not keep track of her. By the time Timon arrived with his royals, Bodramet lay in a

bloody, quivering heap.

"What is going on here?" Timon demanded, standing with his arms folded and his expression at its sternest.

Anksha prodded Bodramet. "I taught him his ABCs. Now he needs his breakfast. Out of a bottle. No nibari for him for a few days."

Isranon, standing with a group of nibari – who giggled at the way Anksha had reduced Bodramet – considered the demonstration thoughtfully. He could understand how those games could get so rough. The nibari seemed to almost worship Anksha, crowding around her as she left the field victorious, chattering and congratulating her, thanking her and gushing with pleasure over what the small creature had achieved.

When Bodramet had been taken away, Anksha threw herself on the ground in a puddle of the sa'necari's blood and rolled in it happily. Isranon shivered.

Nainee appeared at Isranon's elbow and patted him on the shoulder. "She is not as savage as she seems – unless you provoke her. At least not with the nibari."

* * *

"You have done well, my pet," Timon said, sitting on the rooftop garden. She lay curled around his feet like a cat, the tip of her pink tongue poking between her red lips and edge of her fangs showing around the sides. The fragrance of lilies told Timon she had come fresh from her bath to lounge beside him. She wore tight-fitting, black silk pants, but no top. His father and he never had much luck keeping her in her clothing. There was too much wildness in her and clothes caught on things when she was exploring the treetops and bushes. Whenever they caught upon something she tended to divest herself of them and let them fall to the ground.

Anksha purred. "They will not get out of line again for a very long time. Bodramet was second only to the prince. A very fine example he made. Anksha earns a treat?" she slid abruptly into the guttural dialect of her childhood, as she did when caught in emotion. "Isranon confuses me. He smells strange."

Timon straightened, taking his arm from the back of the couch to lean forward with intense interest. "Strange, Anksha?"

"Clean, innocent?" She floundered around, trying to find the words. "Baby. Like a baby sa'necari."

Timon blinked, wondering how old the young male was. "You mean they've just recently taught him the rites?"

"No. Like a baby."

"But he's too old for a newborn. That happens in puberty. You're confused."

"No. No, no, no. Anksha is not confused!"

Timon ruffled her hair. "All right, you are not confused."

"He doesn't eat meals."

"Then I don't know what he is, pet." *Could there be a trap of some kind lurking beneath that peaceful exterior? It would not surprise me. Perhaps the prince is still a player... If so, Anksha will rip Mephistis' mind to shreds through the dominance link.*

* * *

Isranon retreated more and more into his silences, comforting himself with his flute. He liked sitting on the boulder near the odd gate he had found. The gate lay hidden in the most tangled portion of the far northwest section of the garden, high quality steel twisted into the shape of lions leaping. Bone runes were set into the stone of the arch that held it. Isranon could not read those runes and wondered what they said. He felt no darkness emanating from them, and the one time he had touched them he had felt a clean savagery in their depths like a wild beast used this gate and not someone – or something whose mind was turned to evil for its own sake used this gate. The young male had never found any sign, spoor or print from the one who used it, yet he knew it was often used by someone.

Nevin and Olin found him there. It was impossible to escape them for long.

"Is Anksha the troubling scent, Nevin?" he asked, setting aside his flute.

Nevin changed. "Yes. It tugs at my memory. I will not speak of it, since I am not certain."

Isranon sighed. He did not like the sound of that.

"There is no reason to be troubled about Anksha. You know that this is Anksha's gate?"

Isranon looked up to discover Mephistis standing nearby. The prince came and sat down with them, carrying a bottle. His eyes had a disturbing quality, the pupils glazed in a manner that suggested drugs. Sa'necari eyes, once they had taken a life in the rites, became a solid blood-violet, without whites, pupils and iris, and it was frequently difficult to see drug use in their depths. But that glaze was a sign. Isranon knew they were giving Mephistis something to ease his pain and suffering from the deijanrael.

"What is that?" Isranon asked.

"Sanguine Rose. A drug cocktail in a troll's blood base. It helps me." He raised it to his lips and took a long pull from the bottle.

"You're not measuring it?"

Mephistis wiped his mouth on his sleeve in an uncharacteristically untidy gesture, which made Isranon wonder how far down into the deijanrael his normally fastidious prince had slipped. "I need too much of it these days."

Isranon shivered. It was not his place to question and yet his head was full of doubts and questions. "I've never heard of it before."

He did not remember that Dane had dosed him with it when he nearly died last autumn and Mephistis had commanded Dane to save him.

Mephistis took another swallow. "The recipe was lost. Only Hoon knows how to make it. It's from the ancient days when sa'necari warred more freely and openly upon each other." Mephistis took another drag.

"Why are you trusting Hoon so much?" Isranon demanded before he could stop himself. Mephistis had always protected him and Isranon tried in turn to defend the prince's back.

"Because our needs run together. Aejys Rowan is what Hoon wants. He craves her and she is the one who holds my sons."

"I have heard that." Isranon shifted uneasily on the stone, finally moving to the ground to be closer to Nevin. He gripped the wolf's grey ruff.

"It is true. Josiah Abelard has returned. Dynanna rescued his soul and brought him back. The winter mage's drunken apprentice ... the one I could not fathom. He was Abelard. Rowan pulled the sacred sword of Kalirion, Spiritdancer, from the altar stone in Norendel ... despite my and Hoon's attempts to stop her. Should I perish by that blade, the Legacy will die with me." Mephistis took several more swallows of the Sanguine Rose, becoming distanced and detached.

"My Prince, I think you have had enough of that." Isranon reached for the bottle and Mephistis drew back, shielding it like an alcoholic with his brew.

"No." Mephistis fell silent for a time and then began again in that same strange, troubling speech. "Rowan, King of Rowanhart was changed by the blade. She is a wondrous creature now, with azure wings that have crimson tips. All the races have come to her. The swan mays visit her. She has acquired a dragon. It will be a difficult war. But I will have my sons back."

Isranon felt a sudden sorrow for Mephistis, mingled with love for his prince. "If I can help you regain your sons, I will."

"Thank you, my devoted Isranon. My friend."

* * *

Haig followed the sound of the flute until he located Isranon. The sa'necari sat upon the large boulder beside Anksha's Gate. Haig had never known a sa'necari who could stand the sound of a flute, much less play one. His own people believed that flutes celebrated life and seeing the way sa'necari over the years had retreated from such things, Haig believed it. This was the first time Haig had looked here for Isranon since Nainee told him about the young male's frequenting this place. The vampire lingered in the shadows, listening for a long time before he started to step forward, only to hesitate and fade back as he saw another sa'necari emerge from the side nearest Isranon.

Bodramet's hand closed on Isranon's, stopping the music. The two myn stared at each other for a moment, the tension palpable to Haig. Then Bodramet reached out, stroking Isranon's face and Haig saw that his fangs were showing. It irritated the vampire; it was not enough that that one had to have his depnane and nibari, but he had to continue chasing one of his own who rejected him? One that Haig had found a liking for the same as his friend Dane had?

"I want a taste of you, Isranon," Bodramet purred. "Body and blood."

Isranon's blades, the knives he wore at his sides rather than the sword at his back, leaped out so fast it made Haig blink.

Haig saw immediately that they were not the usual spelled hell-blades, but cold steel, well kept. He had not even seen Isranon drop the flute as he went for the blades. Blades and not spells. This was strange and getting stranger.

"Let me be," Isranon growled, one blade resting against Bodramet's belly and the other just beneath his chin.

"Do you bend over for princes only? Or just for vampires?"

Isranon squared his shoulders, staring defiantly into Bodramet's eyes and saying nothing.

"You cannot stop one as deeply steeped in death as I with those toys," Bodramet continued, smirking. "And you are so far from the manor that no one would hear you scream, half-a-man."

Isranon remained silent, ready.

"Bend over for me and I will not kill you."

The sweet venom in Bodramet's voice made the hair along Haig's arms and neck stand up. Haig could feel Bodramet's power rise. The Lemyari, demon-vampire, emerged into the clearing. "Let him be, Bodramet." Haig flexed his fingers, bringing forth his claws with venom dripping from the tips, turning his hand palm up in Bodramet's face. If he got enough fingers into Bodramet, he could give even a powerful sa'necari a swift death. Haig's venom was not as potent as the older Lemyari, since potency increased with age, but it did not need to be if he got all ten into Bodramet.

Bodramet regarded the Lemyari cautiously. "This is none of your affair, vampire."

"It is my affair, if I wish. Isranon is my friend."

"You will not always have protectors, Isranon." Bodramet spit in Isranon's face before striding away.

Haig had some leaves in hand as soon as Isranon sheathed his blades and wiped the spittle from his face. "I do not know if I could have slain him. I'm still very young as Lemyari go. But I was a knight of Oakleigh before my turning."

"I've never been to Oakleigh." Isranon retrieved his flute, making certain it had not been harmed, cleaning it off. "It's one of the city-states south of Minnoras?"

"Yes. No walls. Wide open. Beautiful. We – They have no walls because their knights are very good and if they cannot stop the threat, walls would do them no good." Haig settled cross-legged beside him. "Play some more?"

"You like it?" Isranon sounded surprised.

Haig smiled so broadly his fangs glinted in the sunlight. "It is the sound of life. It reminds me of what I was before I became what I am. Yes. I like it."

* * *

"Plain steel, Timon," Haig said. "Had I not stepped out, Bodramet would have slain the mon." He sprawled in the largest of the chairs in front of Timon's desk.

Timon stroked Anksha's hair, idly pulling the tangles out, while she lay curled at his feet. "Steel? No runes? No obsidian?"

"No hell-blades of any kind, bane, death, harm. None. I know nearly every type of variant blade in existence, and many that no longer are forged. I am a weaponsmaster, Timon. That's the reason they turned me." A shadow passed across Haig's face and then vanished. His turning had not been voluntary. Had Dane not found him, there was no telling what kind of monster he might have become in that

first searing rush of hunger.

Timon's eyes met Haig's and understanding passed between them: they both knew where Haig's thoughts had turned for an instant. "I want some answers, Haig. He's different. I am not asking you to harm him ... unless, of course, he forces you to."

"If I can find them, you'll have them."

* * *

Hoon returned as mysteriously as he had vanished, but this time he came with a sa'necari carry orb under his arm. He slapped his gloves impatiently across his dusty riding leathers as he tossed the reins of his horse to a groom and followed Timon into the house. He had a disturbingly smug expression, as if he had gotten far more than he dreamed of.

Isranon watched him closely, standing beside Mephistis with Nevin and Olin at his heels. The lycans spent increasingly more time in wolf-form and less in human, as if they were searching for something they had not yet told Isranon of.

Mephistis left Isranon, hurrying to Hoon with a half-wild look in his eyes. "You got them?"

"Of course. Come along, we have matters to discuss."

Isranon started to follow. Hoon gave him a hard, quelling look that stopped him in his tracks. There were a thousand possible reasons and Isranon pondered them as he turned away to leave the hall for the sunlit open grounds he loved.

"It is done?" Hoon asked, Servants bustled around him. Nibari were already being chosen and sent to the rooftop garden to await his pleasure. He would bathe and change first.

"Yes, father. We now have a most cooperative prince."

"And you have rewarded our pet well, I hope?" His voice was full of silk and satisfaction.

"As always."

"Wait for me in the garden with Mephistis. I will be up shortly." Hoon went to his private bath and found Anksha already splashing in the large, round, marble bathing pool. He laughed at her. She laughed back and threw water at him. He dropped his clothing and dove in after her. They tussled for a while, settling down to some mutual scrubbing and eventually ended up sitting on the sides dangling their feet.

"How I love you, little one, even if I don't know what you are."

"I'm Anksha," she replied pertly.

"Yes, I know, you're Anksha," he touched her on the nose. Anksha had demanded an occasional place in his bed as reward for summoning him in time to turn Timon when Waejonan slaughtered his family. Theirs was an odd devotion.

"Will you go for your bride soon?" Anksha asked, her expression eager.

"No. She fights me."

"I could get her for you."

"I do not want her that way." Hoon stroked Anksha's breasts, teasing her nipples, making her sigh. "I want a paladin of darkness. A death angel. Not simply a wife. While I have had them that way before, that would not satisfy me. I have had to kill every wife I have taken."

"Then you have chosen wrong." Anksha licked his face.

"Exactly. I want someone who is as strong, as disciplined and as focused as I am. So I try to make her see life from my eyes. Or break her down enough that I can rebuild her in my image. Failing that I will kill her like I did the others."

"Large goals."

"Yes, Anksha. Open your mind to me and let me show you what she looks like. She is wondrous."

Anksha saw the wings first and sighed, then the white hair with the fringe of flame and black, the glistening sapphire hued skin. "Magnificent. What is she?"

"Yuwenghau, little one. That is another reason I will not set you to take her. I have never set you on one and I will not risk you. She has not found her full potentials yet. I must take her before she does. No, I will not risk you." Hoon pushed Anksha down, positioned himself above her, and entered her. She wrapped around him, locking onto him in a vise hard grip. He rose up again on his hands and knees, bringing her with him. She slid down until she hung like a sloth from a tree branch with her pelvis tightly attached to him, rocking and moving with him. She always settled in this position for sex and it made him wonder if her kind made love in the treetops.

* * *

Hoon allowed Mephistis into his private garden on the roof for the first time to discuss some of their plans for the tools he had brought back from Galee's armory. He intended to keep most of his inventory secret. Anksha curled at his feet, now and

again flicking her tongue at Mephistis just to keep him on edge. She had left a deliberate and proprietary scar, long and jagged down the side of his neck, and forbade him to hide it. It stole his pride. The sa'necari, the living embodiment of all the powers of the undead, the most powerful necromancers of all and – Mephistis, with the Legacy of Waejonan the most powerful of the sa'necari – were accustomed to being the masters, not the slaves.

Mephistis felt a burning humiliation, matched only by the psychic pain of being too frequently in her presence. He suspected that pain, which he experienced within his body, his magic and psychic centers to be some manifestation of the dominance link. The pain worsened into anguish and agony the farther apart she spaced her feedings upon him. On the one hand he hated and resented; on the other he craved with a desperate desire to enter and be entered. He had foolishly lowered all his magical defenses and invited her into him.

"I want my children," Mephistis said, his voice calm. "I have resources along the coast to aid us. I have many people gathered at your holdings."

"But first we must have your healing. There is a certain obnoxious little yuwenghau, an upstart godling, named Dynanna who would be perfect for your healing. Or one of her little Badree Nym."

"Badree Nym? Aren't they very dangerous?" Mephistis said.

Hoon smiled. "I have spell cords strong enough to hold a yuwenghau. They were made for the last godwar. They might even be strong enough to hold a fully mature god. They should hold even a Badree Nym."

"Is such a thing possible?"

Timon laughed softly, paraphrasing the old saw about sa'necari, "When gods make war on each other, they do it well."

Anksha crept across the garden on her belly like a stalking cat, wrapped herself around Mephistis' ankles, and looked up at him. "With that kind of healing, your blood would surely taste like fine wine, randy prince. I would be tempted to drink more often."

Mephistis shivered, swallowing hard, then bent and kissed the top of her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. His loins tightened. She twisted in his grip, her tongue flicking out to graze the scar. The breath caught in his throat. He moaned. "Bite me, Anksha. Please bite me."

"Later, randy prince. I'll come to you later."

Hoon and Timon exchanged glances and smiled. It would certainly be nice if something were to happen to his two brothers about now. Then they could place

Mephistis upon the throne as their puppet.

"As I was saying," Hoon began again. "we need to assess what you have on the coast. Tomorrow you will sit down with Timon and two of our clerks to make lists. We will move against the yuwenghau at Blue Dog Pass first. That needs to be coordinated with Galee. Then we will go after your sons and Aejys Rowan."

* * *

Isranon heard horses in the courtyard and roused from where he lay, spooned around Auclos, raising himself on his elbow. His personal nibari, Eustyn was resting in the gardens, having been the first to feed him that day. Whenever possible, Isranon preferred to take a little from two nibari, rather than exhausting one with his needs.

"It's just Naugly and Whirly returning from the Market. Those cursed sa'necari and their appetites. Your pardon, lord," Auclos added quickly.

Isranon shook his head. "You don't need to ask it." He went to the window and leaned out, watching them bring the slaves in, the full meals for the sa'necari. They looked frightened, but did not know the half of it. They must have realized that some of those who brought them here were vampires. But what waited for them was worse – far worse. His stomach tightened and turned sour. He reeled away from the window, trying not to stagger. Isranon could taste their fear. Sa'necari fed on terror, relished it. Isranon hated the taste. It made him ill. He caught the edge of a chair to steady himself, his knuckles whitening in a death-grip as he sat hard.

"You nibari live with the knowledge that your masters could ask you to die for their appetites, doesn't that bother you?"

"At least they don't take our souls."

Isranon could smell Troyes again, and the stench of sa'necari, which grew stronger with each death they took in the rite – Mephistis smelled the strongest of all of them – he could feel Troyes' hands tightening on his arms like vises, that inhuman strength. Auclos touched him and he flinched, folding up. "I am not a monster. I. Am. Not. A. Monster."

"Your pardon, Isranon?"

"Get Nevin, please. I'm going to be sick. No. Wait. A basin."

Auclos frowned in puzzlement, yet obeyed quickly. He had never seen a sick sa'necari. Before he could get out of the room, Isranon was already spewing hopelessly and wretchedly into the basin.

Nevin, with Olin beside him, pushed past Auclos when they reached the room to

bend over Isranon. "Get some nibari up here to clean up."

"Does he need a healer or something? We don't have one, but we could send for one, I think..." Sick nibari either recovered or they died. The older ones had a limited knowledge of herbs and healing and they tended to their own; but this was a sa'necari. Auclos really did not know what he was saying as healers did not treat sa'necari.

"We can handle it." Nevin handed the basin to Auclos who winced and removed it. He wiped Isranon off with a dirty tunic, got the shivering sa'necari to his feet and into bed.

People began appearing at the door, crowding it, and then they gave way to allow Mephistis, Timon, and Hoon to enter.

"What is wrong with him?" Hoon demanded suspiciously.

"Nothing a night's sleep won't fix," Nevin said.

"That does not answer my question."

"I cannot answer your question. My chieftain geised it."

"If he is not able to ride in three days, he will be left behind."

"He will be ready."

As soon as the others were gone the two lycans disrobed, shifted and climbed onto the bed. The two gigantic wolves – jet-black Nevin and white Olin with his black mask and saddle – burrowed under the blankets to warm their clan brother. Isranon threw his arm around Nevin's rough coated neck, falling asleep almost instantly.

* * *

Lord Hoon rode out of his estate with only a small force of arms, mostly Lemyari and lycans, as well as Mephistis' twenty sa'necari – he would leave none of them behind to trouble Timon. He would pick up lesser bloods along the way as he stopped off at his other holdings between there and the ruins of Aubrudrin where he would make his camp to lie in wait for the yuwenghau that frequented the village at Blue Dog Pass. Mephistis' units would be collected also. Anksha rode pillion behind him, like a cat, on a special pad he had created for her long ago. Anksha would need to be kept fed, but that would be no problem as imps were plentiful along the west bank of the Hillora River and they were among her favorite treats.

Mephistis rode beside Hoon, constantly watching Anksha from the corners of his eyes; a kind of intense, aching, hungry look. The very nearness of her was a searing agony that burned his brain, his nerves, his muscles and filled his awareness with

white-hot noise. Only the anguish of her kiss, the terrifying moment that her tearing fangs entered his body, relieved it for a time. He would learn eventually that this was called the Presence Pain, for to belong to Anksha was to hurt and suffer. Yet there was also ecstasy beyond measure, when she took him, making him crave the physical pain in the same way that he craved release from the presence pain. Anksha owned him.

Hoon had denied Nevin and Olin permission to accompany Isranon, leaving them behind at the estate. that left Isranon feeling exposed and lonely. Mephistis had then attempted to persuade Hoon to leave Isranon behind at the estate and this also met with resistance – from both Isranon and Hoon. It had been Timon who argued with his father on the lycans' behalf, which Isranon found surprising. In the end, Isranon was left with only Haig as a companion. Haig seemed as different from the others of his kind as Isranon did of his. The Dark Brother did not probe it, but wondered at it. Haig stayed close to him on the long ride, offering him a friendly presence and began telling him stories to take him mind off having to leave his two companions behind.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JOSIAH

The winds blew cold off the sea, bringing a raging torrent of rain. Maranya stood upon the battlements at midday beside her king: Aejs spent increasing amounts of time up here in all kinds of weather, staring at nothing, rarely speaking or in any way acknowledging Maranya's presence. It had been this way ever since Josiah returned from Creeya – the stain of what he did there and the Jump back had caused the mage's condition to worsen sharply and steadily. Dynarien had come for Josiah one night, very agitated, saying only that he was needed and left with him. Josiah returned under his own power. He had told them nothing about what had happened in Creeya.

Fog shrouded everything so thickly that, should Maranya stick out her arm, she would not be able to see her fingers. Thunder boomed and she flinched in spite of herself. "Is it always this bad this time of year?"

"No," Aejs replied, leaning next to her in the merlon. "Fall isn't usually this rough, this early." A thin strip of black leather held the short stings of her hair from her face. The long lengths that she had severed now lay buried beneath the very first stone they had laid for the new temple to Aroana with her prayers for atonement and forgiveness for the mistakes and bad decisions she had made that had led to the deaths of her mates and their child. The high priest assured her that those prayers had been heard, that forgiveness and atonement had been given. It must have been, since it had been weeks since Hoon had last haunted her dreams. However, they both suspected this was just a different kind of calm before a different kind of storm. And it would be far worse than the one in which they stood.

"I've been looking all over for you!" Tamlestari emerged onto the battlements to snuggle against her na'halaef. Aejs wrapped both arm and wing around Tamlestari, bending to kiss her deeply, thoroughly, whispering sensual promises for later in her ear that brought color to the prince's cheeks. Tamlestari shook her off, her eyes going troubled. "Aejys, you need to come in. Josiah won't wake up. I've done everything I can think of. Laurelyanne's on her way. I think he's going."

Maranya saw the look of grief sweep over Aejs' face and then disappear as the king mastered herself and walked back into the keep. Maranya followed.

* * *

With the weather so bad, Josiah had not gone out to sit as he usually did in the late mornings. Instead, he sat at the smaller table in the parlor, near the window working quietly on a bit of scrimshaw. Most days he slept, rarely going out except to see Zyne. Somehow no matter how bad he hurt or how weak he felt, he found himself going there as if pulled by some force he could not fight. He had not expected to see autumn, even these first few days of it. Aejs put no demands on him. No one else did either. He knew that Laurelyanne had started adding pollendine to the medicine since his return from Creeya; he could taste it. Life had become a fog. He didn't say anything. As long as he did not hurt, he did not care. The Imraloni healer, that Dynarien had promised to send, was supposed to have been there months ago. Josiah was beginning to wonder if he would come at all. Not that it mattered. Only a life mage could put his body to rights and there were none. The sa'necari had been thorough with their acts of genocide. They had even gotten the children.

He felt extremely tired and dizzy. It might be his body or the pollendine. It did not matter. He left his tools on the table and started back to the bedroom, walking unsteadily. A squire came to him instantly. There were always squires about in the parlor these days. She cupped his elbow, steadying him. He caught the look in her eyes. She knew. They all knew. She helped him into a chair in the bedroom, turned the covers back, got him out of his robe and eased him into bed, then left.

Josiah lay staring at the ceiling beams. Helping Dynarien had taken the last bit of strength out of him. He did not begrudge it. He only wished he had had the strength to strike at the monster that had harmed the child. Birdie had had two sisters in Creeya, Talons' protégés. Now one was dead and the other had nearly perished before Dynarien helped Josiah reach her and cast shared life to restore the blood the vampires had stolen from her in a violent assault. He closed his eyes and slept, wondering if he would wake.

* * *

Laurelyanne chose the Readers carefully who would sit with Josiah during his last hours: none of them would have the least bit of mage gift. He did not want the fullness of the damage known, so she intended to preserve his privacy. But, the

mender, Zyne, had been so persistent in her efforts to be included that Laurelyanne had finally given in, after securing a promise that Zyne would limit her Readings to the physical. She did not want to overtax any of them and in the end was forced to allow Taun to be one of them. It was Taun who was with him now. Taun loved Josiah as much as Laurelyanne had come to over the past months. She knew it hurt him to watch Josiah die, but it would have hurt worse to try and close the nerien out.

A deathwatch was a sad thing. Aeijys refused to budge from Josiah's side although everyone had tried to persuade her to leave long enough to eat and sleep. Laurelyanne looked in on them for a moment. She was very tired. A squire appeared, pressing a cup of coffee into her hands. She sipped at it. Coffee was one of the nicest discoveries she had made on the coast. In one of those idle thoughts, that tend to steal in in even the darkest moments, Laurelyanne wondered, just how wealthy it would make the first merchant to import coffee to Shaurone and Vallimrah. The inner kingdoms would appreciate it.

Taun's eyes were as red-rimmed as Aeijys' were. Their grief was silent; twisted faces, distant, leaking eyes. No one spoke. There were no words. Josiah had not regained consciousness since Tamlestari discovered him late yesterday. If only that Imraloni healer had shown up when he was supposed to. But he had been already traveling when Dynarien's request that he include Rowanhart among his stops reached him and, no doubt somewhere along his route something unexpected had delayed him.

Skree had left the boys and Dree in the nursery with Aeijys' twins, he sat in the parlor, coming now and again to stand beside his mate or the bed, studying his godson's features and how much they reminded him of Josiah's father, Tori. He had never really gotten to know the man Josiah had become. Skree had spent twenty years searching for Josiah after his parents and their village had been massacred by the sa'necari. He had found Josiah less than two years ago; a severely damaged, alcoholic young man whose earlier incarnation as the mage-master had begun to emerge. Initially he had been overjoyed to finally find him, but of late he had begun to have mixed feelings, begun to wonder if he could even begin to know him, considering how often he had caught sight of Josiah entering and leaving Zyne's house at all hours of the night. Now he was losing him. Skree did not feel comfortable with the mix of emotions moving around inside himself. He did not feel sad; he felt guilty over not feeling sad, and he worried over Taun who was taking the impending loss of Josiah hard. Taun was tender hearted: knowing what his mate felt made Skree ache.

Tamlestari and Darlbret tried to handle all the people, all the hushed comings and goings in the outer rooms. Becca and Clemmerick had arrived an hour ago from Vorgensburg to sit with the others. Only those closest to the family were being allowed up. Others were in the great hall, awaiting word that the prince-consort had passed from this life.

An excited whispering drew Laurelyanne's attention and she saw Maranya saying something to Tamlestari who then went into the room with Aejs and came dragging the king out.

"I'm tired. I can't give them any ceremony," Aejs told her.

"Give them something. You're the king," Tamlestari insisted, hauling Aejs toward her bedroom.

"Damnit! They've come too late!"

"What is it?" Laurelyanne asked Maranya.

"The swan-mays. They're finally here."

* * *

The storm had vanished with the dawn and the day was clear. Three black swans and six blue gryphons, one of them carrying a rider, circled the city of Rowanhart in stately procession. People paused in their work to stare upward, pointing and shouting. Others came to their windows or emerged into the streets. Wonder spread throughout Rowanhart. The swans' feathers glistened in the sunlight, their long, lovely necks stretched out as they flew with broad, slow sweeps of their powerful wings. No one had ever seen such large and lovely swans before, much less followed by their gigantic companions. The gryphons with their tawny flanks and midnight blue wings with azure tips, their brilliant green crests erect with interest and attention, were also creatures of beauty – and power. Their circling became a tightening spiral over the outer courtyard of the keep.

The swans alighted first, their forms shimmering and changing. Three women stood there in cloaks of black feathers, cuffed great boots pushing the edges of their forest green tunics and over it all shining silver armor with the Willodarian rune emblazoned large upon their surcoats. Aejs emerged from the keep to greet them in the courtyard. Tamlestari had managed to get her into clean clothes, but she had refused to wear any fancy regalia, just a simple circlet with the leaping hart and a black velvet tunic and breeches with her badge on the shoulder. With Josiah lying near death she could not bring herself to wear court attire.

The swan-may captain acknowledged Aejs with a courtly bow. "Warm greetings to your majesty from the emerald shores. I am Cyltemnestra, Captain of this company."

"Welcome to Rowanhart," Aejs responded.

"These are my sisters," they bowed as their captain spoke their names, "Ledaria and Temrys. Have I your leave to call our gryphons down?"

"I bid them all welcome to Rowanhart."

The gryphons descended to the earth. A swan-may gave Fusaaki a hand down from his gryphon. He bowed to Aeijys. "I am Fusaaki, lord," he said politely with another small bow. "I am sent by my Holy One, as a favor to his Twice-Born Son, to give what aid I may to your mate."

Aeijys found herself staring, for his coloring matched her own and she wondered at that. "I fear you may have arrived too late. He lapsed into unconsciousness yesterday and has grown very weak. We've been keeping a deathwatch."

* * *

Fusaaki chased everyone out, save Laurelyanne. He lifted Josiah's wrist and Read him, his expression grave. Fusaaki opened the first of his cases and began taking out jars of herbs and vials of potions. "You will explain to me why his body has not been renewing itself properly. This is not natural damage. The magic centers are burned and scarred. The nervous system and most of his organs are burned by power. The power net itself is brittle. Did he do this to himself or did someone else?"

Laurelyanne told Fusaaki the story of how the magic centers had been burned out of Josiah as a child, how the magic had been partially restored years later, and then how he had cast the spell that so damaged his body in a desperate effort to rescue Aeijys from Lord Hoon. All the while Fusaaki worked. He poured a white powder into a mortar and ground it fine with a pestle, administering it to Josiah's nostrils and gums. Gradually Josiah responded and revived.

"Can you save him?"

Fusaaki gave her a long look. "If you mean health and a normal life span, no. What I can achieve is uncertain. He is too fragile. A few months, yes. A few years, maybe. More than that, no."

"He's been resigned for weeks to their knowing the extent of the physical damage, Fusaaki. But, he does not wish the damage to the magical to be known, to his shields and the energy centers and such."

Fusaaki shook his head, "Why? He needs help."

"He has given me his reasons, and I respect them."

Fusaaki nodded. "Well, it is his privacy, his life. I will abide by this."

Laurelyanne did not feel completely certain that he understood, for he spoke an archaic dialect, so she rephrased her point. "You may tell her about the physical problems, Fusaaki, but the mage-related, he wishes kept private. It is a personal matter. You understand?"

"Yes. I will do so."

"Thank you."

* * *

"He is awake," Fusaaki told Aejs.

"Oh thank the gods!" Aejs wept with relief, clutching Tamlestari's hand.

"He is very, very fragile. Understand. He will recover to a limited degree. He will never be strong." Fusaaki gave a slow nod, his eyes grave. "A serious shock to his system could kill him. He must be careful and he must not drink. Anything could cause a relapse. If he is careful he should have a few more months, maybe even a few more years. I can't say. I've made some medicine for him. Laurelyanne has the formula."

Aejs sighed and changed the subject. "Taun sends his thanks for the herbs, medicines and other gifts you brought to our healers."

"Thank not me, but my Holy One. The gifts are from him."

"Then I will make offerings to his temples."

"Hai! That is good." He bowed an acknowledgement to her wisdom.

"Do you go home, now?"

"No. From here I go on to Creeya. The beloved of My Holy One's Twice-Born Son is seriously ill. She refuses to leave her father's estates, so I must go to her."

Since he did not offer her name, Aejs politely did not ask it. Therefore she did not know what chanced in Creeya with her friend, Talons Trollbane. Nor how close the guild, her greatest ally, was to complete destruction. Josiah had told only Birdie the full story of what occurred in Creeya. Birdie, being a close-mouthed child of the Sharani streets, had chosen to tell no one that Dynarien was fighting for the life of his lover and the very existent of the nethergod's sacred realm against the followers of a powerful undead foe: Gylorean Galee.

* * *

Tamlestari had Josiah up in bed, spooning broth into his mouth. He appeared tired and pale. Aejs took the spoon and nodded her out of the room, to take her place beside him. As the door closed softly behind her, Aejs gave Josiah a stern look.

"You're not going to keep lying to me," she said, sternly. "I've known for months

just by looking at you."

"Aejys..." Josiah lifted his hand and she took it. "Did they tell you what I did?"

"Some of it."

"Perhaps it was foolish."

"I've done foolish things. I thought you were dead. I had given up hope or I would never have accepted Hoon's blood. I thought I was protecting Tamlestari and the children. I wasn't."

"So you're trading me nightmares again?" Josiah's mouth quirked.

"If you're willing to trade. Otherwise this one's a free gift."

"I thought dying was the only way to save you. So I cast a spell that exhausted my body's ability to replenish its energies."

"You're an idiot, Josiah," Aejys said affectionately.

"And what does that make you?"

"A pudding head paladin."

* * *

Aejys stood on the side of a lake. She could hear voices and turned to see Hoon standing in the shadows. He caught her hand and as they touched she was sucked inside him, her awareness a helpless passenger. "If you will not lie in Amalthea's bed, then walk in my shoes," he said.

Hoon parted the branches of the tree and stepped into the open. He had suspected what he would find, but did not want it to be true. When the summons had come to him, he had hoped desperately that his brother would change his mind, but Waejonan rarely did. Hoon was beginning to wonder if Waejonan was mad. Three weeks ago they and their followers had trapped and murdered the two yuwenghau, Dynarien and Tros. Their middle brother, Isranon had refused to participate. Waejonan then ordered him hunted down and taken in hand. They caught him yesterday.

A young sylvan, dark-haired and fair skinned, lay face-down on a wide plank, arms bound behind him – spellcorded to stay his magic – ankles tied to lines held firmly by two dark complected males who tightened it until he could neither twist nor flinch. An eight foot stake tipped with thin sharp iron, all of it thoroughly greased with lard, lay ready. Another man positioned it and then opened the mon wider with his knife, making certain the stake would go in easily. Then with one

mon checking the movement of the stake into the body to ensure that it went in straight, another applied a hammer to the butt of it in small taps.

Hoon blinked, swallowing hard. He closed his eyes.

"Do not look away, Brandrahoon!" a sharp voice shouted.

Hoon opened his eyes, watched another sylvan male approach. He was beautiful, neither feminine nor masculine, but perfectly balanced between them, dark as night, hair flowing to his ankles, rings piercing his delicately pointed ears. He wore only a loincloth. His body was sheer perfection.

"That is Waejonan the Accursed?" Aejs whispered in his mind.

"Yes. My youngest brother. The one they are impaling is Isranon, called Dawnhand, our middle brother. There were three of us."

"You look away from it, yet you do it all the time."

"It is an acquired taste. At this time I cannot handle it." Hoon's thoughts whispered back.

Waejonan grabbed Hoon's arm, pulling him closer to Isranon who writhed on the pole, groaning, his blood pooling around the base of it. "Watch him dance. Watch him dance! Or you and yours will be next." Waejonan shook Hoon.

The scene faded. A woman glided up to Hoon in the darkness. Isranon no longer moved on the pole. Hoon's face was still wet with tears. The woman had nut-brown skin and blue-black hair. She looked vaguely sylvan.

"I can make you strong, Brandrahoon. Strong enough to protect your family. Strong enough to oppose your brother."

"I don't want to be sa'necari, Galee. I don't want to be like him." Hoon's voice was hollow. Aejs could feel the depths of his despair and grief, so like her own had been at the moment she had accepted his blood. She understood him and she wanted to hold him, to be with him, to comfort him. She felt bound to him.

"I can make you like me."

Hope flared. He thought of all the power she wielded. He thought of all the things he could do to stop his brother's madness, to protect the ones he loved. "How?"

"I take your blood and I give you mine."

"Do it, Galee. Do it."

Galee took him into the forest and bit him.

Aejys screamed. Maranya, sleeping on the couch in the parlor, reached her first.

"I feel unclean," Aejys said. "Walk to the chapel with me. I need to pray."

"You want to talk about it?"

"That too." Then she grinned wearily, that spark of irreverent humor flaring in spite of it all, "Ma'aram confessor Maranya, hear my sins."

Maranya laughed and clapped her on the shoulder.

* * *

Aejys stood on the battlements watching the big ships glide slowly out from their moorings, heading for the passage between the talons of Sophren Bay and then out onto the open waters. She could hear the hammering and construction all around as work continued on the keep. Becca had engineered a miracle of organization getting the outer works up so quickly and so well, but it would be years before it was completed. Nonetheless it was all sound. Aejys did not yet know that the guild had been bled nearly white and her most powerful allies destroyed or rendered impotent. All she knew was that Hoon and Mephistis were coming, it was just a matter of when, and she had things they wanted: herself and Mephistis' children. They would get none of them. These walls, this city, would stand fast. Rowanhart would be the rock they smashed their ship against in vain. Here were the reefs and shoals to rip their hulls and break their keels and run aground on or sink to the depths and never rise again. A thousand images of the disasters she intended to visit upon them when they came formed in her mind.

"Come for me, Lord Hoon. Come for the children, Mephistis. I wait for you both. Come and be destroyed."

CHAPTER TWELVE

AMBUSH AT BLUE DOG PASS

Hoon picked up the basis of their army from a dozen of his holdings along the road to the Blood Coast. He intended to fill out the rest of their ranks with turnings by the lesser bloods and raisings of revenants and zombies by the sa'necari. Hoon still needed to acquire that greater death to heal Mephistis. Isranon grew steadily more suspicious of Hoon and Anksha as the days and weeks wore on. He knew these "nibble games," as Mephistis labeled them, were rough and he had seen how badly she tore Bodramet up, but it was in Timbren on the Blood Coast that Hoon chose to let Isranon watch.

Hoon sat before the mirror in his house. 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. He swirled the blood red wine and drank it. He had come in with only six myn besides Mephistis, Isranon, and Anksha, leaving the rest in the ruins of Aubrudrin.

"I have anticipated you, Galee," Hoon spoke to the woman who could now be seen in the mirror. "All those long talks about those infuriating twin yuwenghau. I am in striking distance of the female right now."

Isranon and Mephistis sat in chairs near the fire, flanked by Hoon's royals. Haig stood back, shifting uncomfortably as if he were aware of what was about to happen and could do nothing for it. Anksha sat nude upon a table, dangling her feet, swinging them from time to time like an impatient child.

Galee? Gylorean Galee? Isranon felt icy fingers scratch their way up his spine. *The mentor of Waejonan still lives?* She created both the vampires and the sa'necari. If Hoon was allied with Galee, then they were in far more danger than he dreamed possible. Terror began to gather in Isranon's stomach, spreading through his muscles. Would she recognize the blood of his ancestor, Isranon the Dawnhand in him and order him slain out of hand?

"Are you?" she purred. "Well, let me inform you of the date and the time. Then we will kill them both. It must be done simultaneously so they cannot jump to each other's aid. And how is our young prince managing?"

"Quite well, I assure you. He has made the acquaintance of my little pet and they like each other very well."

Isranon heard the honeyed poison in the vampire's words and flicked a glance at Mephistis. The prince's hands were tightening on the arms of his chair to the extent that his knuckles whitened.

"You always were my favorite, Hoon," Galee smirked.

"I suppose that is a compliment, Galee," Hoon observed, dryly.

Isranon realized that the vampires were all watching him, studying his face while pretending not to and he knew what was drawing their glances – the same thing that drew so many speculative frowns from Hoon: his black-brown eyes with their whites, iris, and pupils intact, clear and clean. Sa'necari eyes changed when they participated in the rites, but Isranon's eyes had remained as they had been upon the day of his birth. More, they sensed what was different about him, about his scent and aura, even if they could not yet set a name to it, and it made them uneasy. He grew more concerned, more certain that something was about to happen here. He suspected that both Mephistis and Haig knew what that was. He stopped listening to

Hoon, turning his attention back and forth between his prince and Haig.

"Dynarien is in Creeya," Galee said. "I intend to kill him and this time he will stay dead. I will see that there are no pieces of his soul left for his divine father to gather up. Just be certain that you get the sister."

"I shall, Galee. I shall."

The mirror went blank and Hoon rose, walking to the middle of the room and then turned to Isranon. "You are truly the prince's man, Isranon."

"Where is this going, Hoon?" Mephistis asked.

"I made a statement. As the prince's man, he should know who truly rules. Anksha, play with the prince."

Isranon started to stand only to have two royals shove him hard into his seat and hold him there. He met Haig's eyes briefly, and then the Lemyari turned his back on them. Isranon felt the cold bite of betrayal in Haig's action.

Anksha shoved off the table, landed lightly as a cat, and stalked to Mephistis grinning. The prince went pale, trying to back away from her and Isranon saw the terror in his eyes. What had been going on between Mephistis and Anksha for the past months had not been a game. It was been something else entirely.

"Blood-slave," Anksha hissed, the dominance link clicking in. Mephistis screamed, clutched at his head, and collapsed, moaning and writhing on the floor.

All the strength went out of Isranon's body at the sight. He could not move. He felt empty and impotent. The greatest power in his world; and all his sense of safety and of reality had been built around the invincible Prince Mephistis, most powerful of sa'necari. He had never imagined that anything existed that could do this.

Anksha raked Mephistis with her claws while he begged her to bite him, to take him, to drink from him. She continued her demonstration, giving him a taste of what she had given Bodramet, only worse – far worse. Mephistis jerked and wept each time she drew her claws along his legs and arms, leaving long, ugly tears in his flesh.

"Anksha, please," he moaned.

"Silence, blood-slave," Anksha ordered, licking her lips.

Isranon sensed the edge of her power as she lashed Mephistis' psychic body through the dominance link. It smelled like smoke and tasted like acid. Mephistis gave a long anguished howl that shivered up Isranon's spine. The prince's body arched and fell in rolling convulsions, his fingers dancing uncontrollably on the carpet.

"What can I do to you, oh foolish prince?" Anksha demanded in a midnight voice.

"Anything, Anksha. Anything you wish."

"And what will you do for me? Open your belly at my command?"

"Everything. Give me the blade and I will do it."

Isranon felt that lash of power again as Anksha hit the prince a second time through the link. He winced at Mephistis' scream. His stomach heaved and it took all his will power not to spew all over himself.

"Bite me," Mephistis pleaded, his eyes filled with desperation.

"This time I will drain you."

"No!" Isranon spoke before he could stop himself. One of the vampires laughed.

"Watch closely, Isranon," Hoon said. "This little demonstration was planned for your benefit."

Isranon looked up and saw Hoon standing close to him.

"Remember this lesson. I brought you here to teach it to you."

"Bite me," Mephistis whimpered louder. He sobbed, moaned, and pleaded until her fangs entered his neck and then he screamed, on and on, while she rode him.

Hoon glanced across the room from time to time. "My lineage, Isranon, is Lemyari. I am a demon-vampire." He flexed his hand and his fingers became claws, venom beading on the tips. "I am the first born of the blood of Gylorean Galee. I am the first vampire made since the Burning Times. I can kill a yuwenghau, if I give them all ten fingers. My venom is very potent. Be careful around me. Provoke me and I will not hesitate to stick you."

Isranon glanced at Anksha still riding his prince, her claws tearing his arms and chest, her fangs deep sunk into his neck. His eyes filled. He thought of his sister and his father, whom the sa'necari had murdered. He remembered Rose, the nibari who had loved him and been loved by him. Rose – whom Dane Jayce had striven so desperately to save and failed. And now Anksha had taken his prince. He had nothing left, except a psychic hollow, resonating with echoes of past and present loss. Isranon retreated into his father's teachings, those of the Dark Brothers of the Light of which he was the last. "The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Isranon's eyes went soft and unfocused, his voice dropping to a whisper that was both silk and stone. "If you do not understand it, then I cannot explain it. When it is my time to die, I will die." He refused to cower before Hoon.

"I have given you a lesson in power. It is mine."

"So be it." Isranon retreated into his castle of silence, wanting to weep for Mephistis, yet refusing to show weakness. "I will not forget it." *Nor will I forgive it.*

Anksha rolled off Mephistis, who lay too still, came to her feet, and sauntered to Isranon. Mephistis' blood coated her face and the front of her. She rubbed against Isranon, smearing his face and clothing with his prince's blood. He flinched and the two vampires restraining him tightened their grip.

"I didn't kill him," she purred deep in her throat. "Get some blood and Sanguine Rose into him swiftly enough and he should live. Had I killed him, I would have eaten his entrails while they were still warm. I like the taste of them."

Isranon glanced at Hoon and the vampire lord nodded for his two lieutenants to release him. He quickly got Mephistis up, shouldering his weight. Anksha paused in front of them as Isranon started for their bedroom. "Maybe I should take you tomorrow," she said.

"The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me..." Isranon replied calmly.

"Let them pass, Anksha," Hoon told her.

Anksha stepped aside, going to the place where Mephistis' blood had spilled onto the carpet. She threw herself down in the puddled blood and rolled in it like a dog over a carcass.

Haig reached Isranon in the hallway and slipped his arm around Mephistis. "Let me carry him. Put your wrist in his mouth."

Isranon glared at Haig for an instant, then yielded his prince, shoved his sleeve up, and pushed his wrist between the unconscious prince's teeth. Mephistis' fangs descended without his regaining consciousness and he suckled. Isranon released a sigh, a breath he had been holding until Mephistis broke the flesh on his wrist. They walked in silence. Haig laid Mephistis into bed and Isranon turned on him.

"Get out," Isranon said, his voice full of ice.

"Isranon..."

"Get. Out."

Haig retreated to the door and left.

* * *

Isranon lit a branch of candles on a table in the bedroom and went through the bottles in Mephistis' saddlebags. He located the Sanguine Rose and another bottle of strong blood, setting them on the nightstand. Then he got Mephistis under the blankets. The prince shivered as if in the grip of fever chills, which worried Isranon. The taste of blood would frequently return even a desperately wounded sa'necari to semi-consciousness, if not complete consciousness. Yet Isranon had gotten only the first reflexive sucking from his prince. He opened the bottles and gathered Mephistis into his arms, sat on the edge of the bed with his prince cradled against his chest, supporting his head while he persuaded more of the Sanguine Rose down his throat. "The Darkness hunts me and the Light doesn't want me. Somehow, somewhere I will win free. There must be a reason for my existence, a place for me to exist in peace, perhaps even in joy."

That night something broke within Isranon and something else healed, as if one source of anguish and shock had overwritten another and given him clarity. He stopped thinking about Troyes and started thinking about Mephistis. Despite Anksha's threat, Isranon did not believe she would take him next, since his power was so modest as to be no threat for any of them. And if she did, then she did, he thought with his usual fatalistic turn of mind. It was an odd comfort that he would probably wither and die within a week or two of being taken. He would not suffer for months like his prince.

He felt Mephistis begin to stir as the prince's body reacted to the troll's blood in the Sanguine Rose.

"Isranon? I meant to tell you."

Isranon settled him onto the bed, drawing the blankets over him. He wanted to be angry with Mephistis for allowing himself to be taken, for compromising them both. The teachings of his father, so deeply ingrained in Isranon, would not allow him that anger and he refused to let it rise. Instead he felt pity and concern, and an almost overwhelming need to understand – perhaps even to excuse. Mephistis had been there for him the past four years, now it was time for Isranon to be there for his prince. "That she had taken you? That this hasn't been a nibble game all this time?"

"Yes."

"I wish you had said something sooner. Now sleep and we will talk tomorrow, my prince."

Isranon sat for a long time awake and thinking. He thought of all the clues he had missed to what was happening because he chose not to look or ask. He could no longer allow himself to spend all of his time inside the walls of his own mind. He had

failed his prince. But what could a Dark Brother of the Light do against creatures of such power? Nothing. The Dark Brothers had been the weakest of the sa'necari because they chose ethics over power, purity over the path of the rites. And yet he had to try. Honor demanded that he try. And if he died in the trying, then so be it.

For the first time in several months, Isranon found himself repeating the oath of the Dark Brothers as his father had taught him as a child:

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

Then, laying down with his arm over Mephistis, as if to shield him with his body, Isranon finally slept.

* * *

Haig came to Isranon the next morning as they were saddling up, making no attempt to conceal the unhappiness and distress dominating his usually bluff countenance. Isranon's face went cold as Haig approached and retreated into the silences as he had been taught, squaring his shoulders, a proud tilt to his head.

"Isranon, I did not know Hoon was going to do that until just before it happened."

Isranon gazed past Haig, arrogantly refusing to meet his eyes, the line of his mouth hardening with his silence.

"Nothing could be done."

Isranon's face did not change as he accused in a tone as soft as the footfalls of a wolf in the forest, "You knew Mephistis had been taken from the first."

Haig held his breath for a moment and then exhaled heavily. "Yes. It is one of the reasons I came with you. So that you would not be alone when you discovered it. Worse, should Anksha choose to kill your prince, you would not last an hour. The others would be upon you before you could draw a breath."

Isranon heard an undercurrent of concern that he could not dismiss, so he regarded Haig with more thought and less hostility. Bodramet would certainly descend upon him more swiftly than a tiger to devour him, body and soul. Haig had not said his

name, but they both knew to whom Haig referred. "That is true, Haig. Yet, I will not leave my prince. Do not ask me to."

Haig must have caught that small thawing in Isranon's ice-coated manner, for he returned to his apologies and explanations before Isranon could close him out again. "Forgive me, my friend. There was nothing I could do, save perish. I never knew that Hoon had set her to take your prince until the night he was taken. I knew then."

Isranon could see the deep, troubled shame in the vampire's face. "You know what she is?"

"The Beast. Hoon ordered Timon to set Anksha on your prince, while he went after the cache of ancient weapons from the godwar. The day you answered his scream, bursting into the room. That is the day she took him, body, mind, and soul. Once bitten, a blood-slave can never be freed. Only death releases one from Anksha."

"Undeath?" Isranon felt chilled to the souls of his feet.

"There is no undeath for her blood-slaves. The linkages are broken, severed. They do not rise. Once she chooses a victim, it does no good to run from her. No one has ever escaped her. She hunts them down."

Isranon tried to find that still place in his mind, to build his castle again, and failed. "No one can escape her once she decides to take him?"

"No one. And once taken they are subject to what Timon calls a dominance link that exists in all the cells of their body, mind, magic centers, neutral nets. All aspects of their being belongs to Anksha. She can order them to them to die and they will. Only the strongest among her blood-slaves last for more than a few months, they begin to wither after a time and perish. I have seen the weakest ones destroyed by the links and something called the 'Presence Pain' within days. I understand almost nothing. I know the words, the rumors. Some of it I have seen for myself. But no one knows the reasons for or the nature of the Beast."

The horror and helplessness of last night washed over Isranon again and he said nothing for a long time. He saw something of himself in Haig's actions in simply turning his back in Hoon's sitting room. It is what Isranon would have done in Haig's place, retreating into the silences while refusing to watch.

Finally Haig broke the silence. "What did you mean last night, by 'The Darkness Hunts me and the Light does not want me?' Your words haunt me. If someone hunts you, tell me and I will try to stop them."

Isranon reached out to clasp Haig's arms. Something in the vampire's intense expression moved him for reasons he could not explain. "I am the last Dark Brother of the Light and if the other sa'necari discovered that, they would kill me."

"Does Mephistis know?"

Isranon nodded.

Haig's mind whirled. "And he can no longer protect you because Anksha has taken him?"

"Yes. I am also the last male descendant – possibly the last descendant – of Isranon Dawnhand. I am trusting you with my secrets, Haig."

"And I will keep them. Henceforth, I am your sworn man, Isranon."

"But I thought – I—" Isranon hesitated.

"That I belonged to Timon? We have an understanding, not an allegiance, save to our philosophy. I am a Borealysyn. I have never taken a life for pleasure or out of appetite. I was the finest knight that Oakleigh ever produced. A weaponsmaster. I was tracking a band of vampires who had raided a village. They ambushed me, turned me against my will, and then left me where I would rise with the obsession of the newborn and consume my own people. In the middle of this Dane arrived, destroyed them and guided me through the worse part of my existence as undead. Will you have me?"

"Yes, Haig."

Then the vampire spoke the words he had not said in centuries, pledging his life and sword to Isranon, son of Isranon. Isranon had never taken a man's service before and it felt odd. He had been a follower and a loner, but never a leader. He repressed a swell of pleasure and pride, feeling frightened and disoriented by those feelings. Could he lead? And if he did, then what did that make him?

* * *

"She is a roaring presence in my mind, Isranon," Mephistis confessed, his voice very low, as they rode from Timbren the next morning. The prince swayed in the saddle, still noticeably weak. "At first her mere presence caused me pain, searing pain, like a hot blade being drawn through my veins and nerves. Relief would only come after she had fed. Her feeding is – is agony. And yet I crave it. There is also an ecstasy in her kiss. I cannot say no to her. There is an exquisite suffering – oh gods, Isranon, my mind is only my own when she had been away for several days, only then am I free. Stay away from her, Isranon. She kills and eats demons."

"What is she?"

"No one knows. Only that she eats demons and trolls. She can control trolls."

They rode together near the front of the march. Mephistis still half sagged in the

saddle despite several feedings, and drank freely from the bottle of Sanguine Rose. Isranon caught Bodramet watching them several times, closely observing the prince's obvious depletion and infirmity so much beyond the normal.

Isranon had always been an observer, but not an examiner, and now he tried to think about what he saw. Hoon had brought no nibari, intending to make them all feed on what they could take along the way or from the bottles they brought. Isranon fed from the bottles when he needed blood. He also began to think about the faces. None of the royals among Hoon's entourage were from the ranks of his son's circle, almost as if father and son had differences among their followers. There were also no ymraudes, the tall females who kept their own private, exclusive nibari herds, which they jealously guarded from the other undead. Isranon had never encountered – or even heard of – the ymraudes before. Haig taught him about the ymraudes, as much as he knew.

* * *

Bodramet sat with his closest supporters, Gareth and Yoris. They had brought others to sit near his blind, Ennis and Petros. They had just begun to speak when Anksha slithered around Bodramet in butter soft leathers, a bodice cinched firmly beneath her perfect breasts. They watched her coquettish movements toward their leader, smiling. She was pretty and sensual, and only the rumors of how rough her sex-play was with the prince kept them from approaching her. Yet even there they found their bodies turning traitor in their loins. She smiled at each one, arching her back to display her charms and slowly rotated her hips in a suggestive pelvic motion masked as stretching. Instantly there was not a single one of them who would have hesitated to climb between her thighs.

Bodramet found his eyes drawn to her breasts in spite of his dislike of her for tearing him that day. Sa'necari fought and then allied to fight again. Alliances were ever changing things. So he was not entirely surprised when she purred sensuously at him.

"Hello, oh envious sa'necari, what is it you envy?" Her nostrils flared and she ran her nose along his shoulders.

He realized, with a jolt, that she could smell emotions, rather like animals. Bodramet had not decided whether she was merely an exceptionally intelligent animal or a true sapient. "What I cannot have."

This was the closest he had come to her since the afternoon she attacked him. Then he had not had time to really consider what she looked like. Up close he could see the soft pelt exposed by the cuffs and neck of her blouse, the coloration so identical to the skin of her hands, throat and face as to be virtually indistinguishable to the casual eye. He wanted to touch her, to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Anksha grinned cheekily at him and began to stalk around him, bouncing on the

balls of her feet "That you cannot have, oh envious sa'necari. Not yet."

Desire entered his being then like wine and his cock responded to her presence.

Anksha pointed at his tented pants. "It likes me, too."

"You play nibble games with my prince ... they are rough, but he enjoys them?"

"Oh, yes. He enjoys them. He begs for more."

"Would you play with me, Anksha?" Bodramet asked, wondering if she could be turned against the prince. His companions grinned at Bodramet's audacity.

"Not yet." Then she scampered off.

Gareth laughed at her departure. "Interesting creature."

* * *

Anksha took to the tree as soon as she left Bodramet and his cronies, leaping from branch to branch and watching below her for Isranon. Isranon looked up a second before Anksha landed on him, having just barely time to throw his arms across his face out of reflex. She sat on his chest, nostrils flared, hands on his shoulders and touched her nose to his, sucking in huge draws of air. Isranon went cold.

"No!" Mephistis choked back a scream, glancing around to see if any of the other sa'necari had witnessed his reaction. Then he repeated lower, "No, Anksha. Please."

Anksha snarled at him, barring her teeth fully. Then she ran her nose over Isranon's face and body.

Isranon retreated into the silences, allowing nothing of his thoughts or emotions to rise to the surface. He gave off no scent marks to betray his fear of her.

"Why are you different?" Anksha demanded. "You smell funny. Sa'necari, but not sa'necari."

"I do not know."

Anksha's snarl turned playful. "Do you want me, oh strange sa'necari?"

"No. I don't want you."

Anksha blinked and then snarled again. "You don't like me?"

"After I watched what you did to my prince, whom I love, could you blame me?"

Anksha blinked, looked deeply uncertain and rolled off him to settle on her

haunches. "You are strange." She slid into the dialect of her childhood, making it difficult for Isranon to follow her words. "Anksha thinks she will leave you for last, unless you make her angry."

"I do not fear death. 'The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me.'"

Anksha backed away from him, her fur rising. "That is a strange thing you keep saying."

"I picked it up somewhere and liked it. It fits a strange sa'necari like myself."

"Don't keep saying it. I don't like it." Then she bounded off.

Mephistis dragged Isranon into his arms and held him a long time in tight embrace. "Thank hell. I feared she was going to take you right there in front of me."

"Can she do it that swiftly?"

Mephistis' shoulders sagged. "Yes. And she's been going all over the camp for the past few days, chatting with all the different groups of sa'necari, as if she were secretly taking their measure."

* * *

One morning, Isranon woke to two warm shaggy bodies smelling distinctly of wolf in his bedroll with him. He had been half-curved and lying on his stomach when he felt them against him, back and stomach. Isranon pushed up and stared at the jet-black wolf beside him, then glanced over his shoulder at the black-masked white one. Joy sang through him.

"Nevin? Olin?" He sat up and hugged both huge heads to his chest repeatedly. "I am so glad to see you. You have no idea."

Nevin shifted shape enough for his scarred mouth to form words. "Actually, we do," Nevin replied. "But that's for later. Timon needed some messages sent and we volunteered, brother. Nainee and Eustyn helped convince him."

Isranon threw his arms around the shaggy ruff, hugging him again, tighter. The stress of the past weeks, following his discovery of the true relationship between Anksha and Mephistis, eased a bit with their reassuring presence. "Mon, I'm glad to see you." He hugged Olin likewise and then sobered. "Stay away from the Beast." He explained.

"We will," Nevin promised. "Red Wolf has known of the Beast for generations. Just before we left, Nainee told us that Anksha is indeed the Beast, Waejonan's Bane. She told us in trust. You must not speak of it."

"Why did you not speak of your suspicions before?"

"Because we do not speak of her. It is forbidden. We all know her scent and her legends, although until we came to the estate none of us had actually encountered her since my grandfather's time. She is a tale for scaring puppies. I had hoped that I was wrong, that Anksha was not the Beast. We have strands of her hair, which we are taught to recognize as children – the scent of her hair. I had not smelled it in thirty years. A mon can forget a scent... I had hoped I remembered wrong."

Isranon pressed his face into Nevin's fur, wishing they had all been wrong. "Well, you didn't. Remember wrong, that is."

* * *

Hoon led them still farther south along the west bank of the Hillora River, turning inland when they reached the section of the river called the Sundering Flood for its wild currents – both of the water and of magic. The island of Faewin could be seen from the banks, strange spires thrusting up amid the thick veiling trees. The land rose steeply here. Then they moved slowly into position near the cliffs above Blue Dog Pass, the site of a little Badree Nym village where Hoon intended to ambush a minor godling, Dynanna God of Cussedness. Hoon would capture her with the ancient weapons and spell cord nets from the cache left over from the godwar.

Isranon was more grateful than ever for Nevin and Olin's presence the nearer they came to the village. One or the other, and often both of them, were always with him. They fed him willingly and, being lycan rather than nibari, could handle it better. It comforted him, especially when he saw the others taking lives out of appetite or simply to raise as part of Hoon's growing army of undead. At least there were no ghosts; not with the souls bound in the corpses and not a single corpse was wasted. Somewhere in the midst of it, Haig vanished, leaving Isranon to wonder at his fate.

Isranon had never seen a working like this – Mephistis had respected his sensibilities; Hoon did not – on this scale before. It sickened and angered him. He had his old shields and castle walls raised around his mind, heart and, hopefully, his soul. But now there was something else: anger. He had been angry before, for brief periods, but this lingered, simmered.

He had once thought Mephistis the ultimate predator. He now realized that it was Hoon. Isranon did not go down to the edge of the little village with the others, Hoon knew that he was the weakest of Mephistis' sa'necari and left him behind at their concealed camp as a liability.

* * *

Hoon crouched in the brush atop the cliff, watching the small village. They could not get into it. A strong enchantary shield shimmered around it in shades of green and gold like a divine bubble. Dynanna took good care of her little charges. The

shield would stand, even if the godling herself were slain. That was the nature of enchantary magic and what made it so formidable as opposed to mere mage-craft. Nothing dark or evil could pass it. This would take watching and planning.

Not all yuwenghau or Badree Nym could Jump. But Dynanna could. Hoon also had to consider the incredible poltergeist effect of Badree Nym when frightened that could knock down buildings. They had to be handled with care. Not even Anksha could take them. She had tried once and been badly injured. He would not risk her again. One of the most powerful of Galee's get, Frozbrodarbrin, had tried to turn one and been destroyed utterly.

"Anksha not get Nym again," she muttered uneasily, creeping to his side and sliding into the guttural dialect of her childhood. She carried a tiny arm with a bit of pumpkin colored skin still clinging to the wrist. She had caught an imp earlier and was still gnawing the remains.

Hoon pulled the little she-creature close and held her tightly. "No. Anksha, you will not have to get Nym. This is my hunt. Go play with the prince."

* * *

Anksha crept down the path to the hidden camp. They were all sleeping behind blinds, feeding from preserving bottles. She found Mephistis laying wrapped in blankets, shivering in the last stages of deijanrael, clutching a half-empty bottle of Sanguine Rose, lost in the hallucinatory slumber of the strange brew. When he had first begun to drink it in small quantities, it brought him merely a feeling of well-being. It was mostly troll's blood, laced with herbs and drugs. But taking it in these massive quantities, as he did now, meant he walked in dreams more often than not, especially during the first hours after drinking it. Eventually, as the effects wore off he would be more himself, sometimes even rousing to his old angers and pridefulness unless Anksha were present.

She smiled, feeling playful and full of mischief. She nuzzled him, pulling him out of the blankets.

"Anksha," he moaned, rousing. His eyes opened, looking at her in a mingling of fear and longing. His fingers fumbled at his robes.

Anksha grinned, her tongue flicked along his throat. "No noise," she whispered, shoving the dirty imp arm between his teeth before taking him savagely in the neck.

* * *

Hoon lay flat on the edge of the bluff to see as far as he could. For several weeks now he had seen Dynanna gather several Badree Nym outside the village, Jump them some place and then return without them. That was curious. Tomorrow they would attack. Every day at least one little Badree Nym would stray outside around dawn to

gather nuts and acorns and other autumn treasures. They only needed to net one of them to bring the silly yuwenghau running. Then they would net her and flee.

It was time. He crept back from the edge, making his way down to the camp to wait for dark. He found Mephistis sitting up in his blind, wrapped in his blanket, his eyes dull, blood oozing from his neck, Anksha curled up like a cat beside him.

"How are we doing, my prince?" Hoon asked.

"You did this to me," Mephistis said, hollowly. "Why?"

"When you did it to others, did you ever ask why?"

"That was different."

"Was it?"

"Why me? I trusted you."

"Yes and I trusted Waejonan," Hoon's voice held a constrained, measured indifference. He studied the trapped prince carefully, interestedly as he spoke.

Mephistis gasped. "You can't be that old!"

"Oh, but I can. I'm his brother. I'm Brandrahoon."

"By all the gods of Hell! But he's..."

"Dead? Not hardly. My son is Timuundar. Do you begin to understand now? I'll give you some rein from time to time because I can always pull you back in. No matter how powerful you become, no matter how faraway you run, I can always pull you back in. Remember that. It was an amazing run of luck that you came walking in with a severe case of deijanrael and me the only one who still remembered the old days and how to cure it. And I am the only one. I assure you. No one else could have kept you alive this long."

"Why? You still haven't said why."

"What do you study these days? Not much history I would say. I have always wanted to control a member of the royal house of Waejonan. Now I do."

Mephistis looked uneasy. "And what will you do with me?"

"I haven't decided. You see, one of you three Waejonan males – and more and more I suspect it is you – carries the Legacy of Waejonan. The souls and pieces of souls of all those lives your family has taken, all that stolen magic and power."

"And you want it."

"No. What I want is the souls of my family. The ones Waejonan murdered. I want to pry them out of the Legacy. I have to keep you alive and well until a means can be found to release them safely. So I might as well find other uses for you until then. So while our goals coincide I will help you. I will even allow you to pursue your own goals so long as they do not run counter to my own."

"And should I die?"

"Undeath will not free you from Anksha. It has been tried."

Anksha rose on her elbows and laughed throatily. "Oh randy prince, your loins and throat belong to me. After all, you invited me in."

Hoon emerged from the blind and nearly bumped into the young sa'necari he saw so frequently with the prince. All the other sa'necari had allowed their eyes to take on their natural state, various shades of deep violet, totally without pupils and iris. This young male's were black-brown at all times and his whites were clear and clean. Hoon wished he could say why those eyes bothered him, but he did not know why. Had Isranon not smelled sa'necari, and to a vampire the odor was distinctive, he would have taken him for human. Isranon was clearly one who had been born sa'necari.

Isranon bowed to Hoon. "Lord," he said politely.

Hoon smiled. Isranon was the only sa'necari that was even remotely polite. "Attend your prince, we'll be moving soon."

* * *

LorenRain visited his mother for the first time in several years. He did not have the power to Jump, so his movements about their world took more time. He had sailed from Jedrua six months ago and then traveled up the Hillora on flatboats, before landing near Treth and taking the overland route to Blue Dog Pass. He got his coloration from Dynanna's side of the family: he had his grandmother, Mariko's iridescent black skin and Dynanna's long red-blond hair. But he had his height and build from his father, Kalirion, standing nearly seven feet tall, broad chested and clean limbed. In terms of magical and mystical ability, he was more night-elf than yuwenghau, which disappointed his father at first. However, LorenRain made up for it with enthusiasm and bluff good nature, gaining a reputation as a hero, and eventually became the apple of Kalirion's eye.

The little paladins, Pieface and Sugar Maple, were away, visiting their friends, the mountainmon, Bernard, and his family. Dynanna had extended her stay at the village to wait for them. When LorenRain strode in, the little people swarmed him, climbing all over him. He sat down beneath a particularly large oak – the result of Evergreen's

magic – laughing as he listened to their chatter. Everyone had a collection of new stories for him.

Dynanna walked down the little market street the Badree Nym had set up in their village, looking for the source of the excitement she sensed, a kind of over flowing happiness. Her stride was ungainly and awkward with the babies due in a matter of weeks. She loved children and it had been over two hundred years since LorenRain's birth. Dynanna possessed an odd fertility, accounting for the fact that one of the babies she now carried belonged to Kalirion and the other to Hadjys. Being the God of Cussedness, she found the jealous way the two gods were eyeing each other quite entertaining. They both wanted her to pick them and settle down – but settling down was just not in her character: babies, yes; husbands, no.

"LorenRain?" She gave the newcomer a closer look. She could not make out his face, buried in a swarm of Badree Nym, but the coloring was unmistakable. She walked faster. "LorenRain!"

The Badree Nym scattered, laughing as he got up.

LorenRain lifted her in a huge, but very gentle, hug, kissing the top of her head.

"You'll have a new brother in a few weeks," she told him.

"I know. Father's delighted. However, you must have been less delighted with his performance than he was with yours. Your gopher-curse has seriously kinked his garden. His Jesmyrran angels will eventually coax them all out. But you should see it, it's a mess."

"Weeeelll," Dynanna flushed. "I sort of lost my temper."

LorenRain laughed. "You always do." He lowered her to the ground.

* * *

Hoon left all save three of his myn with the horses and Anksha at the head of the pass. He intended to risk only Mephistis and his sa'necari. The vampire did not worry that Mephistis might prove treacherous since Anksha would drain him dry if he tried anything like that; and she would know. Mephistis knew she would know. They crept down to the edge of the village and took up positions around it armed with the strangely runed swords and the spellcord nets with extra cords hanging from their belts. The same kind of spellcord that had held Dynarien, Dynanna's brother, when the Master of Blood had nearly slain him.

In the early morning a large male came walking. Hoon could smell the stench of yuwenghau about him. Only the very old undead who had encountered them before recognized the smell of yuwenghau as readily as Hoon and Galee. He had been about to sign them to take him when a small herd of Badree Nym erupted from the

village around him. Hoon shook his head in frustration. There were too many Badree Nym. So they waited a little longer. With luck they would gain two yuwenghau. Finally, at midday a single small Badree Nym wandered out and Hoon nodded. A net twirled. The little male screamed and went down, struggling in vain to get free.

* * *

Disaster started with a cry. Dynanna heard the scream from the forest ten yards beyond the end of the little dirt road. She broke into a rolling trot when she sensed no accompanying surge of power to indicate a Nym's normal response to fear or trouble. She was too far into her pregnancy to run outright, but she moved with fair speed. As she went, she gestured at the Badree Nym not to follow, that she would handle it. She did not need something that might be nothing more than a skinned-knee turning into a disaster of monstrous proportions by highly imaginative group panic. A very few of the Badree Nym actually had a habit of seeing monsters in every shadow. Ahead of her the enchantary-shield she had placed over the village shimmered. This was the only Badree Nym village in existence, because when frightened or emotionally upset they tended to accidentally knock things down with uncontrolled surges of magic. The shield kept out monsters and other nasties so that the little folk could live in enough peace to prevent their destroying the homes they built.

Dynanna broke into the open beyond the shield and looked around, finding nothing. She trotted farther down the path and spotted the little Badree Nym tangled in what looked like a spell-cord net. Spell-cord could not normally hold a Nym, but this one looked different from any she had ever seen before: Black and blood red like the one that had held her brother a month ago. The Badree Nym was completely enveloped except for one small foot. His eyes were like saucers and tears ran down his face. She had never seen a Nym so terrified and yet the magic did not answer.

"Holy Gophers!" She dropped to her knees, reaching instinctively to free him when LorenRain screamed.

"Mother! Run. It's a trap!"

Dynanna sprang to her feet, spinning around. Her son stood three yards off covered in a net similar to the one holding the Badree Nym. He twisted about in an effort to get free while dozens of sa'necari beat him to his knees with deathtree rods. For an instant she wavered, wondering what could possibly be strong enough to hold both a Badree Nym and a demi-god. Then a rustle of leaves came behind her. She started to turn, only to stiffen in shock and pain: six death runed blades protruded from her body. Her unborn children died instantly. She cried out, starting to fall. Hands covered her mouth and then a gag was shoved into it. Her body jerked as they pulled the blades free. She collapsed to her knees. Agony made it hard to think, impossible to react. Her assailants stuck her again and again. They dragged her into the bushes. Someone shoved her down and climbed on top of her, entered her.

Hoon watched quietly, disinterestedly. "You want the male for mortgiefan. He is the stronger of the two."

"You have done well, Hoon. I will have the male, but I will taste the female," Mephistis said.

Hoon exhaled in an angry hiss of impatience. "We need to get away from here before they come looking for her. She is dying too quickly to bring with us."

Mephistis squatted beside Dynanna, stroking her hair back. The joke she had often made of pretending to be a vampire to test potential paladins came back to haunt her as he sank his fangs into her throat, tearing it open so she could not scream. "I want to taste her!" Mephistis snarled, shoving the other male off and taking his place inside her. Her divine blood made her slower to die than mortals, harder – but not impossible – to kill. When he had sated himself, another took his place – and they kept shoving the blades into her. They did not need to – she was already dying – they just liked hurting her.

Hoon squatted by her head, dragging his fingers through her blood and licking them. It tasted very good.

Then a sudden image flashed through Dynanna's mind: She saw Dynarien, his body torn and bloody, staggering across a floor awash in blood; something grabbed him and he went down.

Her assailants must have guessed from the look in her eyes what had happened, for Mephistis leaned closer. "Your brother is dying. We are killing you both at once. No Jumping to each other's aid. No more raiding our soul vaults. No more irritating little games and betrayals. My beloved Margren is dead because you interfered."

They had not spellcorded her, probably in the belief she was in too much pain to manage the smallest magic: they were nearly right. Her feelings for her twin, her inability to rescue and defend her son, the loss of her unborn children, became a roar of emotion, of anger and rage that penetrated the fog of physical anguish. Her awareness graying, she reached blindly to catch the little Badree Nym's exposed foot and Jumped.

Hoon sensed her gathering her powers a moment before she fled and grabbed Mephistis, jerking him away from Dynanna. Then he stared as her form shimmered for an instant and vanished. "What the hell are you doing?" Mephistis cursed.

"She would have taken you with her, Hell knows where, possibly to your doom. We are leaving."

Mephistis rose and stalked over to LorenRain. The vampires and sa'necari had beaten him senseless to stop his tearing at the unbreakable net. At Hoon's gesture the

sa'necari circled around the captive demi-god and carried him to the horses.

* * *

Isranon was surprised when they returned with a large male yuwenghau as their captive, instead of the female they had gone after. They rode swiftly from there, as if fearing pursuit, heading once more to the ruins of Aubrudrin where they had hidden the beginnings of their army for the march to Rowanhart once Mephistis was healed. There they would reclaim the prince's sons and Hoon intended to capture that kingdom's monarch to turn as his bride. The audacity of their plans astounded him.

Isranon sat upon his bedroll in the darkness of the second night of their retreat to Aubrudrin with the lycans beside him. "What happened, My Prince?" Isranon asked, watching as Mephistis half-drowsed in the grip of Sanguine Rose, barely present in his own mind, sliding into a hallucinatory state,.

"Dynanna escaped. She took the Badree Nym we used as bait with her." Mephistis' eyes closed, but he continued to speak in that detached manner the drug lent him. "Mortally wounded ... we cut her up well. We have taken LorenRain, her son by Kalirion. Her brother is slain."

Isranon shivered. This was wrong. Very wrong and it made his stomach tighten painfully. They were going to rite a demi-god of the Light, and the Twice-Born Son of Willodarus and his twin sister were dead. By the time Isranon had pulled himself together, Mephistis had slid into drugged slumber. He felt stunned beyond speaking.

* * *

Very little remained of the temple to Bellocar at Aubrudrin, a few roofless standing pillars and a man-shaped stone table with blood-grooves in the center, cracked and chipped by weather. Grass and weeds grew over the stone floor. The sa'necari prepared for the rite. They had spellcorded the unconscious yuwenghau to the table on his stomach, runes, and sigils had been written across his body, from his neck to the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. Basins were poised to catch the blood. Mephistis disrobed, preparing to mount the yuwenghau and ride him into death. Acolytes marked the Prince's body with scented paints and anointed his head with fragrant oils. It would be the full, High Rite of Mortgiefan. The yuwenghau would perish with Mephistis sheathed inside him; his soul would shatter; and the prince would suck up most of his soul, leaving the remnants a suffering ghost.

Hoon stood to the side with his people watching the sa'necari go about their business, preparing for the rite.

"Will I get some, Hoon?" Anksha asked, crouching next to him. "Never have I tasted yuwenghau blood before."

"Yes, my pet, you will get some. We have been promised half to fill our bottles.

He's a large male and he'll have lots of nice warm, rich blood. Yuwenghau blood is the finest and rarest of all. I've tasted it perhaps a dozen times in all of my existence."

He watched the sa'necari cense the circle and anoint Mephistis' nude body. Then the prince mounted the yuwenghau and began to stick him. Suddenly Hoon experienced an unsettlingly and inexplicable sense of revulsion such as he had not in centuries and turned away, unable to keep looking. He shook his head, trying to clear it. His eyes saw Mephistis, but his mind saw Waejonan. His brother had insisted that he was innocent, that he had not meant to kill Melorien. So when he was forced to flee Imralon, his two older brothers, Hoon and Isranon, had joined in his flight. They helped him take Tros and Dynarien who were pursuing them. Tros had been killed outright in the first moments of the fight – but Dynarien ... Dynarien had ended like this. That was when Hoon began to question.

"Are you all right?" Anksha asked.

"I need to feed. Let's go take a look at some of those full meals we caught this morning." *Am I wrong to walk Aejys through my memories? Who am I convincing her or myself? Am I that different from what I was? Is there such a thing as honor in the darkness? Or am I deluding myself? Or am I descending again into a time of blood madness? For all our sakes I hope not.*

* * *

Isranon shuddered, looking for a way to slide around the gathering without being noticed and escape to some isolated spot where he need not watch or hear. They were murdering a demi-god. It all seemed so horrendous and incredible. Isranon could not sense any terror coming from the godling, only defiance and acceptance. That one was brave and his courage shamed Isranon. In the realm of his birth people were either the hunted or the hunter. The Dark Brothers of the Light, founded by one of his ancestors, had attempted to step sidewise of that, being pacifists. They had tried to reason with their persecutors and instead became food for them. Isranon's gentle father had been burned alive as a heretic and his nibari mother had been rited. He revered his father's courage of his beliefs, but doubted that such courage served any purpose. Certainly the yuwenghau fought. It wasn't enough to be willing to die for one's beliefs, it was also important to be willing to fight for them when directly attacked.

"I would have believed you would wish to be down there with your master," Hoon regarded him, stepping from the trees where he watched with Anksha beside him. "This is a great victory for him."

"I do not participate in the rites." Isranon's head came up, that proud hard angling of head, neck and shoulders as he straightened to face the vampire.

Hoon frowned, his voice oozing with sweet venom, "You do not participate?"

Pardon me, if I find that difficult to believe. A geis, a curse, a forbidding, but not something you would do freely. So give me a better answer."

"You have your answer, my lord. The only answer I have to give."

"You have not participated in a single death in all our long march, I am told."

"I am here solely to attend my prince."

"Why are you here? What are you really doing? And why are you calling yourself Isranon? Is it to irritate me?" Hoon grabbed Isranon by the collar, pulling him onto his tiptoes. "Is this a game?"

Isranon went very still. "Because it is my name, lord. The name my father gave me. I do not intend rudeness. There is nothing more that I can tell you."

"Get out of my sight." Hoon released him with a shove.

Isranon strode quickly into the woods until he found a place where he could hide along a wide stream, which was where Nevin and Olin found him. When Isranon's shields began to prove too thin to block the godling's physical and psychic anguish as Mephistis murdered him, he took out his flute and played to cover the rest of it. A great tearing whoosh of power ripped through Isranon's awareness in the moment of the godling's death and he began to weep as he played. Something wondrous and heroic had gone from the world.

* * *

Mephistis slept in the upper room of an abandoned house in the ruins of Zol. The continent was thick with ruins, many of them unknown, unmapped, and pre-dating the Age of Renewal, going all the way back to the Age of Burning when strange foreign gods burst upon this world to do battle with the Hellgod and his wives who had nearly destroyed it.

They had stayed at the Aubrudrin ruins only a single night, fearing to stay longer lest pursuit appear. Hoon's strategy was to keep moving, to build up their army as quickly as possible, staying hidden, and moving steadily north until they could strike at Rowanhart. More than twenty years ago the entire city of Zol had perished during the Great War when the yuwenghau Ria Torrundarsdottir had called down the storms of heaven in a moment of grief maddened rage, destroying herself and everything around her. This stone building had survived better than others, being at the outer edge of the storm. Mephistis had never felt so well in his life.

A small taunting laugh woke him and he opened his eyes, turning on his side. She crouched in the window, grinning, wearing just a bit of leather about her breasts and loins. She hated clothing. She ran her hands through her long black hair to get the leaves and twigs out of it.

"So randy prince, is your blood more like wine now? Or is it still so thin and tasteless?"

Mephistis shivered, his loins quickened and his pulse raced. "You'll like it now, Anksha. I swear you'll like it now." His breathing became rapid, almost panting as he opened his shirt for her.

Anksha came in, bouncing on the balls of her feet, considering him. She pulled his pants down and straddled him, sighing and playing with her breasts, flashing her fangs. "Show me your throat more," she laughed as she brought herself off.

Mephistis arched himself into her as he came, twisting to be certain she could plainly see the large vein in his throat at the same time. Then she slithered forward on him and took him hard, forcing him to stifle a scream as her fangs entered. She always hurt him, deliberately. Oddly, he was learning to like the pain, to hunger for it as much as for the warm, languorous ecstasy that came as she sucked the blood from his body. He was fairly certain that she was not undead, that she was some strange living vampire-like creature. One of a kind.

He felt weak and disoriented as she finally pulled out of him. "Do I taste better now, Anksha?"

"Yes," she purred, licking his blood from her lips. "You taste much better now. You should go feed so I can bite you again later."

Then she scampered out to find something more substantial to eat.

* * *

"She has gone in to him," Nevin said, stepping through Isranon's door.

Isranon slowly ran the oiled cloth along his blades. He spent greater and greater amounts of time taking care of them as they neared Rowanhart. This whole campaign gave him a very bad feeling. "Tell me when she leaves, he'll need me."

"She knows we're watching her."

Isranon nodded. "The Beast is uncanny. Like nothing I've ever seen before."

"Nor I."

When Anksha finished with Mephistis, Isranon went in to him and Nevin followed Anksha just to see if he could learn anything more. They had started to make a game of it. Anksha realized long ago that Isranon and the others were learning about her, not trying to ambush her. She ignored Isranon pointedly, as he did her, but she played tag with the two lycans who tended to follow her as wolves.

Nevin padded after her as she scampered out to find something more substantial to eat. As she passed two sa'necari outside the tent one of them drew a blade and started to follow her. "That's the creature that feeds on the prince," he snarled.

"I wouldn't," Hoon said, stepping out from between the tents.

Nevin's ears perked up and he pressed himself to the ground on his belly, close against the wall to listen, watching.

The sa'necari eyed Hoon carefully, clearly wondering what it would require to butcher the ancient vampire. "We have a right to protect our liege."

"Then by all means, go die," Hoon said, gesturing at him to follow Anksha.

The sa'necari looked suddenly uneasy. "What do you mean?"

"That is my demon-eater. In fact, that is *the* demon-eater that killed Waejonan in defense of Brandrahoon. Waejonan's Bane has been in my family for generations. Do you understand? Don't say I did not warn you. She will not only eat your body, she will eat your soul."

"No one touches Anksha!" Mephistis staggered from the building, still weak from feeding her. His face was a mask of rage. He gestured sharply at the sa'necari who stood there with his sword out. The man's eyes bulged, the sword dropped from his fingers. He struck back at Mephistis with power, trying to disrupt his concentration and force the release of the spell. Mephistis cupped his hand, then made a claw and a raking upward motion. The man screamed. A white vapor streamed from his mouth into Mephistis' as the prince drank in all the souls and lives the sa'necari had taken in hundreds of acts mortgiefan. Then Mephistis forced him to walk over and he kissed him on the lips. Blood gushed forth and Mephistis drank the blood, draining him to a shriveled husk that collapsed at his feet. Thus restored and enhanced, Mephistis looked at the rest of them. "Who is next? I no longer need the formal rite to take mortgiefan. Thanks to my little one, I can do it with a kiss. Who is next?"

Everyone, save Hoon, politely backed away and left. "I could learn to like you, Mephistis."

"I will never like you, Hoon," the prince hissed back. "Never. But neither will I let anyone harm Anksha. Is she really Waejonan's Bane?"

"Yes. That's why I did not keep her in my valley. She was not safe in Waejontor."

"The stories make her seem so much larger."

"They would. It's a matter of saving face. His myn arrived as he was dying and one

of his sons mounted him and took the legacy. You know how it passes because you took it, didn't you? That's why there is such bad blood between you and Baaltrystan isn't it? He doesn't have it. It is his by right. But he *does not* have it. You do."

Mephistis was silent. He turned, pausing with his hand to the door. "And if I do?"

"Then you will live longer than you would otherwise. Anksha's kills do not rise undead. Even sa'necari. Nor do those she has bitten even once; it matters not who kills them later or how. Once you belong to Anksha, you belong only to Anksha. It must be you or Baaltrystan. Estopholes became sa'necari after Aurean perished. He is nothing."

Nevin, in his hiding place, shivered, he wanted to whimper piteously and run in circles, holding himself there by a tremendous act of will until they had left before bolting into the forest.

* * *

Nevin crept into Isranon's bed in the wee hours, still haunted by what he had seen and heard. Isranon woke, reaching for him and Nevin changed to sit cross-legged beside him.

"No matter how powerful he has become, the Beast will always be his master," Nevin told Isranon. "When she tires of her toys, she kills them or orders them to kill themselves. Then she rolls in their blood."

"Like an animal?"

"Yes. Your prince is doomed."

"I won't leave him."

Nevin nodded slowly. He had known already what Isranon's answer would be. The young mon's honor and loyalty went beyond measure; even when it might well lead to his death. Nevin admired this, yet it pained him also, for he had fallen in love with the young mon he had mentored since boyhood – each time Isranon's father left him at the farm. "So be it. As you will not leave him, so we will not leave you."

Then Nevin thought of Merissa, Claw's daughter, and the one secret the clan was keeping from Isranon. A few months before they left, Merissa had been sent away after it came to Claw's attention that she was sleeping with Isranon. Merissa had always loved Isranon, loved him since they were children together. Isranon had been told that Merissa would not return. What they had not told him was that Merissa carried his child. It had seemed fairer not to tell him, not to allow anyone except Claw's family to know the child existed. The sa'necari could not hunt down what they did not know of. And Isranon could not accidentally betray a child he did not know he had. The young mon was such an intricate bundle of contradictions, like a

thick warm quilt with holes in it: naïve socially, yet experienced in battle, obsessed with avoiding conflicts in a passive manner because of his father's teachings, yet good with his weapons because of Nevin's teachings. A troubling dichotomy for Nevin, who wished Isranon would decide once and for all whether to be prey or predator.

* * *

Hoon thought about the actions of the sa'necari earlier, deciding that he had to work harder at getting Anksha to wear clothes again so that people would see her less as a creature and more as a mon. He had allowed her to slide into her old ways too much. This response would come less often then. It would be easier to protect her. It had been a need to protect her that had led to his keeping her far from Waejontor over the centuries after she destroyed Waejonan, giving the sa'necari time to forget what she looked like. Perhaps, with Mephistis in his hands, it was time for them to remember that she existed. Especially since none of these sa'necari would ever return to Waejontor either alive or undead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FATE OF DYNANNA

Dynanna materialized in the soft, green grass beneath the Idyn tree in Kalirion's garden, her mind shrieking for help as darkness enveloped her and she knew nothing more. The sa'necari raping her looked up in disoriented startlement.

Kalirion emerged from the trees, his face frowning and intent, his fiery aura dancing in licking undulations around his perfect body. The hymns of heaven filled the garden with song both sweet and sad, victorious and angry. Then the sun god saw her and his eyes widened, his full lips curled back from his teeth in a snarl. The sa'necari tried to scramble away, realizing that he faced one of the most powerful of the gods in the Pantheon of Light. Kalirion incinerated the sa'necari with a word. Ashes whirled around Dynanna's still form. Then the Sun-Lord crossed the distance swiftly to drop to his knees at her side. He ripped her clothes away with a thought to get at the wounds, placed his hands on her flesh, and poured his power into her. Her torn throat closed and healed. It was too late to save the babies. He forced them from her body. His eyes strayed to the bloody ruin of the infants: Whoever had done this would pay.

<Assist me. > He sent to his servants.

They came and wrapped the dead babes in black silk and bore them away.

Still he worked on Dynanna, grimly fighting the tremendous swirling of dark magic and venoms to heal her damaged, failing organs; to close the tears in her lungs. "I am

not losing you!" Kalirion shouted.

He fought for hours, nearly losing her twice. Not since the godwar, when the Nine had driven the Hellgod into the Katal and sealed him in, had Kalirion had to struggle so desperately and with all his power to save a life. The multitude of wounds were bad enough, but the wounds had been made by blades of very ancient death magic such as the minions of the Hellgod had wielded against his army of yuwenghau, demi-gods, angels and heroes. After the war the Nine had tried to find and destroy all of the weapons, but apparently a cache had been missed – and found by the sa'necari.

As the sun rose on the world below, Dynanna opened her eyes. She was pale and weak, her voice a soft, struggling whisper, "LorenRain ... they took him ... sa'necari ... outside my village. And ... Dynarien... I – I think they killed him. Can't find him." Then she slipped back into unconsciousness.

Kalirion summoned his servants again with a thought. They bundled Dynanna up and removed her to a bed in the palace. They also freed the little Badree Nym, putting him to bed with a sedative to sooth him. Kalirion was exhausted, but anger was renewing him. He sent his mind questing for his son, but could not find him: he was either dead or within the unholy precincts of a temple to the Hellgod.

* * *

In the little village, the Badree Nym had ventured out too late to help. Dynanna's admonition had kept them waiting until nightfall and then Evergreen, the Nym with a green thumb who could grow anything and served as assistant to Tall Tales the Mayor, went looking for her. He smelled blood and let out a shriek, his panic-magic knocking down six trees before he could catch himself. Evergreen raced back behind the enchantary dome and called out help. Their senior paladins, Pieface and Sugar Maple, were away visiting Bernard, the mountain mon, who was a friend to them.

Evergreen tried to tell what he had smelled as calmly as possible, but still tended to squeak a bit with fright. Some of the houses trembled in response to this. A middle-sized Nym in black pants, suit jacket, and cummerbund with a white lacy shirt came forward. He wore his black hair oiled and slicked back and displayed small fangs when he smiled.

"Calm yourself, Evergreen," Drakengrim admonished in a throaty voice. "The Frightful Four will investigate this matter. Send someone for our paladins."

Evergreen's head bobbed rapidly. "I'll send Skates. He travels fast."

Drakengrim shooed everyone back to their homes and gathered his companions: Frozbie, his tame vampire; GrymGhoul, and Frankie Grymlynstine, an accidentally created stone golem. They were not easily frightened, being Nym who had embraced

some of the Sowayn customs that Pieface brought from another world a few centuries ago.

They emerged from the village to have a look. Frozbie started shivering hard the moment he smelled the blood. He had once been the mighty Frozbrodarbrin, most powerful of Lemyari and second born of Gyloorean Galee's blood. However, he had made a bad decision one night in fanging a child. He drained the child, who had seemed seven years old in the dark. In going straight for the throat he had failed to check his victim's ears, which were pointed – he had gotten a Nym instead. The Nym changed instantly and bit him back playfully while shrieking, "A real vampire!"

That was Drakengrim, now his master. Nothing had gone right for Frozbie since. He was terrified of encountering any of his fellow vampires or, even worse, a sa'necari. The Nym community had kept him captive for four thousand years, trying to teach him how to play and feeding him pie – often forcing it between his tightly clenched fangs. Drakengrim's affinity was transmogrification and Frozbie was slowly ceasing to be a vampire, becoming a nymphire instead and now blood upset his ulcers. Drakengrim fanged fruit alone or sometimes a fruit pie.

"Here," GrymGhoul said, pointing out a splotch of blood on the ground with his scythe. Even in the darkness, it showed to their sensitive eyes. He was pale as a corpse, dressed in a long black, hooded robe with a rope belt. Frozbie began to whimper, but Frankie grabbed the nymphire and pulled him along. Frankie had originally been one of the gate statues at Treth, a southern kingdom ruled by Bohannon. A Nym who liked dolls brought him to life so he would play with her and Drakengrim traded for him.

"When you need someone to deal with the gore, the Frightful Four are at your door," Drakengrim quoted their motto as he proceeded to the splotch and knelt. He tipped his finger in the blood-moistened soil. "That's the mother's blood. We'll be cracking heads soon."

Frozbie's whimpers became sobs of fright.

GrymGhoul started up the path. "This way. They went this way."

They found what remained of the blinds and now Frozbie could smell vampire and sa'necari ... and the Beast. "The Beast! The Beast was here! And Hoon!"

Frozbie keeled over, clutching his stomach. "Oh, my ulcers, my ulcers."

Drakengrim nodded and signed for Frankie to drape Frozbie across his shoulders. "I'll have Tall Tales declare martial law when we return. We'll set up a defensive perimeter." despite the worry in Drakengrim's eyes, his voice suggested he savored being in charge and in a position to use all the words he had learned from Pieface.

Then they went back and Frankie, who did not need to sleep, posted himself as a

guard at the entrance to the village. Once Pieface returned, they would send him to Imralon for advice and assistance from Willodarus.

* * *

Kalirion rose and went to the speaking pool beyond the holadil trees, pushing through their elegant curtain of slender branches heavily laden with sweetly fragrant golden flowers. Misty vapors rose from the speaking pool centered among the holadil trees. White marble rimmed it and golden runes were inset completely around it. Anger still simmered within the god's breast and he wished to punish those who had hurt his beloved trickster. But first, he needed to speak with her father.

"Willodarus," he called into the vapors rising from the pool. "Willodarus!"

The spirit-form of the old treeman appeared, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures. "What is it?" he asked in his deep, gravelly voice. "I am very tired."

"Your granddaughter Jumped to me, dying. A sa'necari arrived with her, caught in the act of raping her. I killed him. I have healed her, 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."

Willodarus exhaled heavily. "Dynarien is in Imralon. He is terribly hurt and his fate is uncertain. He destroyed the mother of the Lemyari blood, Gylorean Galee. His beloved, Talons Trollbane, has been murdered."

The Sun Lord's face twisted into a hideous, burning mask of rage, losing all pretense of humanity. "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." Kalirion started to turn away and then turned back. "You realize that Dynarien belongs to me?"

Willodarus sucked in a deep breath. "Yes, I saw your mark burned into his palm. It distressed me to see you took my son and heir. But you could not have done so without his willingness. If he recovers, I will ask him why."

"He demanded favors. I granted them in exchange of it."

Willodarus looked deeply saddened. "He is my only legitimate son. My heir."

* * *

A pair of blue gryphons, nesting in the cliffs above the Hillora River a day's flight from the kingdom of Treth, found the remains of LorenRain in a small maze of ruins. The sight of circling carrion crows drew them there. He had been bound to a crude stone bleeding-table in the roofless, shattered remains of an ancient shrine to the Hellgod. His body had been violated by an act of mortgiefan. The scavengers had fed heavily upon him, but enough remained for the gryphons to identify him. They took his body and the strange spellcords that bound him to Imralon on the far side of their world.

* * *

Dynarien lingered in an uneasy fever dream from which none could rouse him. Edouina sat with him, as she did for many hours each day, holding his hand and talking to him as if he could hear her. His left arm lay atop the folded back sheet and light coverlet – it was too warm in the humid tropics of Imralon for anything heavier – and the ten punctures from Gylorean Galee's envenomed nails made blackened circles in his flesh with spiderwebs of red along the veins running from wrist to shoulder, discoloring his fair skin. The Twice-Born Son of Willodarus had torn the vampire queen's head from her shoulders, but had been too late to save himself. The night-elf healer, Fusaaki, had made several efforts at creating an anti-venom from samples brought to him by the nethergod's chief clerk, Queiggy, but none of them seemed to help and Dynarien grew progressively weaker. If he had not been yuwenghau he would have died by now.

When no one was around to see it, Edouina wept. She forced herself to eat each day, although she had little appetite in her grief, because the children needed it. With Willodarus' help the bi-kyndi master had managed to move the unborn children into her own womb from the dying body of Talons Trollbane, her na'halaef and third in her triad that included Dynarien. After the midday meal, she would go out to the orchid garden, sit beside the crystal coffin in which they had placed Talons and talk to her spirit, which she felt, hovered near. Then she would spend the evenings with Jysy and Jimi.

Edouina stroked the red-gold hair away from his face, trying not to look at his arms, and failing. Her eyes were drawn back to the marred flesh. The ancient Lemyari, whom Edouina had known as Gylorean Galee, had stuck him into both arms, injecting the entirety of her venom into his body. The more Edouina learned of Galee, as Queiggy continued to translate the creature's journal, the more certain she became that Dynarien would die. Galee had slain other yuwenghau with her venom. She had torn him badly across the chest and stomach, tearing into him like a great beast, before he managed to rip her head off and kill her. Galee had been the third wife of Bellocar, the Hellgod, cast down by him for her attempt to steal his power and sovereignty. Nothing gave a clue to what her name had been in those days. What they did know was that Galee had hidden herself when the eight foreign gods arrived

to aid the Tinkerer – last survivor of the original Pantheon of Light on that world – and she only emerged to spread corruption and destruction after the godwar ended. Ishla the Tinkerer had offered several possibilities as to Galee's identity, but so far none matched exactly, which left them knowing only that she had been part of the Glistening One's Rebellion.

Fusaaki and Queiggy had made several anti-venoms, administering them to Dynarien without success. They worried that the Twice-Born Son of Willodarus had simply grown too weak to respond to them. The cure had come too late; his body was already ravaged beyond even Dynarien's ability to heal. Edouina kissed him.

"I am sorry, Edouina, we tried."

She nodded at the familiar voice, not having heard Queiggy enter. The little yuwenghau, son of Teakamon, grandson of Willodarus, put his hand on her shoulder.

"If there is anything I can do?" Queiggy sounded nearly as sad as Edouina felt. The Master of the Guild Wing, keeper of records and research for the Assassins' Guild, was a spindly young man, who only weeks ago had been old. He restored his youth periodically by sinking his roots into the earth – being of the earth-gifted lineages – and had kept his toes in the strong soil of Imralon while he worked on the translation. His hands, which had been gnarled, were now smooth and long fingered; his previously age mottled skin was a warm walnut brown, clear and clean.

Edouina shook her head at him.

"Well, you know where to find me," he said and then left again.

There had been too many deaths during the months of Galee's building toward the coup in the wedding chapel as Talons and Edouina married Bryndel Wrathscar in a Sharani style triading. The wedding had been a sham before the eyes of the Elder Gods, who had witnessed and legitimized their union with Dynarien the night before. Bryndel and most of Creeya believed the children to be his, when they were actually Dynarien's.

Edouina had asked Willodarus to place him under a stasis as he had Talons. Willodarus refused, saying that Dynarien's soul was too fragile for it – it would simply shatter and this time there would be no retrieving it. Dynarien and his twin sister, Dynanna, were two pieces of the same soul, which had been shattered in a rite of mortgiefan that had ended his first life. Dynarien, although he held all the memories and powers of his first life and Dynanna did not, was actually the weaker of the twins in the strength of his soul. In the eyes of the gods, Edouina was his na'halaef; while in the eyes of myn, she was wife to Bryndel.

Edouina brushed back another tear and kissed him again before leaving. She felt intensely alone in this foreign land to which Dynarien had brought her, with one mate

dead and the other dying. She rubbed her belly as she felt the children move and put on a serene face before anyone could see her.

* * *

Akira, the night-elf armsmaster, began to train the young pair, Jimi and Jysy, in the night-elf fighting style with the katana. In the beginning it was simply something to keep them busy, so that they did not spend their time dwelling on their losses. Too many of their companions and friends had perished in Creeya during the fighting and treachery. Akira believed that hard training was healing to the spirit and heart, especially in two so young, Jimi being fifteen and Jysy bordering on fourteen. They learned quickly and that pleased the warleader. In turn, Jimi taught Akira to use the bolas. Jimi spent nearly every night in Jysy's room, sneaking in after everyone was asleep and then out again before dawn, finding further solace in each other's arms and bodies. Mariko, mother to Dynarien and Dynanna, almost caught them once, making love in the bushes near the baobab tree, and watched them closely after that.

Dynanna moved among the trees, lingering at the old Baobab tree overgrowing the edge of the koi pond, her face oddly empty of expression beyond a small hesitancy in her eyes. There seemed to be nothing left of her devil-may-care attitude. She wandered quietly, sighing constantly as if that was the only way she remembered how to breathe, rubbing her flat stomach in a distracted manner. "They're all dead. My babies, my son, my brother," she muttered to herself.

She haunted the grounds with Jysy and Jimi hovering about her whenever they were free. Mariko rarely left her side; her sweet face filled with pity and sorrow, watching her walking aimlessly beneath the banyan trees. Everyone who saw her felt distress over the little trickster's suffering. Where before they were always complaining over Dynanna's latest escapade, the servants and courtiers now spoke in low, worried voices about her and her brother.

That morning Mariko stood beside Willodarus as they watched Dynanna together. Mariko wore a light silk robe of many colors that glittered with silver threads like fireflies in the night. Her sapphire skin glistened and her long white hair was done atop her head in an intricate style full of ornate pins and clips. The God of the Woodlands, her husband, had long leaf green hair and skin like burnished mahogany, every muscle defined as if by a sculptor's touch, and wore only a white loincloth.

"I've tried telling her Dynarien is alive, but she says she doesn't feel him." Mariko, Lady of the Sprites and Queen of Imralon, told him. "I've tried to take her to him, but she refuses to go. She says she doesn't want to see his dead body."

"Shock must have disrupted the link," Willodarus said. "He mutters in his fever dreams that she is dead. If we can't pull them out of it – restore the link, I fear we will yet lose them both."

The attack, which had killed their loved ones and nearly claimed their own lives, had

shut down the psychic link between the twins, leaving both in a state of deep shock in addition to their other injuries.

Jysy and Jimi crouched in the bushes, half-clothed, their coitus interrupted, and adrenaline rushing through their veins at the possibility of discovery. They hardly dared breathe. If found, Jysy would be all right because she had chosen to wear an ankle length night-elf robe with nothing underneath so that Jimi could get straight to the point. Jysy could simply stand up, allowing the robe to settle and look innocent. However, Jimi had no pants on and that was strictly *in flagrante delicto*.

Dynanna drifted in the opposite direction, Mariko following. Willodarus paused near their bushes, the corners of his eyes crinkled, his mouth widened in a smile and he said softly, "Ah, spring time is for young creatures." Then he left.

Jysy looked at Jimi uncertainly for a moment, feeling confused. "The seasons are reversed here."

"So?" Jimi frowned, missing her point entirely.

"So, he knows. He caught us, but he did not say anything to Mariko."

Jimi breathed a sharp sigh of relief. Mariko was far more demanding of propriety than her husband.

* * *

Jysy, once she got over the shock of discovery, spent the rest of the day thinking about what they had overheard. She had grown up as a street child, a thief, and a prankster before becoming an assassin in training. She decided that the situation with Dynarien and Dynanna might be able to be remedied with a prank. If the link were restored, then Dynarien would start to get well.

"Well," Jysy said. "It seems to me if we can't get Dynanna to come to Dynarien, we need to get Dynarien to Dynanna."

"I don't see how," Jimi said. "He's never more than half-conscious."

Jysy smirked for an instant. "Leave that to me."

"You wouldn't be planning an ambush, honey?" Edouina grinned. She wore loose green robes the color of banyan leaves. The babies were practically screaming to get out, always moving. It could not be much longer. She felt tired and worn, but game.

Jysy led the way through the gardens, looking for Mariko. First thing would be to get her looking in another direction at the proper moment. They found her at the lily pond, watching the rainbow koi, their bright bodies flashing among the green. When she was not with either of her children, Mariko was at the pond. There was an air of

infinite sadness about her delicate face, though she tried hard to conceal it. Dynanna sat beside the pond a little ways from Mariko, staring into the water and watching the flashes of orange and white as the carp moved among the lilies and water grasses.

"Mariko." Jysy bowed politely.

"What is it?" Mariko was of night-elf blood mixed with the divine and had their coloring. Willodarus' night-elves were the result of an inter-marriage of his sylvans and a group of people he rescued when a volcano sank their island, destroying a castle and the surrounding villages. He had been visiting their lovely sun god. As an opener of gates, Willodarus brought them through, giving them refuge here, on his continent of Sealandia on this distant world. Their languages had become a hopelessly confused merging of the two; the only traces of their origins lay in their names, the fighting styles of the males, and some of their customs. They were fiercely devoted to Willodarus, which was why, when he chose from all his peoples, who would dwell in his sacred city, he chose them. Their coloring was to reflect the night sky on distant shores with stars and they literally glistened like polished sapphires. This was in token of the night they had been swept from their world. A fringe of orange and red ran through their heavy white hair, this in token of the volcano whose eruption had cast them here by necessitating the opening of the gate. For some there were little wisps of black among the orange symbolizing those lineages who had lost relatives to the eruption before Willodarus could get the gate open enough for the flight to begin. They were all works of art; genetically, magically designed works of art. None of it was cosmetic. This was simply the way they were, the way they had become; and they were beautiful. And Willodarus loved them.

"Would it be all right if we – the two of us – spent the night under the baobab tree?"

"Whyever would you want to do that, child?" She raked Jimi with her eye suspiciously.

"We've heard that's where the sprites come out to dance at night. I'd really, really like to see them. And Edouina will be with us."

"Hai." Mariko gave a quick bow of agreement at the mention of their having a chaperone, remembering how she had watched for them as a young girl ten millennia ago. "You must be very quiet. The sprites are shy."

"We will."

Jysy procured blankets and pillows, piling Jimi's arms with them, then slipped down to the healer's stores and stole two small vials.

They spent most of the night under the baobab tree, and then, in the hours before dawn, they stole into Dynarien's chambers. They paused for a little while with old Genji, sharing a cup of tea. While Jysy and Jimi talked quietly with the ancient servant, Edouina dosed his tea. Soon Genji was sleeping soundly in his chair.

Then Jimi got a firm grip on Dynarien's arms and Jysy his feet. They emerged into the long hallway with Edouina going ahead as lookout, and came face to face with Queiggy. The spindly yuwenghau regarded them a moment in silence, then simply lifted Dynarien from their arms and nodded at them to lead on. They brought Dynarien to the baobab tree and covered him up, making him as comfortable as possible. Then they sat down to wait for Dynanna to make her appearance at dawn as she always did.

Dynarien lay with his face half-covered while Edouina sat beside him, holding his hand. If this did not work, then there would be nothing left to try. Queiggy settled nearby, hesitating to intrude too closely, but wishing to be there in case he could help.

Jysy spotted Dynanna first, wandering listlessly among the trees.

"Psst! Jimi! Get her over here. Tell her we've got someone she needs to meet. A friend of her brother's."

"I don't know..."

"Just get her over here."

When Dynanna got close enough, Jysy stood up with an irritated whine. "Ahhh! He's fallen asleep again."

Dynanna paused, her head tilting, little frown lines forming as if she sensed that she needed to be over there, yet could not understand why. After a moment she came closer. "Who is he?" Dynanna asked, bending curiously.

Jysy signed Edouina who stuck the bottle of smelling salts under his nose just as Jysy gave him a swift kick in the ass. One way or the other they were going to get a noise out of him, even if it was nothing more than a groan.

Dynarien jerked and cried out, "Talons?"

Dynanna slapped at Jysy, dropping to her knees. "I don't know why she did that," she apologized. "I mean—" Their eyes met and the link between the twins flared, snapping both of them into complete awareness. "Holy gophers! Dynarien, you're alive!"

"Sis?"

Then they were in each other's arms, hugging and weeping and laughing crazily.

"Who kicked me?" Dynarien asked, searching their faces for the missing one who always kicked him. It had felt so like her. "Where's Talons?"

He saw the answer in their eyes. His chest tightened and the edges of his mouth quivered. Then he saw the flatness of Dynanna's stomach. He touched it tentatively, looking down into her face with a silent question.

"Dead. And LorenRain also. Talons lies in stasis. Grandfather has sent his swan-mays in search of a way to revive her."

"Do you wish to see her?" Jysy asked.

Edouina gave a loud gasp of pain, drawing everyone's attention. "I hate to break this up but – the babies are coming."

Dynanna scurried around to her, starting a countdown between contractions. "They're coming fast. No. Time. To. Move. Her. Jysy, get Mariko."

Jysy scampered.

Dynarien rolled onto his side. "Edouina."

"Talons' babies," she gasped and stiffened for a moment, riding the contraction. "Why'n hell did you give her three?"

Dynarien lurched to his feet and fell as his legs buckled. He was still weak, although his divine body was already rallying.

"Sit down," Dynanna ordered.

He obeyed.

* * *

By the time Mariko and her ladies arrived, two healthy baby girls lay sucking on Edouina's breasts while a third nestled in its father's arms.

"I can't believe you did this, Edouina," Dynarien marveled.

"I can't believe I did it either," Edouina remarked dryly. "In all the shit, no one discussed names."

"I've never named a baby before," Dynarien sounded mystified. "Their mothers always did it. I never stayed long enough."

Edouina smirked at him. "You never got married before either."

Dynarien flushed brighter than his red-gold hair.

"All right, then. The one you have is Deatè. That was Talons' ma'aram's name. This

one is Talatielysa, her ma'aramlasah's name – named for a sylvan hero. And this one is Talonea, named for her grandma'aram." Tears started from Edouina's face, "Gods, I wish Talons was here to see them."

Dynarien bent carefully and kissed Edouina. "So do I... I love you, Edouina."

"I love you, too, you silly rakehell."

"Hey," Dynanna said, grinning. "Since I delivered them, doesn't that make me their godmother or something?"

"Yes," Edouina extended the God of Cussedness her hand. "That makes you their godmother and I want you to take that very seriously."

* * *

Dynarien's fever had vanished as soon as the link had been restored. However, it was another week before he could bear even a portion of his own weight. Edouina, Jysy, Dynanna, and Mariko fussed over him until he dreaded to see them coming. Mariko, his mother, had found an acceptable wet nurse to help with the children, which made it easier upon Edouina. They spent a great deal of time feeding him snacks in addition to his meals, nagging him to eat since he needed to regain weight and muscle. His body had atrophied badly during the time the venom assailed him. Worse to his mind, was that they kept refusing to allow him anywhere near the orchid gardens where Talons lay until they felt he was strong enough to handle it.

That morning, Dynarien became insistent. "I want to see her," he told his sister. "Grandfather placed a stasis on her?"

"Yes." Dynanna gave him a long considering look and then shrugged. She gestured to Jimi and they took Dynarien's arms around their necks and walked him to the orchid gardens

"Grandfather thinks there might be a way to revive her," Dynanna said. "but, considering how she died, I don't think Kalirion, himself, could bring her back. Too many organs were damaged. The drug they poisoned her with complicates it all. And ultimately she bled to death internally. She went fast. Edouina barely had time to take the babies."

Dynarien wished she had not gone into so much detail, but she always did.

Talons lay in the center of the west garden in a crystal coffin on a silver bier. They had dressed her in black leather with a swan-may's silver armor, her hands folded across the hilt of a katana. The garden was lush with fragrant orchids of every color. The garden was a maze of hedges and arbors, forming little chambers with an occasional stone bench and table.

The mark that Hadjys placed upon her body was designed to ensure that her soul could not be captured, but released immediately from her body at death. It was very difficult for his grandfather to continue to hold her soul in stasis and Dynarien knew that the sooner he went looking for help the greater the chances of reviving her in time.

In the spring, when the babies were a little older, he would go to Charas and begin his search for the life-mages.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CREEYA

Alora crossed the quad to the school, walking through the main hall to the back corridor leading to the barns. She was a raw-boned young woman with a loose easy stride and a long, heavy braid of dark brown, almost black, hair hanging down her back. When she entered the wide yard, she saw Jorry, the avian hostler, sitting in the middle with a red gryphon and a huge tub of fresh meat. Jorry picked up a piece of meat, pushing it at the gryphon's beak. That gryphon turned his head away, refusing it. Alora recognized Little Bit, Talons' mount. Talons had rescued him as a tiny gryphlet, after his mother was killed by manticores, and raised him, feeding him by hand.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The hostler turned a troubled face to Alora. "He knows she's dead. I don't know how, but he does."

Alora wrapped her arms around the huge predator's neck, rubbing her face against his, crooning in a close imitation to a mother gryphon. She waved her hand at the hostler who put the meat in it. Alora, remembering the stories Talons told her about Little Bit, took the raw, bloody meat in her mouth and rubbed in against his beak like a mother gryphon trying to feed a fledgling. At first, he resisted, but Alora kept on until he took it.

Jorry gave her a tired smile. "That's the first he's eaten in days. You've a way with him. Would you consider reassignment to the beasts? I could use talented help."

Alora smiled. "Yes." Then she took another piece of raw flesh in her teeth and began again with Little Bit.

* * *

Patriarch Eshraf lit the candles and incense at his altar to Hadjys in his private chapel in the High Temple and then he knelt to pray. The realm was wrapped in grief. The

beloved heir of their previous Grand Master had fallen mortally wounded on her wedding day moments after her vows were exchanged, victim of a coup led by the father of her husband and her grandfather's First Lieutenant in the Guild, Gylorean Galee. Galee had proved to be an ancient monster, a lemyari, a demon-vampire. Dynarien Willodarusson, The Twice-Born Son of Willodarus, slew Galee, tearing her head from her shoulders. Then he had carried the dying heir to Imralon, realm of his divine sire in an attempt to rescue the children she carried with the aid of a bi-kyndi master, Edouina Hornbow. They had had no further word. Jysy and Jimi, two Guild students were seen to grab Dynarien as he shimmered into his Jump and they disappeared with them.

"Give me some sign, Oh Lord, my God. Some word to ease my heart, I pray you." Eshraf continued on into a traditional rite of beseeching, moving his hands about the altar, raising, and lowering small symbolic objects.

He felt the surge of power to his left, turning to drop to one knee before the entity manifesting in his temple, half expecting that his god had come. This young male with eyes of flame was no one Eshraf had ever seen before.

"I am HamaDon Karis brye Dynanna byn Hadjys. I stand in my father's stead. I am his eldest son."

The young god was strongly built with a narrow waist and hips. His black caftan shot through with glittering threads of gold and flame, was sashed with gold, the hem brushing his boot tops at his knees. Hama had his mother's red-golden hair and his father's dark skin. He was still yuwenghau – one of the young rogue gods who roamed the world as divine knights-errant – yet the nearness of true maturity filled the temple with his burning power.

"Holy One," the Patriarch bowed his head.

"Rise, Eshraf and hear my words, my father's words," Hama bid him.

"Yes, Lord." Eshraf rose and faced him.

"We can give no comfort. Talons is dead. The woodland divines could not save her. The others who traveled with Dynarien lie beyond our perceptions in the innermost recesses of their sacred realm. Your people in the east, betrayed by Galee, are being hunted and slain. Bend all to save them. Withdraw your forces from other places to send them there and keep some in Creeya itself. This realm must be saved."

"Your Will, Holy One."

"My father's will."

"It will be done."

Hama vanished and Eshraf found himself alone again. Truly they had entered a time of darkness. Dynarien? Did he yet live?

* * *

"Grand Master, there is a delegation to see you." Mohanja's deep, rich voice had a quiet, patient quality. The huge, black-skinned Jedruan, who still cared for Takhalme, the previous Grand Master with the love and devotion of a son, had swiftly become mentor to the young mon who now sat the throne. Mohanja wore a lionskin around his waist over his trousers: he had straddled the beast and broken its neck while just sixteen.

Ceejorn sighed and stretched his lanky form. "Can you put them off? I have had no time at all with Isen today and I feel as if my head is going to burst if I have to read another petition or arbitrate a quarrel."

Mohanja favored him with a small smile. Isen was Ceejorn's child-bride, the last heir of the Branch Clan. It was by reason of his marriage to her that Ceejorn sat the throne as Grand Master. Isen was fourteen to Ceejorn's twenty-six and already swelled with their first heir. Ceejorn loved her passionately and devotedly. Isen's father, the last prince of the blood, had commanded them to marry before the night was out as he lay dying last autumn – Creeya, being far to the north was already into winter with snow on the ground – and they had done so. The marriage was consummated the next day, although Ceejorn had at first been reluctant to touch her because of her youth. But all of them, Mohanja included, had feared that if this was not done the council might order the marriage set aside should matters go awry. Although Creeya was a broken realm and the Guild shattered in far-flung places, the people were rallying to Ceejorn's banner as he struggled to repair the damage that had occurred under his predecessor.

"They are from Imralon. Three swan-mays and a full company of gryphons."

No matter how badly Ceejorn wished to see his Lady Wife, he knew better than to refuse to speak with a deity's delegations – especially when they might have some word about Takhalme's descendants. "Send them in."

They wore silver armor over short green robes, their hair thonged back with strips of black leather. Cuffed great-boots pushed at the edges of their robes. Ceejorn stared before he could catch himself: he had never seen more beautiful women. The swan-mays were the best-loved paladins of Willodarus, going into battle at the heads of their companies of blue gryphons.

The leader of them regarded Ceejorn arrogantly for a long moment. "You are the Grand Master?"

Ceejorn nodded. "Yes. Our god decreed that the rule pass to the branch clan."

"And Takhalme? We have come to speak of his great grand children."

"Takhalme is dead. He took ill shortly after the attempted coup and died within a fortnight." Ceejorn's face turned sad. "I will always believe grief and shame killed him."

Leante considered that. "Willodarus holds Talons' soul and body in stasis. We travel in search of a way to restore her to life."

"Is such a thing possible?" Ceejorn sounded concerned.

"We do not know. What is known is that Aejustrys Rowan was, herself, called back from death. It may be that her return cannot be duplicated, but we journey from here to Rowanhart." She took a package from the pouch at her side and, dropping to one knee, extended it toward Ceejorn, "In exchange for this, Willodarus intended to persuade Takhalme to relinquish all claims on Talons Trollbane, should the means be found to raise her, and upon her children that she might dwell in peace as bride to his son. He also wishes that Bryndel Wrathscar relinquish his claim to the children."

"The children survive?"

"Yes, lord. Edouina has taken them into her body and wombs them." Her eyes searched their faces. "My liege-god can force Bryndel to relinquish his claims, but we would rather not go that route. May I have your word not to repeat what I tell you now?"

"Does it have bearing on this matter?"

"Yes."

"Then speak, the words shall not go forth from here."

"The children are not Bryndel's, they are Dynarien's. Which is why Willodarus will not part with Talons even should she be raised. The children belong to Willodarus. The Nine Elder Gods witnessed the marriage vows spoken between Dynarien, Talons, and Edouina the night before her death. They regard that as the true marriage and the ceremony, which bound Talons and Edouina to Bryndel the next day, as a sham. However, the laws of gods and myn often differ."

Mohanja watched Ceejorn's eyes soften, his body, which had been momentarily tensed, relaxed. "And their divine heritage holds first call upon them, since they are the legitimate children of Dynarien and Talons. They are princes of Imralon, not Creeya."

"I will speak to Bryndel. Creeya willingly relinquishes all claims to her and her children. They are free. Tell me, what is in the package?"

"A letter for Bryndel from Edouina and the elixir of youth which was intended for Takhalme."

Mohanja Raam took the package and carried it to his lord.

Ceejorn took the letter and returned the bottle. "Tomorrow, after I have spoken with Bryndel Wrathscar, I will call a general assemblage in the Great Hall. If Wrathscar's decision is the one you wish, then I will accept your gift and try to be worthy of it. My wife is a sinjin and will be young still when I am old and withered."

"As you wish," the swan-may captain replied. "Your wife is descended of the Black Swan?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes." Ceejorn smiled fondly. "And I must apologize in advance for the poor quarters we have to offer. Our best guest quarters were in the west wing. A murderous ghost dwells there now and many people have died as a result of her rage."

"Would the ghost's name be Arruth?" the swan-may captain asked him.

Ceejorn was surprised. "Yes."

"If you will tolerate gryphons in the palace, my company will spend the night in this west wing and speak with the child."

"This may not be wise. But, if you wish, you may bring your gryphons inside and spend the night in the west wing. I will have servants show you the way."

"I am Captain Leante, my sisters are Selena and Daphne. As soon as we have seen the wing, we will bring our eighteen gryphons inside."

* * *

Long intricate murals of flowers, birds, and animals that could be found only in the imagination swirled in an endless pattern along the walls of the wide corridors of the west wing. Captain Leante, following Alora as the young woman showed her into the west wing, trailed her fingers along it, half closing her eyes at times. Selena and Daphne were bringing the gryphons in. Alora, in awe of the whole thing, watched her curiously. The swan-mays were imposing creatures in their black-feathered cloaks, silver armor, and cuffed great boots. They were fair skinned and their hair ranged, in color, from Leante's pale red to Daphne's corn silk and Selena's brilliant white.

"How strange," Leante murmured. "What very strange things you humans can come up with."

"The mural?"

Leante smiled like a complex flower slowly opening at the first touch of the sun. "You are always having visions of things that have never been. Spinning through the creation in curious spirals like this mural. Perhaps that is why the gods are so fascinated by you – why they breed with you so often."

Alora flushed. "I wouldn't know."

"That's because you haven't slept with one." Leante took her smile back and said, "Show me the rooms where the key events took place. Talons' rooms first."

"You've already heard the story?" Alora asked.

"Bits and pieces. Arruth loved Talons, idolized her. Talons was forced into a betrothal with a cruel man. He poisoned her, but she died in battle instead."

"Your facts aren't right," Alora protested. "I mean they are, but they aren't. You can't understand anything until you know about the vampire."

"Then tell me about the vampire."

Alora then told her all the things she had learned from Bryndel concerning Galee and how terribly he had suffered the night that Dynarien removed the coercions.

"A terrible evil was that one. It is good that the holy one destroyed her."

It took Alora a moment to realize that Leante meant Dynarien when she said "holy one." She had known him as a mage first and learned later that he was yuwenghau. Alora unlocked Talons' rooms, walked to the table in the middle of the parlor, and lit the lamp, turning up the wick. Everything was as they had left it the night before the wedding, although it was now coated thickly with dust. Pillows and blankets lay scattered over the floor where several of them had slept. Alora snatched them up as she passed, throwing them on the couch rather than walk over them. It felt sad and empty. They had finally acknowledged the evidence of their eyes: that Talons was dying. No one ever told Bryndel that – after he had fallen into exhausted slumber on the couch, wrung dry by Dynarien's efforts to pull all of Galee's coercions from his mind and body – Dynarien had slept that last night in Talons' bed. Talons, as she lay dying on the chapel floor, finally told Bryndel that she had never loved him, that it had always been Dynarien. Initially they had all, including Talons, believed they were deceiving an enemy, and only later learned that Bryndel was as much a victim as the rest of them. In the end he had found his courage and helped them destroy the monster.

A blast of icy wind ripped through from a broken window as Alora opened the bedroom door. Alora shivered and it was not just from the cold. Cass had thrown herself out that window the morning before the wedding. Two Guildsmyn had nailed boards over it, but the boards were gone. Snow had drifted in over the furniture, the

quilts and wealth of embroidered pillows Talons had loved to nestle down among. Everything was ruined. Alora's eyes filled. She began knocking the snow away and Leanthe stopped her with a light touch. She shook her head, flicked her feathered cape and a small wind rose, gathering the snow and carrying it out the broken window.

"What happened here?" Leanthe asked, squatting.

"Galee took Cass' mind. Cass was a servant. She took care of the west wing. She also wiped noses, bandaged skinned knees..." Alora's nose wrinkled and her mouth twisted. "Surrogate mother to a lot of kids. Cass thought she was making Talons better ... but she was poisoning her. She threw herself out that window."

"Does it always snow this early in Creeya?"

"Sometimes. The snow never completely leaves the peak. It's there year round. We're very far north."

"Is this the first snow? When did it come?" Leanthe fingered one of the pillows. It had not been damp long and was not soaked through.

"Yes, it's the first and it came last night. Why?" Alora frowned in confusion.

"Get a fire going in the hearth to warm this place and to dry out the bed clothes and the pillows before they ruin. Then find Daphne. I'll explain after she gets here."

Alora left.

Leanthe went to the window and dropped to her haunches, turning the boards in her hands, finding a bit of gray rot caught on the nails. The cold air did not hold much of a scent. She lifted the board to her nose and smelled it, her nostrils flaring. Human. The dead flesh had been human. And it was on the side of the board from which the nails protruded, which meant that the creature had pushed on the boards from the outside. Leanthe straightened and leaned carefully out the window, looking around the edges. There on the stone a little further down she found a bit more. The thing had climbed up from the outside.

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 laid atop it in a long flare of seven wings, five small sub-wing additions (which had been built later) 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, having been endlessly added onto over the centuries until no one knew all of its secrets.

Leanthe felt grateful that, while there were some forms of undead that sylvans and their related races could be forced into, this was not one of them. The thing had

entered either shortly before the snow fell or as it was first falling since there were no tracks in the room and lain quietly in its hiding place. Leanthe straightened, turning slowly, scanning the room. The closet and the two wardrobes offered the best possibility for hiding if it was still in this room.

"Cass? Come out, Cass." Leanthe walked to the closet first, opening the door and peering inside. There were a few chests and some leathers hung on racks, but nothing else. She heard a squawk from the other room and left to see who had come. She found Alora, Daphne and a large gryphon. Daphne looked the most birdlike of the three, her cornsilk hair in little feathery layers around her face and shoulders, her sharp, pale, blade thin features and eyes so profoundly slanted they seemed no more than slits in her face. She kept her fingers, the longest, thinnest fingers Alora had ever seen, folded together, thumbs hooked in her belt. Daphne walked with her head half bowed as if caught in a reverie.

"There is a revenant in the wardrobe," Daphne said, lifting her head at a tilt.

Alora's eyes widened and her hand dropped to her belt knife. "Is that what came in the window?"

"Yes, I had just started to search before you returned," Leanthe told them. "That's why I sent for Daphne. Are you Guild, Alora?"

"Not yet. Come spring I will be. But I've been marked by Hadjys."

"A revenant isn't a vampire. It can't turn you. But it is still good that your god has marked you."

"It is disturbed," Daphne said, her voice soft, reflective. She started toward the bedroom. "Confused. Hungry. It awakened last night. Arruth's rage is growing. I think that may have been part of what awakened it."

"Can you lay it?"

"I am not certain. You may have to destroy it, Leanthe."

Seeing Alora start to follow them, Leanthe paused and faced her, "Are you certain you wish to see this? This monster was probably Cass. The woman you spoke of."

Alora thought for a moment, gnawing her lower lip and then nodded. "Otherwise I'll always wonder."

"Then stay behind us. If it attacks, get out of the room. You're too inexperienced."

Leanthe entered first, drawing her blade and facing the wardrobes while Daphne stood a little behind and to the side with Alora just inside the doorway. Leanthe nodded at Daphne.

"Come out, Cass," Daphne said.

The wardrobe nearest to the closet creaked open. Alora's gorge rose at the sight of the blue fingers and blackened nails. Torn flesh and bits of bone showed. How it could even grasp was beyond Alora's imagination. Cass' face was largely intact, although discolored. She had struck the lower roofs, breaking her neck and back, before sliding into the trees below, but her face had been untouched. Alora shivered.

"Swan mays," the creature's lips did not move as the voice rose from the hollow of its throat. "Go away."

"Go back to your rest, Cass," Daphne commanded.

"No. Too much rage. It hurts. Makes me hungry."

"That is Arruth's rage. Not yours," Daphne told her.

"Mine too. The monster made me kill her. Talons. We'll kill the Wrathscars. All of them. The babies too."

"No!" Alora cried out, realizing that Arruth had somehow aroused the revenant to send it after Bryndel.

Cass noticed Alora for the first time and smiled. "You like pretty Bryndel?"

"Bryndel did not mean to hurt anyone."

"Hush," Leanthe hissed. "Don't speak to it."

"Old Cass is cold, Alora," the revenant shuffled forward. "You do not want me to be cold. I'm so very hungry. Come here to me, Alora."

Alora blinked and for a moment she saw the woman who had bandaged her skinned knees when she was little and told her stories when the other adults were busy. She started forward and felt a sharp sting as the godmark branded on her breast stirred to life, burning away the touch of the revenant's fascination and she realized she had been ready to walk down its throat.

Daphne sketched the Willodarian rune, chanting quickly the virtues of the seasons, demanding that Cass return to the earth. Cass retreated as far as the window, hissing. "In the last weeks," Cass screamed, "She began to feed on me and two of my children. She made them unclean. When they die, they will rise as more of her blood."

"I will see that your children are cleansed," Leanthe vowed. "as my god is my witness."

Cass calmed. "I hunger," she said.

"We cannot allow you to feed." Leanthe measured the distance to reach the revenant, not wanting Cass to go out the window and escape: Leanthe was fast, but the distance between Cass and the window was short. Many people would die and the creature would grow stronger if Cass got out. "You would be doing to these people what Galee did to you."

Cass eased away from the window. "I am hungry." She watched Leanthe's sword, regarded the shimmer of power surrounding Daphne, and focused again on Alora, the only human. Abruptly the revenant broke past Leanthe and Daphne, slammed into Alora, and carried her to the floor, biting deeply into the young woman's arm. Daphne touched the rotted flesh, spoke a single word, and Cass became rich brown topsoil and bones. The swan-may's eyes were troubled as she extended her hand to Alora to help her up. As soon as Alora stood, Daphne walked out, saying nothing.

Leanthe examined Alora's arm, then rummaged in Talons' cabinets for stuff to clean and bandage the wound with.

"What's wrong with her?" Alora asked, her eyes trailing after Daphne.

Leanthe nodded in a thoughtful manner. "Caught that did you? Daphne's a spiritworker. It hurts her to throw someone's soul to the winds that way. But once Cass got her teeth into you she had no other choice."

"Will she be able to deal with Arruth?"

"I don't know. Arruth is extremely powerful to have awakened Cass. It may be that Arruth's spirit will require propitiation of some kind. Or a greater working. Certainly the entire palace grounds will need to be warded or consecrated to prevent her rousing other unquiet spirits and that will need to be done by priests. Too much work for just one spiritworker to handle. Arruth is drawing power from the feelings of guilt and grief that are pervading this entire compound."

Alora rubbed her finger around the edges of the bandaged bite.

"Don't touch it. You'll irritate it. You should have a healer look at it."

"After I've shown you the rooms, I'll go."

Alora showed Leanthe next the room Arruth had shared with Jysy. All of Arruth's belongings were where she had left them – no one had had the heart to remove them. Then Lord Wrathscar's bedroom in his apartments where they believed she died and where he had nearly murdered her sister, Jysy. By then the wing was full of gryphons. Daphne re-joined them in Lord Wrathscar's suites, looking more herself. She pulled a small charm from her pocket. It dangled from her fingers on a chain as

she turned, walking about the room. Stopping and closing her eyes frequently.

"That's Arruth's!" Alora said, "Jysy had it."

"Sssh, quiet. Jysy lent it to us."

"Yes," Daphne said finally. "She died here. Her body was discarded at the training grounds. He killed her because he was angry with Edouina. The councilors had given her the victory – he had wanted Edouina killed, but murdered Arruth instead. To hurt them."

Daphne stroked her fingers along the bed, tears starting from her eyes. "Her fear still rises off the bed. She was so frightened. She knew he was going to kill her." Daphne broke away, going to the window. She opened it and stuck her head out, sucking in deep breaths. When she had regained her composure, she turned back to the others. "I will wait for Arruth in this room. I'll curl up on the floor with Arachne." She gestured at a gryphon that squeezed in behind her.

"So you really did come looking for Arruth."

Leante nodded. "Her sister cannot sleep at night for fear of Arruth's visits. They become more and more terrifying. Each of us will spend the night in a different room, waiting for Arruth."

* * *

The great hall was a maze of pillars, groin vaults, and conchoidal arches. The frescoed walls gleamed in the torchlight with images of birds and flowers that existed only in the imagination of the artists. The patterned tiles upon the floor swirled with colors in a spreading arabesque that could only be appreciated from the elaborately balustraded balconies ringing the hall. The huge dais, three encircling golden steps high, held the throne.

Alora joined Bryndel at the high table, sitting beside him as Talons once had. In spite of some excitement over the swan-mays, it was an oddly quiet gathering. Too many people still grieved. Too many noble houses had died: some executed to the last adult for their treachery and others extinguished by the vampires in the initial moments of the fight in the chapel. *So many empty places, empty tables*, Alora thought. There was no banter, no laughter. Ceejorn Osterbridge presided over a court ruined and decimated by treachery and battle fought on these very grounds. The nobles who remained were still unsure of their new ruler and what changes he represented, since barely two months past he had been an unknown Guildsmon. Alora wondered what it must have been like before the betrayal of the old Grand Master by Galee. The swan-mays, in their feathered cloaks, sat at the head where they could talk with Ceejorn and Isen.

The slender queen wore a golden robe with ribbon setting off the high bodice and

the loose folds fell around her stomach revealing the swelling curve of the child she carried. Ceejorn's hand kept returning to cover Isen's fondly. She beamed at him.

"Edouina sent me a letter," Bryndel told Alora, his mouth close to her ear as he whispered. "She has dissolved the marriage and wishes me to relinquish all claim to the children."

"Will you?"

"Yes. I don't deserve them. I want them, but I don't deserve them." Bryndel touched her on the arm and she winced.

"Alora?"

She shook her head. "I – I got bitten working with the animals." She did not want to tell him what had happened in the west wing.

"You should be more careful. Did the healers look at it?"

"Of course."

"I still can't see you as a Guild hostler."

"Get used to it," she grinned.

* * *

Arruth appeared in Talons' bedroom as she did each night to wail. So long as Talons had lived, Arruth had appeared only to her sister and her victims. Now she walked the halls in her grief and rage, railing at the evil that had been done here, keening for the beloved lives that had been lost, shrieking for what had been done to herself and her sister. There would be vengeance. There would be blood spilt. There would be terror visited upon others as it had been visited upon herself. She was startled to find someone apparently sleeping there. The ghost calmed. She crept up to the bed with hope and a question.

"Talons?"

Leante sat up, Temocratus had already alerted her of Arruth's approach. The gryphons were sensitive to the spirit world. Leante regarded the ghost calmly.

"Talons is dead. She lies in a crystal coffin in the orchid gardens."

Arruth shrieked. "How dare you sleep in her bed? No one will lie here in peace again! She suffered so much! She suffered...she...suffered." Wind rose around her, overturning the furniture. The cushions and pillows Talons had loved flew around the room in a furious breeze, but nothing got past the eye of calm Leante.

maintained around herself.

"Who are you?" Arruth demanded, seeing she could not strike Leanthé. "What are you to violate this place?"

"Captain Leanthé of the swan-mays." Leanthé watched the ghost closely. The room had settled in disarray. "Jysy sent us."

"Get out of here. Get out. You don't belong in her rooms." Arruth shrieked hysterically.

"No. Not until we have spoken about Jysy."

The ghost fled through the room and out into the hall. She blew along the corridors, wailing, passing through the walls and into the bedroom she had shared with her sister. Someone was sleeping in Jysy's bed. Again the ghost quieted, wondering, wishing.

"Jysy?" Arruth called quietly.

Selena, alerted by the gryphons, sat up as Leanthé had.

"Why do you still walk?" Selena demanded.

Arruth realized that she had been ambushed again. "Because of him! He killed me. He killed Talons. He hurt Jysy." She began to throw things, but as before the swan-may sat in an eye of calm and was not touched. Arruth fled again. She avoided the corridors and hallways, passing through the walls and discovering gryphons in every room. She swept into Lord Wrathscar's chambers, shrieking and wailing with rage. This time the swan-may sat on the floor, her back leaning against a tremendous gryphon.

"What would let you rest?" Daphne asked her.

"Five Deaths. Lord Wrathscar. Bryndel. And the three children he got on Talons. Nothing less. I will haunt my sister until she kills the children."

Arruth vanished and did not return that night.

* * *

Captain Leanthé met with the Grand Master privately before the assembly in the great hall was to take place. Mohanja was the only other mon in the room. He sat in the chair nearest to Ceejorn, watching for the smallest sign of need from his master. Mohanja was Guild. The three lord-lieutenants were always Guild. Isen sat to his other side with her chin propped on the back on her long-fingered hand.

Ceejorn looked thoughtful, leaning on the arm of his chair, his face turned attentively to the swan-may as he listened to her story of the meeting with Arruth's ghost. *Poor child*, he thought, *poor angry child. More sinned against, than sinning*. He would make certain that no more playful, precocious Sharani children would suffer as that one had. She had not known what would happen when she innocently kissed Wrathscar or she would never have done it. He would make an edict forbidding anyone who was of age from touching one of them on pain of death.

"Arruth asks for too much," Leante told Ceejorn. "Willodarus will never sacrifice the lives of the children." The quiet, stern Captain of Swan-mays had an intensity about her words and voice.

"Nor would I sacrifice Bryndel Wrathscar. He has granted your desires. He relinquishes his rights to the children." Poor Bryndel. There had been so many, many victims. Ceejorn understood Bryndel finally, unlike the time he had thrown Bryndel out of the chapel where his friend Yahni's body lay in state. He had accused Bryndel in the murder, either as a participant or one who looked the other way while it happened. But Bryndel had been as much a victim as Yahni – only he escaped with his life. Yahni, whom Ceejorn had loved as dearly as a brother, had been cruelly murdered, one of the first victims in the recent war with the scions of Hellgod.

* * *

Alora made her way through the dispersing crowds to the swan-mays. Bryndel had left on some unspecified errand and she was alone. Seeing their gryphons a night ago had set her thinking about Little Bit. For all her efforts, he still mourned for Talons and did not eat enough to survive. He was withering away as she watched and it tore at her heart. Considering their abilities with the blues, could they possibly help a red?

"Captain Leante?"

"Ah, the young woman who showed us the west wing," Leante smiled at her warmly. Their task finished as much as it could be, they could look to a moments' pleasure and rest before continuing on to Rowanhart.

"I – I have a favor to ask." Alora felt suddenly awkward and unsure.

"Well, ask. I can't promise to grant it until I've learned what it is."

"There's a red gryphon in the barns. His name is Little Bit. He belonged to Talons. He's grieving himself to death. Would you try to help him?"

"I have only dealt with Blues..." Leante watched Alora's mouth tighten and tears gather behind her eyes. The swan-may lowered her head a trifle as she thought, her lips pursing at the stoic young woman who could shed tears of distress for a beast but not a single one for herself when she was bitten by a revenant. She patted Alora's arm, reassuringly. "Yes. Take me to him."

Alora led her to the great barns behind the palace. The Guild captured many kinds of winged creatures as eyases and reared them. They were used to transport chieftains to gatherings primarily. But some were personal mounts and others carried supplies to places difficult to reach by horse. They also used them for emergencies when time was of the essence.

Jorry, a gaunt old man in stained leathers, goggled at the swan-may for a moment when they crossed the yard, rising to his feet so quickly that he dropped the harness he was working on. Leanthe gave him a small 'don't you wish' smile as Alora briefly introduced them and then went to Little Bit's stall.

Alora wrapped her arms around his neck and crooned softly. He perked as Leanthe came and laid her head on his shoulder with an odd croon that Alora knew she would never be able to imitate.

Little Bit's eyes brightened and he sniffed her, smelling gryphon and something else.

<Sweet gryphon , > she sent. <You miss her?>

Little Bit sighed. *<Yes. Miss her. Lonely.>*

<Our quest is to find a way to bring her back . >

<Back? Make Alive? >

<Yes. If you're coming with us, then you had better start eating . > Leanthe turned to Alora. "We'll be taking him with us. I'd better get back and let the Grand Master know that we'll be delaying our departure a week."

Alora hugged Leanthe impulsively and kissed her.

Leanthe smiled, whispering in her ear. "Do you like women?"

"I don't know."

"Would you like to find out?"

"You mean with you?"

"Yes."

Alora's pulse quickened. "When?"

"As soon as I've spoken with the Grand Master. Come with me?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE VISITATIONS

Winter was coming early; Aejs could taste it in the air, a crisp sharp clean taste brushing across her lips. She could feel it in the sting of the intermittent wind on her cheeks. The Sharani King of Rowanhart dropped to her knees, pulling more fiercely at the sere grass, shoving at the bits of wind-blown debris, which had gathered over night, away from the headstone. Her mail glinted brightly in the morning sun. Doing this always seemed to strip her psyche down to its bare bones; which was why she did it, instead of having someone else do it. Aejs came to the grave nearly every day now and talked to him. He had always listened. She swallowed back a sob. Sooner or later she always started to cry. Finally she would get angry and when she reached that point she would pull herself together again.

"Brendorn, I'm never there when people need me. I'm always cleaning up the messes afterward," she muttered bitterly. "I'm sorry, forgive me."

A slight sheen of sweat shone on her face and bare arms, bringing out the blue tones in her black skin. *It isn't your enemies who hurt you the worst in life, it's your family, your relatives; the people you are taught from birth to love; the people who say they love you, but then try to force you into a mold you can never fit; the people you love, often just because you think you are supposed to love or feel guilty because for some reason you can't love. So many memories. So damned many memories. So many faces of the dead.*

Aejs cleared all the dead grass away, yet she could not clear the memories away – they had colored every word she had spoken that day, every action, until she knew she had to get away to try and get hold of herself. Brendorn's grave was where she usually did so. Next spring, if she still lived, she would try to make it look better here, perhaps plant some flowers.

Brendorn rested where his spirit could look out over the sea. He had never seen it before. She remembered how his slanted green eyes had filled with awe and amazement at how it seemed to stretch forever into the distance. She had promised him that they would sail to the islands one day on a ship she owned once she brought Ladonys and Laeoli safely out of Shaurone. The tears started again and she covered her eyes, sucking deep breaths. A circle of evergreens formed a small glade behind her so that he would always, year round, have greenery and shelter.

With the exception of the day Josiah had gone to Creeya to save Jysy, he had now been sober for several months. Aejs loved him desperately, but if something threatened the kingdom and Vorgensburg, Aejs would be the first to pass him the cup. She was a king first, and a woman second. When the time came, would she bury him beside Brendorn? Let her mates sleep in the earth together? She shivered at

the thought, but could not stop herself from asking it.

Aejys rose and walked to the edge of the bluffs, staring at the sea. "I have made my share of mistakes. People have died because of them. Some of those were people I loved. I have given in to despair, but I have pulled myself out of it. On my own. I do not surrender. I do not yield to the darkness. I have served my god and I have served my people. Surely I can be forgiven? Surely that single blasphemous act made in a moment of despair can be forgiven by god, by just one god out of all the gods in haven."

Aejystrys Rowan spread her azure wings, their crimson tips flashing as the sun glanced off them. She stood six three, statuesque and powerful as she drew the sacred sword, Spiritdancer, and whirled it defiantly. "I am the rock!" A single day after her act of despair had caused Aroana to abandon her, the sun god, Kalirion, had allowed her to draw it and the blade had given her this form, yet he had not spoken to her, had not taken her as his paladin.

"I am the rock that Mephistis and Hoon's ship will be smashed upon! I am the Rock! I know they are coming. Mephistis knows I hold his children; that I will not allow him to take them into the darkness; I have given them and their 'lasah sanctuary. Hoon wants me. He will never have me. I will break them with or without your blessing; with or without a return to your grace. I will hold fast. I am the leaping hart and I will put an antler in their throats and watch them choke. I will fill a bucket with sa'necari blood and drown Mephistis in it. I will see an end to this madness even if I must spend every coin in the wyrm's hoard to do it. I was happy in my tavern. For four years I was happy. No one knew who I was. No one cared. I just ran my tavern. Why couldn't they leave me alone? I'm going to make every damned one of them pay."

"You are impressive when you are angry," said a deep, mellow male voice.

Aejys knew him before she saw him; recognized his voice though she had never heard it before. She sheathed the sword, dropping to one knee as she turned; experiencing a rush of warmth and light that nearly blinded her awareness with ecstasy. Although it was autumn verging on winter, Kalirion manifested on the bluffs as a tall man, bare-chested, in a white kilt, surrounded in an aura of dancing flame with burning eyes that matched it. The bluffs became as warm as mid summer, the air filling with enticing scents of flowers from shores undreamed of and dreams that danced like mists of visions past touching. The Lord of the Sun, Master of Healing and Prophecy had come to her at last.

"What is your will, lord?" Hope filled her and wonder. He was magnificent. The breath caught in her chest, her pulse raced and she fought down an urge to weep with an indescribable mix of emotions: joy, confusion, relief, and worry. Then she saw his transcendent face tighten with anger, and for an instant she feared that it might be at her, but his words dispelled her fear.

"My sons, LorenRain, and one as yet unborn have been slain. The Hadjeeshyn paladin, Talons Trollbane, has been murdered. My beloved Dynanna and her brother have been grievously wounded. The guilty must be punished. I would visit my wrath upon them and you will be the instrument of their destruction. You will be the sword I wield in this holy vengeance."

Aejys' stomach did a slow queasy roll and then seemed to go empty and bottomless as if she had just fallen from a great height. She had heard of LorenRain, he had been very powerful; by what art could they have taken him? Dynanna and Dynarien grievously wounded? Talons murdered? Allies and good friends come to harm? The violence had escalated. Had the battles fought last spring accomplished nothing more than to drive the sa'necari to greater acts of outrage and audacity? How much could a rogue without a god achieve? She now wielded the Dancer; and she had been transformed by the Dancer into a form approaching that of a demi-god, but Dynanna and Dynarien were yuwenghau – young gods, far less powerful than the Nine elder gods like the one now facing her – but far more than she could ever become. *Well, she thought grimly, it's not the size of the myn in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the myn: and I have a whole lot of fight in me. I am the Rock. I am the leaping hart and I will shove an antler in their throats and watch them choke.*

"I foresee that those who have contrived, committed, and ordered each of these crimes will be found in the spring in the city of Charas. On the dawn of the equinox you must march south to Charas, rescue my life-mages who are hidden there, and destroy those responsible for these crimes. Hoon and Mephistis."

Hoon. He had tried to seduce her into seeing how the atrocities committed against him had justified the atrocities he committed later, those he still committed, but she rejected him. She had refused to be drawn into it. But it had been hard. She hated him all the more. Especially now.

"It is my will, also," a female voice spoke from Aejys' left. Aroana rode out onto the bluffs on a shining silver unicorn. She dressed in white with a double-bladed axe hanging at one hip and a sword at the other, a shield at her back. Her face was all angles and strength, handsome rather than pretty.

Aejys' throat tightened at the sight of her former patron.

"Do we now vie for her favors, lovely one?" Kalirion demanded of Aroana. "She owes me this one for my having allowed her to claim my sword."

"That is understood. However, she once was mine and could be again."

Aejys' pulse quickened at the thought of becoming ha'taren once more. This time she would be a true paladin of her liege-god.

Kalirion raised his hand and something on a slender chain now dangled from his

fingers. He tossed it to Aeijys. She caught it. Her hand closed on it and it burned her palm. When she opened her hand a golden charm on a golden chain lay there. A brand was burned into her palm in the shape of a flame. "What can you offer her that I cannot?"

The Compassionate Defender's face remained impassive as she dismounted, saying, "Atonement and forgiveness. Nothing more and nothing less."

"I give you a year and a day, Aeijstrys Rowan, to choose between us as your liege-god."

"No," Aeijys protested. "I do not wish to choose ... Hadjys and Dynanna share."

Aroana scowled deeply and Kalirion raised a fiery eyebrow.

They turned toward her, expectant.

"Just because it has never been done..." Aeijys said. "You have rarely marked your paladins in the millennia since the Age of Burning. Yet you, lord, have marked me." She opened her hand, displaying the brand in her palm.

Aroana smiled abruptly. "I have always wanted to slap that little scoundrel of a god..." Aroana began to frown and then laughed instead, ringing and bell-like. "But sometimes she gets an interesting idea. What say you, Kalirion? Shall we share? If it does not work out well, we simply do not do it again. But just this once?"

Kalirion's mouth quirked into a mischievous smile. "An experiment? But is she strong enough to carry such a double burden?"

"I am willing, lords," Aeijys said.

They exchanged a nod and Aroana approached her. "Put forth your other hand."

Aeijys did so. Aroana grasped it. Aeijys endured the burning pain of her grasp until Aroana released her. She looked and saw the Aroanan rune seared into her flesh.

"You are paladin to both of us. And if you are not already aware of this, you are yuwenghau. Josiah cast shared life. Perhaps once in a thousand castings genes in the blood bond. The first blood that you received to replace that which you had lost was Dynarien's. Spiritdancer acted on those genes. You are genetically a child of Willodarus, as much so as if he had sired you." She laughed then at the complexity of it all. "You are one of a kind, something that has never existed before and may possibly never exist again. Do not be surprised if you find every male god in creation trying to climb into your bed and half the females if they can beg the kyndi from Ishla. Up until now they've been chasing Dynanna. But once they get a look at you they'll be chasing your genes."

Aejys shivered and her head spun. She finally understood why all those sylvans kept calling her "holy one."

"Go forth and battle the darkness for both of us," Kalirion admonished her. Then they were gone.

"I will go to Charas in the spring to avenge your children and my friends." *If they have not come here first and been destroyed. However that falls out I will still have to fetch the last of the life-mages.*

* * *

Aejys stepped off the bluffs, opened her wings, and caught the rising air currents. Maranya did not want her coming to the grave alone, knowing that for Hoon, Mephistis, and many others, the king had become a target. She circled lazily, watching Skelly – quetzalcoatli were fisher dragons – rise from the water with a large squid in his jaws. The creature flopped and writhed, then slid down the dragon's throat. Skelly grinned toothily, spread his wings, and sprang skyward to meet her, flying escort to Rowanhart. Part of her wanted to exult and spin through the sky in joyous flights at finally being restored to honor and a place at a god's side as a paladin; but that joy was tempered by the loss of Talons; the fact that she would probably have to offer Josiah the cup to discover what had happened and how it might affect those under her protection. Drink would trim more days off his life and possibly undo Fusaaki's work. What was the loss of one failing life compared to the loss of many? It was down to a time of hard choices. She would do what duty required and she would expect as much from others – even if it broke her heart.

Maranya came to her feet outside the dragon barn as she saw them returning. Guardian in dark places, constant companion and shield-sister to the king, her black hair was finally growing out to her shoulders. Aejys walked slowly toward her, and extended her hands, palms up so that the paladin could see the brands.

"Both of them!" Maranya sounded impressed, and then she saw the heavy twisted lines of Aejys' mouth and brow. "What happened?"

"A friend has died. Someone I owed my life to several times over."

"How?"

"Murdered. Kalirion did not say how. I need to find Josiah and then go to Skree's."

* * *

Josiah sat by the window in the parlor, turning a bit of scrimshaw in his hands to let the sunlight catch on the lines as he considered which angle to work on next. Three bedrooms and the door to the outer hall opened on the room. Two couches, a large central table with heavy chairs and a scattering of others as well as his worktable

filled the large chamber. It was all comfortable in an oversized way. Josiah caught the serious look in Aejys eyes as he saw them come in, laid aside his work, and moved to a chair beside Maranya. Some of the sallow tinge was absent from his reddened, abraded complexion: It was one of his better days, so Laurelyanne – the earthmage and healer who tended to his needs – had already gone home, rather than hover over him. The only other mon that Josiah allowed to tend him on the days that Laurelyanne needed time away was Zyne. Since Fusaaki pulled him back and he opened up more to Aejys, Josiah had been willing to make his periodic attacks of high fever, extreme weakness and pain less of a lone fight and that had been a surprising change of heart, which pleased Aejys and Laurelyanne, giving them more hope for him. Yet there was still much he held back. "What is it?"

"Talons is dead." Her voice was flat, distant, as she worked to conceal her grief. They both owed Talons their lives several times over, forming a close friendship with her as a result. There had been too many deaths since she had been called back to Shaurone to rescue her daughter, Laeoli, from her traitorous, mad sister. Aejys had found no solace in the fact that she had destroyed Margren at the Battle of Hoon's Valley. She would not rest until her vengeance was complete with the death of Margren's lover, Mephistis.

Josiah looked stricken: she had been barely twenty. They had met her betrothed, Bryndel, at Norendel, and yet he had always suspected that the male she actually loved had been Dynarien – that the marriage was a mere political match, since Talons had been the Grand Master of Creeya's only surviving heir. "How? Was it the pregnancy?" He wondered who the bloodmother was. He had not thought to ask.

"She was pregnant? Does that mean the unborns perished with her?" Aejys felt chilled and angry. Killing children and pregnant women, innocents, was one of the greatest crimes of all. No wonder Aroana wanted the murderers punished. "How far along was she? Do you know?"

"Dynarien told me they were due in either late fall or early winter."

"Then they died with her," Aejys said, knowing that meant she had been too far along for a bi-kyndi to have rescued the unborns from her body. "Someone killed her."

"How?" Josiah asked again.

"I don't know yet. But I intend to discover it," Aejys' voice hardened; her eyes narrowing dangerously. "Until I do, I don't want the information getting out. First, we talk to Skree and decide who to call to a special council."

"You're sure the information is sound? I mean, Talons – she was good. Very good. Pregnant or not."

"Yes," Aejys answered and then told him of the meeting on the bluffs.

"we should talk to Skree at once," Josiah said. "I don't like the sound of anything you've told me. One of our strongest allies is murdered. The two yuwenghau who have been helping us are nearly killed. I've a feeling whoever did this is coming for us next."

"Same here. Let's go." *I know they are coming for us. I've known it for months.*

The three of them came along the flagstone walk leading to a two-story stone structure, which sat upon a rocky ledge overlooking the sea, securely above the high-tide mark. The couple had added a modest back yard with a low stonewall fence, just tall enough to keep the children in once they were of a size to wander – that would not be for a while yet. A small barn stood in the yard where they kept a pair of goats to provide milk for the twin boys, Wolff and Fauxx. Skree and Taun enjoyed fatherhood. Like most amphibians, they had a marked talent for mind-speech, allowing them to consult with Dree concerning the boys; and the little cat thrived under the couple's care as well as her sons. Dree had been catkin pledged to Dynarien – which allowed the yuwenghau to call her back to life after her murder by the boys' ma'aram, Margren. Her human form's destruction meant she would remain a cat for the rest of her days.

They knocked on the door and Taun answered; he carried Wolff on his hip. The child held a bottle, watching them with his strange, slitted catkin eyes as he sucked the cow-gut nipple. Taun wore a quilted vest with leather padding on the shoulders to accommodate Dree who curled around his neck. Although they would be a year old in two months, their physical development had been slowed by a number of arcane factors: they were born nearly five months pre-mature because of their 'lasah's transformation into a catkin and their own into kittens, then back into human infants. Skree had explained that their 'biological clocks' had not caught up yet, which was a phenomena he had witnessed in other species-shifted children. They were just now beginning to crawl about and get a first tooth.

"Is Skree around?" Aejs asked.

"He's feeding Fauxx in the sitting room. Is something wrong?" The little nerien sounded worried. After nearly a year he had learned to read the nuances of his liege-lord's face and voice to a fare-thee-well. Taun's squarish, blunt face frowned deeply. He wore his glossy black hair tied back with a simple leather thong. The thin lines in the sides of his throat looked more like scars to the casual glance, than what they were – the pouchy coverings of his gills. For years Taun had worked hard to distance himself from his mixed species heritage so that he would be accepted simply as a healer first. He was not ashamed of it: but it had once proven so awkward for his patients that he had simply chosen to downplay it, rather than lose them to less skilled, but more racially acceptable practitioners. However, the last year in Rowanhart and the previous six months in Vorgensburg had begun to bring him out of that. Taun felt more and more secure and accepted under Aejs' leadership.

Aejys glanced at Josiah, then back at Taun, deciding to just get it out. "You remember Talons?"

"The young Hadjeeshyn?" Taun remembered her fondly. She had brought a cure for Aejys after she was bitten by a magically enhanced viper and then showed him how the vipers fangs worked to deliver the venom. He had a dwarf artisan trying to make him hollow needles, although, as yet, he had no idea how to use them properly to get medicine directly and safely into a creature's veins. It seemed that if a bubble of air got into the creature's veins with the medicine it stopped its heart. So far he was still experimenting with small creatures.

"She's dead."

"Oh, my! How?"

"That's what we need to find out."

Taun led them into the cozy sitting room. Cedar hangings in muted tones covered the stone and plaster walls with matching mats over the floors; a long low table ran along before the seal skin couch and a smaller one between each pair of chairs. The corner stone hearth was broad and deep. The huge triton, sea-mage, Skree occupied his favorite chair like a throne, his tankard, and a bowl of charged stones beside it.

Tiny sea-green overlapping scales covered his face and body – except for his lips, the tips of his fingers and palms of his hands – reminiscent of a reptile, which he was not; his long hair green to the edge of black hung loose about his shoulders, draping the delicate lace-work of gills that ran from the back of his jaw down his long neck; suspicion was written large on his face, his half-past six foot body tensed as if ready to strike at some danger he had sensed. He was of a height with the Sharani, but larger and broader and heavier boned. Skree listened in silence to Aejys' story of what had happened on the bluffs. "There is a thing that Josiah, Branch and I have worked out," he said, his voice a deep, basso baritone. "We can scry and then drain the episode we've witnessed from the bowl onto a white tapestry. It is called a telesthesian tapestry. Then the incident can be viewed repeatedly and in depth. We'll do it tonight."

Aejys took her pipe out, filled it, and smoked. They would stand or they would fall together. She had agonized for months over losing Josiah. She had had years with Brendorn; but while she had been around Josiah for a few years, she had only really known him for a few months. Aejys rolled the bittersweet taste of resignation through her mind and let it sink a little deeper before she put the pipe away and reached for his hand. In Shaurone, when things went sour, even the children fought, throwing rocks and firepots or shooting if they were old enough to draw a bow. Where the women of other cultures quailed at the possibility of rape, the tough-minded Sharani took it in stride: "so long as you survive, you can always come back and cut his balls off" ran the old saying and some of the more bloody

mindful of Sharani veterans during the Great War wore the dried sacks sown to their necklaces and clothing. She could not be less now than she had been then. She had lost both her edge and her nerve. Spiritdancer had dulled the memories and nightmares that had shattered her courage. There was a strong, stubborn core, an iron rod in the center of her that Spiritdancer re-forged and now the edge as well as the rod was swiftly returning. *No one and nothing will ever break me again. I am the rock upon which their boat will be smashed to sink beneath the waves to drown.*

"It needs to be done," Josiah said, drawing her back from her musings. "This is the best way to assess the dangers. Lives could be lost if we do not have the information."

"After you have seen the tapestry, Aejys, then we can decide who to call to your council." Skree told her.

"We'll have Zyne in attendance," Taun said, addressing her unspoken concerns, knowing the full extent of the physical side of the damage since the night Josiah nearly died. Josiah still refused to allow Skree to Read him for the subtler aspects. "Zyne is a mender. She should be able to help Josiah afterwards." Since the genocide of the life-mages menders with their modest gifts was the best they could manage.

"So be it." She had to respect Josiah's willingness to rise to meet their needs and not give in to a desire to protect him. There was too much at stake, too many lives, and she had no right to try and hold him back out of a selfish desire to have him longer than the gods allowed when his talents were so urgently needed to protect their people.

* * *

They made two tapestries: one of the battle in the wedding chapel; the second of the attack on Dynanna and LorenRain. Skree caught the reference Galee made to the attack on Dynanna and as soon as the first scene was drawn, but not yet viewed, moved the scrying to the attack upon her. Then they viewed them in their entirety.

Josiah reeled away from the final scene of Talons' being lifted in Dynarien's arms. He snagged his bottle of Dragonsbreath whiskey as he fled the room too quickly for anyone to stop him. Zyne flicked back her long green hair with a glance at Skree, and then went after him.

Zyne followed him, a smile of victory on her lips. He was exhausted, drunk, and grieving for a lost friend – he was vulnerable. This time she would take him completely; sing him so deeply he would never get free. Josiah dropped onto the beach and fled down the strand. The tide was out and the mouth of the great grotto exposed. Josiah ran into the grotto. Zyne found him sobbing brokenly in a corner. She held him. At first he thrashed in her arms, but the seiryn was too strong and he

could not get free. Zyne kissed him, calming him with her lips as she took the bottle from his grasp. He caught at her then, nuzzling her breasts like a blind desperate child. He called her Aejys as if he could not tell the difference. Zyne bitterly resented the fact that, although her songs continued to bring him to her bed, she could not compel his love.

Zyne opened her garments to him and he suckled hungrily at the soft, silken green-scaled breasts. She licked and kissed, moving with quiet intensity over his body as she removed his clothes. She took him inside her, wrapping her legs around him tightly. Only then did she reach into his mind with her mender's modest gifts to ease his grief, to age it to a bearable level. Skree would expect that much and watch for it.

When he had spent himself and fallen into a deep slumber, she felt warmth settle into her belly. She slipped from beneath him, digging among her clothing for her blade. She touched the point to his back between the third and fourth rib. She had promised to kill him as soon as she got his child; to remove all possibility of the Abelard heritage continuing among the landsfolk while stealing its magic for her own race – to give her people the strength to destroy the tritons and neriens. And then her hand trembled. Why was this one different? She had killed all her other lovers without a qualm – simply because she had tired of them. Perhaps because in Josiah's case she could not make it a true seiryn kill without bringing Skree after her. As Skree's godson, it could be perceived as breaking the truce. The seiryn always killed their non-seiryn lovers after conception, sacrificing them on their altars. Slipping an anonymous blade into him, as she was about to do would be strangely unsatisfying. And yet...

She did not want to lose him any sooner than she had to; she wanted to keep him as long as possible. The stories of other seiryn who tried to hold onto a male always ended badly, but Zyne was convinced that they were just stories and not facts. Besides, this one was not exactly going to last very long, anyway. Zyne laid the blade down and then sat stroking his head. She would have to take dangerous chances if she were to sing stronger and stronger chains around his mind and heart – strong enough to take him away from Aejys and Tamlestari. Stronger still would she need to sing before she could carry him away from Rowanhart for what few months he might have left. She sang, wrapping her power though his slumbering mind, wrapping chains around his heart and loins. Soon he would be unable to touch any female but her.

She dressed them both and carried him out.

Although his two incarnations had now meshed, drink coupled with grief and exhaustion still had a tendency to reduce him to the painfully sensitive Josh, rather than the capable, self-assured battle-mage Josiah. It would be well if she could permanently render him back to Josh again entirely. He would be more pliable. When she got him home and tucked him into bed, Tamlestari climbed in with him.

Zyne gestured for Aeijys to follow her out. "Don't leave him alone until he's come out of it completely. It was bad, very bad. You need to come now and look at it. Talons died hard. And the ambush of the yuwenghau – dark magic... I want to send for more of our people. I'm afraid they're coming after the children and very soon."

Aeijys was silent for a moment. "I'll meet you there. I need to dress and wake Skelly."

* * *

The quetzelcoatlys slept in a gigantic dragon-barn abutting the keep at the edge of the outermost bailey, forming a jutting quad. Parapets topped the barn and towers marked its corners. He shared his home with Jumpfree. In response to Aeijys' knock the dragon opened the doors and stuck his head out, blinking sleepily. He slept on a bed of hay with quilts thrown over it.

"Wielder? What's up?"

"Is Jumpfree with you?"

"Yes."

"I want you both down at Skree's house. Talons is dead and Zyne thinks Mephistis is coming after the children."

Skelly's eyes narrowed dangerously. "No one takes the children." He turned back into the barn for a moment to wake Jumpfree, and then came out. He shook himself to settle his feathers, and then gave a shattering roar. "Children have no fear! Skelevratham is here!"

Lights went on around the quad. Aeijys sighed. "So much for secrecy."

"Should've told him to be quiet before you said anything," Jumpfree said, buckling on his sword belt as he emerged from the barn, flicking his white wings back. "She's really dead?" he asked. The fact seemed to have gone right past Skelly at the mention of children. Everything did. Skelly was just that way.

"Yes."

* * *

Dawn spread a blood red light streaked with gold across the sky. Aeijys stared at it. "Red sky at morning, sailor take warning," she muttered, standing on the flagstoned path beside the house. Maranya paused next to her. Skree and Zyne waited in the fenced yard. The two tapestries lay on the ground drying, the edges pinned with rocks to hold them in place.

Skree was grim. "Zyne is right," he said, "Mephistis is coming after the children. I shifted the focus of the tapestry. He and this vampire—"

"Hoon," Aejs supplied. "it must be Lord Hoon. How much time do you think we have?"

"Seven weeks at most," Skree replied. "The attack on Dynanna occurred outside the Badree Nym village at Bluedog Pass. They are moving quickly. LorenRain, Kalirion and Dynanna's son, was murdered four days ride north of Treth. They used his death to heal Mephistis. With Mephistis healed, it may well be that not even Josiah can stop him. Furthermore, as weakened as Taun tells me my godson is, it would probably kill Josiah if he had to pit himself against Mephistis."

Skelly put his big square head in her face, his breath smelling of fish. "When the sa'necari come, I'll charge right into them, wielder. They won't get anywhere near Josiah or the children. I promise. No magical duels allowed." Skelly heard Skree snort and amended, "Not with Josiah."

Aejys turned to Skelly, "No one comes near the tapestries unless they are accompanied by a member of the Privy Council. This must be handled right to avoid a panic."

They watched the tapestries then. Jumpfree burst into tears and fled in the middle of seeing the liege-god of his childhood raped and nearly murdered by sa'necari. Dynanna was surrogate mother to all the little Badree Nym, whose big secret was that they eventually cocooned and became Jesmyrran – unless they refused to grow up of course. Aejs and Skelly watched both tapestries to the end, now and again shifting the view slightly to draw every possible nuance from them.

"Skelly, start reconnaissance flights as soon as Omer and the guard relieve you. If you find them, don't engage. If they attack, break off and run. Skree, have Dree locate the catkin queen. If their mind-links have enough range we can send some with our scouts and Skelly to relay word back and forth. Set up watching and listening posts. Use the coronation as an excuse to quietly evacuate some of those remote villages and towns that have pledged to us into Rowanhart for their protection over the next few weeks. We can always rebuild. It's the lives that are important."

"As you wish, wielder," said Skelly.

"I'll see it done," said Skree

"So we have a coronation in three weeks and then we get hit by monsters in seven. That's a great start for a kingdom, don't you think?" Aejs gave a mirthless laugh, walking off with Maranya close behind.

* * *

Maranya could not get the ghastly image of Talons' face out of her mind. Nor could she stop the words from echoing in her ears: *It's a better death than I was dying...a better death...a better death*. She suspected from the king's expression that it was the same for her. Talons had been dying long before the blade entered her body. To die slowly, inch by inch. The blade was a mercy.

"It was poison, wasn't it?" Aejs asked abruptly as the keep came in sight. "They poisoned her?"

"It must have been." Maranya's voice and manner had a blade's edge to it.

"Could she have survived long enough to have given birth if—"

"Possibly. She and her unborns perished to save her liege-lord."

"Would you?"

"I'll never know. The Order practices complete kweigeyl. I'm sterile."

"At fourteen?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. My choice. I don't regret it."

* * *

"How is he?" Aejs asked, returning to her rooms tired in both body and spirit. She settled into a chair in the central parlor, which the three bedrooms opened on, and propped her elbows on the table. She could forbid Josiah to fight; confine him to the keep at the first sighting of the enemy; no one would question it – except Josiah.

"Well," Tamlestari grinned like a cat, shaking back her long blond hair. The Valdren prince was conspicuously sylvan, despite being half-Sharani, with slanted green eyes and fair skin. "He woke long enough for one good roll and then went back to sleep. His head seemed fairly clear by the time we finished. Want to lick me clean?"

Aejs' face brightened, "Imp!" Then she shook her head. "Did the drink weaken him any?"

"I didn't Read him, Aejs. I just slept with him," Tamlestari's tone turned sad. "I'm certain Zyne has all ready done what can be done. She's as good a Reader as I and a mender besides."

"Mephistis has been healed. Skree says...he says as fragile as Josiah has become if he has to fight Mephistis; Mephistis will kill him. We only have three mages and neither Skree nor Laurelyanne are anywhere near in Mephistis' league." Aejs closed her eyes, breathing heavily, her fists clenching together.

Tamlestari slid into the chair beside her. "Aejys? Are you worrying about Josiah?"

Aejys shook her head. "Not just Josiah. I'm remembering what it was like to go up against the more powerful sa'necari during the war. Up until now we've really gotten lucky. I need to assume he's equal to Aurean or Shintar."

Tamlestari's face paled. She had only been a child, but she had heard the stories. Roughly a thousand years ago the Sharani had been like all the other races. Then Aurean the Golden, daughter of dragons and most powerful of banewitches, ascended the throne of their hereditary enemies, the Waejontori. She stole a protective charm from the Sharani realm – the Moonstone of Reyanon – and came up with what she believed to be a rather clever curse, working it with a ten fold rite of hecatomb: all male children conceived by the Sharani would be miscarried or stillborn. It hit hardest in the north and frayed out along the edges so that there were still a very, very few male children born and those few tended to be frail and weak. That should have been the end of the race. However the women took up arms against her in their men's place and appealed to the god Ishla the Tinkerer for a solution to the curse.

Ishla, god of love, fertility, and technology, was not a breaker of curses. They needed to free up at least half their population at all times to fight. So the Tinkerer tinkered. She created the kyndi and the Sharani became triadic, requiring three genetic parents to produce viable offspring: sire, bloodmother or ma'aram, and wombmother or ma'aramlasah. With the kyndi a woman could pass an embryo to her female mate, leaving behind her child to replace her should she fall in battle. It also led to many odd variations such as pods, with a single womb mother and several blood mothers. Children generally got their gender from their 'lasah who also contributed to their genetic inheritance. The Tinkerer enhanced their strength, endurance, and speed; their resistance to poisons and many other things. Their culture changed. The trading in male love slaves, especially imported exotics burgeoned, with Readers listing their genetics for the women and their trainers listing their talents and specialties. Sperm could be crystaled and stored. Some of the temples maintained stud houses for the choosey. The poorer villages tended to purchase and own males in common with the local priest administering and protecting the male. The women married among themselves. And the Tinkerer continued to tinker. Twins, both womb and blood, were commonplace. The Sharani were long-lived and youthful with two hundred years for an average life span barring accident or violence and fairly disease resistant; and they matured very young like many species hard pressed by hostile external forces.

"Aejys?"

"If he carries the Legacy he is their equal. What he does not have is their armies and resources. I need to think. You need to get down to Skree's and look at those tapestries." Kalestari, Tamlestari's ma'aram, in her fireborn form had made the difference at the Battle of Sharatier. She had had the three artifacts of Eldarion Havenrain to aid her or she would never have been able to do it alone and she had still died. Could Skelly make that much of a difference against Mephistis? Were his powers anything like Aurean's? What were they really up against? That big idiot of a dragon meant well, but what could he really do? Beyond get himself killed with the rest of them?

During the Great War, the magics of Aurean and Shintar had decimated the first Sharani armies to go up against them, and drove deeply into Sharani lands before they were finally stopped. *No. We broke them in Shaurone. We drove them back and destroyed them and overran their lands. Rowanhart is mine. The children are mine. I am the rocks and reefs that will break their keels and rip their hulls so that they are thrown into the sea to drown.*

* * *

Birdie waited in the courtyard, accompanied by her mate, her ma'aram, and her sire. Aejs knew it was serious by the simple fact that she had brought them with her, while exercising priest-right to force Aejs' to come to her in the courtyard rather than entering the palace itself. The king guessed that it had to do with the tapestry. Little happened in Rowanhart that Birdie did not know. The diminutive priest had established herself quickly and efficiently, ministering to the lower classes and the troublemakers, outcasts and pariahs in a way that kept trouble to an acceptable level and flare-ups to a minimum. Birdie made a point of seeing that Aejs was aware of this and considered it a 'service to the crown.' She was also becoming Aejs' eyes and ears in dark places.

"We heard that something terrible happened," Birdie said, stepping forward. "But not what. Your dragon wouldn't let us see the tapestry. So, I have come, in the name of my god, to demand that we be allowed to view it. Whatever has happened could affect my flock. Nothing affects my flock. I'll kick it to Hell and back first. And that includes you, Lord Aejs." She put her hands on her hips and stared defiantly up at Aejs.

Maranya watched the small priest. One of the smallest Sharani Maranya had ever encountered, Birdie could not have stood over five six, if that. But the young woman made up for her size in sheer feistiness. Maranya admired that.

Aejs regarded her grimly, the news in that tapestry would hit that one hard, but she expected that she would handle it. Birdie was a scrapper from the wrong side of town like her ma'aram, Blackbird. At just fourteen, she had two children – womb twins with different sires – and, as a priest of Dynanna, a substantial flock that she

kept well in hand. No one messed with Birdie and got away with it. Which made Aeajys wonder how she had gotten children in the first place, especially at an age when the kyndi generally still blocked conception. "Your holiness, you are the one I wanted to talk to first."

Birdie blinked. "I'm here, what is it?"

"We're lost a friend. She was closer to you than anyone I know."

"Who?"

"Talons Trollbane is dead. She was murdered."

A shadow of grief passed over Birdie's face. Birdie mastered herself with a discipline few adults had and sketched the Dynannan rune. "She was a fine woman. May her spirit rest easy and never return to the wheel."

"May it be so," the others replied.

"Does the manner of her death reflect a clear and present danger to our community, Lord Aeajys?" Birdie asked.

"It does. As does the second tapestry. You should view them before anyone else does. It's hard to watch. All of it."

"We understand. Take us there."

* * *

In the privacy of her rooms, Birdie balled up and sobbed. She had feared for her friend since Josiah told her that the pregnancy might be killing her – but to hear that the matchless Talons had been slain hurt still worse. In a few short months time she had lost her favorite sister and her best friend. It was too much. She had managed to keep an impassive face throughout the viewing, but it had been one of the hardest things she had ever done. Seeing Dynanna and Dynarien hurt – even knowing they both survived – and then seeing Talons die, she felt as if her heart had broken. The days of her devil-may-care attitude seemed gone forever. Paunys, her 'lasah, had taken over the children for the day; Blackbird had assumed her duties with her religious flock, dispensing wisdom and aid to their various members to give Birdie some private time. She was nearly adult, coming of age in another year. She had shouldered her responsibilities as a priest at thirteen and managed well.

She looked up at a knock on her door. "Go away."

"Nah, I not be goin', lass, till we be speakin'." The voice was cracked with age.

"Gaffer?" She started at his voice. No one knew what his name was; they just

referred to him as the gaffer. He had moved to Rowanhart from Vorgensburg, shortly after she arrived. His storkish looks, although twisted with age and arthritis, reminded her of someone she had known in Shaurone, but she had not yet given it enough thought to be certain. "What do you want?"

"I heerd about Talons an' I need ta be talkin' ta ya. I got word ya need ta hear."

Birdie wiped her face off with a corner of her sleeve and opened the door. She felt leery of letting a male into her bedroom, but the gaffer seemed like someone she could beat eight ways to spring. "Let's talk in the parlor."

"Nah. It be very private. Very private." He nodded at the bedroom.

Birdie frowned. Something was going on, but the gaffer was unusually hard to read. "I don't know about that, gaffer. What could be so secret?"

He leaned so close to her that she could feel his breath on her neck. "Tha swan-mays. They be comin' soon wi' a full company a gryphons."

Her eyes were inexplicably drawn to his tobacco stained teeth and she found herself suddenly wondering how so obviously ancient a man had such good, strong teeth and a conspicuous overbite. "Shit. You're a Hornbow. You're the local Guild chieftain."

The gaffer straightened, dropping twenty years in a blink. "Ya gotta good eye, lass. I wisht we coulda enlisted ya. Yer sisters be good, but it be my guess yer better."

"Damn straight. We'll hold our talk in my study."

As they started up the stairs, six of the clan children rushed past them hollering and in high spirits. Birdie shook her head at their dirt and scruffiness. She sighed. "No matter how often I replace their clothing, they always look like they're still sleeping on the streets."

The gaffer laughed softly at that. "Ya ken take the children outta tha streets, but ya can't take the streets outta tha children."

"I guess that's a good thing. It means they're keeping their hand in."

"Yah. There's that."

"Except for my sisters and brother, they're all war-orphans."

"Some'a them seem a mite young fer war-orphans. Tha big'un's been over nigh on nine years now."

"You're wrong. The war's not over. They're just not fighting it with armies at the

moment. I know about the attempted coup in Creeya." Birdie's voice hardened. "That's what killed Talons. She was my friend."

Birdie led him into her study and closed the door. They were still adding on to the house, the children slept two to a bed except for the boys, because there were fewer of them. But Birdie had insisted on having everything she needed first, because she had to do business and business sheltered the children in ways that a roof did not. That meant her private bedroom, a parlor, a study, and a chapel. It had been fortunate that they had moved in the spring while it was warm enough for the children to sleep outdoors.

The study was furnished in cedar, the desk, couch and chairs as well as woven cedar wall hanging depicting Kwaklahmyn legends. Eventually a totem pole would go up on the front courtyard, depicting the clan history and liege-gods. The shaman, Branch, designed it. Birdie looked eagerly forward to its arrival. Several of the children now wore appropriate feathers braided into their hair and were picking up the Kwaklahmyn language at an incredible rate as well as triton swear words.

Birdie sat down at her desk and leaned forward on her elbows. "what is this about?"

Gaffer Hornbow pulled a chair up to the desk and settled into it. "Ye've seen tha tapestry. Things be even bloodier in Creeya right now than they be in Shaurone – and it's still pretty bloody there."

"What has this to do with swan-mays and gryphons?"

"I'm gettin' there. I gotta set things up so ya'll know where I'm comin' from an' goin' ta. Now, I've had ta send most'a me myn back ta Creeya ta help. They're callin' in folks from all over tha Merezian continent an' some say from even further. I nah longer ken keep me eyes on both Vorgensburg an' Rowanhart. I'm cut ta tha bone, can't hardly keep an eye on Vorgensburg by itself."

Birdie rolled her eyes, wishing he would get to the point. "So what do you want from me?"

"Eyes an' ears, lass. Eyes an' ears. What ya did in Rowanslea's becomin' somethin' of a Guild legend."

Birdie smiled, wondering what the children would say when they discovered they were already heroes of legend and most of them not yet ten years old. "So, how many of the children do you want?"

"All of 'em."

"Gaffer, you realize that Vorgenis orphans have been making their way across the bay, on their own, without assistance of any kind, for months now to enlist in the Orphan Brigade? I have over thirty children. I have one eight year old who can put a

dagger in a mon's eye from sixty paces. I don't, however, want them to engage the enemy."

"That be understood."

"What can you offer me for their services? We don't need gold yet. Dynanna has been generous. Offer me something we can't get elsewhere."

"Ya've seen Little Bit?"

"Are you offering me gryphons?"

"Yah. A mated, saddle-trained pair an' their three gryphlets. An' tha services of a trainer fer three years ta teach tha children tha art."

"Reds?"

"Nah," he grinned. "they be too temperamental. Whites. They've been known to rear human children as their own."

"Gaffer, you have a deal. Let's work out the particulars."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SACRED KING

Gaffer Hornbow settled himself onto a rock in the gryphons' aerie. Cloud and Snowmane were instantly all over him, crooning and cheek-marking. The same folks who accepted that the blues were as intelligent as people, being beloved of Willodarus, tended to think of the rest of the gryphon species as poor dumb animals. Gaffer had always felt certain that the problem was a lack of speech. He had reared a lot of gryphons in his nearly one hundred years and felt convinced that they either understood every word he said or they caught images from his mind.

"Darlin's," he said. "I've found a new home fer ya. It's an orphanage. With tha Guild hard pressed, I needed to make a deal fer more eyes an' ears. An' ya need more time than I ken give ya. Add inta tha mix, tha kiddies need more protection than they ken get from dogs an' cats or even people. An' I know how ya love children. Whatta ya say, me darlin's, will ya be happy livin' with about thirty young'uns?"

Cloud tapped her foot twice firmly. That meant yes. Gaffer Hornbow threw his arms around her neck, hugging her. "I knew ya's would understand and not let me down. Ya be good Guildsmyn."

The gaffer had gotten them an armsmaster from the Guild. A good one. He had had a single ulterior motive that he had not shared with Birdie. He intended to enlist the

best of the children, and then send them to Creeya. He also intended to spread word, suitably enlarged upon, about their rescue of the King of Rowanhart up and down the coast to all the small villages and kingdoms. The Orphan-Brigade would eventually become the principle place for the Dark Judge's recruitments. With the Guild nearly destroyed they would need these little scoundrels more than he dared tell Birdie.

* * *

Ash, grandson of Branch the Kwaklahmyn shaman, raced into the yard, his young face flush with excitement, black braids bouncing on his shoulders. "The boats have been sighted! The chieftains are coming!"

Aejys snatched a cloth from the bench mopping sweat from her face as she handed the exercise blade to a squire. Maranya handed her own pair to another squire. She had been working the king hard: Aejys was good and getting better, showing impressive speed; but nowhere near Maranya's equal. The very few in the Order who had been privileged to see Maranya fight full out believed her to be the equal of the now legendary Kalestari Desharen Havenrain.

Aejys had turned the day-to-day workings of the castle and city over to Tamlestari and Darlbret, spending her time either with her officers planning their strategy for dealing with Hoon and Mephistis or on the practice field trying to sweat the anger and grief from her body. She saw less and less of Josiah, almost as if he had lost interest in the marriage. When she tried to talk to him, he would walk off or refuse to answer. So Aejys tried to let it go, there were too many other things to worry about besides Josiah's growing indifference.

But not everyone was unhappy. Darlbret had astounded the entire keep by falling in love with a pair of huge, muscular Sharani soldiers and they declared their intention to triad on New Year's Day. Becca and Clemmerick, on the other hand, had quietly tied the knot when no one was looking.

"What's this?" Soren demanded. She sat watching the match between Maranya and Aejys. "It's still two weeks to the coronation!"

"The chieftains always come early," Aejys grinned. "They want time for dancing and their shamans will want to check the omens and give blessings. Will you come along and help me get my gear right, Ash?"

Maranya gave a puzzled frown. "Can't I help you?"

"You can come and watch." Then Aejys led the way to her quarters. Bluewings, Ash's sister, had anticipated her and waited in the King's chambers. Maranya sat to observe and shake her head. The king soon became a blend of cultures in fringed buckskins and beads. Maranya's trained eye detected a pattern to the feathers woven into the leather strips attached to the golden circlet on Aejys' head. Finally some

skillful paint in odd designs and Spiritdancer at her shoulder.

"Does all this have meaning?" Maranya asked.

"Yes, but you'll have to ask a shaman. I'm not allow to say," Aejs responded with a grin that was only half teasing. "Let's go meet the chieftains."

The Sharani they passed looked startled by the transformation. Soren gave a nod and six ha'taren – paladins of Aroana – fell into step beside them as they headed for the bay, following Ash and Bluewings who knew where the chieftains would be landing.

The twenty boats, four from each of the five clans, hove into view. Each had a crew of sixteen oarsmyn, a mon at the tiller and another on the forward platform as well as passengers and gear. They could be seen to be pulling something large and oddly made that bobbed in the water as long as three of the boats.

Aejys grinned broadly.

"What the hell is that?" General Soren Deontaramei demanded, pointing at the strange object. Soren was a gray-haired, gaunt woman, who had stopped counting her birthdays when she passed one hundred.

"It looks like they have brought me a totem pole. Branch must have told them of my lineages and adventures."

The myn jumped into the waves and drew their boats high onto the strand, setting their young males to dragging the totem pole to shore. Branch's people waded out to help them. They brought less than a handful of women with them. Aejs went forward to greet the chiefs and shamans with thumps and strongly clasped forearms.

Soren watched this frowning.

"This is my warleader Soren Deontaramei," Aejs said and the largest of the chiefs responded by giving Soren a hard thump on the shoulder, staggering the general.

Soren gasped and a paladin nearby reached for her blade. Aejs stopped her with a frown, hissing at Soren in Sharani, "Thump him back! Don't be rude! Then clasp his forearms strongly." Aejs demonstrated the greeting again.

Soren obeyed and the chief grinned. A round of mutual thumping and clasping rippled through the ranks as the Kwaklahmyn visitors showed their appreciation for the evident strength of the Sharani warriors, both sides gradually relaxed, and they started toward the keep with their gear and the totem pole.

"Is all this necessary?" Soren asked in Sharani, walking beside Aejs.

"Loosen up, Soren. Their customs may be different than ours, but they are the most loyal, trust-worthy, and dependable of all the peoples of the coast. And they are my friends."

When they got the pole back, there was some debate as to where to put it and finally they set it up in the inner yard beside the main doors. They built up a bonfire in the middle of the outer bailey. They drummed, danced, and sang long into the night. Aejs had dinner served in the yard and her court was forced to eat with the chieftains and their folk. Some began to join in.

As the moon rose, the chieftains sat apart with Aejs, Soren, Maranya, Omer and Tamlestari, passing a long pipe around.

Aejs leaned close to Maranya, saying quietly in Sharani. "You've never smoked anything like this, so don't inhale too deeply. It will make you giddy. Caution your grand ma'aram." She smiled, turned to the chiefs, and said respectfully. "Understand and pardon them if they get silly, they have never smoked this before. I have cautioned them."

"Do you know, Lord Aejs, the omens you have called down upon yourself?" asked Branch.

Aejs shook her head wondering where this was going as Soren stared closely at her. "If I have done something wrong, why have you not said something sooner?"

Branch nodded slowly. "It was needed to see if you were set upon the path."

Tagalong glanced around the faces and nudged Aejs, rolling her eyes. A Kwaklahmyn beaded headband held her unruly mass of crimson hair from the dwarf's blunt face. As usual things sometimes got lost in translation between Sharani and common and in this case Kwaklahmyn had been added in. She called the kingdom Rowanhart and thought she had the word right. However, the beast on the banner was the gigantic Aroanan stag, as she had had it drawn the previous winter. "It's yer banner, ya blasted puddin' head paladin. Ya picked a damned power animal again. They've been lookin' at it all year an' thinkin' about it."

Two-Birds-Flying grinned at Tagalong and pushed the sturdy dwarf gently, in a symbolic gesture of respect – at one time it would have been a resounding thump, but they all knew about the head injury she had taken in the battle of Sweetwillow. "You have the right of it. The stag that stands at the gates of the underworld and prevents the dead from devouring the living."

"You called challenge on them when you raised your banner," Branch said.

"We stand with you!" declared Two-Birds-Flying.

Maranya listened to the chiefs and shamans talk, understanding only a little of it. She

drew on the pipe as it came round. Her body felt warm and light, her thoughts hazy and strange. She could sense a thinning of the veils between the worlds in her awareness. Like many members of the Order of the Hidden Shield, she was a death-child, born at the moment of her blood-mother's death. Bryngaryn, her niece was a blade's child, torn from her dying wombmother by a skilled surgeon with a hope and a prayer. They did not talk about it much, but they were all born with death on their lips. The drums and the chanting and the intermittent yells of the Kwaklahmyn warriors at the other fire echoed through her mind.

"The unholy creatures must not be allowed..."

"It is good that Rowanhart has grown so strong so quickly..."

The pipe came round again. Maranya felt how smooth the wood was, like silk to the touch. Painted white, very long, and straight with a little cup on the end and feathers hanging down. She drew on it and passed it round again. Her awareness slipped sidewise and strange. Images wove through her mind in a wide shadowed vista. The stag danced with the unicorn, shield and sword, the twin aspects of Aroana, defender and aggressor; then they joined in battle against shadowy creatures that she could not quite make out. The strange, warm dizziness enveloped her more deeply, more completely.

The pipe came round again. Aejs put her hand on it as Maranya took it. "You don't have to keep smoking it, Maranya. You can just pass it on."

"It's nice." Maranya drew from the pipe. Then she rose from the circle and drifted with half closed lids toward the warriors dancing. She watched them, and then shouted at several ha'taren. Soon kettledrums and flutes appeared. An intricate war dance began involving twelve ha'taren, all members of the Order. The paladins danced slowly, quickening to the beat of the drum, a long blade in each hand. Soon they were whirling and leaping furiously, barely missing each other.

Branch saw them and paused in his conversation to watch. "It is a rite, I think. For warriors." Then he rose and went to watch. One by one, the chiefs and shamans followed. Gradually everyone in the courtyard formed a circle around them, watching.

Soren scowled deeply, standing beside Aejs. "The Holy Mother will not be happy with Maranya for calling the dance in public."

"Those blades are not blunted," Aejs observed.

"That's the point. They will dance until one of them is cut." Soren's voice had taken on a hollow quality that sent a shiver down Aejs' back.

"Are they trying to cut each other?"

"No. All the steps are a precise measure. The first one to tire or misstep for any reason ... it's a testing of the omens. There is no rhyme or reason to it and frequently the one who missteps is the best warrior among them, the one least likely to tire first or misstep. The one who reason says should never be cut, never be touched. It is said that the god herself chooses," Soren's mouth tightened and her gaze dropped as they saw Maranya's arm pinked. The dance ended. The dancers sheathed their blades and one by one each kissed Maranya and walked away. The general strode from the yard.

Aejys glanced from Soren to Maranya and back again, finally setting after Soren. "What do you mean it's a testing of the omens?" she demanded

"Members of the Order believe that the one who is cut will be the first to die," Soren said, without stopping. "Forgive me, majesty, but I am very tired."

Aejys felt chilled. When she turned about Maranya was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

"Did you really have to go through all that yesterday?" Soren asked, irritably.

"Yes. And I will for the next three weeks to varying degrees. The way one gets alliances and trade agreements with the Kwaklahmyn is that you dance, talk and smoke for several days. Then and only then do you talk business. Going directly to it is considered rude. But that isn't what you're worried about. It's the dance. That's why I decided we should talk alone."

"I rather suspected that," Soren smiled thinly. "Maranya is my favorite grandchild."

"Yet you made her King's Shield."

"Not I. Sonden and Aroana. I prayed and begged ... I'm a proud woman, Aejys. Can you imagine how hard that was? It was hard enough watching her confirmed into the Order at fourteen..."

"Who is the Holy Mother?"

Soren shook her head. "I don't know. Sonden said only that she was already in Rowanhart and was yuwenghau. That she would make herself known when faithhome was built."

"Could the dance's omen be wrong?"

"No. I first saw them dance when I was twenty. I have seen them dance under all conditions and *in* all kinds of conditions and the omen has never failed. Lock her in a nice cozy tower and a storm will knock the tower down. Something always happens."

The note of weary resignation in Soren's voice angered Aeijys – it was too much like despair. She had only given into despair once and the price had nearly been her soul. "Hell Shitting Damnation!" Aeijys snarled. "Fuck your dance. Fuck your omens. Nothing is happening to Maranya! If the fucking Order wanted omens why the Bloody Hell didn't they simply ride out to the Willowhorn?"

"What are you talking about?" Soren nearly spewed her mouthful of ale back into the glass. She swallowed, and then barely managed to set the glass down without slamming it. "Did I hear you right? Did you just say the Willowhorn?"

"The Willowhorn!" Aeijys snapped at her. "It was here, not in Shaurone that our people first arrived on this world, following our god. We went overland from here until we settled in Shaurone. It's a day's, possibly a day and a half's ride from here, I've only ridden it from Vorgensburg, so I'm not certain of the distance."

"The holy of holies," Soren's voice softened with understanding and a feeling of having come home spiritually. "Many things now make sense to me."

"I always wanted a sister. Not the travesty that Margren became so quickly in childhood. It left a hole in my heart. I never – until now took a shield-sister. Maranya is very important to me. If I can do anything to protect her, I will."

Soren raised an eyebrow, giving a small ironic cough. "The King protecting the king's protector?"

"A fine shield and good armor serves best with faithful care and attention to its needs. If there is a way to avert what Maranya has called down on herself in her desire to protect me, Mother Suthana will know. You, Tamlestari and Tag can entertain our guests. The Kwaklahmyn respect omens. Maranya and I will be gone three days at the outside, more likely two. I'll take a unit of Ha'taren Guard with us."

Aeijys grabbed her cloak as she strode out, spied Maranya seated on a bench in the hallway waiting for her. "Get a unit of Ha'taren Guard saddled and ready to go within the hour. Supplies for three days. Get our mounts ready. I'll meet you in the bailey as soon as I make my excuses to the chiefs and shamans."

"Where are we going?" Maranya asked, falling into step at her side.

"The Willowhorn," Aeijys called over her shoulder, lengthening her stride and challenging the taller woman to match it.

"What?"

Aeijys laughed and began to explain it all again. The arrogant Sharani, convinced that they would be civilizing and educating a bunch of backwater barbarians, were going to be getting quite an education over the next few years, as well as giving one.

* * *

They dismounted in a willow thicket by a tiny sheltered stream. The ha'taren rode wynderjyn, the unicorn-horse hybrids that were a sign of their god's favor, tall elegant creatures with a short horn between one and three handspans in length. They had an intuitive link with their riders and the more gifted among the ha'taren could actually understand their speech. The pace of their travel had been held back by the fact that Aejs rode a horse, her own wynderjyn having been slain a year earlier. They could hear a waterfall crashing into the stream beyond the willows.

"Sacred ground, King's Shield," Tovari, Maranya's wynderjyn remarked to her. *"I can feel it."*

Maranya rubbed his cheek. During the long journey from Norendel, she and Tovari had concealed the full extent of her gifts by not conversing except by touch and sign and the intuitive link. They were accustomed to iron discipline where it was needed, although they were both creatures of passion by personal nature. "As can I."

"I told you," Aejs repeated, impatiently. "This is the Willowhorn."

The ha'taren shrugged and dismounted, following her. They were willing to grant that this was a shrine to their god, but not that this was indeed the holiest of holies: the long lost Willowhorn. Aejs pushed through the sacred willows, careful to do no harm to them. Strange foreign pantheons of Gods were awakened and drawn to the world of Daverana by the holocaust that nearly destroyed it. When they began to cleanse and rebuild it, they each brought gifts from other worlds. Aroana brought the willow tree, the tree that wept, as a symbol of her grief at the destruction and loss of life among the elder races of that world. The willows growing around a shrine were doubly holy because the priests consecrated them to the god. The doorframe and edges of the roof were thickly adorned with seasonally discarded deer horns. The wild deer came and left them there each year in remembrance of the early days of the New Creation when gigantic stags defended Aroana's shrines, her children, and the helpless that came to her for succor.

The door opened and the slender figure of the priest stood forth. She was a small dark woman with a face too narrow and long for her otherwise modest nose. Her large black eyes, warm and compassionate, seemed almost too large for her face. "I have been expecting you since yesterday, Aejs's Rowan. The priest extended her hands in greeting.

"Welcome, King Aejs's and you Maranya Deontamei, King's Shield, and you also paladins of the Order of the Hidden Shield. Welcome to the Willowhorn."

Maranya looked startled and then grinned at Aejs. "You sent someone ahead and told her!"

The priest inclined her head, letting it almost rest on her shoulder and opened her mouth in a saucy, half smug manner, very different than usual. "The priest here is always an oracle. All of you have little sins and shames about this riding, except Maranya and Aejs, and you're wishing you had not had to come and miss the party. I promise you the best will not happen without Aejs." She smiled, gesturing at the trees and seven animals emerged, three giant stags and four unicorns. The lead unicorn was a flame colored stud with a restless, constantly moving mane caught in a private wind. The priest gestured at the falls and seven more creatures came, this time three unicorns and four pegasi.

All disbelief fell away from the paladins of the Order who had ridden to the Shrine with Aejs and a solid round of "I told you so's" surged through the intuitive links of the wynderjyn. The paladins, including Maranya, started dropping to their knees.

"What is this about?" Aejs asked.

"The first time you came, you rode a wynderjyn. Never again. Why?"

Aejs closed her eyes briefly "He's dead."

"Then you should have taken another."

"I ... I couldn't." Aejs shook. "Gwyndar had courage, and fire and strength and... I don't mean the others don't. But the way he had it ... the way of it ... the warmth ...the character, the way he delivered it. The way he didn't back down. Stubborn idiot. Gods, how I loved him."

<What do you think? > A stag sent to the flame colored unicorn.

"I thought he was rather pushy." Suthana replied.

"Never," responded Aejs. "Gwyndar was very supportive. Impatient sometimes. But I needed that. I was indecisive. I backed away from conflicts. In my personal life," the king added, feeling the eyes of the paladins on her back, who were very aware of her military reputation, which was anything but indecisive.

<I like that one. She's honest. She listens. > The unicorn said. *<The sacred king should not ride a mere horse. >*

<Yes, but should she ride a unicorn? > One of the stags replied. *<My antlers are far more imposing. >*

<And seasonal , > the flame-colored unicorn replied. *<What are you going to do out of season? Butt them? >*

"Aejs," Suthana said, "Talons is dead, but not lost. Willodarus helped her bi-kyndi lover pull her unborns from her body and they survive. So, do not feel heartsick for

her loss."

"How can she be restored?"

"That is not your question to ask. Two others already go in search of it."

"Josiah."

"There are life mages in Charas. But you will never find them unless they find their courage and make themselves known to you. They have been given sanctuary and under the rules of sanctuary their protectors may not speak of them. Even to say they are there."

Aejys nodded. That was something at least. Another reason to go to Charas. But first she had to keep Hoon from overrunning her city.

<That's it! > The unicorn said. *<I have chosen her. >*

<You miss the point, old friend, > interposed a pegasus, good-naturedly. *<Kalirion sent us, because we could choose her as easily as you. So it's really a matter of her choosing. >*

Suthana sat cross-legged on the grass before Maranya, gesturing for her to do likewise. "Maranya, your fate cannot be changed. You have chosen it. If you remain behind in Rowanhart, it will be ignoble. Go to Charas and it will be glorious. However, one who dwells in Charas, can choose to take it from you if you prove worthy. But there will be a desperate price to pay. Learn to play the game – as it is played on the coast – and play it well over the next few months. Lives depend on it. One of the keys given to the Order is intelligence, learning how to read the people around you, their signals, watching for the hidden blades, the agents of the hellgod. Aejys already has an intelligence network in place that listens for agents of foreign kings and such. Becca put a very good one in place. From that one you can learn how the Blood Coast differs from Shaurone in its customs, methods and interactions. It is time that you met Janine."

<I'm not putting this off. > The unicorn said. He moved forward, seizing Aejys' tunic's shoulder and pulling at it. *<I have chosen you. >*

Aejys started to look up at him, startled, but before she could meet his eyes like dancing flame, the pegasus had grabbed her other shoulder.

<Don't look up. The eyes you meet are the eyes you get. I choose you also. >

"Uhhhhh ... Suthana?" Aejys said, hesitantly, without raising her eyes.

The priest turned from Maranya to smile at the bewildered king. "Choose freely. They are acceptable to both of your liege-gods. No matter which you choose,

neither will be offended. Pyroslyrikos is a pyracanthian, firethorn. Longfeathers is a snowwing."

Aejys closed her eyes. She remembered seeing the slender sorrel equine bolt fearlessly from the herd in her direction as she walked out on the meadow, as if sensing her from a distance and recognizing her and then Gwyndar had simply spoken. Some heard their wynderjyn as words spoken aloud, others as mind-speech, others as certain knowledge or as that small, quiet inner voice, but they all in some way connected. Each wynderjyn was unique, because being a magical hybrid made it impossible to predict how the magic and the genes would mix. Her throat tightened. "I want Gwyndar back."

<I know I cannot replace him and I will not try. But I promise never to shame his memory. > Pyroslyrikos said gravely.

Aejys sighed and made her choice, Pyroslyrikos had struck a chord. She turned her eyes to his. His gaze burned and soared with the intensity of a song sung to the fires of heaven. Pyroslyrikos dropped his head onto her shoulder and she wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his glowing mane. The link flared into life, wrapping her in the spirit fires of the heavens and she knew that Hoon would send her no more dreams; there would be no more nightmares. The fiery hymns of the heavens stood between Aejys and the vampire lord; and Hoon would never reach her that way again. Then she heard Suthana talking.

"By our god's decree this day. The borders of Rowanhart are as follows: as far north as the south bank of the Barking Salmon River, east to the Hillora River and south to Ogre Fells. With that in mind, build the faithhome here. On this sacred ground. Separate from the main temple. This will be a smaller second temple."

"Suthana, I have two objections. Our borders would extent south beyond Timbren. Timbren is an ally. Secondly I am concerned about your safety here."

"Timbren has a date with destiny that you have no part in. Let that be. We will be safe. I am the holy ma'aram Furiosa and I have led the five orders for ten thousand years in secret through my ever-reborn son, Sonden. I have ignored you for a long time. Sonden does well by you at need and you do well enough on your own. A ruler rules best that knows when to take her hands off the reins. I much prefer to tend my shrine, channel my god, read the omens to what I am now doing. I am certain you understand, Aejys? When you first came to me you were running a tavern."

Aejys nodded reflectively. "Quite contentedly."

"I am displeased with the lot of you ... except for your majesty. All of you participated in the dance. I am banning the dance."

An audible gasp went up from the paladins.

The priest raised her hand. "Except with blunted weapons, for exhibitions of skill only and after a suitable declaration that it is not being done for any arcane purposes whatsoever. You believed it a testing of the omens. It is not. Its roots are in a time so dark your minds cannot begin to comprehend it. It is a way of choosing a willing human sacrifice to god. One paladin gives up her life on the altar of battle that the lives of her liege lord and her comrades will be spared. When you offered, Maranya, and your offering was accepted, you became the lamb. The offering cannot be withdrawn."

Aejys reached for Maranya's hand, gripping it wordlessly as the paladin calmly recited the oath, "I live to die..." and Suthana continued to tell the story of the dance.

"It is darker than that even. When the Nine first came here, it was not yet the Age of Renewal. It was still the Age of Burning. The only light was from the fires. The sun and the moon could not be seen. There was neither daylight nor moonlight and in the distance the fires could be seen and the screams could be heard echoing of pain and anguish. The Order of the Hidden Shield performed the first dance. We needed light, for our spirits and our eyes both. When the outcome of the dance was decided, an altar was built. We had male paladins as well as female then and we will have them again some day. This was a young male. The enemy charged upon us, hard to see in the strange patterns of shadow and distant flame. We could not control our mounts. We were in danger of being overrun. Then the young man...young paladin laid himself upon the altar and...by his own hand...gave himself as a sacrifice to our god. Light, true and unblemished light, spread across the field. The smoke from the flames cleared from the skies over the field. Our mounts steadied. We could see the sun. The enemy broke and fled. We cut them to ribbons. From that day forward the sun always shone over that patch of field without fail. It still does. Now the rest of you go away – I have one last thing to impart to Aejys."

When the others had withdrawn Suthana reflected for a time before she began. "Prophecy is an inexact science. The pieces can shift unexpectedly. Most of the time they don't because people do not have a strong enough will to alter events. But they can be altered. At some moment you will encounter Hoon in a situation where you will be able to use what I am about to tell you to great effect. I caution you to hold it back as long as you can. His existence was shaped mainly by a single act of betrayal..."

"Waejonan and Amalthea."

"Yes. But there is more to it. Amalthea did not willingly betray Hoon. Waejonan experimented with his new powers by gradually taking control of her mind until he took it completely the day he forced her to help him kill her children. She did not betray Hoon. She was innocent. Mephistis holds the Legacy of Waejonan. Hoon possesses a creature that can read the Legacy within Mephistis. He can learn the truth of this. Every act of magic they have done is written in the Legacy."

The horror of the dreams washed through Aejs afresh and worse. Tears welled in her eyes and she wept for them all. Amalthea was innocent. She reached for Pyroslyrikos and buried her face in his mane for comfort, which he freely gave.

* * *

Aejstrys Rowan enjoyed turning hidebound folks lives upside down and watching their expressions and generally bedeviling people. It was a trait she shared with Tagalong. She packed her audience chamber with every paladin and officer she could drag into it for a little soiree and conference to just to watch Soren's and the others faces while she gave them whatever information she could think of that might be useful concerning who would and who might show up for the coronation and what they might do while they were there. Maranya and her companions were sharing the news about the Willowhorn while Aejs watched it go round. Tagalong was the only non-Sharani present.

Aejys propped her muddy boots up on a nice chair and grinned broadly with a pint of ale in her hand. For a little while she allowed herself to forget the more ominous parts of the visit. She had come riding home on a unicorn with an annoyed pegasus following. Carpenters were already making changes in the stables for Pyroslyrikos. The wynderjyn stalls were close to acceptable, but not quite. He needed a lot more freedom. He would also require a harem of mares nearby for pleasure trips. She felt far less ready to brood and far more like her old self than she had for more than a year with Pyros dancing at the edges of her awareness. The link was far sharper and clearer than the one she had had with Gwyndar when Pyros chose for it to be, but then he was a unicorn and not a hybrid. Just as her having been chosen by Kalirion and Aroana, as their paladin, Pyros was another bright omen to offset the dark ones. He made her heart sing. Kalestari had ridden a unicorn, the great steel dust Tala'ajan.

Aejys had a sudden thought that came half from whimsy and she sent through that small private link *<When I destroy Mephistis, Kalestari will be restored. Will Tala'ajan return to her? >*

<Certainly . >

<Could we race them? >

<You mean could I outrun him? > Pyros laughed. *<Now that would be a race! Who can say? >*

"You know them that well?" Soren asked.

Aejys turned, retrieving the threads of the conversation that she had drifted from for a moment. "I've lived on this coast for nearly eight years. I know the customs from Brunstrat to Ocalay. You told me what you wanted, but I'm the one who knows

how to get it. At some point today Maranya gets buckskins. She needs to learn their ways and move among them as freely as I do. If she's to be of any serious use to me. The five Captains of Ocealay will show up in another week. They are the ones we will need to keep an eye on. The Orphan-Brigade will handle intelligence on the Captains. No one notices children. I deliberately did not invite Brunstrat. They're slavers and raiders. Word will reach them eventually that we're not an easy mark. Probably through the Captains. Should they decide to hit us at some point, I intend to burn them to the ground. I will sell the slavers into slavery. I will make an example of them."

"You have many plans for the coast, majesty."

"Most of the coast is merchant kingdoms. That was all I intended to have when I founded Rowanhart. I never dreamed you were going to come riding into Norendel bringing me an army larger than anything along the coast. Never. Never in my wildest imaginings did I think you or anyone would bring the Order to Rowanhart. A sword cuts two ways. By making Rowanhart strong you also issued a challenge to the Captains and others. So now we play the game. Thank my gods I still know how to play it." Aejs drank the last of her pint, lowered her feet, and got up. "Now I think it's time you and I went out to see the chieftains and played some more. Maranya needs to get her buckskins and dance with those warriors."

* * *

Aejys continued her sessions with the Dancer, the spirit dwelling in the sacred blade she carried, until she understood the whole of both Galee's stories and Hoon's. Much of what the dancer told her only served to confirm the worst of what Father Keikero had told her. Galee carried a venom in her nails, as did Hoon and all of her bloodline, from tiny sacks and glands in her fingers. She had been half lamia and half demon while living. It was the venom as much as the wounds that had nearly slain Dynarien. She became a vampire by seducing the most powerful one she could find, thereby doubling her power. Her descendants gained both the lamian and vampire heritage from her with her blood. Aejs knew she would have to be very careful when she fought Hoon or her resistances would be sorely tested. She thought of Dynarien lying face down beneath the banyan tree and shivered, certain that Hoon would try to bring her down with the venom.

Hoon pursued Aejs because he craved a mate who would be as powerful in her own right and way as Galee. He believed he could make such a one of Aejs: a death angel, a nekaryiane. He could not do that because two gods had marked her. What would he do when he realized she could not be turned? Kill her most likely – if he could.

"Why can I not get the taste of him out of my mind and body?"

The Dancer looked at her sharply, as if she questioned the obvious. "*Because, in*

your heart you still feel unworthy of being loved by a liege-god – of being a paladin. If you were truly unworthy you would never have been able to pull me from the altar. Nor would two gods have wanted you so badly that they agreed to share you. Go to their temples and receive the priests' consecrations. That is what you want. You are already marked. You cannot be turned. And when Hoon comes for you, destroy him."

Aejys shook herself free of her meditation and looked about the room for a moment. She took her cloak from the hanger, throwing it on. Clothing was a serious problem with wings. The cloak was slit at both sides, so that the back would settle behind her and two panels at the sides and front with a belt to hold the back down. Jumpfree and two clever tailors were proving immensely valuable in her efforts to contend with her bodily changes. She had given up wearing armor heavier than hardened leather because the weight interfered with her ability to maneuver in flight. What she wore now was not as strong or sturdy as the dwarf forged light chain she had once worn, but had to have it made to fit around her wings. While there were a few dwarf smiths in Rowanhart, there were no armorers. Jumpfree insisted that in time she would be able to handle the greater weight of chain in flight, but she wondered about that.

Aejys climbed the tower stairs, entered the large, round room, and went out onto the circular walk outside it. She spread her wings and lifted into the sky, wondering how Jumpfree managed to wear both chain and a breastplate and still outfly her. People walking stopped to stare and shout greetings as she flew past. She waved and kept going. The temple district lay on the northwest side of Rowanhart, close to the docks on one side and Skree's home on the other. Only a single temple was going up on the east side: the Temple of Dynanna.

* * *

Hoon sat before the fire, watching it dance in the hearth. The stone house had belonged to one of Mephistis' sa'necari agents who dwelled on Sophren Bay midway between Rowanhart and Vorgensburg. He had joyfully given it to Hoon after meeting Anksha for the first time several days ago. Anksha had taken him as a blood-slave, breaking his will once her dominance link had been thrust into his brain. Eventually Anksha tired of her toys and killed them. Normally sa'necari, when they died, rose in an undead form known as necari. However, Anksha's victims did not. Hoon had never figured out why. If Anksha had not been one of a kind, Hoon might have considered trying to see if creatures like her could become undead. But he would never risk her – not without knowing for certain. She was too precious. She was like the living creatures that the first vampires were modeled on and sometimes he wondered if they had been. Anksha, he suspected, was native to this world. As Galee had been. He wished now that he had thought to ask Galee if she knew what Anksha was.

The sa'necari screamed. The three royals who had accompanied Hoon on his little

reconnaissance laughed and one of them turned to watch the sa'necari's thrashing for a moment before they resumed their conversation. Anksha liked her meals lively.

* * *

Zyne set the pot of incense and a pan of cedar chips beside the hearth, removed her clothing, and settled cross-legged to begin her singing. Josiah had seemed so exhausted last time that she had waited longer between songs than she usually did. She had begun making discreet inquiries into acquiring spellcord to bind him with. Only the temples had it and they controlled it heavily. If she had spellcord, she could simply – no. She was becoming impatient. She would have to shatter his mind if she moved too soon. But she would need the cord eventually. Zyne heard a scratching at her door. She rose and stood next to it, her head cocked, listening. The scratching came again. Zyne opened the door, gazing into the darkness.

"I thought I smelled seiryn," a deep voice said.

Zyne's nostrils flared and she sniffed the air. "Lamia? And vampire?"

"Yes." Lord Hoon stepped out of the shadows. "I have an offer to make you, my lovely seiryn."

"I am not interested." She started to close the door, but Hoon caught the edge and prevented her.

"I have listened to you sing the mage to your cottage."

Zyne frowned, but stepped back allowing him to enter. "What do you want?"

"Prince Mephistis desires to regain his children. I desire to possess Aejs Rowan or, failing that, to kill her. You want the mage, but he refuses to abandon her for you. These goals could easily work together. Especially yours with mine."

Josiah would be hers. If Aejs were gone. The offer attracted her, even if she did not feel entirely comfortable dealing with the undead. "What do you want me to do?"

"First, where are the children?"

Zyne's mouth twisted into a dark smile. Seafolk raising landschildren seemed like a abomination to her, though she had never dared say it, not wanting to risk Skree's wrath. Skree and Taun were so happy and proud to have the boys and that strange cat. She had only known the children's identities since the pulling of the tapestries. Everyone was being so very careful about the children. "A house on the rocks, not far from here." She went on to describe it.

"You will lead the defenders away from the west side of the house so that we can break in and reclaim the children. While that is happening, I and several others of

Galee's lineage will pull down Aeijstrys Rowan. Abelard will be grief-stricken and, thereby, easy prey to your songs."

Zyne withdrew to the bed, opening her robes. Hoon followed.

"Nibble games, my dear?" he asked.

"A taste of the future, Lord Hoon."

* * *

Zyne entered the Blue Bull, looking for Josiah. She had heard from Skree that he had begun binging again since they pulled the tapestries. Zyne spotted him trading stories with a couple of sailors. His eyes were reddened and his face flushed. She sat down beside him, covering his hand on the tankard with her own. Josiah glared at her, and then released it. Zyne pulled it away and drank it herself.

"I think its time to go home, Josiah," she told him.

"Naw. We're jest gettin' started."

"It's time," she settled back, tilting her breasts at him. "My place?"

The two sailors guffawed. "That's an order ya can't refuse."

Josiah grinned at them and stood up. Zyne slipped her arm through his and they walked out.

She led him toward Skree's, turning off just before reaching it, and heading for her own small cottage by the water. She took Josiah to the bed and undressed him without lighting the lamp; not wanting him to see the wounds in her breast where Hoon had fed. He caught her breasts, rubbing the dark-green nipples. She winced as his finger grazed the edge of the wound, but he was too drunk to notice. "I like you, Zyne," he said. "I like you just fine."

"I love you, Josiah." Zyne undressed and climbed into bed beside him. She arched her back as he began to suck her nipple and play with the other. Zyne reached down and stroked him to hardness, beginning her spell song. She wrapped her legs around him as she settled back onto the bed. Zyne drew him close, guiding him into her, moaning softly as he found the pleasure node inside her.

They wore away the hours until dawn, when sobriety restored Josiah's conscience and he fled from the seiryn's bed.

* * *

Skree watched Josiah emerge from Zyne's cottage and stepped back into the

shadows. His godson's faithlessness angered him. He had watched it grow worse for a year. It had not mattered as much before they wed. But once pledged a breach of trust was a terrible thing. Life, especially among his people, depended on trust. If you could not trust the one who stood beside you then the sharks got you or a thousand other dangers that dwelled in the deeps. The tritons punished such violations with death, for they were a hard, stern people. They had to be to survive.

He thought of Tori Stormbird, his slain friend, and brother of the spirit who had been Josiah's father. When he had first found Josiah it had been like finding Tori again, but Tori would never have betrayed Merann. Then Skree's anger turned to sadness and disappointment, which was at the root of it all to begin with. He had expected Josiah to be Tori, but there would never be another Tori.

The sea-mage rethought his errand, turning back to his home. Skree wanted to sit a bit more with his family and not think about his godson. He would go take care of his business at the keep later. He had a roll of architects drawings under his arms. they were extending and enlarging the docks and quays to accommodate the triton vessels that they anticipated would soon be using them on a regular basis as well as the landsmyn crafts. Also, the king had questions of protocols on the upcoming visit from the triton kings.

When Taun saw him come back so quickly, the little nerien knew something had happened to trouble him, but did not ask. Skree could not be pushed or prodded, but always needed to be allowed to talk in his own time. Wolff crawled up to him and Skree lifted the child onto his lap and held him. The boys had partnered off with the two men differently, which amused Skree. Fauxx followed around after Taun and Wolff after Skree, when they were not playing together in the middle of the floor. The hardest thing was keeping them from changing back into kittens and climbing everywhere. Dree would chase them down and discipline them back into boys each time they changed. Skree could have bound their powers until they were older, but wanted to meddle as little as possible so as not to risk untoward side effects.

* * *

Josiah slipped into his rooms through the outer door, climbed into his bed, and rolled up in his blankets. He felt tired and ill; the drinking was pushing him toward a relapse, almost as if he wanted it. He felt dirty. The morning that he had awakened after nearly dying Aejs had shown him a love of such exquisite intensity it made him ache; yet he could not stop betraying her. The more guilt he felt, the more he drank. Each time he thought of Zyne he reached for the bottle as if it were a talisman. But if it were a talisman it was a faulty one – it only got him into her bed faster. He kept hearing Talons speaking from the tapestry, telling Bryndel she did not love him and turn to Dynarien with words of love on her lips. That image shamed him. "What am I doing? What in Haven's name am I doing? Why can't I stay away from her?"

"Josiah?"

He released the edge of the blanket, rolling over. Aeijys stood in the doorway. She was so beautiful it took his breath away.

"Are you all right?" Aeijys asked, concerned. She wished he would not drink, but withheld comment rather than argue with him. It had been the stress of the tapestries and she had asked him to do it. She came and sat on the bed. "Where have you been all night?"

"Walking the beach, drunk." Tears started suddenly in his eyes and he grabbed her. "I love you. I love you more than anyone else in the world."

"I know that." She kissed him and opened his shirt. He started to respond and then shoved her away, turning onto his stomach with a sob.

Aeijys left, closing the door quietly behind her.

* * *

Josiah balled up. He could not think straight where Zyne was concerned. There was something he should know – such as why he was doing this – yet every time he tried to reason his way through to it his mind slid sideways. In the end all he could be certain of was a pervading sense of guilt. He felt dirty – too dirty to touch Aeijys. This was the second life they were spending together. He had triaded with two Sharani over five hundred years ago during the War of the Three Queens. He knew the rules and he was breaking them. Then Aeijys' name had been Shularrien and he had loved her intensely – as he did now. He was losing her again, as surely and unforgivably as if he had put a blade to her throat and slashed it.

* * *

Tagalong strode toward the Blue Bull. Everything along this street was the blue something. She guessed it was because it faced the water. The buildings were spaced with yards around them and alleys behind. Rowanhart had lots of room to grow within the walls they had built: Becca had known what she was doing when she told the builders where to put the palisades. Tagalong hated to think that Becca knew what she was doing about anything. After all, friendly nemeses were not supposed to agree. Becca was the only thing she missed living in Rowanhart. Other than that it was perfect.

She could hear the voices and singing even before she opened the door. It looked to be an enjoyable night and she intended to toast a few. But when she stepped in all eyes went to her and all the noise ended. Everyone seemed to flinch away from her. She stood for a moment surveying the room, wondering how every eye refused to look at her. Tagalong had never gotten that reaction before in her life. It was as if she had the plague or something. The room had a long bar at the back, tables in the middle and booths along the walls. She scanned the room again, spotting a soldier

she knew sitting alone in a booth. Tagalong crossed and slid into the booth opposite him. She leaned forward and growled, "What the hell's goin' on?"

"You don't want to know," said Rob. "You don't want to know."

"And was everyone talkin' about it fore I came in?"

Rob nodded. "It's what everyone is talking about."

"Is it about me?"

"No. And don't press me, Tag."

She stood up, reached across the table, and grabbed him by the collar. "Ya owe me, Rob. I'll beat hell outta ya if I have ta."

Rob tried to turn his head away, but her grip tightened painfully. "Okay, let go."

Tagalong released him. "Spit it out."

"The Prince-Consort is sleeping around in a very public fashion. Since before the marriage. Still is."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know. A triton. They all look alike."

Tagalong fled the tavern.

* * *

The coronation achieved all of Soren's aims. The neighboring realms were suitably impressed and would not soon be testing the borders of either Rowanhart or Vorgensburg. The Kwaklahmyn chieftains had signed several trading agreements. Soren knew very little about those matters, but Aejys seemed pleased.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SHARDS OF A MAN

Hoon's camp lay unnoticeable to living eyes, hidden among the trees and bushes and beneath the soil itself; without tents and horses; without food and almost without drink; carrying only their weapons and a few preserving bottles to sate their taste for blood between the harvesting of villages and isolated farmsteads. The undead did not tire like living creatures and they could carry the sa'necari more swiftly than horses. They skirted Ocealay; avoided Ildyrsetts; and devoured Timbren as it slept.

They were leaving no sapient alive behind them, wiping out anything not strong enough to stand against them and avoiding those too costly to take – places that might get word out of their coming before they fell. Only those places that could not be taken in a night were passed by.

They lingered in Timbren the longest, radiating outward and gathering their ranks in for the last miles journey. They filled their bottles with the blood of the old and the very young; and the lesser vampiric lineages turned the rest – Lemyari did not do mass turnings, they hoarded their powers and blood and did not cheapen their lineages with such acts.

The sa'necari took their share of prey, creating zombies and revenants, obedient, unthinking myrmidons; not completely trusting the vampires and their lord. Vampires of the lineages called royals were rivals in power to the sa'necari and their mutual distrust ran deeply. The arts of the sa'necari could not control them or easily destroy them as they could the lesser bloods. And their command of the lesser bloods was not nearly as strong as that of the Lemyari. The sa'necari were, by nature, suspicious of those they could not control or influence. Especially among the undead. More to the point, their undead were only animated so long as the sa'necari who raised them remained alive. They could have done it otherwise, in a different fashion, that would have allowed their creatures to survive them, but again they were distrustful. If Hoon needed their legions, then he had more reasons to keep them alive as a hedge against the forces of the King of Rowanhart.

That morning Agasthenez Wrathscar, Bryndel's undead father whose coup had nearly destroyed Creeya, walked into the concealed camp. He was large, heavy boned, with an almost hulking quality. Seeing him, Isranon shivered and gathered both the lycans to him. All could see that he was hungry, half-starved, and very dangerous.

Wrathscar had smelled his own kind for weeks now; ever since he crossed the Hillora River into the lands south of Rowanhart. It had drawn him, although he could not say why. After all, what he wanted most was to reach Rowanhart and drink the lives of Arruth's sisters, as he had hers. He could not turn aside. Wrathscar had been going rogue and uncontrollable for months before he fled Creeya after his coup failed. Most of Galee's vampires had perished at the hands of Dynarien. Wrathscar had gone out the window, escaping into the forest beyond the castle as the destroying divine magic was reaching for him and the other undead. Since arriving upon this coast he had found little to eat and what he did eat failed to satisfy him. That was the nature of obsession, especially among newborns like himself. Had Galee survived she would have destroyed him.

Hoon watched him closely from the branches of a tree, noticing that he smelled of Galee. Since the fall of his citadel to Aeijys Rowan last spring, Lord Hoon had redoubled his efforts to locate and draw to himself all those of Galee's blood to the seventh generation. It was his call that had drawn Wrathscar to their camp. Hoon

dropped lightly to earth behind him. "What do you seek here, brother of my blood," Hoon demanded.

Wrathscar spun, smelled that this one was also of Galee, and smiled slowly, his head tilting, his fangs at full extension in a disturbingly guileless expression. "I am Wrathscar of Creeya. I travel to Rowanhart to find the sisters." The sisters of that twelve-year-old Sharani slut he had murdered out of spite. Their blood called to him. He had gotten her sister Jysy also. How fine they had tasted! Arruth had lasted for months, but he had consumed Jysy in a single frenzied feeding and rape. There were four more sisters, one nearly grown, and three younger than Arruth. They would ride well and taste like wine. He ached to find himself sheathed within them, taking them as both a man and a monster.

Isranon knelt lower in the bushes, his arms around Nevin and Olin's necks. "Obsession," he whispered softly.

Hoon heard Isranon and nodded. Seven sa'necari emerged from hiding, circling Wrathscar cautiously.

Wrathscar frowned at them. "What are you?" he asked when none of his senses could discern their nature. They were clearly alive, yet stank of death and blood.

Hoon gave him a curious look, for he seemed like a newborn – possibly damaged by the fullness of his obsessions – and knew so little that it seemed incredible Galee had let him loose. "Galee has neglected your training, young one. These are sa'necari, the living embodiment of the undead. Necromancers of great power."

"Galee has been destroyed," Wrathscar said. He was hungry. He had searched the desolated ruins of Timbren in their wake and found not so much as a tiny morsel of quivering life: even the dogs and cats were gone. The easy prey had been eaten before Wrathscar arrived, leaving nothing for him and he did not know the lands around here. Hunger clouded his mind, making him more of a simple obsessed thing and less of a thinking creature. He had forgotten the sa'necari although his estates had once harbored large numbers of them; forgotten nearly everything except his obsession, which had drawn him from Creeya where he had once been lord over large holdings – most powerful and wealthy of the secular lords.

Isranon could hear the hollowness of hunger in his tone. acute hunger could cloud a vampire's mind, erode his thought, and leave him an unthinking revenant. "How long can he have been trailing in our wake?" Isranon muttered.

"Galee destroyed? It is not possible!" Hoon exclaimed.

Mephistis approached Wrathscar with two persevering bottles in his hands. "I am Prince Mephistis of Waejontor," he said, making his own introductions, trusting his instincts. His power roared within him, rarely stilled since he took the demi-god LorenRain in the most exquisite mortgiefan he had ever experienced. He extended

the bottles to Wrathscar. "Drink and then we will talk."

Wrathscar frowned; he had never seen golden bottles smelling of warm flesh before. He took them, opening the first. He took a long pull. It tasted as if it came directly from living veins. By the time he finished them both, his mind had cleared; he could remember the sa'necari, the dozens of manifestations of the undead and he remembered the bottles. He told Mephistis, in detail, all that had transpired in Creeya. Galee had tried to take over the Assassin's Guild and the realm, murdering one highly placed lord and nearly another; she had slain numerous Guildsmyn and passion-danced the Grand Master himself over a period of months, nearly killing him before Dynanna intervened. The Trickster had forced Galee to rely on other tactics. "Dynarien is dead. I saw Galee get all ten fingers into him. Dynanna, by your account, should be also."

Isranon shivered, listening to the tale of how near the realm of the Assassins Guild, the holy avengers of Hadjys the Dark Judge, god of just punishment, had come to falling. Isranon knew Gylorean Galee's name, for she had been the mentor of Waejonan the Accursed. He had listened to Hoon speaking with her through the mirrors in Timbren the night he demonstrated to Isranon how futile resistance was, by showing him that Mephistis had already fallen to him. More dead gods. It horrified him and he clutched at Nevin.

Hoon listened thoughtfully. "So, the mighty Galee has fallen at last. And to a sniveling yuwenghau at that. I would never have believed it possible. She was the mentor of Waejonan. Can you be certain the Rose Warrior is slain?" Then the ancient undead lord fell silent again.

"Galee got all of her venom into him. There is no way he could have survived. It was a mutual kill." Wrathscar watched Mephistis more closely than Hoon. He could feel the power rising from the Waejontori Prince like heat upon the plains at summer's height. It was easily as great as what he had sensed radiating from Galee. If not greater. That was one whom Wrathscar would not underestimate. It was difficult for him to comprehend. There was so much to learn and Galee had taught him so little.

"Dynarien dead. That is a victory. Dynanna's fate is not known, young one," Hoon said. "I will be your master and teacher, for I am the oldest and first of Galee's get."

Wrathscar nodded slowly. "So long as you do not try to deny me the sisters."

"You may have the sisters."

* * *

Mephistis crawled back into his blind to find Anksha already curled up in the middle of his blankets. All the confidence and power drained out of him the moment he saw her. She tended to disappear for days at a time now. At first he would miss her

intensely, craving the pain and ecstasy of her feeding; then he would steady and enjoy his freedom, gaining in power and clarity; finally she would come back, bringing an instant of terror before the cravings returned. He could neither fight nor resist her; she had only to meet his eyes to break his will; dissolve his power.

"We will have your sons back soon, prince," she said, "How old are they?"

"They are babies." He thought of Margren and felt nothing. It was as if he had never felt anything for her at all and yet he knew she had been the center of his life for many years.

"Babies grow up," she purred. "When they are grown, can I have one? I will eat him nicely."

"Let's not talk about them." He shivered, fear curling in his stomach.

"I asked you a question," Anksha snarled, dragging him down. "Can I have one?"

"Anksha, please, not my sons."

She took him savagely, tearing a large strip of skin loose. He screamed. She shoved a corner of the blanket into his mouth, and then sank her fangs into him to feed. After a time she pulled the blanket out and he whimpered, "Yes, Anksha, you may have one." Satisfied she left him. Mephistis sobbed into the blankets, "I hate you, Hoon. I hate you."

What she had done to Waejonan had been merciful compared to this: She bit through his spine and shredded all his lower organs and legs. If he had ever dreamed that this tiny she-creature was Brandrahoon's terrible demon-eater he would never have touched her tail to begin with.

* * *

Isranon had seen Anksha slide into Mephistis' blind and crept close to watch, crouching at the far side out of sight, his vision lined up with a tiny crack. He prayed she would not notice him or ignore him if she did. His mind had grown full of stories about her: legends from Nevin; words that Haig had spoken to Mephistis – which he had overheard – and information had gained from Haig before he disappeared.

"My prince?" Isranon came to the edge of the blind, squatting to enter. He felt his heart torn every time he watched her hurt his prince, and feeling as impotent as he did at that moment, gave way to a subtle anger.

Mephistis levered himself up on his elbow. "Go away, Isranon."

Isranon crawled into the blind and crouched beside him. He cut his wrist and extended it to Mephistis, waiting patiently without a word for the prince to take it.

"You should not have come to me. I do not deserve your loyalty."

Isranon did not answer. He simply met Mephistis' eyes and let understanding pass between them. Mephistis took his wrist and began to feed. Anksha angered Isranon with her cold-blooded appetites, yet she also engendered mixed feelings like watching a cat going after birds' nests in the treetops. She seemed to have no heart at times, being entirely a predator. Yet, she was been gentle with the nibari who worshipped her and became childlike in her romping with the lycans. Her behavior alternately charmed and horrified him. It was difficult to hate her. With Hoon it was different. Isranon hated Hoon as he had never hated anyone before in his life. It went totally against what his father had taught him. His father had not believed in violence or vengeance. Yet, more and more Isranon did.

Mephistis was pledged to keep that secret of Isranon's lineage. When he had taken enough blood to recover a bit, Mephistis released Isranon and lay back for a moment.

"Once there were three brothers," Mephistis recited the opening to the tale, "Brandrahoon, Isranon called Dawnhand, and Waejonan called the Accursed."

Isranon nodded his understanding, knowing that Hoon was Brandrahoon – the only one of the three still existing. Then he repeated the oath, the teachings of the Dark Brothers.

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

"You heard all of it?"

"Yes." *Yes, I heard it all*, Isranon thought, and again felt his anger rise. *'Be as still as the deer in the forest' ...as the deer in the forest...the deer. No! There must be a way out.*

* * *

When word of the possible attack went out, the citizenry responded by throwing a

wall-raising party. Until then Rowanhart had made do with a wooden palisade and catwalk. By the middle of the second month of winter, they had a strong wall of stone enclosing the landward side of the city. Then they settled in to wait.

Skelly, flying reconnaissance, had caught sight of the sa'necari twice during the first week, but then they disappeared, as if they knew the dragon was watching them. Which they probably did, since the quetzalcoatli as a species, had no love for the sa'necari and their undead minions. The rangers went out to all the small villages and isolated farmsteads, bringing the people into Rowanhart. They ranged farther and farther afield, until, in the fourth week, they began discovering decimated villages. The sa'necari had gotten past them.

On a calm, lovely day, with just a hint of breeze, the current carried a three-masted ship onto the rocks near the south talon at the mouth of Sophren Bay. The bay was shaped like an eagle's claw, with the entrance cliffs forming the north and south talons respectively. The rainshadow of the cliffs sheltered Vorgensburg on the north side of the bay and Rowanhart on the south from the worst of the winter storms. Becca intended to build a tower eventually, but for now there was just an alarm bell in a metal housing with a long pull rope standing on the shore on the rocks above the south talon. As soon as the coast watcher saw the ship he began to pull frantically. The sails on the big vessel were reefed and the oars set. People stood screaming at the rails in panic, yet the watcher see no sign of a crew moving to bring her about and away from the rocks. He watched in horror as it struck the sharp, jutting edge. Then he grabbed the bell and began to ring it frantically.

By the time Aeijys reached the beach, the tritons were already bringing survivors and bodies ashore, laying them out on the beach. The ship itself lay half upon the rocks, listing to the side and rear half had torn free, sinking beneath the waves. The dead lay covered with blankets, but not the slightest comfort had been offered to those still living. A crowd gathered, watching as the tritons brought up another body.

Posidea, High Priest to Nerindalori of the Waves, had taken charge. She wore sealskin trousers and vest with a sea-green linen tunic. She was tall and commanding; a powerful presence, exuding authority as she issued orders and kept the curious away.

"How could this happen?" Aeijys demanded. "And why aren't you helping the survivors?"

Posidea's eyes were very hard as she knelt and flicked back the blanket covering one of the bodies. "It looks like they hit Timbren first."

Aeijys stared at the multiple bite wounds on the body and closed her eyes, turning away.

"The taint is on all of them. Every body and every survivor. It looks as if they turned the entire city. We'll have to dispatch the survivors. We can't afford the risk.

If the lineage was royal, they could possibly change instantly at death."

"No," Aejs' mind recoiled from the thought. These people had not deserved the doom that had come on them. They did not deserve to simply be put down like animals.

"Majesty..."

The unfairness; the ugliness; the cruelty clutched at Aejs. She raged at Hoon and Mephistis. There was only one place to turn. She thought of the children, the women, the men. She thought of how terrified they must have been that night, of how they must have fled and found no place to flee to. She pulled her gloves off, throwing them down on the strand, turning the marks of her gods toward the heavens and lifting up her face. With tears streaming, she began to pray, softly at first and then louder until it became a chant. Around her the members of her Ha'taren Guard and then the onlookers joined their voices to hers and it became many voices singing. The sun shone brighter and brighter. Then lances of white struck a mon lying upon the strand, first one and then another; finally enveloping Aejs for several moments. As the light faded, Posidea scrambled to touch the nearest survivor and gasped with astonishment. "He's cleansed. The taint is gone!"

Every single survivor and all of the dead were cleansed. They would not rise undead.

"Get the living to shelter fast," Aejs commanded and people scrambled to obey.

Omer strode over to Aejs and asked, "How can we fight a city's worth of vampires?"

"Vampires will only be a reasonably small percentage. It will be mostly minor undead. Zombies, revenants, and such," Aejs answered, her eyes hooded,

"How can you be certain?" Omer had not fought in the Great War.

"Sa'necari do not trust vampires. They will have limited the turning. It takes a special and dangerous binding, a circling of priests for sa'necari to control vampires. They're rivals in power."

"There's no such thing as *minor* undead. They'll all rip you apart." Omer said sourly.

Aejs lifted an eyebrow as Tagalong gave a sharp bark of laughter and Soren said dryly, "True. But, spitting the master makes most revenants just bad meat on the fire."

* * *

The night was cold and moonless. Snow fell in swirling flurries past her window.

Zyne roused at the sound of scratching at her door. Josiah slept beside her. He had arrived drunk, as he often did now. A chill ran down her spine. She bent and kissed him lightly; not enough to awaken him and slipped from the bed. She cracked the door open.

"Well, lovely seiryn, are you going to let me in?" Lord Hoon hissed.

"I have company," she said, glancing over her shoulder.

"Abelard?"

"Yes," she answered, her suspicions awakened by his tone.

"I want him."

"No. If you hurt him, the deal is off. I will fight you."

Hoon considered that. The seiryn was large and strong, like all of her race, a possibly worthy opponent. And Hoon had too many uses for her. He would get Abelard later. "Then give me a taste of you instead."

Zyne stepped out, closing the door behind her, she opened her robes and let him drag her to the ground in the snow. She did not like it, but she could handle it, having swum the arctic waters as a child. This time he took more than her blood, sheathing himself in her body. She bore it unresponsively as if she were a simple dead thing, not caring what he did so long as he did not enter her home and threaten Josiah. When Hoon had sated himself, he explained what they planned to do and what her role would be.

"I have had an inspiration, fair seiryn. I have thought of a way that you could use your gift so that the mage would kill the one he loved to save the one he did not love."

"You mean Aejys and me? He would never do that."

"There are two men inside his mind, not one: Josiah Abelard and Josh Stormbird. They are poorly meshed, because that idiot god, Dynarien Willodarusson had only a few drops of the elixir to give him. So far Josiah has become the dominant personality by will alone. Allow me to guide you this night we will split them. Then, when you are injured in the battle Josh will panic, cast shared life and drain Aejys to death to save you."

"Why should he use her life?"

"Because her blood is an anti-venom."

"Let me go in first and make certain he still sleeps."

Zyne opened the door and, as she stepped inside, Hoon pushed suddenly past her. The seiryn swallowed back a cry, darting across to Josiah's side. Standing as still as death, Hoon stared down at Josiah, considering him. He could easily kill the mage before Zyne could stop him. However, if he wished to be certain of getting Aejs, he would need to set several traps to take her during the battle or soon after. This one would be the most certain to see her dead. If he could not have her, then no one would. Furthermore he needed a strong woman with strong blood to create his nekaryiane, his death angel. None had existed in since the Age of Burning when Kalirion and his angels destroyed the last of them.

"Trust me, Zyne. I never break my word." Hoon smiled, drawing the spellcord from his belt, quickly tying it around Josiah's wrists without waking him: the magic would not answer. "Hold him. He won't remember any of this when I am done, but it will help to set your own power deeper. And I will erase my mark. Place your body across his to pin him and grasp his wrists tightly."

Zyne obeyed. Then Hoon knelt by Josiah's head, dug his fingers into his hair, and shook him awake. Josiah's eyes widened in shock and terror. "Hoon!" He tried to move and realized that Zyne had pinned him. "Zyne! What are you doing?"

"Betraying you," Zyne said calmly.

Josiah reached for the magic, found they had corded him, and cried out. "Oh gods, no."

Hoon laughed. "Josiah, you are going to murder Aejs."

"No," Josiah said.

Zyne clamped her hand over his mouth to muffle his scream as Hoon's fangs entered his neck. Pain seared through him, shoving him down. Small whimpering animal noises slowly worked their way up from his throat. The world turned gray and he could not see, did not know whether his eyes were open or closed, yet he could hear Zyne and Hoon talking.

"I never dreamed he had become so weak," Hoon said. "I knew he was dying. They speak of nothing else in some quarters. But this? His shields are in tatters, his innate defenses are shredded. I cannot imagine what could have done this. It works to our advantage. It is almost too easy."

Zyne tilted her head, fascinated, as Hoon continued to explain.

Hoon slit his wrist and put it to Josiah's mouth, watching him drink in a listless, yet unresisting fashion. In his first life, Kalirion had marked Josiah. In this one, damaged as he was emotionally, no one had chosen Josh. How amusing. It was very, very tempting to simply turn him tonight and send him back to Aejs undead. What a

lovely image that conjured in his mind of shock, betrayal and death. But no. Josiah was his if/then card, to be played only after his other snares had failed. If he could not take Aejys alive, then he would see her dead and leave behind an undead Abelard to destroy the rest of her family. And he would have Zyne.

"Come, Zyne, sing very carefully, calling him Josh." Hoon took his wrist from Abelard's mouth, noting with satisfaction the way that he tried weakly to pull it back. "Tell him how much you love him, how frightened you are, how desperately you depend upon him to protect you, to keep you safe." Then Hoon closed the wound in Josiah's neck.

Zyne sang while Hoon moved more deeply through Josiah's damaged centers, adding his arts to hers. When they finished, Hoon grasped Zyne's hand, pressing the tips of her fingers to his lips and kissing them. "Was that not easy, Zyne?"

"The easiest and deepest, Lord Hoon."

"Bring him."

Zyne tensed instantly. "Where?"

"Another act of trust. We have only a short time in which to make this binding as tight as possible. There is a place nearby where I can teach you in private, where we can work for a few days. You are far more like me, than you are your own kind. Bring him and come with me. Let me teach you, Zyne."

"You promise not to kill him?"

"Why should I kill him? He is the tool to get me what I want most."

* * *

Mephistis had taken over many of his sire's old networks that were lost at the war's end over ten years ago, re-weaving them. It had netted him things that would have taken the young prince a lifetime to build. Among them were many properties. The gem of gems was a house on Sophren Bay, strategically located midway between Rowanhart and Vorgensburg. He had another up the coast between the Blowholes and Vorgensburg, and a third on the windward side of the south talon. Hoon considered them all and chose the first one to set up in. It would take time to bring his army along, especially since Aejys Rowan was now aware of their approach – how he had no idea – but her dragon was making sweeps and her rangers were evacuating villages and towns. They had to move slower and more cautiously. So Hoon picked his elite units, two of them, to go ahead to the house on Sophren Bay, to reconnoiter and prepare for the attack on the city.

Hoon would have preferred to leave Isranon behind, but where Mephistis went, Isranon went and Nevin and Olin followed. Ironically, it was Anksha who argued on

behalf of the two lycans, who in their furry forms – at least – could not be affected by her, and had become romp mates willing to chase her about in the woods, which made her laugh. Hoon had not seen her laugh like that in centuries and felt unwilling to take it from her. So they all went.

They had been there a week when Hoon returned with a captive and a triton. Isranon learned later that Zyne was actually a seiryn – he was learning many, many new things, soaking it all up, watching and listening with greater and greater care as were Nevin and Olin, storing it all away. He had finally seen the sea for the first time, an infinity of water that dwarfed his sense of reality. One day he would be free, he would walk with gods and kings of light to Ildyrsetts to claim the staff of Dawnhand, his ancestor, and he would never be a monster.

Isranon could taste the terror and pain in the mage. Hoon had assigned Isranon and his clan-brothers to care for the mon. Isranon kept his shields as tight as he could without closing himself off entirely, since he needed to Read him in order to care for him. All sa'necari were Readers; it helped them eat their victims, kill them more effectively to gain the most power and pleasure out of the rites.

"I've brought you some dinner," Isranon said, settling the tray on a small table near the window. Sunlight slipped through the thin linen curtains in slender beams along the edge of the worn dark wood. Josiah turned on his side, regarding Isranon with tired eyes. The sa'necari helped him to rise, got him seated, and took the other chair. They watched each other, as if wanting to speak, but not quite knowing what to say. Josiah ate slowly, reluctantly.

"I'm sorry," Isranon said suddenly.

"For what?"

"That they are doing this to you."

When he finished eating, Isranon helped him back to the bed.

Isranon took Josiah's wrist, extending his senses through his body. He was shaken by the amount of damage, and then impressed by the natural power in the mage. This was the terrifying mage who knocked down the ruins at Dragonshead, who split the gate to arrive at the topmost altar in the Chamber of Hecatomb to rescue Aejiystrys Rowan. He could scarcely believe that Hoon had taken him; and knowing that Hoon had, deepened Isranon's hatred and terror of Hoon. Were the man well, he could easily have stood against Mephistis. Mephistis' power was not natural: it had been built through the legacy, centuries of horrific rites. How incredible to have simply been born with it, a gift of the gods and natural order. Even Isranon, as isolated as he had been growing up and as isolated as he had chosen to be among the sa'necari, had heard of Josiah Abelard. In his previous life he had been a mage-paladin of Kalirion, a man of unbelievable power; yet in this one something had damaged him beyond repairing – the man was dying, even without the added stress

Hoon placed upon him by feeding and tormenting him. Clearly, Hoon had brought Josiah here to break him.

"How did this happen?" Isranon asked. "The damage?"

"The magic was burned out when I was a child," Josiah said, impulsively trusting him. "It came back sideways, but only when I drink."

Isranon nodded. He had heard of that being done to sa'necari who displeased King Baaltrystan. "But that cannot be all of it."

"It isn't. I cast a dangerous spell to save my mate."

Isranon remembered how he had felt going after Troyes to save Merissa ,and in that instant, sensed a kindred soul in Josiah. "You knew what it would do to you?"

"Yes."

The mage's devotion to his loved one touched and shamed Isranon. Josiah had far more courage than Isranon.

Mephistis came in and reached out to touch Josiah.

"Mephistis..." Isranon said.

"I won't hurt him. I'm not ready to die. I just want to know what kind of duel we might have had had he been well. Hoon holds both of us, Abelard. With different leashes." Mephistis closed his eyes as he Read Josiah. When he finished, he nodded. "Impressive." Then he left. A few minutes later a scream echoed from the stairs.

Isranon's face went very still. "Anksha must have seen him leaving. He was told not to come up here."

"That was Mephistis screaming?"

"Yesss!" Isranon sucked in a deep breath. "I wish that I were not sa'necari, but merely Waejontori so that I could tell your people what has really gone on in my lands. The secrets. But if I were not sa'necari, I would not know them. And then, because everyone kills first and asks questions later, in the end the truths are lost. The knowledge gone."

"You are a very strange man."

Isranon snorted. "No. I am a very strange sa'necari."

The door opened and Hoon entered. Isranon rose, moving from Josiah to the

farthest corner from the bed. Two royals followed, dragging a bloody ruin of a man that they threw across the foot of Josiah's bed. Josiah used the headboard to pull himself into a sitting position.

"I had intended to use another to test the limits and possibilities of your spell of shared life," Hoon said nonchalantly. "However, Anksha got a little over enthusiastic while disciplining the prince."

That was when Josiah realized the bloodied man was Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan. Something with claws had ripped through the most powerful sa'necari that ever existed in a matter of moments.

Isranon started forward and Hoon stopped him with a gesture. "Stay there. I want to see how much blood and life can be pulled from a single creature with this spell before it dies." Hoon waved at a royal and they brought a bound and gagged human in.

Josiah shook his head. "No."

"Come here, Zyne, ride my thoughts," Hoon said. "watch me do this."

"Give him a drink first," Zyne said. The seiryn stepped past Hoon, to take Josiah's flask from the pouch she carried. She pressed the bottle into his hands. "Don't make me tell him," she hissed in his ear.

Isranon heard her and wondered if she meant the mage's need for the bottle to access the magic – if so then the mage had trusted Isranon with a secret. The sa'necari felt awed by his trust. Trust was something Isranon treasured above all else. He decided then to return it.

Josiah's hands trembled as he opened the flask and took a long pull, feeling the damaged magic centers flare up. "Bring them together. They need to be touching. I will give Mephistis some, but not enough to kill that man."

"This man is a full meal that we captured," Hoon explained. "He is food. Cattle. Use him up completely or we will eat him in front of you. Either way he dies."

Zyne moved very close to Josiah, finally sitting on the edge of the bed, watching the vampires closely.

Josiah began the spell.

Hoon caught him by the hair, twisted his head back, and entered his mind. "Zyne follow me!" Zyne obeyed.

Josiah felt the control of his spell of shared life torn away from him and twisted. He was not a Reader. he could not tell what was happening until the man's body

convulsed beneath his hands and then stilled in death. Josh screamed at the violation of mind and magic.

"We complete Josh's lesson in obedience now." Hoon bent over him with a gesture to clear the room, shoving him onto his stomach as he tore Josh's pants down and thrust himself inside as a man before sinking his fangs behind Josh's ear for a long drink.

Josh wept.

Isranon shouldered Mephistis, who was still weak, and helped his prince from the attic room, refusing to look back, wrapped in his own and the mage's terror.

* * *

Josiah lay staring at the crossbeams of dark wood in the attic room of the stone house on Sophren Bay. He glanced at Isranon. That one was not like the other sa'necari. Josiah could not quite say how, beyond the eyes. The others did not bother to conceal their eyes, to make them look human the way that Isranon did – Josiah almost suspected that Isranon's were real, but that would mean that this sa'necari had never taken mortgiefan. There were two kinds of sa'necari those who became sa'necari through a long process of rites and those who were born that way because so many generations of their parents had been sa'necari that their genes had finally been altered. In both cases, the eyes did not become violet without pupils and iris until that first act of mortgiefan.

Isranon dipped the cloth in warm water, squeezed it out and bathed Josiah's face, gently cleaning away the blood and vomit. Nevin and Olin lay on the floor at his feet, watching. They had helped him change the mage into clean clothing before resuming their wolf forms. Josiah stirred, opening his eyes under Isranon's ministrations.

"Why? Why did that sa'necari keep calling you half-a-man?"

If Isranon could have let him go, he would have. "Because I have never stepped into the darkness. I have never committed mortgiefan, or any of the other rites. I have never taken a life out of appetite. Only in self-defense or the defense of others. There are so many things I wish I could tell you, all the secrets of the sa'necari."

"Don't endanger yourself."

"The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me. If you swear not to betray me to the others I will tell you what I am."

"You have my word, Isranon."

"I am the last descendant of Isranon Dawnhand, Isranon son of Isranon son of Isranon for all of our generations. We still need the blood to survive, but we do not

take lives out of appetite. I am the last Dark Brother. The sa'necari have slain the rest of us. Those who rejected the rites."

* * *

Isranon spent hours talking to him, cleaning him up after each of Hoon's sessions. The residents of the house changed. People came and went constantly as Hoon brought his army secretly into position around the city. Late in the afternoon of the fourth day of Josiah's captivity the house was empty. Or Isranon thought it was.

"Hello, half-a-man. So this is the great and terrible mage that leveled the ruins at Dragonshead?" Bodramet stepped quickly across the threshold with a spell on his lips to snare Isranon before the man could reach for his blades, wedging him into a corner. "I've come to pay Mephistis back for humiliating me when all I wanted was a little taste of his catamite. Give me what I want and I'll leave you alone."

"No."

Josiah levered himself up, pale and hurting. He dragged the whiskey from the nightstand, taking a long pull from the bottle. Power flared in the damaged mage. Isranon saw the change in him over Bodramet's shoulder.

"Josiah!"

Bodramet released Isranon, drawing a blade. He threw a snaring web of dark magic at Josiah. Hoon did not want the mage killed, but that did not mean he could not cut Isranon up some. Isranon, freed in that instant, seized his blade hand. Bodramet whipped back on him, angrily, shoving the spell in his face and the blade in his gut. Then Josiah was on him. The wasted, puny drunkard came like a tiger, his magic searing through Bodramet. The sa'necari screamed as power tore through him. He was thrown backwards, hurled from the room and down the stairs.

Isranon slipped to a sitting position between the dresser and the wall. Josiah drew the blade from his body and began that strange spell of his, shared life, giving from his own body, to strengthen Isranon's. Isranon received the blood differently from ordinary humans and healed, the wound closed. He felt odd. Something was changing inside and he could not say what. Then Josiah screamed, losing control of his spell and flooded Isranon with pieces of himself. Isranon broke the contact, shoving Josiah away. Hoon stood over them.

"I told you, you were not to attack anyone in this building!"

Josiah writhed, clutching at his head and sobbing.

"Bodramet attacked us," Isranon said. "He was trying to rape me and cut Josiah."

Hoon spun, "Anksha! Punish Bodramet."

* * *

"What did you do?" Isranon asked. He cradled Josiah, trying to get a little broth down him. The mage had become so weak after five days that he could no longer rise to dine at the table.

"Shared life ... random factor. I don't know. I'm not a reader." Josiah closed his eyes, turning his head into Isranon's shoulder.

"Josiah, please don't pass out. Please." Isranon shook him.

Josiah stirred again. "Isranon ... don't tell them ... what I did ... I was ... only trying to help."

"I know. I won't tell them."

Two days later Hoon took Josiah away and Isranon never saw him again alive.

* * *

They left Josiah on the beach, the water eddying gently around his ankles, the whisky bottle clutched so tightly in his hands that if it had been a man's throat the bones would long ago have been crushed to dust. Josiah did not remember who had left him there. He felt heartsick, terror running up and down his spine, a crawling sickness in his veins. The morning was cold; but his forehead was hot, sweating and the breeze caught the moisture and chilled it. He shivered, watching the water, wondering listlessly at how easy it would be to walk out into it, to let it rise up around his calves and then his thighs. It would be cold at first, like a shock. And then he would get used to it. He would will his body to accept it. It would be easy to keep walking. Surely it would be easy. Josiah walked into the waves. He heard someone shouting at him and closed them out. He was right. The water was a shock. His foot turned on a rock. He slipped, going to his knees. A wave hit him. The water caught him, dragging him into the depths of the undertow. His head struck something hard and he knew nothing more.

* * *

Laurelyanne had barely sat down on the low chair near the window, her thin hands wrapped around a cup of coffee when a knocking came at the door. Taun was still upstairs with Josiah. Tagalong got up and answered it. Aejs entered, followed by Maranya, Tamlestari, and Bryngaryn.

"I'm told they brought him here. He's been missing for over a week," Aejs said.

"He tried ta drown himself," Tagalong said. "Somethin's botherin' him bad."

"Way I hear it," Maranya said. "He was just plain drunk as usual."

"Josh's been drunk all his life an' never done nuthin' like this before," Tagalong growled. "This was deliberate. Taun an' I saw it. We hollered at him an' he kept on walkin'."

"Tag, the man's a sot, for Aroana's sake."

"Stop it!" Aejsys shouted. "Shut up both of you. Tag, you turn this into a brawl, I'll throw both of you in irons."

Bryngaryn sucked on her lower lip and tried not to look at her aunt, then followed Aejsys upstairs to the bedroom.

Taun looked bedraggled, though he had stripped out of his robes and changed into some dry things that a triton friend fetched for him. His dark hair, still wet, was tied back. He had dived in immediately to drag Josiah out, fighting waves that only an amphibian like himself could have handled. Taun looked up and glanced meaningfully at Bryngaryn. Aejsys indicated that the ha'taren should leave and then shut the door.

"Can I bring him home? I brought the carriage."

Taun shook his head. "I don't want to move him. There's a mild concussion. He cut himself up on the rocks, but it does not explain all the blood loss I'm finding."

"Vampire?" Aejsys asked, feeling chill.

"No marks. I can't understand why he would do it. He just kept walking." Taun tucked the blankets around Josiah differently, adjusting them more out of nervousness than anything else. "I've never seen anyone do that before."

"Do you have any idea where he's been?"

"He said he didn't remember. This last year I've started learning about sots and such. Maybe he had a blackout. They do that sometimes, I'm told."

Aejsys recalled how naïve the little nerien had been a year ago when it came to hard-drinking landsmyn. "Yes, they do. Do you think he could have had a relapse?"

"It's possible, Aejsys. He's terribly weak. He needs to rest. Tag's going to stay over and help Laurelyanne with him. I'll return tomorrow."

Taun rose and left her alone with him.

Aejsys folded her wings tight and sat down. "Josiah," she murmured. "Why did you do it? Where did you go? I thought we promised there would be no more secrets, no

more hidden nightmares. You promised me." She watched him sleeping, started to lean forward to kiss him and then she simply could not do it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PROMISE FOR THE DEAD

Bryndel Wrathscar sat on a bench on the north side of the quad, snow falling around him. There were no people about. It was very cold, even for Creeya, and they had all gone in, except Bryndel. He could feel the cold through his heavy clothing. The wind began to rise, souging across the quad with a promise of storms from the north. His clothes, although a bit rumpled, no longer looked slept in, as they had before Talons' death. His hair was combed and his face shaved. The goatee, which he had sported out of vanity, had long since disappeared. He had no vanity left. He existed, but it could hardly be said that he lived.

"Hi."

Bryndel emerged from his brooding to see Alora sit down beside him. "Hi, yourself," Bryndel responded, forcing a smile of greeting that never touched his eyes.

With Jimi gone, Alora had become the leader of the knights. They were now more of a study group, than crusaders against evil. The Patriarch, who had informed them that Jimi and Jysy were in Imralon, assured her that they would return eventually, although he could not say when.

Telamyr, the young Guildsmon, who had replaced crippled Yukiah as armsmaster, knew every one of them. He trained them harder than the rest and kept them separate on the fields, for reasons he would not give them. Bryndel and Alora suspected that Telamyr did this because the students had gotten too deeply into the Guild's affair when they appointed themselves Talons' guardians. They had gone up against the vampires in the Poor Quarter with just two shadow hounds and a bunch of catkin when no one else would credit the old priest's claim that the creatures were feeding on his parish. The students had been marked by Hadjys, which guaranteed their admission into the Guild. The skirmishes in the dark leading up to the final battle in the wedding chapel and streets of Havensword, had left as many crippled myn in their wake as deaths. A general pall of sorrow, comprised equally of grief and outrage lay over everything. Every direction that Bryndel looked, there were new faces taking the place of old beloved ones who had either died or been crippled past mending.

No one lived in the west wing any longer. Arruth's ghost had been seen once too often walking the halls. Bryndel believed that his father had escaped and that Arruth was looking for him. Bryndel was now technically Lord Wrathscar, although he

refused to be referred to as such. He had not wanted the estates or the titles. He did not want anything that had belonged to his father. It all felt tainted. He was the last surviving member of his family. His father had turned his four sisters and the Guild had destroyed three of them. Belyla, his favorite sister, had destroyed herself when she realized she could not control her appetite for blood. Poor sad Belyla. She had Passion-Danced her beloved Guildsmon – Yahni Kjarten, son of Lord Oakwithe Kjarten – to the edge of death, and then fled with him too late. She had also stolen Galee's journal as they fled: it eventually reached the Guild's hands, incriminating the ones who had nearly forced her to murder her beloved Yahni. *Belyla. Belyla. Belyla. I will never forget you. I swear it. I will have vengeance for you.* She built a pyre by Yahni's crypt and destroyed herself rather than harm anyone else. Bryndel now had a reputation as a warrior and a hero, something he had once craved and now did not want. Dreams of power and glory were empty things – especially with all those he loved most slain.

The number of executions in the city had dwindled. His father's allies were still being hunted by the Guild. The undead were destroyed out of hand, but the humans were brought back for trial. Lands and titles were going begging in places as a result, with the crown placing immense properties under attainder.

"Bryndel," Alora said, "You're not still planning on going into the west wing tonight are you?"

"Yes. I want to talk to Arruth, if she will appear to me."

"That ghost has killed many myn. You know how she hated you," Alora caught his hand, her own tightening around it with concern. "Bryndel, she'll kill you. I can't tell you what I saw, so you'll have to trust me. She'll kill you."

"It's something I must do. I cannot give her rest without knowing why she walks." He knew that Arruth had spoken to the swan-mays and they in turn had spoken to the Grand Master. However, no one wanted to tell him what she had said. So he was determined to find out – from the ghost herself. "If it's my death she wants, then she can have it. But I cannot go on this way."

He was certain that Arruth's hostile spirit believed that he had had a willing part in Talons' death. However, if he could just talk to her, then he could find ways to give her rest – perhaps she even could tell him where his father had fled. More than anything Bryndel wished to find his father – and kill him.

* * *

Dynanna stretched out by the scrying pool, nibbling grapes and cheese. She frowned deeply into the pool, fuming. She had begun to get angry as soon as her strength had returned. Only the elder gods had ever caught her before, never a mortal – and no one had ever tried to kill her. *Cage, rape, seduce, yup, yup yup. But kill, no.* The Master of Blood had once tried to get close enough to attempt it when he

sniffed out that her second-hand magic peddler identity concealed a yuwenghau, but he had not known whom he was messing with and never got within a yard of her. Nor had she ever lost a child and that hurt worst of all. She spent hours and days talking to Kalirion, sitting on the bench beside him in his garden. He no longer tried to so much as kiss her. They just sat there, fingers touching lightly, comforting each other with words and glances. He promised her several bottles of the sapphire elixir of Idyn, the healing potion, as soon as more could be prepared. But that would take years, considering how badly her gopher curse had damaged the Idyn tree. Maybe she should learn to think before she did things like that out of pique.

She had gone to Kalirion one day, trading kisses for answers to her questions, which only the god of prophecy could give her. His love play had gotten too rough, and, added into the fact that Dynanna had an intense fertility that always resulted in pregnancy when she lay with another god, she had lost her temper. Their relationship had changed since the deaths of their children: LorenRain, a hero born of an earlier coupling and the unborn child she had been carrying when she was assaulted.

Kalirion had identified her assailants, the murderers of her children, promising to send paladins after them. However, Dynanna wanted to do it herself. They were going to pay. Both of them. She had never deliberately planned to kill anyone before either – not once in four thousand years of life. That was about to change as soon as she figured out how to do it without getting caught again. She imagined lighting out after them with an impossibly huge axe, screaming "Chop! Chop! Chop!" while they fled in terror. The image satisfied, but she knew that realistically she could not pull it off. She had never learned to use a weapon. Lokynen Willidar, one of Badonth's rowdiest yuwenghau sons, had offered to teach her to use a mace. Maybe she needed to take him up on his offer.

For once she did not take her troubles to Hadjys. They had visited only a single time. The Dark Judge was lost in brooding. In a space of months Galee had destroyed more than two thirds of his devout Guildsmyn and half his priests in betrayals and lightning strikes. The massive deaths of those closely linked to him had left the god wounded in body and power as well as heart and spirit through the symbiotic link with his most intense worshippers. Dynanna did not want to further burden him with her problems.

"Sis?" Dynarien came out of the house they shared with his pack hanging from a single strap on his shoulder.

"I know who attacked me," she said, grimly.

Dynarien sat down beside her, reaching behind him for the second strap and getting it on. "Who?"

"Mephistis Waejonan and that vampire catamite of his, Hoon."

Dynarien exhaled a breath he had not realized he had been holding. "Be careful."

Don't try to take them on alone. They're tough."

"You're telling me? I ought to know." Then she gave him an exaggerated grin and a shake of her head that melted into a look of pure cunning. "I'm going to be as sneaky as hell."

"You'd better be," he advised, knowing there was no way to talk her out of it. "Sis, they were leagued with Galee. That's how they hit us both at the same time. They're as much to blame for Talons' death as Galee."

"Kalirion said—"

"Creation! You're not doing that again." Every time she started seeing one of the elder gods it made him nervous – in fact, it made his stomach queasy. He could take a lot of punishment, but not like they dished it out. His magical armor had finally finished repairing itself and he wore it again under his clothing. He opened his palm and stared at the flame-shaped mark burned into it. The one time he had broken his rule to save a friend, Kalirion had marked him and forced him into servitude. This was not the time to tell his sister that he had, to all extents and purposes, become her lover's slave.

Dynanna rolled her eyes at him. "He's being very sweet and not at all randy. We're not sleeping together."

"Uh, okay." He did not like the sound of that at all, she was being entirely too open and she never played cards with a full deck.

"Kalirion says the best time to hit them will be in the spring in Charas." She had not told him, but she had a temple in Charas, staffed entirely by Badree Nym who wore hats and cowls to disguise their ears and nature. That would definitely give him a screaming fit. In fact she had the only temple left standing in the entire city of Charas and had been increasing her defenses for weeks just before the ambush so that hers did not end up like all the rest in the city, which had been mysteriously destroyed over the last two decades.

The Badree Nym, pariahs of the sylvan races because of their erratic poltergeist like powers that tended to knock down buildings when they became frightened, were only one of several races she had included among those hidden in her temple. She had set her mind to getting even.

"Then I'll meet you in Charas."

"You're not going with me?"

"No. I'll find my own path to Charas. I have some unfinished business."

"Josiah again?" She sounded peevish.

"Well, we did screw up his life."

"We did not screw up his life. It just happened!"

"Sis... And Talons."

She heard the sadness and hurt come into his voice and pulled him to her. "Good luck." She kissed him. She could have given him some a little hope, but there were rules that even a wild young godling was bound by and she could not break them, even for her brother. The secrets had to be kept until the people they belonged to chose to tell them.

* * *

Bryndel let himself into Talons' bedroom and settled down among the blankets. He pressed his face into the pillows, the sheets, and the blankets hoping to catch the lingering scent of her but it was gone. Tears filled his eyes and slowly trickled down his face. He kept wishing that he had been stronger, less terrified of Galee. If he had trusted Dynarien sooner to take the coercions out of him, Talons would still be alive. Deep sighs shuddered through him. "Talons, I'm sorry. I'm so very, very sorry."

Cold filled the room, sending a chill through him.

"I just bet you are," a nasty voice hissed. "Can't you find a whore's hole to shove your rod into?"

Bryndel turned slowly. The hideousness of the ghost's torn, mutilated body appalled him. He desperately wanted to run from her, but held himself in place. "I'm celibate. I won't put anyone else through that," he responded calmly.

"Yeah, right. You knew what he was doing to me. You fetched me for him. You watched him do it."

He wanted to scream that he had not been given a choice, that he had been terrified of both his father and Galee, but that would have been trying to justify himself – and there could be no justifications for his actions. "What do you want? What can I do to let you rest?"

"You can die." A wind swirled through the room. Bottles flew off shelves, paintings off the walls, furniture leaped up. All of it hurled at him. He threw his arms up, trying to protect his head and face. A chair struck him in the back, knocking him against the wall.

"No, Arruth, don't hurt him." A golden light flickered into being between Bryndel and Arruth. Slowly the light resolved into a woman and Bryndel gasped. "Talons."

"Why are you protecting him?" Arruth shrieked. The wind became a maelstrom roaring around the room, but where Talons stood was a sea of calm. Her spirit moved to Bryndel's side, protecting him. She dressed in black leathers with fingerless black gloves and a katana at her back – the way she looked in her coffin.

"He was as much a victim as we were. He is my friend."

"He isn't! He isn't." More Books flew off the shelves, furniture smashed, but none of it could get past Talons to strike Bryndel. "You couldn't even get dressed because you knew he was coming back at you. Barely even get washed up and there he was – back again. Even in the middle of the night, waking you again and again. Knocking at the door.

"I could have stopped it. I didn't, but I could have. I made mistakes, Arruth. But they were my mistakes. Not his."

The maelstrom lessened.

"I wanted the children. I felt used. Angry. I thought the game was simply a power play and I was the pawn. I intended to kill him as soon as the children were born."

The air stilled.

"I did not know then, that he was as much a pawn as I. I came to love him as a friend and brother. It was Galee who was moving all the pieces. It was Galee who turned Lord Wrathscar. Then they were both running Bryndel with coercions and sways in his head. Show her."

Bryndel took off his shirt, revealing the puncture scars.

Arruth's ghost tilted her head, staring at them. "Your father?"

"And Galee," he said.

Talons extended her arms to Arruth. "Let me help you." Arruth came to her and they embraced. The golden light enveloped the dark one, burning away the anger and pain. Arruth's ghost changed, healed. When the embrace ended, Arruth stood there, looking much as she had been in life, before Lord Wrathscar had first touched her. The golden light faded and Talons' spirit disappeared, forced back to the orchid garden by Willodarus' bindings.

Arruth turned to Bryndel. "Why did you come?"

"Because I knew you were suffering. Because my father must be stopped, if he still exists. I want to know where he is."

"He has fled southwest beyond your reach. Tell the others – tell them they don't

have to be afraid of me any more. I will continue to haunt this place until he is destroyed. But I will no longer harm anyone. I tried to make Jysy kill the children. But I won't do that anymore. It isn't their fault." Arruth vanished.

As Bryndel emerged from the west wing, Alora appeared. She threw herself on him, kissing him thoroughly. Bryndel's face burned and he looked startled.

"I was afraid she'd killed you."

"She almost did," Bryndel responded, slipping his arm around Alora's shoulders. "I'll tell you about it. First, would you consider having breakfast with me at the Music Chamber? I hear we have a fine group of snowbound minstrels and a couple of new bards stranded here for the season."

"Yes," she said and then laughed. "Outlanders never realize how drastic our storms are and then they get stuck here."

"To our advantage."

Alora leaned forward and kissed him again. Bryndel pulled away, took her hands in his, and told her, "Don't, Alora. Don't fall in love with me. I'm not looking for life or happiness. So I can't give them to you. I'm going to destroy my father. Then, if Arruth forgives me, she'll take me by the hand and pull me from this world."

Alora seemed to totally ignore what he had just said. "Bryndel, let's pretend that we're in love – just until you leave."

* * *

Wrathscar watched the children playing in the snow. He could smell the blood, it drew him, so like to Arruth's and Jysy's. He circled closer until he could be certain which of the children was the one he wanted. A ten-year-old girl wrestled and tumbled, contesting with the other children for the sheer delight of it. She had a broad, flat nose in an otherwise delicate face; long curly black hair pulled loosely back; and chocolate skin. She did not look much like her sisters, but her blood smelled the same. He walked nearer to Mathryn. He called to her. Mathryn walked up to see what he wanted, their eyes met, and Wrathscar smiled. He stretched out his hand and Mathryn put hers into his. They walked off together.

* * *

Birdie curled up on the window seat, reading a book on the theories of priest-gift. It was slow going, but she worked at it dutifully. The more she knew, the better she could protect and teach the growing numbers of orphans making their way to her. The fire was built up and the room felt very warm and comfortable. From time to time she looked up just to watch the snow falling. She could smell dinner cooking. Paunys always made dinner. Despite all the alarms and alerts about the approach of

the sa'necari forces, Zarim had taken some of the Urchins hunting. The result was venison for dinner. As long as the children would be taking chances, as the Urchins always had, she should probably talk to the gaffer about getting an armsmaster for them – preferably Guild. Her thoughts strayed to the day the Gold Ravens attacked her home and she nearly lost two of her parents to a stone troll, which Talons killed. An armsmaster, yes. And come up with strategies for dealing with large, nastily dangerous creatures. Not that she expected to have another stone troll in her sitting room; but it never hurt to be prepared.

"Birdie!" The familiar voice shouted.

Birdie started from her book and stared. Arruth stood there, looking just as she had in life except that Birdie could see through her. That was a vast improvement over her first visit, looking all torn up the way Wrathscar had left her body on the training grounds. Birdie never told anyone about it. She did not want the physical details of her sister's death getting back to her wombmother, Paunys. Paunys was getting her strength back slowly, after nearly dying from an incurable degenerative disease, which Dynanna had healed with a stolen elixir.

"Birdie, he's here. Wrathscar's here. He's got Mathryn."

"Shit." Birdie jumped up and rushed into the stairway. "Where's Mathryn? We're got to find her."

"Calm down, child," Zarim said. "She's just out front." He pulled his cloak on and went out. "Where's Mathryn?" he asked the children. No one knew, Zarim went back inside. "Get everyone together, Mathryn's missing."

The gryphons were screaming. Birdie walked out to their stable. Cloud and Snowmane kept shrieking and when Birdie opened the stall, they shoved past her, taking wing from the doorway. "Follow them," she shouted. "They know where she is."

Birdie walked quickly in the direction they had flown, calling to everyone she passed that a vampire had taken her sister. A posse formed behind her. Most of the trees were still standing in the area that had been designated for the City Commons, making it like a small forest in the middle of town. Eventually it would become an open field with trees around the edges so that meetings and festivals could be held there. Birdie caught a flash of white feathers and began to run. She could hear the gryphons crooning loudly. Mathryn huddled nude beneath a tree, her skin turning blue with cold and Cloud wrapped around her in an attempt to keep her warm. Mathryn shivered violently in Birdie's arms as she lifted her and climbed onto Cloud. Staying on bareback would be difficult, but time was desperately short. They flew home.

She immediately put Mathryn to bed with Paunys, using body heat to warm her. Birdie examined Mathryn the next morning after she was no longer in danger from

exposure. Her tiny prepubescent breasts were bitten and her loins bloody from Wrathscar's violation. It matched the pattern endured by her sisters Arruth and Jysy, one of whom had died. Arruth's ghost was right: Wrathscar had come after the rest of them.

* * *

Mathryn turned restlessly in her bed. Her privates hurt, especially when she walked. But that did not matter: the night was full of life, which beckoned to her. She wanted to be up, but Birdie and Blackbird had insisted she try to sleep. So she pretended to sleep. Mathryn had always been the most obedient of the six sisters, until now. She had been listless and unhappy all day, but now she wanted to be outside. She could feel him coming closer; slipping through the streets to approach from downwind so the gryphons could not scent him. He had learned from the gryphons. They had chased him away from her. She hated the gryphons.

<Hello, little slut.>

Mathryn shivered, climbed down off her bed, and looked out. He stood there in the courtyard, limned in silver. They had told her she should not go to him, but she wanted to. She desperately wanted him to play with her again. Birdie said he had hurt her. But she did not feel hurt. Not when he was just outside.

<Come, to me.>

Mathryn threw her night robe over her sleeping gown and slipped her feet into shoes. She stole out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Everyone was asleep. She let herself out. Her heart raced when he extended his hand. She slid her hand into his and walked off beside him.

* * *

Zarim adored the children, both his own and the add-ons. He never spoke much about his birth family to his na'halaefs. In self-defense, his mind had blocked out the memories of his first home and family, but it tended to come back in odd pleasant flashes when he interacted with the children. He had been barely thirteen when the slavers came raiding out of the south, hitting all the villages along the edge of the veldt. All the great tribes raided back and forth for slaves. On the continent of Jedrua, mighty kingdoms and walled cities were built on the backs of slaves. Zarim had not yet encountered slaves in Rowanhart or Vorgensburg, but he suspected there might be some: he had not really gone looking and was not certain that he wanted to find out.

As slaves went, Zarim had been uncommonly fortunate. Most of the males from his village had been sold to the Black King of Dobomey for the diamond mines and those slaves had short, unhappy lives. An older woman buyer, looking for exotics saw him on the block and, thinking him younger, because of his small size, bought

him; and Zarim, being a clever boy, told her he was ten. The other boys of his village had always fiercely teased him for his size and, yet, in the end, that was what saved him. The buyer carried him across two continents and sold him as a love-slave in the land of a very strange race of women where he not only gained his freedom, but found true love with Blackbird and Paunys. Birdie got her size, feistiness, and cleverness from Zarim and he was very proud of his oldest child.

The chickens would not start laying again until the weather warmed in a few more weeks, so breakfast was a huge pot of oatmeal. Zarim carefully folded two kitchen towels, and then used them to grab the handles on the kettle, moving it from the stove to the big trivet on the middle of the table. He set out honey, a crock of butter, and a bowl of cinnamon. Then he rolled his eyes with a sigh as he realized that he had forgotten to wake the older children to milk the goats and therefore there was no milk to go with breakfast. He was not yet accustomed to having animals, although he enjoyed the extras they provided. He could always slip one of the kids some money and send them to the market. Birdie would complain. She wanted them to live within their means – meaning that no one was supposed to know about those chests of gold and gems buried beneath the house.

Zarim came out of the kitchen into the living room to see who else might be up and saw Mathryn curled on the couch, her chin resting on her chest. "Mathryn?" he shook her lightly. Her head flopped back and Zarim saw the wounds in her throat. He scooped her into his arms, crushing her to his chest.

"Oh Gods! LIZARD!"

Doors opened throughout the house and the young healer ran down the stairs.

"The vampire," Zarim sobbed. "He's been in the house. He got her again."

Lizard Read her, and then turned to one of the children. "Find Josiah. He's the only one who can help her. Zarim," he said quietly. "Get hold of yourself. Take her to Birdie's study. It's the safest room in the house. Make certain some one is there with her at all times while we try to find Josiah. Keep a weapon with you. This one can go out in the daylight."

Zarim took her upstairs; settling into the rocking chair with her cradled tight against him and began to rock.

* * *

Josiah spent most of that day working on Mathryn as he once had on Jysy in Creeya. He was exhausted when he finished and walked out into the waning sunlight to return home. Josiah paused by the birch trees in front of Hinkty Molly's, sinking onto one of the three iron laced boulders beneath them. The burning in his feet and ankles presaged another attack. He pulled a small bottle from the pouch at his side, unstopped it, and drank. Stress, exhaustion, and drink – deadly combinations –

always brought them on quicker and harder. *This is not the time to think about it*, he told himself. Two weeks had passed since Taun dragged him out of the water. He carried a collection of different drugs and potions in the satchel at his side and in his pockets, coded by the shapes of the vials; he refused to let anyone – especially Taun and Laurelyanne – know that he was becoming increasingly dependant on arcane substances to keep functioning.

He could not figure out why the vampire was attacking this child when they were expecting Mephistis' people to go after Skree and Taun's young foster sons. The guard had spent the day combing that end of town, looking for it. It was dark when he started back. He reached the middle of town just as alarm bells began to peal. The battle mage listened for a moment, noting the tone, tenor, and location: Bless Becca! The woman was a genius when she set up the system of alarms in the city: there would never be a mistake as to which bells and where and why they went off. The majority of the guards were on this end while the attack had finally come on the other. Damn Hoon and Mephistis! The attack on the child must have been meant as a diversion and he cursed, taking his bottle of whiskey from his pocket. Josiah took a long pull, feeling the power flare hotter and began to run. He dared not blindly Jump, not knowing what chanced ahead of him and what he might emerge in the midst of. Worse, the majority of his most potent attacks would be hampered by the presence of his own troops; he could not cut loose with power lest he catch his own myn in the blasts. Josiah began to run.

* * *

Three black swans flew toward Rowanhart, followed closely by eighteen blue gryphons and a single red. They had stayed longer in Creeya than they originally planned to, then again in Vallimrah and at the Monastery of St. Tarmus, gathering needed information. Weeks had passed. Captain Leanthe of the swan-mays saw smoke rising from fires throughout Rowanhart. They swept across the city and circled, taking in the struggle below them and it's nature. Leanthe hissed <*Undead! At them, ladies and lads!*> She sent back through the ranks. <*Not you, Little Bit. You're not ready yet.*>

They did not join the main battle, but sighted the sa'necari at the water's edge, beyond the reach of Aejys' troops and the struggling tritons. When they fell, the undead they personally controlled would stop fighting – the revenants and zombies. Killing them would change the odds significantly. Then the gryphons hit them. The swan-mays landed, changed and two began to lay about them with their bright swords while Daphne turned her arts against the invaders.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BATTLE OF ROWANHART

Isranon grudgingly admitted Hoon had his brilliance. After check-reining that newborn, Wrathscar, he loosed him the morning before the attack was scheduled for the evening. Wrathscar went straight for the unfortunate little girl and had most of the city guard hunting vampires in the wrong direction. Isranon, his clan-brothers and Anksha formed the prince's personal guard as the sa'necari assembled in the rainshadow of the south talon to manage the revenants and throw death webs at the troops – mostly the former since they would be going up against a large company of bradae, fighting priests of Aroana, who would counter them with prayer chants as well as swords and staves. Isranon had heard that the bradae were tough. And then there was the dragon. It seemed very odd to Isranon that a dragon would be fighting against them, considering that the dragons were supposed to be allies of the Waejontori. Dragons had even married into the royal house.

The sky darkened and Hoon gave the signal, a wave of the blade he carried. Isranon watched Mephistis lift his hands and then lower them. They stood in the spot that was most removed from the actual fighting, a towering wall of stone on two sides, sandy orange spiked with sere grass clumps. Isranon tasted the power as an acrid sourness pressing the back of his mouth and felt it as a weight on his neck and shoulders.

The undead rose from the sea like ghosts of sailors past with bits of seaweed and other ocean debris clinging about their faces and bodies. Males, females, and children, all the missing villagers and the murdered citizens of Timbren, swept into Rowanhart like waves breaking upon the rocks. Hoon had marched them through the waters and hidden them beneath the sands where even the tritons could not find them. The sa'necari followed them from their hiding places among the shadowy boulders, ledges, and outcroppings along the rough shore.

Alarm bells rang and conches blew. The tritons emerged from their dwellings only to be pulled down screaming in the initial rush. Others, farther up the shore managed to fall back to Skree's home as had been planned and formed up to make their stand there in defense of themselves and the children. A dragon's shrilling battle cry sounded and Skelevrathammon came. He hit the ranks of the undead with fury, throwing them about, buying more tritons time to reach the house where Mephistis' children were held. Skelly plucked several free just as they were being pulled down, placed them on his back and flew them to where the line had been drawn in the sands of battle. Then he went back.

Mephistis continued to work steadily. He would soon destroy most of their Ha'taren Guard in a single blow. His power had grown immense since taking that yuwenghau in mortgiefan. Isranon's stomach clenched, souring at the taste of death. Bile rose in his throat. He dug his fingers into Nevin's ruff. There was a wrongness to it all. He thought of Josiah. Then he saw the dragon returning.

"Mephistis! Look out!"

Skelevrathamon went for the prince, roaring. Mephistis lifted his head and threw the death web, which could have slain a hundred myn, at the dragon. Skelevrathamon was moving too swiftly to turn and avoid it entirely. The web struck him along the left side, the spell passing into his body, tearing flesh and feathers. Skelevrathamon spun out of control, shrieking and crashing into the rocky strand, rolling into the waves.

Isranon ran to Mephistis' side, Anksha and the lycans pacing him. They stared as Skelevrathamon dragged himself onto the beach. His head would start to sink and he would jerk himself up. He curled his one good fore claw around a small boulder, raised himself up, took aim and let fly with the huge rock.

Anksha and Isranon pulled Mephistis out of the way and the rock clipped him, knocking all three of them into the sand. Anksha rolled, coming to her feet instantly, rushing fearlessly, shrieking and clawing. Skelevrathamon knocked her into the waves fairly far out.

"Anksha!" Mephistis shouted, staggering to his feet.

Isranon supported him, drawing him back.

Mephistis snarled and threw another spell in Skelevrathamon's face. The dragon screamed and collapsed. "I'm going to kill it!" Mephistis lurched toward the unconscious dragon.

"Flee!" Isranon shouted, drawing his blades, backing toward his prince. A swan-may had descended from the skies to confront them with two white gryphons, a red, and two blues arrayed behind her. He could feel her power rising in bright sheets of white: spiritworker. She could cast their souls to the winds to be buffeted for eternity. *How can the King of Rowanhart command such diverse allies?* He had never seen so many strange folk and creatures coming to any one's aid. Certainly the Light was differently served than the Dark.

Mephistis turned, he hurt, and his power had been heavily spent defeating Skelevrathamon. Before he could see what had new threat had arrived, a lance of green living power struck him. He screamed, falling to his knees.

"Die, monster, and feel your soul cast to the winds for eternity!" The swan-may spiritworker shouted.

Mephistis realized he was too weak to fight them all. "Wait! I have death webbed the dragon. Kill me and the dragon dies. Allow us to flee and I will pull it out."

The swan-may walked cautiously around him to touch Skelevrathamon, Reading him. "Pull it out. I will allow you and your companions to withdraw from the field."

"You have my word."

* * *

<They're here! They're not attacking anywhere else. It's as if they know! > Zyne sent to Skree, deliberately filling her mind voice with a sense of anger and desperation – to cover her betrayal of him. She stood outside as part of the assigned watch. All the seafolk had been standing turns on watch for weeks. Soon Skree's act of abomination would end.

Skree raced downstairs, grabbing his trident from the pegs in the sitting room. "Taun! Get the boys and Dree into the cellar." He wondered how the creatures could have known where the children were. Only a handful of people, Aejs' inner circle and a few tritons Skree trusted, knew that the boys were her nephews.

Zyne whirled her long, heavy halberd with the ease of a landsmon with a much lighter weapon. She cut down three revenants, fighting her way along the edge of the house. As she reached the west side she shouted for the tritons guarding there to come to the south with her, that they were needed. As the last one rushed past her, she saw the vampires emerge from concealing rocks. One of them gave her a nod and she returned it.

* * *

"They're attacking the beach!" Omer told Aejs as she strode through the hall beside him with Soren. Soren had immediately ordered out the ha'taren heavy cavalry, throwing everything at them she could without stripping the keep. The bradae, fighting priests of Aroana, had received word from her, but they had already heard the sounds of battle and entered the fray. The general was angry beneath her veneer of calm.

"They know," Soren said, grimly. "I don't know how, but they know."

Aejs spied Jumpfree by the doors and broke into a run. "Come on!"

"Don't do anything stupid, majesty!" Soren shouted. "Don't get too far ahead of my soldiers." Since Ladonys' death, the old ha'taren, who had never expected to find herself a general, had grown increasingly crusty and cantankerous, especially when it came to trying to keep her king safe. It was widely debated in some circles as to who had more crust: Tagalong or Soren. Some said that Tagalong had found her match in Soren.

"Stupid, puddin' head paladins," Omer muttered in a close approximation of Tagalong. Then he flinched as he remembered the general was a paladin, smacking his palm against his forehead.

"Get your units on the walls, Captain. Let's be prepared should they try for the keep," Soren said, brusquely, then she started barking out orders to other officers,

she needed to get archers with fire pots onto roofs at the edge of the battle. Fire arrows would be something the undead would find quite nasty. They had to hold them on the beaches, not let them get loose in the city itself.

Omer snapped to, hoping that meant she had not heard him, but at the last instant her cracked, cranky voice muttered with deliberate loudness, "Stupid puddin' head captains." Omer grinned; at least Soren was a good sport most of the time. Life had gotten way more complex than it had been when Aejs had just run a tavern and a trading concession.

* * *

Aejs strode across the courtyard with Maranya, Bryngaryn, and Laelyn falling in at her side. Two companies of heavy horse were already mounting up and waiting for her as the halberdiers were ordered out as well as a light unit with torches and fire pots. The Sharani and Valdren units were all experienced with undead; the others would learn fast. Aejs intended to take personal command of one of the heavy units. Laelyn would take the other. Aejs had ordered Tagalong to stay out of it, although she worried that her childhood friend would not: the dwarf had taken a very serious head wound at Norendel and Aejs feared that it would not take much of a blow to that side to finish her. Furthermore, Tagalong's balance and timing had not always seemed right after that. Most would not have noticed, but Aejs did.

"We must hold them on the beaches," Aejs shouted at Laelyn, as she mounted Pyros. "At all cost, don't let them get loose in the city." Then she signed to Jumpfree and Skelly who immediately took wing. Aejs led her companies down Dock Street and Laelyn took the next one over, Blue Street.

Torches filled the streets, throwing a bright dancing glare across the buildings. Bonfires blazed at every intersection and now she could see the ones exploding along the shores in the distance where the tritons and Branch's fishermyn had started lighting them. Aejs' philosophy of "no such thing as non-combatants" was evident already. The people were frightened, but calm. "Block parents" in special tabards issued by the king were evacuating the less able-bodied; mostly children and elderly, from the area immediately around the battle to the Dynannan orphanage and other designated safe areas. Barricades made of wagons loaded with firewood and straw, which had been kept covered to keep out the damp, were going up quickly and efficiently. They would be doused with oil and set ablaze if the undead got that far. The vigilants in their special tabards and stripped armbands held a corridor open for the cavalry and soldiers to pass before closing the barriers behind them as Aejs had ordered days before. There would be no retreat.

A sea of rotting corpses surged toward them; the paladins and knights couched their lances and charged with the names of their gods on their lips. Aejs cursed softly as she saw the torn colors the closest ranks of the undead wore: the dark green and pale saffron of Timbren. These undead wore armor and drew blades to

meet the charge as the revenants erupted around to the sides of them in a heedless wave to bracket the charging cavalry. Hoon and Mephistis had not gone in and randomly taken and turned the populace of the towns, villages and cities: the warrior classes had become lesser bloods, which made them all the more dangerous.

Aejys slammed her lance through the chest of a vampire captain, discarded it, and drew Spiritdancer. The link with Pyros went far beyond anything she had ever had with Gwyndar. The unicorn was a raging flame between her thighs, striking with horn and hoof. Those undead pierced by the horn perished. She moved with him as if he were part of her own body. She never knew why she looked up in time to see Jumpfree knocked from the sky with arrows. She shouted a loud curse, but there was nothing she could do. Even if she took wing immediately she would never reach him before the undead tore him apart. Then he winked out, saved by his gift and she could only pray that the naïve young Jesmyrran's wounds were not serious.

The revenants rushed them from the sides as the undead soldiers charged the fronts, catching the cavalry between them. They attacked the mounts, dragging the riders off as the undead soldiers moved in to finish them. Aejys turned in the saddle, throwing a quick glance. The infantry should have reached them by now to help prevent this kind of encirclement. She saw them coming. Something large hit Pyros and Aejys was thrown. She rolled, striking around her. Spiritdancer seared through the revenants and destroyed them, but there were far too many. She could hear Pyros screaming in her mind "where are you? Where are you?" as she was forced farther and farther from him by the battle. An arrow caught her wing as she scrambled to her feet only to be knocked down again. The arrow twisted in the wound and broke off. Aejys rolled and came to her feet. She was dimly aware of Maranya, on foot, fighting through toward her.

Her exposed skin was torn and bloody from where she struck the stones of the rocky ground. Claws fastened on her side, cutting deep, ripping through her armor like a knife through butter: Lemyari that one. Aejys had seen the damage Galee's claws had done to Dynarien's matchless armor. The Lemyari sprang away from her, avoiding the sword. Revenants swarmed her, biting and tearing at her arms and legs. She twisted, one skilled stroke severing the revenant's head. She cut the others away only to have more rush at her, heedless of the flashing blade.

A sudden impact on Aejys' shoulders knocked her down. Her gauntleted hand cracked against a rock and Spiritdancer whirled from her grip. Claws flipped her over before she could gain her feet and a vampire sprang atop her, his claws digging around the gorget protecting her neck.

<Mine. > Hoon's voice slammed into her mind. <Stop fighting. You want me. You know it. >

"Damn you!" Aejys' hands closed on his throat, forcing him loose as she crushed his windpipe, which did nothing to slow him down. She brought her legs up, taking

him in the mid-section and throwing him off.

<If I can't have you, no one will, > Hoon snarled. He leaped onto her again, his hands forming claws. He shoved long, venomous nails into her chest, close to the breastbone and expended his poisons, determined to knock her down enough to carry her off. He was startled when the venom did not immediately bring her down. He shoved the nails of his other hand into her arm to give her all ten, but before they could discharge their full load, Aejs threw him off and rolled to her feet. She summoned Spiritdancer and the sword flew to her hand. Then she faced Hoon, the sword dancing in her grip. "Not this time, Hoon. I'll see you in hell before you touch me again."

<Another time, then. > Hoon shape-shifted and fled.

Aejys looked about her and saw that the battle seemed to have moved away, closer to Skree's home. She felt dizzy. The tiny wounds burned and hurt worse than all the others combined. She staggered against the wall of a house and leaned there, her wings drooping. Her breathing came in deep, ragged pulls. Growling and shuffling steps made her look up. The undead surrounded her and she had no idea where they had come from.

The king gave a small resigned laugh, a tiny shake of her head and forced her body to straighten as she pushed away from the wall. "Wrong meat, assholes." Then she saw Hoon standing behind them, driving them toward her. He was a canny old monster, unwilling to risk so much as a brush of the blade across his flesh until he understood it better.

"I'll say!" Maranya sauntered to her side.

Hoon glared at this newcomer. There was something familiar about her and yet he was certain he had never met her. "You can die," Hoon said quietly, struggling to contain the blood rage rising inside him, making him teeter on the knife blade of vampiric madness. "I'm taking the king."

Aejys fought well, despite her injuries; but Maranya was like nothing and no one Hoon had ever seen before. The King's Shield danced like the avatar of death, forcing Hoon to flee again.

Maranya realized the street had gone suddenly quiet. She did not recognize the area. She and the king had been driven far from the main battle after being unhorsed. Undead littered the ground in mutilated pieces. Only beheading; a stake or blade through the heart; or burning destroyed them. She made certain of several as she turned about.

Head thrown back, Aejs leaned against a building, breathing in ragged pulls, one wing drooping oddly. Maranya took in the blood, torn surcoat and rent armor. She reached the king just as Aejs started to slide down the wall.

"Aejys!" Maranya got an arm under her shoulders and lowered her gently.

Aejys swallowed. "Wing's broken," she breathed hoarsely. "Venom...lamia-venom." She raised her hand to brush at a series of tears and punctures in her arm. "A little paralyzes...lot kills. He wants me alive. I'm yuwenghau...he's guessing...how much to...bring me down."

"Rest."

"No. He's out there. He's coming back."

Maranya scanned the street. "Where are we?"

"Help me stand and I'll tell you."

Aejys recognized some of the buildings "Textile warehouses. We're about four blocks from Dock Street, that way." The broken wing dragged. Maranya gathered some leather belts from the undead and used it to quickly strap the wing down, then shouldered the king's weight and they began to walk.

They paused at each corner, scanning the street in each direction before going on. Maranya could tell that Aejys was weakening as they walked by the way the king sagged more and more heavily against her. She thought she saw someone small, then several someones, children possibly. They faded back and she heard them running.

* * *

A series of firewalls created by the infantry and city guard from strategically placed wagons of brush and oil, which they had rolled out and overturned before firing had divided the undead army into more manageable chunks, buying Rowanhart's units time to reform. As the two companies came together, Laelyn's eye swept them and spied Bryngaryn. She nudged her wynderjyn to the younger woman's side with a thought and the touch of her knee. They still had not broken through to the triton enclave.

"Where is the king?" Laelyn demanded.

Bryngaryn felt her body tighten. "I don't know."

"Take six myn and go back. Pray Aroana you find her alive."

Then Laelyn signed that they were going through. Several of the halberdiers used their pole arms to pull two of the burning wagons aside and the cavalry went on. A shout came behind them as the city guard, who had been vampire hunting on the far side of Rowanhart finally arrived with Josiah.

"Where's Aeijys?" the mage asked.

"I don't know," Bryngaryn told him. "I'm going to find her."

Josiah grabbed the reins of a riderless horse and mounted. "I'm going with you." He felt in his pouch as he turned the animal, finding the vial of straight amphereon – he had coded the three bottles by shape – and took a large swallow before capping and returning it to the pouch. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He would crash hard when this night ended.

* * *

Lizard and seven of the older children stood in a circle, listening to a Vorgeni boy named Yvery telling what he had seen near the textile warehouses.

"The king," he gasped out, clutching at a stitch in his side from running hard. "Just a single paladin with her and undead swarming up behind, from all sides."

"Where?" Lizard asked, dropping a reassuring hand on Yvery shoulder.

"Cloth merchant warehouses."

Lizard looked up at the sound of hooves and saw Pyros and Tovari running alongside several knights and paladins, he recognized Josiah riding among them. "If you're looking for the king, this boy's found her," he shouted to them.

"Alive?" Bryngaryn asked.

"Yeah," Yvery shouted back, turning. "But not for long if you don't hurry."

Bryngaryn reached down, dragging him across her saddle. Yvery gave a yelp and pointed. Lizard and the orphan-brigade followed.

* * *

Hoon let the corpse fall. Hunger burned hard and desperate; getting worse as the night wore on; he writhed inside his own skin as in a cage; the madness of obsession was on him and he could not fight it. Hunger seared him with need, calling through his veins and along his throat. He had drunk three lives to death and still he hungered. He craved the blood of two women to the exclusion of all others and one of those was six thousand years dead. But even more he craved to possess her, to turn her that he might then drink from her forever as some vampires did with their vampiric mates. If he could not possess her then he would destroy her and find another. His features twisting in the hard grip of an overpowering Blood Obsession greater than any he had felt in centuries. The instincts of the vampire were closer than ever to shoving aside the personality and reason of the man; something that Hoon, in calmer moments feared. Then he gathered more undead and went to find Aeijys

again.

* * *

"You die this night!" Hoon screamed. "You die. If I do not take you now, my servants will reach for you in the night. My snares will find you. What I cannot possess I destroy."

Aejys' mouth drew together in a grim line. She forced her body to straighten, her sword coming back to guard. "Try if you must, monster. I will never surrender. I will never yield."

Maranya moved nearer to her, eying the circle of undead that waited for Hoon's signal to close with them. There were too many.

<*Broiled, baked, or fried?*> Pyros sent, rearing and trumpeting angrily.

They had finally overtaken Aejys.

Before the battle could join, a thin lance of blue light struck from behind Hoon into the ranks surrounding Aejys, spreading into a barbed net. It dragged down the revenants, crisping their rotting flesh to ash, leaving charred bones in brittle piles. Hoon spun, darting to the side as a second lance barely missed him. "Abelard!" He snarled. One word. It would only take one word to trigger Josiah's memory and reduce the mage to helplessness. One word. Hoon swallowed it back as the word rose to his lips. No. He would not lose his last snare.

Josiah stalked toward him, striking again and again, driving him along the flagstones. "Stay away from her, Hoon. Stay the Hell away from her."

Hoon turned and ran.

Aejys fell back against the wall and then slid down the wall onto her butt, bending forward over her folded arms, Spiritdancer still clutched in her hand. The ground was wet and soaked through her pants. She sheathed the sword. Her limbs felt heavy, dragged down by weariness. The world started to gray out.

Maranya caught her as she crumpled the rest of the way, cradling her shoulders, leaning her head against her breasts.

"Stop Hoon," Aejys whispered hoarsely.

Josiah knelt beside her. Part of him wanted desperately to touch her, while another wanted to run away from her. A memory rose, not in forms, words or images, but a taste of terror that said, "stay away from her. If you truly love her, stay away from her."

"Hoon..." Aejys said again. "Stop him."

Josiah nodded, backing away from her, seizing on it as an excuse, for he suddenly felt that same terror at the thought of going after the vampire that he felt of being near his mate. He climbed into the saddle, sucked in a series of fortifying breaths, and went off in Hoon's wake.

Bryngaryn and the riders dismounted around Maranya and the king, bringing their torches closer. Pyros whickered and pulled at Aejys, getting no response. That was when Maranya realized how still the king had gone. She snapped a worried glance at Bryngaryn before drawing off her gauntlet to reach her fingers beneath Aejys' mail and gorget to find the pulse in her neck.

"She's alive. We need to get her back."

Bryngaryn nodded. "Laelyn sent us after her. Someone needs to tell her we've found the king."

"That too."

Bryngaryn gestured at one of the knights.

"Let me see her, I'm a healer," a new voice said and all eyes turned to Lizard and several of the older members of the Orphan-Brigade armed with bows and slings: Except for Lizard, they were all less than thirteen years old.

"We decided to come see if we could help."

"You brought children to a battle?" Maranya frowned.

"My myn are probably the best ranged units in the city – except for those Valdren rangers. We've destroyed four vampires and six revenants with no losses." Lizard knelt, reaching through one of the tears in Aejys' vambrace to touch her arm and Read her. "We need to get her out of here."

Bryngaryn shouldered her arm while Maranya took the other and they lifted her between them. The children formed up around them. "Those wounds are poisoned," he said. "What kind of creatures did you fight?"

Poisoned? Maranya sucked air, feeling suddenly chill beneath the layers of fur-lined winter clothing as she glanced from the sides of her eyes at her liege-lord. What had Aejys said? "Lamia venom."

Lizard Read her again, walking more quickly now. Bryngaryn explained how if the children had not seen them they would never have arrived in time.

* * *

Snow began to drift in tiny flurries across the battlements. Tamlestari and Soren watched from the walls, standing beside Omer. Soren held a spyglass to her eye. The general's face and stance tightened. She lowered, the glass, turning first to Omer, "Get the Gate open." Then louder when he did not move fast enough, "Get the damned gate open!" She collapsed the glass, shoving it into her pouch and starting after Omer.

"What is it?" Tamlestari asked.

"Stay here!" Soren went after Omer.

Omer had the portcullis rising by the time Soren reached him. He glanced his question, rather than asking.

"It's the king. They're carrying her. They're still some blocks off."

Omer sent a guardsmon in for a litter, blankets, and a healer. "I'll go back up, she'll be able to see it soon, even without the glass."

Soren nodded. "I pray the king's..." the general's face tightened into a grimace.

"We all do."

Then Soren led the small group of guardsmyn out. A shrill, high cry, one and then many broke across the sky. Soren looked up. A huge flying creature passed before the bright orb of the moon, tawny body and bright blue feathers, crested head.

"Gryphons!" The general shouted. "The swan-mays have come!" Then she ran, seeing Aejs and the others nearing. Aejs shivered violently; sweat congealing on her face at the touch of the cold air. Lizard and Pyne, the keep's healer, took the unconscious king from Maranya and Bryngaryn, wrapped her in blankets, and strapped her onto the litter. The snow fell harder as they turned toward the keep. Pyros danced anxiously beside them.

* * *

They carried Aejs upstairs and moved her onto the broad bed in her room. Maranya and Bryngaryn unfastened and removed Aejs' armor, then stepped aside to let the healers work. Tamlestari nodded at Pyne. "Lizard and I can handle this. They're bringing many more wounded in."

Pyne glanced around the room, at every face, and then acquiesced. "Yes, highness."

Tamlestari took Aejs' wrist and Read her as deeply as she could go. "This is not like anything I've seen before." She washed the blood from Aejs' arm, pointing out

the puncture wounds and tears. Unlike others who had been stuck by the Lemyari, Aejs' arms showed no sign of the blackening, necrotizing flesh around the punctures. Her skin remained clean and clear of the slightest reaction to the venom.

"I have seen venoms and poisons many times," Lizard answered. "A hydra killed my sister during the war. They became an obsession of mine. The poison is a nerve toxin. I've never seen anything exactly like it before. But similar. Her resistance is many times greater than any Sharani I've ever encountered. It's making her sick, but she does not appear to be in any danger."

"Are you certain?" Tamlestari had been trained as a battlefield surgeon and paladin before learning that she was the prince of Vallimrah.

Lizard began to explain, indicating that Tamlestari should Read her again. He took a tiny glass rectangular plate from his pack, smearing a sample of her blood on it and put it back in a little case.

"What's that for?" Tamlestari asked.

"I'm making a collection of blood and venom types so that other readers can examine them. Learn to recognize them. They will see what the lamia venom in her blood looks like. I wish someone could get me a hand from one of those creatures."

"I...may have...killed one," Aejs said, her voice so soft it almost slipped past unheard.

Tamlestari started, and then saw the tired azure eyes were open. "Aejs!" She caught at her, a single tear finally escaping.

Aejs smiled crookedly. "Business. Quick...before they burn the bodies."

Maranya, who had been standing near the door while they worked, straightened. "I'll send someone." She left the room and then returned. "You'll have a collection of hands preserved in snow by morning. I hope one of them is what you want."

"Did we stop them?" Aejs asked.

"Yes."

"The children?"

Tamlestari frowned. "I don't know. I'll send someone."

Maranya gave Bryngaryn a look that told her it was her turn and the younger paladin left the room briefly to talk to the squires and pages waiting in the parlor.

"Good," Aejs said, slipping from consciousness again.

Tamlestari felt more confident in Lizard's words, having seen Aejs awaken. They cleaned and bound the king's wounds.

"You should talk to Josiah. He wants to start a school for healers. He's been talking about it for a while. He thinks that by developing new techniques, lesser talents like menders and touch-healers might eventually be able to duplicate some of the results of the life-mages." Then she saw how exhausted the young man looked and remarked on it.

"I've had no rest since dawn," Lizard explained. "When Zarim found Mathryn. Then the battle. Birdie and I each took units of orphan-brigade for clean up. We rotated the units, but not ourselves. Aejs does not approve of everything we do with the children...but she's alive because of them. We did stakings and choppings, evacuated wounded and told those paladins where to find the king...showed them. Eventually the children will find their way into either the Guild, the military or intelligence work."

Tamlestari nodded. "I'll give you what aid I can." Then she Read Aejs again. "I agree about the venom. She's holding her own."

* * *

The seafolk fought and died, arranged around Taun and Skree's home. For every undead creature they destroyed, five appeared to take its place. Skree used his trident to focus his power, burning them down in a sea-green scythe, but their numbers were incredible and he knew that eventually his strength and magic would begin to fail.

"We can't hold them much longer," Zyne shouted, retreating to Skree's side. Blood ran down her body from a dozen wounds. A large vampire sprang upon her back and a single long nail slid into her leg. She screamed as the venom raced through her and collapsed, convulsing on the sand.

Skree pivoted, sweeping his power toward Hoon. The ancient Lemyari released Zyne and leaped away. Hoon landed, rolling toward the shelter of the rocks, disappearing into the darkness.

Skree cursed.

A shout came from the other side as Laelyn and her companies finally broke through to the enclave. A ragged cheer went up from the tritons and they rallied. Josiah riding on their heels, dismounted beside Skree who knelt, cradling Zyne.

"She's dying," Skree told Josiah. "The venom appears to be similar to what took Aejs down a year ago. Aejs' blood might help her. An anti-venom."

As Josiah knelt by Skree, all the confidence and focus melted from his mind, fading into confusion and cold panic. Josh could not think. His mind became a jumble of information and images, most of which he could not understand. He shouldered Zyne, pulling her from Skree's arms. He trembled violently, his stomach souring and bile rising in his throat with dread. The sailor was about to do something he did not comprehend and it terrified him; but he could not stop himself. Skree saw the change come over Josh and barely had time to grab his shoulder before his godson Jumped.

Maranya started from her chair, hands on her blades when they materialized.

Josh took Aeijys' arm pressing it to Zyne's without a word to anyone, intending to start the spell. Maranya reacted instantly to the sensed threat, knocking him to his knees and straddled him, her knee in his back and a stiletto at the carotid artery. Josh – with Josiah's battle-mage instincts – reacted just as quickly, drawing a stiletto, catching her by the hair and dragging her forward across his shoulder to press it under her chin as he fell and before her hold could tighten on him. They locked together, staring into each other's eyes in a tangle of arms and blades. In a moment they would both die.

Bryngaryn had her sword out, but she was on the far side of the room. She would never reach them in time.

"What the hell were you doing?" Maranya demanded. She could see now that he had reacted instinctively, for there was no sanity in his eyes, only the strange, desperate panic of a wounded creature – which made him all the more dangerous.

"Zyne's dying," Josh said. "I wanted to use shared life to give her some of Aeijys' blood as an anti-venom."

Maybe it was his manner, his attitude, his words; maybe it was the fact that Josh did not first ask the condition of his wounded mate, the king, or whether she was strong enough for this; but it sent a flush of anger across Lizard's face. "Are you asking me to risk the King for Zyne?"

"Did you know the king was wounded when you brought us here?" Skree asked Josh. He was seeing something in the man he had never suspected was there, either as he had known him before his incarnations merged, or after. Josh was his best friend's son. He had known him as a small child and then searched for him for twenty years after his parents were murdered. But looking at him now – this was someone Skree did not know.

"Yes," Josh said, without taking his eyes from Maranya, speaking just a trifle defensively. "Just a little bit. It won't endanger her."

"How can you be certain? You're not a Reader!" Lizard demanded.

"I just know! She's going to die, damn it!"

"Perhaps if you give mine to Aeijys as soon as you give hers to Zyne?" Tamlestari stood in the doorway, looking from the troubling expression on Josh's face to Lizard's uncharacteristic anger. Lizard was one of the gentlest people Tamlestari knew. She ranked him right next to Taun, which made him one of the best healers in the city. Josh was also. The Josh he had been before he became Josiah. She knew he loved Aeijys; knew he would never deliberately hurt her; and yet she felt chilled and strangely uncertain in a way she could not describe. Something was wrong. She felt it in the back of her mind; but because she could not say why or what, she disregarded it, wrote it off to exhaustion. Josiah was worried, perhaps too worried, about a friend who had helped him through his illness. And he had just fought a battle – a battle that must have sorely tested his damaged body.

Lizard nodded. "Maranya, let him up. Put Zyne on the bed next to her." Josh and Maranya separated as Tamlestari and Lizard defused the situation. Skree settled Zyne beside Aeijys. "Tamlestari, I want you right here so that not an instant passes before the second spell starts. Cast Shared Life." Lizard was the most sensitive reader in the city and, as he monitored the transference, he noticed a tiny life growing within Zyne. So far as he knew, she did not have a partner. He continued to Read her. "She'll live. The child also."

Aeijys' face went suddenly pale and she twisted up in pain and shock. Lizard knocked Josh backwards screaming. "Oh my gods! What the hell are you doing! You're taking too much."

Skree dragged Zyne off the bed.

Maranya grabbed Josh, forcing him back to the bed. "Get the next transference going quickly, or so help me, I'll kill you."

Aeijys steadied as she received blood and life-force from both Tamlestari and Maranya. Servants took Zyne from Skree, moving her to another wing of the keep to be tended by others.

"I think we should check on Taun," Josh said, as much out of a desire to escape as out of a desire to be certain of Taun's safety. He touched Skree's arm and they Jumped.

Lizard read Aeijys again, to be certain that she had not suffered from what they had done. "I don't like this," Lizard shook his head. "She's much weaker than she was before. I don't have slightest trace of mage-gift so there's things I can't Read for. I'd like to send for some of the other Readers to check her, but there's so many wounded right now." Lizard rubbed his face, looking very tired and even younger than his mere sixteen years. "Highness, Maranya, will you step into the parlor with me for a moment." When he had closed the bedroom door behind him, the Dynannan healer turned to them. "I don't want my words going any further, but after what I have just seen and heard, I do not trust Josiah. Don't leave him alone with the

king. Maranya, having watched that take down. If you had to fight him, could you take him?"

Maranya rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Abelard's good. But he lacks stamina. He's ill. There's the magic to consider... But yes, healer, I can take him."

"Highness, could you put me up for the night? I would like to be here when she wakes."

"By your leave, highness," Maranya said. "I would like to sit with her."

"Yes to both of you."

"And don't leave her alone for a moment until there's some improvement. I'm concerned he may have done something else to her that I can't find. But all the ones with mage-sense are out there." Lizard nodded toward the beaches where there was still scattered fighting.

* * *

As soon as the attack began Taun went after the children. He lifted the boys from their cribs, settling them against his shoulders as Dree jumped up, wrapping herself around his neck. He hurried downstairs, leaving the children on the sitting room floor with Dree while he got the trapdoor to the cellar open. Then he went back for them. Taun had just gotten them settled again on his hips when the sound of splintering wood caused him to look up. The shutters on the sitting room windows slammed open to hang half off their hinges. Taun screamed as the vampires and revenants hit him. The little nerien spun, clutching the boys tightly and tried to run. Teeth sank into Taun's arms, legs, and neck. Claws sliced into his back and he was thrown down. His side and hip struck the low table before the couch. The impact forced the breath from his lungs. Taun fell to his knees, then onto his face, curling around the children, trying to shield them with his body, pressing them between himself and the table. Dree shrieked and then fell silent. Darkness swirled through Taun's mind, dragging him down as the creatures drank the life from him. A sa'necari climbed through the window, glancing about for the children, but did not immediately see them, hidden as they were by Taun's body.

Wolff was very afraid; so was his brother. Fear triggered the magic. Their bodies matured months in moments. They squirmed free, crawled under the table, and tottered to their feet to face the feeding monsters. Fauxx's hand caught his brother's. The link snapped into place. Power joined to power. Unseen beneath their winter garments, the flame-shaped birthmarks, identical to the mark in Aejys' palm, glowed.

"Bad things!" Fauxx cried, angrily. Light flared around their chubby fingers, danced in patterns of flame in their eyes and around their heads. "Bad!" It engulfed the undead feeding on Taun. Ash – all that remained of the undead – drifted through the sitting room, falling on everything. The sa'necari's eyes widened, "What manner of

monsters have you sired, Mephistis?" he growled, throwing up his shields as he moved closer to the boys.

Wolff's manner changed and a voice, not his own, came from his lips, "The Children of the Risen Dead shall destroy their fathers' evil."

The sa'necari did not even have time to scream as Fauxx's lance of cleansing flame burned out his heart and he fell dead. The presence left the child. Wolff tottered to Taun and plopped down, pulling at his unresponsive body. "Papataun," he wept, continuing to pull at him. He placed his cheek next to Taun's and Read him. Taun's flesh was chill and clammy with shock and the nearness of death. Wolff, tears in his large eyes, crawled onto Taun, touched the wound in the side of the little nerien's throat. The light danced across the wound and it closed.

The front door slammed open. Skree and Josiah had seen the shattered the window and charged in prepared to fight. The triton's eyes widened at the dead sa'necari, then they saw Taun lying too still on the floor, Fauxx clinging to him crying and Wolff crawling over him. There was no sign of Dree.

"Taun!" Skree dropped to his knees, moved Wolff aside, and Read his mate, cradling him in his arms.

Josiah immediately began shared life, using first himself and then Skree as donors. As soon as they had left Zyne, Josiah's head had cleared and he forgot what he had done in those confused moments in Aeijys' room except for a vague outline of events as if it had all happened in shadow. A single thing stood out: Zyne carried his child.

"That isn't enough, you must give him more," Skree snarled.

"We need some others," Josiah said, his voice steady. "I can't just drain you to save him."

"Yes, you can!" Skree growled. "Give him more."

"No. Stay here."

Josiah stepped out, going into the yard. The battle was ending. The sa'necari had lost. Bradae surgeons were moving among the wounded. "I need donors," he said to the nearest one. "They got Taun."

The surgeon looked grave, "The children?"

"Safe. Taun must have fought the creatures off." *But what killed the sa'necari?*

"A moment." Then she went to several tritons that were acting as litter bearers, moving the wounded to a field hospital they had set up in the Nerindalorian temple.

The tritons followed Josiah back to the house.

Skree still sat in the sitting room; not wanting to leave the children alone, he had not yet moved Taun. Wolff touched the wound in Taun's leg, light flared.

"What's he doing?" Josiah asked, his eyes widening.

Skree looked at Wolff, seeing the child close another tear in Taun's body. "Healing. He's closing the wounds."

"He's a lifemage."

"Yes." pride roused and threaded through Skree's desperate need to save Taun.

Josiah knelt, beginning the spell of shared life. He was not a Reader, but he could tell from the expression on Skree's face that they were pulling Taun through. Josiah was exhausted by the time the day dawned and Skree moved his mate to the bedroom.

Wolff watched the whole process, following it easily. He did not yet have words to explain what he saw and learned, but it sank deep within him and lodged in the intuitive recesses of his infant mind. Should he ever need to use the spell, he would be able to cast it. Finally he curled up and went to sleep. One of the tritons picked him up and put him to bed. They looked for Fauxx and found him sleeping behind one of the chairs, Dree on his lap.

When Josiah touched her, Dree raised her calico head and sent *<They killed the undead .Fauxx killed the sa'necari. >*

CHAPTER TWENTY

TREACHERY AND GOOD WILL

Josiah stood for a long time, staring at the aftermath of the carnage. Most of the wounded had been moved; the slain lay in a long row, waiting for their relatives to come and identify them and fetch their bodies home for burial. There were too many wounded to do anything better for them yet. Josiah was exhausted, but then everyone was. He thought about how many people had died, who might have been saved had there been lifemages. Margren and Mephistis had been thorough in their acts of genocide, stealing the lifemages from their homes and murdering them in unholy rites. There were two that might become true lifemages in Rowanhart, when they grew into their powers: an eight year old girl that Taun had discovered and then moved into the keep for her safety and just hours ago they had learned of Wolff. Who would teach them? All that knowledge had been lost with those slain and would have to be rediscovered. Then he thought about all of the minor healing gifts, the

menders and the touch-healers and himself with his spell of shared life. Maybe, if all the lesser talents came together they could learn ways to combine them, find new techniques, more effective ways to use the gifts.

"I'm going to found a school," he told Skree. "for healers and mages with gifts that can be adapted to healing. I want to make it better." *If I can at least get it started, others can finish it...*

"What about Zyne?" Skree asked suddenly. "How are you going to make it better for Zyne? It's your child, isn't it?"

Josiah looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. I've been sleeping with her... Every time I got drunk... I slept with her."

Skree's face hardened. "That's a lie. You were sleeping with her from the beginning and you were sober. Don't blame it on the drink. Furthermore, don't try to blame the child on someone else. She has slept with you and you alone. Do you think my people are blind? They have been bringing me word of this for months."

"I don't love her," Josiah said, lamely. He had spent weeks trying to understand what had drawn him to Zyne and what held him to her. Yet all that came of it was confusion, distress, and overwhelming shame. When he tried to hold himself back from her, his body and mind filled with the same intense longing he felt for the liquor – he felt drunk in her presence, even when he was sober; yet he knew it could not possibly be love. He had loved Aejs through two lifetimes and now he felt so coated in filth he could not bring himself to touch her, making excuses as he turned away from her advances, her kisses. Sooner or later she would discover it, her heart would break and his would follow – and yet he could not let go of Zyne.

"Think about what you have done. Zyne is in love with you. Aejs loves you. You betray them both."

Josiah gave him a stricken look. "Don't tell Aejs. Please, don't tell her."

Skree's lips twisted in disgust, his nostrils flaring. He raked Josiah with his eyes and returned to his house. Josiah followed him. Skree knelt on the cedar mat, his features harsh, his fingers pressing a drying stain of his mate's blood.

"Godfather..."

"Leave me," Skree growled deep in his throat.

"Skree..."

The triton whipped round on him, slamming him against a wall with his hand tight to his throat. "For Taun's sake and Tori's memory ... just that ... I will not kill you. You knew the king was wounded. Had no one been there to question it, you would have

cast the spell without considering the danger. I saw it in your eyes. You would have killed the king, your mate. You are a traitor. Now get out of my house before I change my mind."

Josiah staggered to his feet, reeled away from Skree and fled. He managed to get away from the immediate area, but had no idea in which direction he traveled. He felt disoriented. Nothing looked familiar. It had to be. This was just a confusion of the senses. *No. That's not possible. That's not possible. I wouldn't have. Killed the king...killed the king...oh gods, Aejys. Don't think that... I wouldn't have. I would never do anything to hurt you.*

He stumbled to his knees, breathing hard, pain coming up in a rush along with dizziness. He should not have needed the medicine so soon, but the stress he had put on the magic and his body had been incredible. It seemed as if all the drugs he had been consuming for hours wore off in a single instant, entirely without warning. His hands fumbled at the bottle in his pocket, his fingers refusing to grip. He had to use both hands, shaking hard to get it out and nearly spilled it. His vision grayed.

Someone stopped. He did not know her. She put a supporting hand to his shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

"My medicine. I need to take my medicine," he said.

She steadied his hand and he swallowed. Warm flooded through him. His vision cleared. She had large dark eyes and dead leaves in her black hair. She was a tiny female, naked, seemingly unbothered by the snow, which fell thick about them, crouching, balanced on the balls of her feet. "If you weren't already dying, I'd let you play with my tail."

Josiah's blood chilled. He had never seen anything like her before. "What are you?"

"I'm Anksha," she replied and scampered away.

* * *

Josiah returned home to grim faces. He had almost not returned to the keep. Josiah always faced his mistakes; Josh always ran away from them. While Skree's words still echoed painfully in the back of his mind, the frightening encounter with the strange she-creature on the street had brought Josiah more to the fore and pushed Josh further into the recesses. The main hall had been turned into a hospital, wounded guardsmyn and soldiers laid along the walls on pallets while the keep's healers moved among them. At the far end near the stairs, Omer and Tagalong stood talking with Soren, Lizard, and the swan-may Captain Leanne. A large number had fallen to the venom of the Lemyari. The healers were hard pressed to keep any of them alive, including the Sharani. Lizard agreed to have Birdie invoke Dynanna to see if an antidote existed and could be brought from Imralon by the irascible deity. Lizard strode past Josiah, favoring him with an ugly glare, which startled the mage,

whose memories were severely blurred by Hoon's coercions— Then Omer, following on Lizard's heels, stopped Josiah to talk.

"We got hit hard," Omer told him, watching his face closely, searching for something. "Aejys is wounded. Lamia-venom."

"I know." What did Omer want him to say? Were the looks the guard captain giving him because of Aejys? Did everyone know what he had done, but him? Or was it because of Zyne? Did everyone know about him and Zyne? Did Aejys know? He felt dirty and ashamed. He could already feel the pressure gathering in his loins at the thought of Zyne, despite his exhaustion.

"One of the rangers, who just came in, thinks they were harvesting the villages and farmsteads as they marched to swell their ranks. That's why we kept missing them. They started out small and got bigger. Then they took nearly all of Timbren and, as we suspected after that ship crashed, must have hidden there a long time. If it hadn't been for the swan-mays and their gryphons we might have lost this one."

"Where did they put Zyne?" Josiah asked, distractedly, only half hearing what Omer said. Exhaustion had begun to creep back over him. His hands trembled and he pressed them together to hide it.

Omer told him, then watched him go, frowning deeply at Josiah's actions in going straight for Zyne, down the opposite corridor, rather than Aejys; thereby confirming the rumors that he was betraying his mate. "Damn," he muttered. "I always knew he wasn't good enough for her."

Tagalong stalked over to him, pulling her gauntlets off and shoving them through her belt. "What's got ya riled?" Tagalong asked, reading the look on Omer's face.

"Shit-fucking prince-consort," Omer muttered.

Tagalong blinked. "What'd he do?"

"Aejys is wounded, yet he doesn't go to her — no, he goes to his triton leman instead. If it were up to me, I'd catch him taking that ride and put a sword through both of them."

Tagalong looked more unhappy than angry. She could not hold back much longer. Josiah was not only betraying Aejys, but also doing so in such a way as to make the cuckolded king the laughing stock of the kingdom. She had to tell Aejys. It would hurt, but she had to tell her. "Do you know her name?"

Omer's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned in disgust. "Zyne."

* * *

Maranya brooded. She believed, with every fiber of her being, that had no one been present to call Josiah to account, he would have killed the king: Maranya had seen how the spell weakened Aejs in the lines of the king's face, the way her body had twisted in pain during the moments before she received the transfusion from the prince and herself. Had Josiah been anyone else, other than the king's triaded mate, Maranya would have already killed him. Given a good opportunity she might still do it. Put the dying man out of his misery.

The door opened and Tagalong came in. "Thought I'd spell ya. Let ya get some sleep."

Maranya shook her head. "I'm not leaving until she wakes up at least once."

"Okay." Tagalong pulled another chair in from the parlor and sat down next to Maranya.

"How long have you known the king?" Maranya's voice was tight.

"Since we were kids. Grew up together." Tagalong smiled at a flash of memory, an image of them running wild together on the back streets of Armaten at every opportunity. "Boy, did we have some times."

"And Josiah? How long have you known him?"

"Five, six years. Why?" Tagalong had spent too many years prowling the mean streets in search of interesting times not to catch the small nuances in Maranya's guarded tones.

"Who is more important to you, Aejs or Josiah?"

"Aejs. Yer puttin' a tack in my chair and yer gonna tell me what it is."

"I think he tried to kill her."

* * *

The Dancer moved through a landscape of willow trees and glistening natural arches of orange and red stone, the colors of sunset. Unlike other souls sealed to blades, the Dancer dwelled in a private realm captured in a gem on the sacred sword and she had gone there voluntarily when near to death from old age. Here she was forever young and strong, at the height of her powers and knowledge. Lizard did not know whether he had been drawn into the Dancer's dream or whether she had entered his, bringing her world with her.

"Ah, Lizard," the Dancer sang softly, "I wondered when you would come to visit me."

Lizard felt suddenly shy. "You knew I wanted to speak to you?"

"Yes, I felt your longing each time you spoke to Aejs," the Dancer replied.

"I – I have so many questions."

"It is always best to begin with what troubles one's heart."

"Shared life...Josiah..."

"Would it have killed her?"

Lizard nodded, unable to say the words.

"Yes, Lizard, it would have. I tremendously improved her resistance. With each exposure to a poison or venom that resistance increases. Should she invoke the mark on her palm it will increase still more. As it is, Josiah has delayed her healing by days and possibly weeks."

Lizard shook his head. "Why would he endanger her?"

The Dancer sighed. "I do not know. I am not a mind-reader."

"But you knew I wanted to speak with you."

The Dancer swept around him, her fingers brushing his face with the softness of a spring breeze. "You have a sweet and open face, revealing every thought as if it were the pages of a book."

"Oh!" He flushed.

The Dancer laughed and it was like a song. "You will discover, when you have had more contact with other healers and Readers, that the most finely attuned among you all possess that characteristic – that rampant sensitivity so keen that it filters through all aspects of your lives. You have it. Your friend Taun has it. Kalirion has decided two things. He wishes you to write down everything I know of healing and genetic manipulation. With all the older life-mages slain, I am the only repository of their knowledge left. You will teach the children with my help. He also wishes to make you his priest in this place."

Lizard felt overwhelmed. "I accept."

"Good. Kalirion will send you teachers," the Dancer told him. "Each night as Aejs sleeps, I will come to you and we will begin to write. The powers are the sword's, not mine. I merely guide them. I was very, very old. I died quietly before it was completed and entered a gem to wait. The gem that is on the blade. Kalirion made it a very pleasant home, as you can see. I – I – Oh, gods, Lizard, wake up

and get Josiah, some donors, some Readers with mage gift. He's done something to her! And he's the only one who can fix it."

* * *

Zyne's room was small, just a bed, chest and dresser, a single window through which she saw that snow had begun to fall again. Zyne was sitting awake, covered by several warm quilts, bolstered by large pillows to her back. Josiah entered after a tentative knock, pulled a chair up, and sat down beside her. He took her hand, leaning close. "How long have you known?"

"Several weeks. I got the potion from Ishla's temple," she lied, dropping her eyes demurely in imitation of various landswomen she had seen. Seiryn, genetic parasites, were fertile with everything that walked on two legs, but tritons were not. She pretended to a tiredness she did not feel: her body now sang with incredible strength and energy from the blood of Aejs Rowan. She wished she could have gotten all of it as Hoon had intended.

"Why didn't you ask me?" He sounded hesitant, uncertain, and vulnerable.

"You would have said 'no'. I know you don't love me. For you it has been just a joining of bodies in moments of need – nothing more. Sooner or later you will leave me. I wanted to have some part of you to hold onto and love." Hoon had told her how to play the game – she would learn now how well it worked.

Josiah was silent, his expression troubled.

"I do not expect anything of you. I do not ask it." She wrapped her arms around him, drawing him close. If only the others had not been there to stop him – Zyne imagined the look of horror she would have seen in his eyes when he realized he had slain the woman he truly loved. How she would have savored that after these months of frustration. It would have broken him completely and she could have taken him away immediately before anyone was the wiser.

"Zyne ... that does not change the fact that it is my child."

"Then I will go back to my people – have the child in the islands. I will not let my love become an embarrassment to you."

"No! No, it's my child. I should, at least, get to see it. To know it. I'll have to tell them. He placed his hand on her belly, leaned forward, and kissed her lips. "I care for you, Zyne. But as a friend and nothing more."

"I understand. It is enough," Zyne replied.

Then he left.

Zyne thought for a long time. Hoon had known much more about Josiah than she did. She really did not understand the other races. Among her own people the women always sacrificed their captive other-racial and other-species males after conception. Males were the only offerings they made to their dark god. They were a parasitic species – fertile with nearly all sapient beings, requiring no intervention from Ishla's temples. The child would have the talents and gifts of its sire, but it would be purely seiryn in body and temperament. Seiryn always bred true. Zyne had already scanned the unborn and knew it carried the full heritage of Abelard. It would be a powerful mage and sire scores of mage children to destroy the tritons.

* * *

The battle had ended, yet the guard and other units were still flushing out small isolated pockets of undead and other creatures. A dull, dragging pall of exhaustion lay over everything, as much of spirit as of body, where only will and determination kept people going. Fires had to be put out. The wounded tended. Soldiers and guardsmyn fed, mounts cared for. The citizens and others who had not taken part in the actual fighting came forward to care for those who had. The Orphan-Brigade unfurled a banner reading "Don't Mess with Us" and went stalking through the streets with some hatchets and stakes looking for injured undead led by some priests including Birdie. They did not polish off very many and mostly ended up helping some exhausted soldiers get back to the keep.

* * *

Tamlestari sat beside the bed with Tagalong. They had had a difficult time convincing Maranya to get some rest. They were all exhausted, even those, who like Tamlestari, had not participated in the fighting. She had squires and pages sitting in the parlor on hand to run for things. One of the definitions of wisdom was a willingness to listen and learn; to accept that there always existed another way or something that one did not know. She was finding that there was a whole lot that she did not know, despite her training as a surgeon. Her specialty was entirely battlefield medicine. What Josiah had done tonight was totally outside her purview.

"I have to believe that it was carelessness or stupidity or too much drink. I cannot believe it was attempted murder. However, I do not want him left alone with her under vulnerable circumstances. Tomorrow I will go over the list of squires and younger ha'taren and arrange for someone to sit with her at all times and then when she's well, I will continue to have someone in the parlor at all times. Even if it's just you or me."

The sound of a change in Aejs' breathing jerked Tamlestari's attention from Tagalong. Tamlestari grabbed her mate's wrist, Reading her. "Oh dear gods, Tag, find Josiah and Lizard. I can't handle this. She'd be all right if he hadn't insisted on that bloody spell. He took too much out of her. And he's damaged other parts of her, but it's so diffuse, I can't quite be certain of anything. I should have let Zyne die.

But he looked so desperate."

Tagalong got the two squires, Tariah and Tomio moving and the three of them ran smack into Lizard as they emerged into the hallway. Lizard took charge. "Tariah, fetch Posidea, she's the best. Take some guards with you to make certain you get there and back safely. Tomio, round up all the squires. I need Josiah anon. Check Zyne's rooms first. I also need Maranya and all of her family. Donors for shared life spell. They're compatible with the king. Tag, come back inside with me."

They knew what that meant without being told and their faces turned very serious. Tariah and Tomio were womb twins and scamps, responsible scamps, but scamps nonetheless, so when they appeared on the landing above the stairs, snagging guardsmyn who fell in behind Tariah and scattering squires and pages in all directions, Omer immediately noticed. He crossed the great hall and went up the stairs with a gesture at them. "Tarianree. Tomiolytyn." Omer said, sharply.

The squires stiffened, knowing that when the Captain of the Guard used their formal names they were probably in trouble. But they should not be. They were acting on orders.

"Captain Wheeler, we need to go. It's the king," Tomio said. She was always the spokesmon for the pair.

His face lost expression as he listened. "Go on, get it done." Then he walked off, gesturing to his lieutenant, who fell into step beside him. "If the king does not survive, and Tamlestari doesn't chop him, I want him dead. I don't care how you do it. An alley someplace. Just do it."

"Like in the old days?"

"Exactly."

* * *

Zyne heard all the rushing and talking in the corridors. She slipped out of bed, cracked the door, and listened, catching bits and pieces of scattered speech in which a single phrase was repeated endlessly in urgent tones, "the king!" Then Josh must have killed her or if she were not already dead, she soon would be. Even if they found him and brought him to her he could not save her, they had split him. Around Aejs, he would always be Josh, poor hopeless, panicked, ineffectual Josh; away from her he would be Josiah. He would not be able to help her. Eventually the mere thought of Aejs would reduce him to Josh and finally Josiah would not exist at all, unless Zyne wished to call him forth with her song. Hoon was brilliant. Zyne had never dreamed her songs could be used in this way. She retreated back to her bed when she heard footsteps getting too near and slid in between the covers pretending to sleep. Two squires and one of the guards entered.

"For this trash he would kill the king? His own na'halaef?" the guard whispered to the squires.

"It's his child, I'm certain of it," one of the squires whispered back. "When I'm done, no one in Rowanhart will speak to her again. I just wanted to see what she looks like so I can point her out."

"What's her name?" the other squire asked.

"Zyne," the guard replied. "I used to think it was a pretty name. I used to like her. I don't anymore."

"You know where she lives?"

"You want to see it?"

"Let's go."

* * *

Maranya, returning to her rooms, saw the squires erupt from the royal chambers and worry sent a chill through her. She went after them, seizing Tariah by the arm, halting her with a jerk. "What's happening?"

"It's the king."

Please no, Aroana my God. Maranya bolted into Aeijys' rooms. She could hear the stertorous breathing from the parlor. Tamlestari supported Aeijys in her arms, the king's head resting against her shoulder. "He took too much," Tamlestari said, tears streaking her face. "He took too much. If I lose her, I'm going to kill him."

"You'll have to wait in line, highness," Maranya told her, moving onto the bed and taking the king from her. "Let me hold her. You'll need to be free to help Lizard."

Tomio reappeared with two other squires, shoving Josh roughly in front of them. He winced, hunching his shoulders, half staggering as if he could barely keep his feet – whether from drinking or fear, Tamlestari could not tell.

"Tomio, fetch my family, all of them, we'll need donors. Highness, Read these two," Maranya said, nodding at the other squires. "See if they're compatible."

Sheer terror that made saucers of Josh's eyes and his hand kept going back to the bottle of whiskey in his pants pocket, stroking it like a talisman. "What's going on?"

"You nearly killed the king! That's what's going on!" Maranya snarled. "You concealed how much you took from her! Thinking we'd miss it no doubt!"

"I didn't hurt her! I swear I didn't hurt her." His voice trembled and he hunched down still more, practically crouching. Sweat beaded on his face, spread in wet circles around the neck of his tunic and the pits of his arms.

"Shut up, Josh!" Tamlestari said. "Get over here, this girl's compatible, the other isn't. Work the spell." The prince pressed the girl's arm to Aejs and, seeing Josh hesitate, yelled, "Now, Josh!"

He crept up to them, casting it while glancing nervously around at every face. When they finished, Aejs was not substantially improved and the girl looked tired.

"Take her to her rooms, give her some tea and let the chamberlain know she's excused for the day, you both are. Stay with her. She'll be a bit tired, maybe a little dizzy, but she just helped save the king."

Maranya's sisters and nieces arrived led by Soren at the same time as Lizard. They stepped aside to let the young healer pass, fanning around him. "What in Aroana's Name is going on?" Soren demanded.

"He hurt her, that's what," Maranya snarled, jabbing her finger at Josh.

Lizard immediately moved to Aejs' side, "I don't know why you did this, Josiah. Have you lost your mind? Now fix it!"

Josh cringed, retreating into a corner and sliding down into a fetal ball. Everyone was shouting at him. He pressed his face into his knees, wrapping his arms over his head. They screamed louder. He could hear the way Aejs struggled to breathe. She was dying. He couldn't think. He could hardly breathe. Someone grabbed him by the arm, trying to pull him to his feet and drag him to Aejs. He screamed wordlessly in terror, flailing at them. Tagalong suddenly understood. She had seen this behavior before, dealt with, pulled him out of it. She jumped from her chair by the bed, shoving people out of the way and pulling Soren's hands off Josh.

"What the hell?" Soren cursed, but the stout dwarf shoved her hard away from Josh.

"Everyone shut tha fuck up! Back off, ya bloody idiots, he doesn't need this shit! Get me some whiskey fast or Aejs dies!" Whiskey came from the parlor and was pressed in her hands. She knelt by Josh, patting and stroking him. "Josh, have a drink." She pried one arm down and pushed the bottle to his lips. He drank in long drags; trembling so hard she had to help him hold it, which awakened a strong protectiveness in the fierce dwarf. She messed with him, but she refused to let others get away with it. Especially with so much at stake. "Maranya, Lizard, Bryngaryn, you can stay. The rest, get out, yar frightenin' him." Tagalong said. "Bryngaryn grab Aejs' arm an' hold on until I tell ya." Tagalong stroked Josh's head. "Josh, come save Aejs just like ya did before. Ya love Aejs, remember?"

"Yes."

Tagalong could hear that disturbing fear and trepidation in his voice, the way he sounded ready to cry; so she spoke softly, reassuringly, "An' Aeijys loves ya. I love ya. I'm not gonna let anyone hurt ya."

"Yes." He seemed to relax the merest bit, yet it was enough to give Tagalong hope. She helped him to his feet, guiding him to the bed, and put his hand over Bryngaryn's where she held Aeijys'. "Cast the spell. Lizard Read, speak softly ta me of what happens. I've seen him like this before. Ya gotta handle him like a frightened critter. Quietly now."

"It's helping."

"When she's given as much as is safe, tell me." Tagalong continued to stroke, pat and reassure Josh. Someone had done to this Josh. She could feel it in her gut. She did not care what Maranya had told her earlier. Someone had done this. And when she found out who they were, she would beat their heads in.

* * *

They galloped up to the temple near the beach and found Posidea standing outside, overseeing the wounded that were still being discovered around the beaches and brought inside. She looked up at the ha'taren as Tariah arrived. One of the ha'taren dismounted.

"It's the king," the paladin said softly. "Take my mount."

Posidea met the woman's eyes and knew. Then she noticed something odd about the horse, reaching up she brushed the animal's forelock aside, finding a handspan of twisted horn. "What is this thing? It isn't a horse."

"It's a wynderjyn. Annji won't let you fall and she'll come back for me. Go on." The paladin cupped her hands and helped the priest mount, then clicked her tongue and the group set back off as quickly as they came.

* * *

Posidea conquered the keep the minute she stepped into the entrance hall and saw how little help the healers were getting compared to how much she felt they should have been and started barking orders in passing at the guardsmyn, ha'taren and servants. She had them all shaped up and moving before her feet even touched the stairs, heading for the king's chambers. She had a power and commanding presence that put even the crusty old general Soren Deontaramei to shame.

She swept into the room, saw all the people clustered around the bedroom door and bellowed. "What the hell is going on? This is not a circus! Everyone sit the hell

down!"

Soren spun with a blazing word on her lips.

The high priest's eyes fixed her with a glance as unrelenting as the darkest depths of the seas. "You too, general."

Then Posidea entered the bedroom. "What is going on?" she asked Tamlestari. Everyone answered. "Silence! I'm asking the prince."

Tamlestari explained.

Posidea turned to Lizard, "You've done well, go home, and get some rest." She settled down to Read Aeijys as Josh worked steadily. "That's enough for now. I want him spellcorded and the cords sealed. Escort him to my temple and have my priests do it. I want him housed under constant supervision away from the keep while I work things out. I am not entirely certain what he did to her. But it's much more than can be fixed with shared life. We have only two full mages in this city. Other than him."

"He didn't mean to do it," Tagalong said, wrapping a protective arm around him.

"I don't give a damn whether he did or not. Argue with me and I'll shackle him in the temple dungeons and, yes, my temple has dungeons." Posidea cut her off. "I'm not even certain whether he's sane or not. I can't take the chance. Bind him and take him."

"I'll house him at Laurelyanne's and take personal responsibility," Tagalong said.

"Fine! Get him out of my sight!"

Tagalong followed Josh out, her chest tight as she watched the guardsmyn truss him up for the ride to the temple.

"I want Zyne removed from the keep immediately also," Posidea said the moment the guardsmyn left with Josiah and Tagalong.

"Why?" Tamlestari asked.

Posidea's gaze swept the room, wondering who knew what she did. She was now the only triton in the room. All of her people knew about Josiah's liaison with Zyne, but they were a close-mouthed race. If no one knew, if the king did not yet know – it was not her place to tell. She had a suspicion that Aeijys would feel far more hurt by the information than the prince would.

"I have my reasons. That is all that I will say. Assign one of the human healers to look in on her or I can speak to her grandmother. I am certain Kanaloë will manage

for her."

Tamlestari nodded, going to the door. She spoke for a moment to one of the squires and then returned. "Will the king be all right?"

Posidea gave her a sharp look. "Who can say? She's badly damaged. Get me one of those really large, comfortable chairs I've seen, some pillows, and a blanket; I'll be sleeping in here. Sitting up. I want Skree here in the morning."

"I doubt he'll come," Tamlestari said. "Taun's hurt."

"Taun?" Posidea hissed and then listened as the information was imparted. "One of my priests can sit with Taun, but Skree will come."

* * *

Laurelyanne answered her door, her eyes going first to Josiah's face so lined with pain and exhaustion he looked half dead and then to his wrists, each one separately banded in braided fibers woven in gold, black and orange and sealed with a silver piece bearing the rune of Nerindalori. He staggered, falling across the threshold onto his face. Then she saw Tagalong and the Ha'taren Guard standing behind him. The paladins turned, mounted their wynderjyns, and rode away, leaving Tagalong and Josiah behind. The dwarf shouldered his arm and dragged him inside.

"What's the meaning of this?" Laurelyanne asked, her voice hushed with a edge of anguish.

"Aejys is hurt bad. They're saying Josiah did it. That's why he's corded."

"He would never hurt her."

"Well he did. Question is whether it was on purpose or not. He almost killed Maranya also. Put a stiletto ta her throat when she tried ta stop him."

"That doesn't sound like him."

"My thoughts. Can we put him in one a tha guest rooms?"

They got him upstairs and then came back down. Laurelyanne put tea on and they settled in the sitting room.

"Couple a months ago he nearly dies an' everyone's on his side. Now everyone want's ta shove a pole up his ass an' watch him dance. That's an ugly way ta die. Yer gonna tell me what's wrong with Josh. No one really knows why he almost died an' I have a feelin' it's got a whole lot ta do with what happened today. Somebody's done somethin' bad ta him. Somebody broke him worse than he was broke before. An' he was broke bad."

Josh had wept through the ritual cording, feeling the magic cut off again. They tied the cords so tight they cut into his wrists. The tritons would not let Tagalong near him until it was over, although she raged the whole time as she watched. One of the tritons had "graciously" pointed out that Posidea could simply have ordered him killed under the tenets of religious law, which did nothing for Tagalong's temper. Rowanhart was getting too dangerously civilized for Tagalong's taste.

"I can't tell you that. I promised Josiah."

Tagalong whirled and grabbed her, gathering a tight fistful of her dress in the middle and pulling her forward, off balance so that her face was only inches from the dwarf's nose. Laurelyanne teetered, catching at Tagalong's shoulders, her eyes wide and uncertain. The dwarf's rage was intense and desperate, with tears running in rivulets down her flushed face. "Ya will tell me or I'll beat tha shit outta ya. Yer an old woman. Yer Brendorn's mama. I loved him, an' I love Aejys; but I'll still beat ya. An' I don't think ya got enough magic ta stop me."

"You can kill me if you wish, but I will not tell you." Laurelyanne sounded sad and resigned.

Tagalong let go of her.

Laurelyanne sank abruptly to her knees, her arms folded across her stomach and doubled over.

Tagalong paled in worry, peering into her face. "I'm sorry."

"It isn't you. It's everything. Swear to me. Swear you won't tell. Swear by everything you hold dear and holy you won't speak a word to anyone."

"By the hammer and tongs of GimliGloikynen. By the perverse tongue of Dynanna. I do so swear never ta speak a word, may I fall down in a pit and never get out if I so forswear this promise. Is that good enough?"

"Yes, Tag, that's good enough. Help me to a chair. I feel rather weak."

Tagalong caught her elbow and helped her into the chair behind her.

"He's been more Josiah Abelard, than Josh for months now. He still can't access the magic without liquor. When shifters attacked their camp, he lost his flask so he had only his blades to defend Aejys. Aejys fled. He tried to keep the shifters from reaching her, to exchange his life for hers. He was badly wounded. Talons rescued him. They went after her. He was too badly off to go into the enemy camp after her, so when he finally had liquor – Dynarien had caught up with them by then – he cast a desperate spell – a potentially suicidal spell, called in the ancient tongue of the battlemages mortgueir. They only cast that when they expect to die because the odds

are insurmountable. The spell frequently kills the caster even when the battle does not. But it was the only thing that would strengthen his wounded body enough for him to reach her. As damaged as his body already was from the rite that had burned the magic out as a child and from the years of heavy drinking – he knew he could not possibly survive. A healthy mage would not have had good odds."

"Oh my gods," Tagalong plopped down on the floor. She had never dreamed that he was killing himself for Aejs. "I think everything that happened ta night was because of panic. I think he panicked about Zyne an' didn't mean ta hurt Aejs. If I hadn't recognized it was that same old Josh panic an' pulled him out of it, Aejs would have died. I talked him through it."

"Tag, his body is disintegrating. His shields are non-existent. The panic could be a manifestation of exhaustion. Something could have happened during the battle to bring it on. However, I think someone or something has been getting in his mind. I've never encountered anything like it so I can't say for certain."

"Yer tha best we have."

"I wish we had better."

Laurelyanne had some suspicions but did not know enough about the seafolk to be certain of which ones were correct or even possible. She had Read him and found things she did not understand at all, odd tastes and flavors in his damaged shaukras, especially the groin, heart and forehead. It could have been caused by the damage or the steady deterioration of his body and magic; but she did not think so.

* * *

When Posidea saw Skree open the door she stiffened, throwing her shoulders back and tilting her head at an arrogant angle, eyes blazing,. "Read her. Go on and then tell me what he did to her. You are the only mage I can ask. There are only three full mages in Rowanhart: the one who did this; the other is one who is protecting him; and you, his godfather. However, you at least, I assume to have some honor about you."

Skree drew a chair to the bedside, sat down, and took the king's wrist. "I have read..." he hesitated to say it. "I have never heard of it being cast on another ... battle-mages use it ... it's a twisted effect ... but it's rather like ... the side effects of..."

"Say it!"

"Mortgueir."

"Good. We are getting somewhere. Now are you also aware that there are three variations of that spell? And two of them are used as attack spells?" Posidea

swiveled in the chair, taking a book off the nightstand behind her. "I had one of my priests fetch me a book last night and I've sat up reading. Meenaleigh, at Aroana's temple, has a remarkable library." She handed Skree the book, opening it to the page she had marked with a bit of paper.

Skree read and when he finished, he handed it back in silence.

"I'm willing to grant madness or murder, but not an accident. And I am far more inclined to the latter. I have had him corded and sealed."

"Have you told anyone else what you have learned?"

"No. I will tell only the king when she is well enough. Then it will be for her to decide whether to execute him or not."

"She will survive?"

"She's yuwenghau. I take it you have not Read her since she changed?"

"No."

"That's why she's still alive, beyond the fact that I forced him to replace most of the blood he robbed her of. Still, it was a near thing."

Skree's face had become an impassive mask. It was well that Tori had not lived to know the monster his son had become. Only a landsmon would allow his lust to drive him to such obscene acts of betrayal as this. Tori had belonged to the sea. Josiah did not.

"What I want from you is a list of names of people to talk to. People who have known your godson a long time. I need to build a case for whether he is merely insane or whether he just made a very clever attempt at regicide. Three of those spells were delayed. Set like little eggs to hatch."

"Posidea...enough!" Skree stood abruptly and turned away. "I will get you those names. Please do not mention any of this to Taun."

"You have my word."

* * *

Aejys' breathing was still raspy, heavy and somewhat labored. Tears of exhaustion gathering in the corners of her eyes and trickled intermittently along the edges. Maranya moistened her cracked lips. "No matter ... what they do ... to me ... ahhh uuhhmnn..." a low groan slid up from the center of her stomach. "I will ... not back down. I will not ... surrender ... not yield." Her eyes kept drifting closed and then fluttering open again.

"I know." Maranya set the cloth aside, poured four fingers of a golden liquid into a glass and raised her king's head up to help her drink, then lowered her again.

"I'm going to Charas ... I'm going to get them."

"*We're* going to get them." Maranya's mouth drew tight and her eyes hooded, she could not help feeling that for all her efforts she had failed her king, whom she had come to love, by not preventing Josiah from hurting her. Somehow, someway, she would prove that his actions had been deliberate and she would cut his throat. All that panic and confusion had been a sham to cover a murder. The man was sane.

As Aeijys slept at last, Maranya prayed.

"I love her ... as my sister. She inflames me in a pure clean way that knows nothing of the senses, but everything of the spirit and the soul. She makes my heart sing with a pure intense passion that makes me want to lay down my life in her cause. I do not go into battle looking for it. You have promised it to me. When it comes to me I will die proud and with joy, knowing that my sacrifice is for her and for you, Aroana, my god."

* * *

Posidea's eyes blazed with fury as she sat across from Skree in the little sitting room in the house on the rocks. The boys crawled about, chasing Dree and squealing delightedly every time they managed to catch the little cat's twitching tail, seemingly unaware of the conversation going on between the adults. Every few days, Posidea returned to have this same conversation with him after she had taken another action against either Josiah or Zyne. Skree wondered what the High Priest had done this time. Eventually she would force him into a corner; force him to act, when for the sake of Tori's memory he did not want to.

"Standing there in the room, Skree, not wanting her to wake up and hear us talking about it. Wondering how many of us knew. You have no idea how hard it was!" She drew in a sharp breath.

Skree nodded. "I can imagine."

"I watched her work a miracle. She is the sacred king. And he does this to her! To *her*?" Posidea snarled, showing her shark-like teeth. "And one of *us* does this to *her*? I will not be the one to tell her. I could not bear to see her face. Nor will I ever have anything to do with Zyne. Were she bleeding to death on the temple steps I would not open the doors to help her. Tomorrow I will declare Zyne anathema for her part in this."

"He saved my mate. I owe him."

"I understand. I will not ask you to become involved. Only to stay out of my way."

"That much I can do."

* * *

Tamlestari lifted her head from her folded arms on her desk as someone set a tray on it and she saw Darlbret. The little seneschal poured her a cup of steaming coffee, adding cream and sugar. She gave him a tired, but appreciative smile. They had turned the small audience chamber into a command center with twelve desks and various people working busily as casualty and damage reports came in from across the city. Aejs' contingency planning had kept the civilian losses to a minimum, for which the prince was grateful.

Dynanna had responded with an antidote to the lamia venom within hours of the battle. It was not precisely for lamia venom, but as close to it as Fusaaki and her grandsire could formulate in a short time, since victims of that venom had not been seen in millennia. It was one of those they had given Dynarien. Those who lived through the first night survived. It took an engineering feat worked out by Tagalong to get Skelly moved off the beach and back into the dragon-barn where his injuries could be tended. They rigged a huge net and the blue gryphons airlifted him. The swan-mays had been disappointed to learn that the method which had called Aejs back from death a year ago could not be duplicated since it had involved the ghosts of nine life-mages freed from the blade in which they and much of their powers had been imprisoned when it shattered in its maker's heart. So the swan-mays moved on, headed this time for Charas, the City of Magic. Rowanhart buried its dead and began to pick up the pieces of its lives with stubborn resilience.

Survivors of vampire attacks were quarantined until priests could check them for the taint. Any who were found to be tainted were held in the keep's dungeons, as comfortably as possible, until the king could recover enough to perform a cleansing. At that point it looked to be several weeks off. The remains of the undead were gathered and burned in great bonfires on the beaches.

The soldiers and populace were at first startled and then warmed to find the prince making rounds with the rest of the healers, stitching wounds, and changing bandages with a deft and capable hand. They opened their hearts to her and she reciprocated. When Tamlestari learned of several children whose soldier parents had been slain, leaving them orphans, she sought them out and made them wards of the crown, placing them among the pages.

Tamlestari drank the coffee. "Darlbret, could you handle things here for a while?"

"Yes, highness."

"I need to stretch my legs. I'll pick up an escort and walk over to Skree's for a bit. Have one of the guest rooms readied. I'm going to try and talk them into moving into

the keep while Taun gets his strength back."

"An excellent idea!" Darlbret exclaimed perkily. "Then I can visit Taun in the evenings again. Just like old times! And my sister can too! She loves visiting Taun."

"If I can't convince them, I'll send you and your sister over in the coach to talk to Taun and persuade him. How's that?"

"Oh, my sister would love that!"

"Good." Tamlestari strode to the door, motioning to Bryngaryn to walk with her.

No matter how grim the task the people were at as they passed, everyone paused to smile and nod to her. Tamlestari seemed to leave a trail of brightness in her wake.

Skree looked pleased to see Tamlestari, letting her and Bryngaryn in. The boys crawled about the floor while Taun rested on the couch.

"Skree, I'd like for you and Taun to stay at the keep for a few days while he rests. The boys could play with the princes; Ivander and Elynnis would love it. Darlbret and his sister would enjoy having Taun around."

"No. I do not want them near Josiah."

"Hmnp. I can understand that. However, Josiah has still not been allowed back into the keep."

"He will be eventually."

"There is that." Tamlestari nodded. Aejs had begun asking about him, although she was still too weak to notice much and slept for all but a few minutes out of each day. He had hurt her grievously. "Would you agree to my sending a couple of people to stay here to help with the children and give Taun some company?"

"My own people can do that."

"No. Your people were among the hardest hit – the highest number of casualties. Your people need you. I want to send Florry, Darlbret's sister and two of the Ha'taren Guard. I know you only have the one guestroom. But you could put some pallets on the floor."

"I would like having Florry," Taun said softly, speaking for the first time. He stretched out, propped on pillows against the arm of the couch. Tamlestari moved to his side and knelt, touching him lightly to read him before anyone could stop her.

"You haven't been fishing," She said suddenly. "You're living on nori and wakami."

"I can't leave them," Skree said, sounding for the first time helpless and frustrated.

"Hell!" the prince cursed with a sudden realization. "None of your people are fishing. There's not enough of you left hale. Damn your stupid pride! One, I'm sending Florry. Two, I'm opening the keep's stores to your people. Three, I'm sending to the Kwaklahmyn villages to catch you some whales to eat. You like whale meat, don't you?"

Skree started to protest.

The prince wagged a finger at him. "I'll turn you over my knee."

Skree glowered. Taun glanced at the prince who, though only small by Sharani standards was positively diminutive next to the huge triton, and giggled softly. Bryngaryn chuckled and the boys, hearing the change in mood began to laugh and pat their knees. Skree smiled. At first it was slow and grudging, painfully reluctant. Then the laughter emerged, almost like a strangled sob. Taun stretched his arms for his mate and Skree moved to his knees beside him. They held each other as all the tangled emotions and stress released themselves in a rush. The prince withdrew to give them space. The boys toddled closer and stood patting both of them.

"Papaskree? Papataun? Better now? Happy now?" The boys chorused. Skree lifted both of them onto Taun's lap and enclosed their sons between them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PERSECUTION

Zyne walked slowly through the square, turning along Brown Street. She carried her halberd. The hostility thickened with each passing day. No triton or nerien would speak to her, beyond the occasional priest carrying another of Posidea's condemnations and bans. Her fishing rights had been revoked. If a triton caught her fishing in these waters they would kill her. The community was forbidden to either sell to her or buy from her. Josiah brought her gold to purchase food from the landsmyn. Everything had become painful and complicated. If she tried to carry Josiah off with the tritons watching, Posidea would call it proof of their guilt and kill them both out of hand. Hoon was supposed to help, but where was he? She considered returning to the house on the Bay, but feared that would lead the watchers there.

The tritons allowed only her grandmother, Kanaloë to speak to her. Posidea called that a kindness. Perhaps Posidea hoped Kanaloë could turn Zyne against Josiah. Hah! Posidea's prejudices were showing. Josiah had not initiated this game.

Zyne entered the shop and bought two fresh killed chickens. She did not like the

taste of chicken, but it was all she could afford. She wanted to fish; to feel the deep waters pressing around her; to taste salmon and blue fin instead of chicken. Zyne shoved the chicken into her pack and walked out. Hard packed snow hit her in the face, followed quickly by a rock. Zyne staggered, falling to her knees. Her halberd skittered from her grasp and she got hit twice more.

"Whore!" shouted one man.

"Filthy, murderin' whore!" screamed another woman.

"We don't wancher kind here!" yelled a man.

Zyne looked up and saw that a crowd of landsmyn had gathered with rocks in their hands, yelling as they closed around her. A young landswoman in what could only be called priest robes shouted down a side street and soon came the sound of hooves. A unit of mounted guardsmyn led by two ha'taren forced the crowd aside.

Laelyn dismounted. "Get out of here!" she ordered the crowd. "Disperse!"

"She and her bloody cockwhore tried to kill the king!"

"Rumors! Nothing more!" Laelyn said, "Until something's been proven, she's free to go."

"Lock her up, Laelyn! At least lock her up!"

"Disperse!" Laelyn gestured and the guardsmyn began to push at the crowd.

Birdie walked around the edges and extended her hand to Zyne. "Nothing happens in Rowanhart that I don't know about," Birdie said grimly.

"You sent for them?"

Birdie nodded. "Uhm hmm. I'm priest to Dynanna. I preach to pariahs, rogues and outcasts. People who steal to eat. Fnd someone to do your shopping for you."

"My grandmother."

"Good idea."

* * *

Laurelyanne held Osbert, the little kitchen golem, turning him over in her hands as she did at least once every day. She always threw a fit if anyone else picked him up, for fear that they would drop and break him. The old mage never woke him. The orange and brown porcelain figure in his glazed green shirt and trousers had been made by her son Adrein when he was a boy. Adrein, with a child's sense of humor,

had given Osbert a fussy personality that tended to get on Laurelyanne's nerves. She hugged Osbert and put him back on the sitting room window shelf next to a large pot of oregano.

The front door slammed open. Laurelyanne froze like a deer in the meadow, head raised, alert for danger that might be coming through her door, power gathering on her fingertips and the word for tanglebriars on her lips. Then she heard Tagalong muttering and cursing. Metal and wood scraped. Laurelyanne relaxed and went to see what was going on.

Tagalong dragged a chest through the door. Three more sat in the snow and a small wagon waited nearby. "I'm movin' in for awhile, if ya don't mind."

"Of course not, I can use the help with Josiah."

"Maranya pushed me too far this time! Said Josiah's tryin' ta drown himself weeks back was just ta set this whole madness thing up. Said that he's been plannin ta kill Aejs fer months maybe!"

"Tag! Tag, listen to what you said."

Tag let go of the chest and turned to Laurelyanne. "What?"

"This doesn't prove anything, understand. But Josiah vanished for a week. They took him, Tag. They took him, broke him and sent him back, with some kind of triggers and sways in place. I can't prove it. But that's what they did." Laurelyanne swallowed, fighting back tears. Then she changed the subject. "What's in the chests?"

"Aejs has been using her part of the wyrm's hoard, but I haven't. So I just thought I'd take some of mine. Rowanhart belongs ta her, not me. I want no part of it."

"So what kind of stuff?"

"Well, for one thing, I took all tha books. That wyrm demolished some schools an' temples. Cassana Odaren an' I had this idea of buildin' a school. We told Aejs we wanted all those books an' she agreed. Cassana's dead. So tha books are mine now. Most of them are in a warehouse. I brought a few chests of them. I also brought a few chests of other things. Open them up and look through. If ya see somethin' ya want feel free ta ask."

Laurelyanne opened the chest and stared at all the green and blue stones, a wealth of emeralds and carved figures in jade, turquoise and lapis.

A long scream made Tagalong drop the next chest in the middle of the hall. She started toward the stairs and Laurelyanne stopped her. "Quiet and slow."

Laurelyanne led her up to Josiah's room. Laurelyanne gestured toward a chair while she settled on the bed near his head. The screams had stopped, replaced by sobs. Deep slumber and the drugs for pain and fever glazed his eyes.

"She ripped him up again. Mephi's bleeding all over my bed. Do you see him?" Josh curled up tightly against Laurelyanne.

"Yes, I see him."

Tagalong's eyes saucered and her mouth opened.

Josh uncurled a tiny bit, his leg settled on her thigh. "Anksha did it. But Isranon makes it better."

Tagalong crept closer. "Is he mad?"

Laurelyanne shook her head slightly. "Shhh."

Josiah closed his eyes and slipped deeper into sleep again. Laurelyanne moved him and tucked him in.

"It's an altered state. He's asleep, dreaming." Laurelyanne led Tagalong back to the sitting room. "This is the third episode of this, but it's nearly always the same. My Reader's gift was not trained for healing, but for mage-sense, although I can do both after a fashion. Sometimes I think, yes, I can handle this. I start thinking the way I did when the boys were kids and I thought I could handle anything. And then I just feel tired, Tag. I wish we had a group of young mages. Some real good ones. No stodgy masters. Better some wild-eyed young journeymyn ready to take on the world, you know. That's the best kind when you don't know what you're up against."

* * *

Tamlestari watched Aejys sleep. Improvement came slowly.

"Shall I take over?" Maranya asked, settling into the chair on the other side.

Tamlestari shook her head. "I can't tell her what he did. I saw the look in his eyes. It was panic. I don't know where it came from. But it was. Tag's right. I've started getting it around, word of mouth, that no one is to tell her."

"Why?" Maranya asked suspiciously.

"She loves him. But I'm going to watch him. If he panicked once, he could panic and do something fatally stupid."

"Unless we can convince her to leave him corded."

"She'll never agree to that."

"Stari, Posidea is building a very, very convincing case for attempted regicide."

Tamlestari's face flushed, she glanced at Aeijys sleeping, grabbed Maranya and shoved her through the door, following her out and gesturing a squire to go sit with the king. The prince did not stop until she had Maranya out on one of the tower catwalks where they were not likely to be overheard.

"Now what are you talking about?" Tamlestari demanded angrily, her flush depending.

"Posidea borrowed a book. Tritons are a close-mouthed race and we were interested in what she might discover. She thought she borrowed it from the bradae, but it actually came from the Order's shelves. We deal in secrets, highness," Maranya said, going very formal, very careful. "One of those books was on the theory and practice of battle magic. Abelard is a battle mage. She marked a section. I read it and then had one of our paladins who is also a Reader sit with the king the second night. He hit her with not one, but four spells. He was trying to kill her as quickly as possible so no one would discover the damage had not happened in the battle."

Josh's frantic, frightened face flashed across Tamlestari's mind. "I – I can't believe he would– "

"He meant to kill her. I've had people following Posidea. Each mon she talks to, we talk to. I'm going to shove a pole up his ass and watch him dance. If you truly love your mate, you will help me."

Tamlestari turned and fled.

* * *

Isranon thought it incredible that Aeijys Rowan had beaten them. They fled far into the south forest, gathering in some nameless ruins to lick their wounds. Many of the strongest sa'necari had been slain. Unfortunately, that had not included Bodramet who had returned to eyeing Isranon, which kept him on edge. Mephistis grew angrier day-by-day, the old fury rekindling in his voice and manner, the old hubris. He raged in the forest before the ragged remnant of his forces. "Swan-mays and gryphons! Willodarus sent them. I will eat both his grandchildren for this! I will make this a godwar."

Hoon and Anksha had rejoined them an hour ago and she had not yet snapped the leash back on. He listened in silence, his expression distant and reflective. Mephistis had recovered himself in her absence. Her toys always did. At first they would believe because they did not feel its presence in her absence that it was not there;

they soon learned otherwise.

King Aejoystrys had been seriously wounded and Prince Tamlestari had taken command of the city. Rowanhart's substantial army, although it had sustained losses, remained dangerous. So Hoon had chosen to backtrack their fleeing forces with a handful of his royals to ascertain whether Prince Tamlestari would choose to lick her wounds or send rangers after them. She had chosen the former, wrapping her surviving forces around her city in bristling vigilance. She was far more cautious than her mate: Aejoy would have been hot on their trail by now.

Hoon's royals had suffered fewer losses than Mephistis' sa'necari, which had been nearly wiped out. "I am not ready for a godwar. Not even a small one. I will not move again in force. The Sacred King and her allies have taught me two hard lessons and I, for one, will not forget them, my prince. Nor should you. Go back to Waejontor. Forget your sons. While you live, you can make more."

Isranon shivered. He had never heard Aejoystrys Rowan referred to as the Sacred King before. What was a sacred king? All the years he had isolated himself while in Mephistis' court came back at him in a rush and he remembered the words of those ghosts outside the farmhouse where he and Troyes had fed: *Learn or die*. There was so much he should have learned.

"Cowards talk," Mephistis growled. "I will track down and destroy all the paladins of the Nine."

A thin smile slid across the vampire's face. He wondered where that thought had come from. "In that case, you must finish off the life-mages."

"There are some left?" Mephistis was surprised.

"Yes. In Charas."

"Then I will go to Charas."

"And I will meet you there when I have finished my business in Rowanhart."

"But I thought you said—"

"I said not again in force. I will try a different path to my goal."

Isranon found the ruins strangely emptied standing there with only himself, seven other sa'necari, his prince, and two lycans. Bodramet smiled, turning in his direction.

Mephistis saw this, caught Bodramet by the arm and hissed, "If you touch him, I will eat you."

* * *

Hoon thought about Mephistis as he started back for another try at the Sacred King of Rowanhart. Was he drinking Sanguine Rose again? Mephistis no longer needed it: taking that yuwenghau in a rite of mortgiefan had healed him. But Sanguine Rose was incredibly addictive. He would ask Anksha if she had tasted it in his blood.

He needed to discover whether Aejustrys Rowan had died of the injuries Josiah inflicted. He doubted it because someone had shielded the king's chambers and he could not get in. Why shield it unless someone was there to be shielded? However, Zyne had received a part of Rowan's blood, and would make a good nekaryiane, death angel. If Rowan survived then he intended to have either or both of them. He would kill Aejustys if he could not have her. No matter how it played out he would have what he wanted.

"Can I eat one of them?" Anksha asked, coming out of the bushes to curl up at his side.

"No. I need both of them. Did you get to eat any tritons or neriens? How did they taste?"

Anksha positively purred. "Delicious. I tried to bite the dragon, but he was too big. He knocked me in the water. Brrrr! I don't like the ocean. It stings my eyes."

"It's salt water, little one. Leave the dragon alone."

"Can I let the winged one touch my tail?"

Hoon laughed. "I doubt you can fascinate him. He's Jesmyrran. But you can try."

* * *

A brief idyll came into Zyne's life. That strange little Sharani priest named Birdie came twice and brought her food, staying for tea and discussing religion. Landsmyn had strange gods; and Perverse Dynanna had to be the strangest. Imagine a deity who actually cared for those that no one else wanted: the cast-offs of society. Zyne had had to be very careful talking to her. Tritons belonged to Nerindalori; but the seiryn worshipped dark gods, the wives of the Hellgod who were bound beyond the escarpment with him.

Josiah, having begun to get his strength back, had spent part of each night of this idyll making love to her, without need of her songs to force him there. It amazed her. Landsfolk were definitely strange creatures. She was getting deeper and deeper into his mind with her "little songs" as he called them – and he was letting her in – not consciously, but he did not recognize them as spells. He thought she was singing to the baby. How very, very strange. What remained of his shields had fallen. Oh, how much she wanted to keep him. She prayed each night for the power to bind him, to take him away with her. If only she had met him first; before Aejustys came to

Vorgensburg. Maybe then she could simply have forgotten she was seiryn and spent the rest of her life as a triton with a human mate. It was not unheard of. And when the male was a mage, not entirely unacceptable. The tritons thought highly of mages.

Zyne had begun to hope that Hoon would not return when the scratching came at her door. She slipped out of bed, picked up her halberd and answered it. Hoon stood there.

"Hello, my pretty seiryn," Hoon said.

"What do you want?" Zyne demanded suspiciously.

"What I always wanted. Aejys Rowan. I know she's alive. Prince Mephistis has gone to Charas to attend to other business. The attack was a costly failure." Hoon looked deeply into her eyes, trying to snare her mind just to see if it could be done.

Zyne laughed at him. "My gift is like yours. I cannot be snared by it anymore than you can be."

Hoon laughed. "Then perhaps you would invite me in for a nibble-game?"

Zyne stepped back and swept her arm toward the bed. She disrobed, walking ahead of him and dropping her garments on the ground.

"Having received her blood as antidote to my venom, you are far more powerful than you were."

"I wish I could have gotten all of it. It was a wondrous thing. It made my body sing with power." Zyne stretched herself out on the bed, waiting for him, wanting him in an unexpected fashion. Hoon was power. She remembered the things he had taught her in the stone house. Her gifts had deepened in breadth and potency. Hoon shed his clothing, leaving no question of his intentions. Last time he had simply taken her, hard and quickly, as the price of sparing Josiah and then never touched her again. This time he made love to her, starting at her ankles and slithering up along her body with his tongue and hands. She shuddered, moaning with the intensity of his touch, which was greater and more skilled than any living male could be. When he finally entered, she was desperate with need for him. Then, before she realized what was happening, he had her pinned tightly beneath him, opened a vein in his wrist and forced his blood down her throat. With that first taste came a screaming hunger for more. Her lips closed tighter upon him. His mind slammed into hers as the hunger claimed her, dominating, commanding, and owning. Zyne convulsed in weeping as she realized she had been trapped and taken. Sex, as with all seiryn, was her weapon – now, she knew it could also be someone else's. Anksha crept into the room and sat by the fire laughing.

* * *

Aejys had listened to the talk coming from the parlor for days. Most of it she could not make out, but there was enough of it to tell her that the room was crowded at all hours. Tamlestari and Maranya were with her, trying to keep her awake long enough to get some stew down her. It was hard, since all she wanted to do was sleep. She hurt constantly and they were afraid to give her anything stronger than holadil, which barely addressed it.

A knock preceded Bryngaryn's entrance. "There are three triton ships sighted, flying the North King's colors. From the ensigns there's a member of the royal family aboard."

"Get me up," Aejys said, pushing them away. "I'll see them. Then you'll tell me what's happened to Josiah."

"Aejys!" Tamlestari protested. "You're not well."

"I'll see them. Hell shitting damnation! Is he dead?" Fear lanced through her.

Tamlestari looked very worried. "No, Aejys, but he isn't in the keep. Let's do one thing at a time. Tritons, first; Josiah, second."

"You'll bring him to me?"

"Yes. Bryngaryn, get one of those big chairs, a footstool, some pillows and blankets together in the small east audience chamber. Then get the king settled comfortably there. Have Posidea present. Maranya, stay with her."

Maranya nodded. "I will be right at her side."

"Good. I'll go down to the docks and meet their ships."

by the time Tamlestari arrived, the triton ships stood docked; tall three masted, carved in wondrous forms like huge broad finned creatures and painted with eyes and mouths in bright blues, yellows, and reds. She gave her permission and the captains and royalty disembarked. Prince Nerindari, son and heir to the North King, led his party. He was seven feet tall and very dark green-skinned with raven hair.

"King Aejys could not greet you. She was gravely wounded. However she waits for you at the keep, attended by Posidea, High Priest of Nerindalori."

"We bring relief to your people. Our holds are filled with fish, medicine and other aid as gifts to yours in their time of need."

Skree stepped forward, offering a blessing wish, "again we extend the hand of friendship to our brethren of the isles. May Rowanhart and the Neridians grow ever closer through the generations."

Both princes smiled at Skree's words and they clasped arms. Then they walked together to the waiting carriages.

* * *

No matter which way Josiah turned in his sleep the cords hurt. They had bound them too tightly, cutting him. His skin was reddened and irritated; swollen with tiny pustules that Laurelyanne lanced, cleaned and soothed with ointments while being careful not to disturb the cords. Eventually his flesh would toughen and this would end. He hoped. The cords had been sealed, which meant they could not be cut except by a priest, otherwise it would kill him. The tritons knew what they were doing when they corded a mage. They were a hard, stern race. He drank himself to sleep each night, woke to hair of the dog each morning, and experienced no flare of power. He did not know the why, the what, or the how only that he had nearly killed the one man he loved most.

Aejys, forgive me. Forgive me. I did not know what I was doing.

Zyne. The thought of her came crawling through his mind like a song and he twisted in the blankets uneasily. He had done it for her sake. He did not love her, yet for fear of losing her he had nearly murdered Aejys. Zyne. Pressure and hunger built in his body. Tagalong told him they had sent her back to her cottage the same night they moved him to Laurelyanne's. He wondered how she managed. Josiah rose and dressed. He was not supposed to leave the house alone, yet he could not stop himself. He slipped out quietly. The cottage was not far. He kept to the shadows.

Zyne heard his soft knocked on her door and let him in. She stared for a moment at his wrists in shock. "They corded you!" she gasped. "How dare they...Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

Zyne drew him to the bed. "I'll help you forget them." Zyne smiled, pushing him onto his back and straddling him. The door opened and Hoon entered.

Josiah tried to shove Zyne off him. "That's Hoon! Move!"

"I know. We've done this before." Zyne said softly. "You don't remember it."

Josiah thrashed and kicked, but the seiryn's sea-born strength was greater than his wasted power. "Why?"

"Because he deepens my hold over you. We place the coercions too deeply for anyone, save a yuwenghau to find," she said conversationally.

"What are you?"

"I'm a seiryn, Josiah. You're my meat. You won't remember any of this."

Hoon smiled now, thoroughly enjoying every moment of his old enemy's terror. "Snares within snares within snares, Josiah." Hoon released Josiah's memory, letting him know what had happened, letting him drink the fullness of the cup that had been brewed for him. "Had they not stopped you, Josiah, you would have drained Aejs completely. There would have been nothing left of her but a gray, withered husk."

Josiah screamed.

"Galee taught me to place my snares in sets, in series. Remember the rest of it. See how close you came to killing her. I still cannot comprehend how she can live."

Josiah faded into Josh with the realizations of what spells he had cast, feeling a paralysis of grief and shock, drawing shuddering breaths; only partly aware of his body as if he had no weight or bones. Zyne sensed the change in him and moved away. The instant her weight lifted, Josh curled into a fetal ball, staring at nothing.

"What's wrong with him?" Zyne asked, her voice hushed.

"Josh has run away. Josh always runs away. If not to some hidey hole, then deep inside himself. What do you want, Josh?" Hoon asked, giving him more memories back.

Josh felt hunger race through his body, a warm desperate tickle in the back of his throat and a need for something that was greater than anything he'd ever wanted, including whiskey. "No," he began to cry and then to sob, closing his eyes. "No, you didn't."

"No god has claimed you. You cannot resist. You have no defenses. No strength. What do you want?"

"You."

Hoon slit his wrist and held it out. Josh gasped, watching the blood come forth and then tumbled from the bed, crawling to Hoon. He fastened his mouth on Hoon's wrist and he drank.

* * *

Laurelyanne only needed a few things when she entered the apothecary's shop. She carried her canvas shopping bag on her arm and her moon-orb staff in the other hand. The place was filled with huge urns and jars on shelves. The man knew her and she saw the odd look on his face the moment she entered.

He shook his head at her. "Go away," he said harshly. "Get out of my shop."

"Tanan, I just wanted to buy a few things. I– "

"Get out!"

"Why?"

"You're under ban. No herbs, drugs, medicines can be sold to you. Now get out before I call the guard!"

"Tanan!"

He reached for a cudgel he kept beneath the counter.

Laurelyanne bowed acquiescence and withdrew. Every apothecary and herbalist she went to was the same. In despair, she raced home and found Josiah holding Osbert, her crockery kitchen golem. Laurelyanne could grow him to man size at need. He was very strong in terms of lifting, but he would not have been much good in a fight because he was made of dinnerware and would have broken easily. One of her sons, Adrein, had made him as a gift, one of those things a mother puts on her shelf and then never goes back to except to say "Because I love him, I'll keep it."

"Josiah, I need to talk to you," Laurelyanne caught at his arm, avoiding his spellcorded wrists.

"What do you want?" he asked uneasily, returning Osbert to the window, he had a bottle of whiskey sitting on the table.

"I know you don't want to talk about this, but eventually we must. About the accusation of trying to kill Aejsys."

Josiah turned pale. "I've told you I don't know what I did. I don't remember."

"Let me send to Ildyrsetts for a mage to look at you," she pleaded. Matters would continue to worsen until and unless they could prove Josiah's innocence. "Let me tell Aejsys. She's going to start asking anyway."

Josiah felt his stomach seize up and he started to shake.

"At least tell me why? Why conceal the damage to the magic?"

Josiah exhaled heavily, took several drags from the bottle and felt the magic fail to respond. "Because ... because if I started looking for help my condition would become known and – and someone might try to use me against Aejsys."

"What if they already have? What if what you did to Aejsys was because someone had been inside your mind? You did not simply take too much from her in shared life. I Read her. You disrupted her body's ability to repair itself, much as you did

your own, only different. You caused other damage as well. Were she not yuwenghau, she would have died that night. Can you truly say that was an accident? You would not have done that in your right mind. I think someone has been meddling."

"Have you looked?"

"Yes. I haven't found anything. Just some anomalies I can't explain. Nothing I've ever seen before. Josiah, that day when you tried to drown yourself, you had been missing for a week. What if that week you had been taken by Hoon?"

"No. That's not possible—" Josiah made a staggering turn and nearly fell, catching at the arm of a chair, sinking onto it.

"You had three hallucinatory dreams. Tag was present for one of them. The last one. You said three names. Anksha, Isranon and Mephis or Mephi. I could never quite make it out. Could it have been Mephistis? Who is Anksha? Isranon?"

"I don't know. Laurelyanne, please. I don't know!"

"Let me get someone in here to look at you. There's a half-yuwenghau mage in Ildyrsetts. I met him briefly during the coronation. Let me send for him."

"No. You're the only one I trust. Gods, I wish Eliahu were here. Or Sonden. "

"I'll try to get word to Eliahu. But that will take a long time. The Iron Glacier is far away." She placed a comforting hand on Josiah's.

He took another long swallow of whiskey and leaned back in the chair. "Thank you. Laurelyanne, I have another possibility I want to suggest. One that frightens me even more. Is it possible that the meshing of my two incarnations was not permanent? That they're coming apart? And as a result I'm doing things I can't explain. Ugly things?"

"I had not considered that. But whatever the reason, Josiah, I don't think those cords should come off until we know what caused that to happen. If I know Aeijys, she'll want them off." Laurelyanne took his hands, folding her fingers over his. "Josiah, I'm very much afraid that if those cords come off you will kill her."

Josiah jerked away, sucking in a struggling breath. "They got me. I don't feel it. I don't remember it."

"That's frequently the case," Laurelyanne continued patiently, watching panic start to build in him. "They block the memories so you cannot give them away."

Josiah took a long pull from his bottle. "Can't there be some other answer?"

"No. Posidea will not allow me anywhere near her. But I've still picked up rumors. Aeijys got hit by some serious spells. All battle magic. If those cords come off you are going to kill her."

Josiah folded up. The sounds began as a kind of hicking, slowly turning into racking sobs. Laurelyanne stayed with him, but he pushed her away, so she left. Clearly he needed to work it out on his own.

* * *

Aeijys and Tagalong had had several chests brought up from the hoard and secured in the dungeons during the weeks preceding the coronation so that gifts could be chosen for some of the visiting royalty and other dignitaries. Even though it was less than a drop in a bucket to what they had, it was enough to fill a room. Skree went down with Tamlestari: neither of them had seen it before. They had the Ha'taren Guard who had accompanied them stand outside near the doors.

Skree, who rarely gave expression to surprise, much less astonishment, was absolutely stunned. He opened chest after chest, running his hands through mounds of priceless gems and strings of jewels in matchless settings. Crowns and tiaras; rings and bracelets; necklaces and chokers; wands and scepters.

"When she said she had more wealth than any ten kingdoms combined—" Tamlestari breathed. "She wasn't bragging."

"And all the while she was living on the upper floor of a tavern sharing tales with sailors in the common room..." Aeijys had just grown enormously in Skree's estimation of her stature as both a king and a mon. Most of the chests contained gold, but when he got to the last one he pulled out a crown set with pearls, coral and abalone. He started to shake violently, tears running down his face.

Tamlestari knelt beside him. She had never seen him this obviously shaken. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's the crown," he said, in a hoarse whisper as if it were all he could do to speak for the strength of his emotions.

"I can see it's a crown," Tamlestari said, frowning in concern and puzzlement.

"No. It's the High King's crown. I only saw it once. I was very young. But I would recognize it. It was lost during the Seiryn Wars. We thought the seiryn got it ... but it was the wyrm. The ship was lost—"

"Then lets return it to him."

"Yes. Yes!" Skree rose with the crown held reverently in his hands. "This will seal the alliance forever." The tritons of the Neridian Islands had four kings, North,

South, East, and West. The priest and oracles chose a High King to settle disputes between them, but there had been no High King since the crown had been lost.

"What's a seiryn?"

"I'll explain as we walk. They're an evil, parasitic race."

* * *

Aejys sat in a chair bolstered by pillows with blankets folded across her lap and draped about her shoulders, her wings spread over the arms. She sipped at a steaming cup of coffee to which Posidea had added some fortifying herbs. The prince and his captains had wine. The conversation so far had been limited to pleasantries as demanded by custom. The tritons, stern folk that they were, tried, but did not entirely manage, to hide their dismay at the king's condition. The triton prince, more than once, shot both Posidea and Maranya an accusatory glare that said, 'You should have done more to protect her.'

Clearly the tritons were not yet aware of Aejys' reputation for an obstinate determination to always be in the thick of it.

Tamlestari and Skree returned, bringing the crown, wrapped in silk as close to a sea green as they could find and placed it on a velvet cushion. Skree carried it. The prince rose when they entered, acknowledging the Valdren prince with a bow and touching her hand to his lips. Tamlestari sighed. She was not certain about that custom, since the closest thing to it among the Sharani was reserved for the Saer'ajan, their equivalent of a king.

"Highness," Tamlestari began. "I only wish, we had brought Skree to see the hoard sooner, for only now have we discovered something that should have been restored to your people long ago."

The prince raised an eyebrow at this and Posidea came closer to see. Aejys, although the movement hurt, leaned forward in her chair.

"Please, accept this with our wishes for continued friendship between our peoples." Tamlestari said, inclining her head.

Skree extended the cushion and the prince took the object, unwrapping it slowly. A gasp went through the room. Prince Nerindari's hand shook as he held it. Posidea's eyes went wide. She signed the holy rune, saying, "Nerindalori be praised. For seventy years we have been without a High King because one could not be crowned without this."

After several minutes Aejys called a halt to the endless rounds of thanks and praise, saying that she was tired. Tamlestari saw their guests out and then returned, expecting to find Aejys preparing to return to their rooms. Instead she found Aejys'

face blazing with fury.

"Josiah would never deliberately or consciously hurt me! I don't give a Hell Shitting Damn what you think he did! There is a rational explanation for it and I will see him now. Send for him."

* * *

Tagalong and Laurelyanne watched the change come over Josiah as they neared the keep, worsening as they got nearer to the audience chamber where they would see Aejs. Gradually the same old Josh came back, only worse: disoriented, stumbling – part of that was drunkenness – confused and terrified. The hostile eyes watching him as he passed did not help. Everyone in the keep had already passed judgment and word had filtered down even to the servants. The place was full of hostile whispers and suggestions of punishment.

Aejs saw the cords, almost before she saw his face. She did not know what had happened to him, but it broke her heart to see it. "Take them off."

"Majesty—" Posidea said.

"TAKE THEM OFF!"

Josh jerked free from Laurelyanne and Tagalong. Instantly Maranya moved between Aejs and Josh, blades out. However, Josh simply folded up over his hands, screaming, "No, don't take them off," over and over and over in the grip of terrifying inexplicable panic.

Aejs stood up, trying to go to him, but her knees gave and she fell. Posidea dropped to her haunches, supporting her. "Help him," Aejs said. "Someone help him."

Josh straightened and fled. Laurelyanne and Tagalong went after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HANNI

Laurelyanne and Tagalong found Josiah two blocks from the keep, lying in the gutter, shivering violently in the grip of the worst attack he had had since before Fusaaki's visit. They had known that this one had been only a matter of time with the heavy drinking and other stresses. They got him back to the house and were almost to the doorstep when a huge boat of a wagon, brightly painted in black and orange, pulled up drawn by four of the largest oxen Laurelyanne had ever seen. The wagon was a huge thing, featuring a hammer and anvil with striking lettering proclaiming:

Hannigan O'Flannigan Tirconnal, Stone Mage and Smith Extraordinaire.

Tagalong gasped, uncertain whether to be happy or scared shitless. "Oh my gods! It's Hanni. He's found me."

The stout dwarven driver jumped down, planting a firm kiss on Tagalong's mouth. "Damn woman! Yer a hard one ta catch up with. I been trackin' ya fer over twenty years. I read yer letters every night." Then he lifted Josiah from their arms and asked, "Where ya want yer friend?"

As they got Josiah settled, Hanni finally noticed the cords and frowned, a hard, disapproving edge entering his voice. "What kind a criminals are ya runnin' with this time, Tag? He's corded. Sealed cords."

Laurelyanne glanced at them, "Go downstairs with it. I've got to get some medicine into him and get him warm." She had run out of the actual medicine a week ago. This was just something to take the edge off.

* * *

Tagalong settled on the chair nearest the window, torn between talking to Hanni and either diving out the window or running through the door. It would probably offend Laurelyanne's sense of hospitality to simply chase him out of the house and, looking at how large and sturdy he had become, Tagalong's head barely came up to his chin, she doubted she could still deck him the way she did when they were fifteen. Then again, he had matured into a rather handsome dwarf – Tagalong shook herself loose from that thought. It was thoughts like that that had gotten her into all the trouble with Hanni in the first place. Hanni had spent a year visiting his aunt, who was married to Tagalong's uncle, and studying some new techniques with a local master smith. All the young dwarf girls had chased him, but he was only interested in his forge. Two months before he was to leave, much too late to do anything about it, he discovered the only girl who knew as much about a forge as he did: Tagalong. There was a year's worth of impassioned letters that dried to a trickle on Tagalong's part as she followed Aejs into the first skirmishes of what would eventually become a war and then into the war itself. When Tagalong looked back on it, the letters embarrassed her and she had begun to hope that after more than twenty-five years Hanni had forgotten about her. But oh, no, here comes Hanni with the letters.

"Hanni, listen. It's not what ya think."

"Ah, Tag. Ye always were such an impressionable young thing. Ye can't go pickin' up just any stray dog. He could be dangerous."

"I don't care what anyone says! Josiah Abelard would not intentionally hurt her."

"Josiah Abelard? That's Josiah Abelard? I heard he'd come back. But they corded him?"

Tagalong sighed, for the first time in a very long time she felt close to tears. "There's a lot I can't tell ya without Laurelyanne's permission. But by GimliGloikynen, ya might be just the mon ta talk ta. We need another mage."

"Well, yer talkin' ta one, me girl. So talk an' I'll listen." Hanni moved his chair closer to Tagalong.

Tagalong poured out all the parts that were hers to tell. By then Laurelyanne had come down and joined them.

"You're right, Tag, we need another mage. I'll have to trust your discretion, Hanni."

"Ya have it, young woman," Hanni said.

Laurelyanne smiled at the blandishment, knowing full well how much gray she had in her auburn hair. "Can you Read?"

"Stone and metal better than people, but yes. I could Read him. At least anything that mage-sense can pick up."

"Then follow me quietly and see if you can Read him. He's dosed and out for the night. He won't wake before morning."

Hanni went with her, creeping to Josiah's bed to touch his upper arm as far from the cords as he could get. The sight of the cords made his stomach tight and he could feel the dangerous energies in the seals. When he finished, Hanni motioned for them to leave and did not speak until they were seated once more in the sitting room.

"Have ya anythin' strong ta drink, lass?" he asked Laurelyanne, his brogue thickening with distress.

"What would you like? Whiskey? Brandy? Gin? Wine?"

"Whiskey."

Laurelyanne got out a bottle of Dragonsbreath and three glasses. She did not normally drink the hard stuff, but tonight was different.

Hanni took the bottle, turning it in his hand. "Ah, a very good year." Then he poured for all of them. He knocked his down and poured another. "His shields and such are basically shredded, gone. I could find nae coercions, sways, an' triggers as such. But," and he waved a thick finger for emphasis, "I found some odd tastes an' anomalies tha makes me suspect someone's been there. Two someones, in fact. A male and a female. An' there's a pattern ta tha damage. Rather like someone found a flaw in tha stone an' struck it with a hammer an' chisel. Deliberate like."

Laurelyanne and Tagalong locked eyes, saying together, "Hoon and Zyne."

"Rowanhart needs mages. We need more people ta consult, ta bring in on this."

Laurelyanne nodded. "Yes, but where would we get them? I have no idea."

"Ah, but lass, I do. However, it takes gold ta make things happen. Couriers an' such cost money. Ya think we could borrow from yer cousin, Tag, I see he's got his smithy goin'."

Tagalong laughed. "I take it ya don't know about tha wyrm's hoard."

"Ah, I heard, but I didn't credit it. I mean, yer tough, lass, but yer just a wee little bit of a thing."

"It's true, Hanni. Josiah, Aejys and I brought it down. So how do we convince some mages that Rowanhart is tha place ta be?"

* * *

"I want to talk to Aejys." Laurelyanne stood in the Great Hall, her way blocked by Omer and four guardsmyn. "I demand to talk to the king!"

"Go away, Laurelyanne, no one wants to talk to you," Omer said stubbornly.

"It's about Josiah."

"All the more reason for you to leave."

Laurelyanne spotted Soren crossing near the stairs. "Soren! Please!" She broke past them, running to the general, catching at her arm. "Please, it's very important. Everyone's had their say, except me."

Soren paused, taking the mage's hands in both of hers. "You're a good woman, but I think you're mistaken in this."

"I'll come back and I'll keep coming back until someone let's me talk to Aejys."

"And we will keep turning you away," Soren told her. "Be content that she has forbidden anyone to harm him."

Laurelyanne drew her cloak around herself and walked out, wondering where she could possibly go to find allies. The hall was filled with people. She knew nothing of the ways of the coastal peoples, and very few individuals beyond those who had come west with Aejys. She found Tagalong and Hanni waiting in the bailey by the totem pole.

"I just can't think where to go next."

"I do," Tagalong said, nodding at the totem pole. "Branch. We haven't talked to Branch."

The beach was a series of rocky shelves covered in sand with rocks thrust up in broken patterns along the shore. The tall houses, three-stories high, were set in long rows, four deep well above the high tide mark. The nets were strung between poles to dry and the boats were drawn up between the houses. A tall pole wrought in strange animal shapes and faces stood before the largest house. The carved beak of a huge bird, the eyes and features depicted in heavy lines of black, filled in with white and a rusty red, thrust out over the door. The sight awed Laurelyanne and Hanni. Children played and ran while their parents worked. A man, his skin a shade more brown and less bronze than the Sharani, sat upon a spruce round. He wore soft, deerskin breeches, a loose sleeved black shirt and soft boots. He held a small piece of redwood in his hand, working its surface slowly with a small knife. Three ravens hopped about his feet like pets or familiars.

The old shaman raised his head, nodding to Tagalong. "You bring me mages this time, Tagalong?" His lower lip hung away from his teeth, weighted down by a heavy labret. He had broad, high cheekbones, a strong cleft chin, full lips, and large, black, long-lashed eyes.

"Laurelyanne Amaranth of Vallimrah, earthmage," Tagalong said. "And Hanni, stone mage."

"Very good, I am Branch." He put aside his carving and rose. "I assume this is about poor Josh. Every newcomer for weeks has arrived asking about him."

"Yes, it is," Laurelyanne said.

"Well, let us go see him."

As they neared her house, Laurelyanne saw ravens hopping along the eaves.

Branch spread his arms, stopping them, scanning the house and grounds, and then he moved cautiously around to the back. The birds took flight, arrowing toward some evergreen bushes and a thicket of pine. A bank of snow had drifted deeply here. A huddled form could be made out laying in the middle of the drift. Branch kept them back with curt gestures of his spread arms. The ravens settled in the branches above him. The shaman brushed snow off Josiah's unmoving form, dug his face out, and turned it from side to side, checking his neck for bruises or punctures. He found two bruises, but no indentations to indicate that fangs had pierced the flesh. However, his attackers, if they had been royals might have had the art to seal the wounds.

The back of Laurelyanne's hand came to her lips as she watched Branch dig her

friend out.

The shaman slipped his arms under Josiah's shoulders and legs, he was an old mon, but still quite strong. As he moved Josiah, a spattering of blood on the snow was revealed beneath him. "There," he said, nodding for the others to look.

"Josiah's?"

"Yes. See the bruises?"

Branch lifted Josiah and rose. The mage's wasted body was light, giving more evidence that he suffered. That angered Branch. Josiah was a good mon. He had been a sweet boy, playing with Branch's grandchildren and great grandchildren.

"I can take him," Hanni said.

"No. You should have come to me sooner."

Laurelyanne led them into the house and upstairs to Josiah's room. She turned back the covers while Hanni and Branch undressed him. Then Branch slipped the mage between the sheets. Branch sat for a long time simply staring into Josiah's face. They tried to talk to him, but Branch did not reply or give any sign that he heard them. After awhile they simply went down stairs and waited.

They sat around the table in silence until Tagalong finally broke it. "They're feeding on him, aren't they?" Her voice was soft, oddly hesitant for the usually sassy dwarf. Of all the people for them to pick on, hurting poor Josh angered her most. She had no idea how to protect him, or even if she could protect him.

"Yeah," Hanni answered. "Stands ta reason. If they held him fer a week..." He rose and headed for Laurelyanne's kitchen, returning with the Dragonsbreath and glasses. He poured himself a double. "It's part a tha process. Confirms my suspicions, lass. They broke him. Given enuf torture and humiliation, even the strongest breaks sooner or later. My guess is, just along tha split in tha incarnations so's no one'd notice."

"The attack means Hoon's back," Laurelyanne added.

"Yeah. Thas exactly what it means. He must not be left alone."

"Do you think he knows?"

"Naw. Hoon's been blockin' his memories all along. Why should he stop now?"

Tagalong had had her confidence shaken at Dragonshead a year ago, when she had apparently lost Aeijys despite her best efforts to protect her and, seeing how easily the vampires struck at Josiah, she had that same sick sensation of helplessness

sweep through her. Her hand stole over Hanni's for reassurance. He glanced at her and then covered her hand with both of his big calloused ones.

"Tha sways, triggers an' coercions, as we've already discussed are too deep fer us ta' find. But maybe I can do somethin' ta tweak 'em."

* * *

Branch sat with Josh. The shaman had refused to speak to any of the people who had come to him concerning Josh, beyond saying that Josh was a good mon and would do nothing to consciously harm Aeijys. If he had harmed her it had been out of a disoriented panic that had caused him to lose control of his damaged magic. Posidea had been rude and threatening. Branch responded by reminding her that she stood on sanctified ground. A shaman needed no temples and proud edifices to mark the bounds of his power, the ground and earth itself was his realm. His ravens chased her out of the village.

The paladins of the Order were only slightly more polite, having no conception of how to deal with a holy mon like himself and he ordered them out also with an escort of the younger braves. Aeijys would deal harshly with these people when she learned of their behavior. Branch would tell her.

He turned Josh's wrists in his hands. The cords had been bound too tightly. There were signs that at one point the wrists had swollen and the skin broken. Old crusted blood and gray matter, the remains of some kind of cream Laurelyanne had put on it to ease the discomfort. There was very little she could do for fear of disturbing the seals. The tritons had deliberately hurt him. In time he would deal with Posidea over this. The old mon considered himself one of Josh's protectors.

Josh looked forty, but he was only twenty-five. That had been the price he paid as a child when the sa'necari burned the magic centers in him. The superstitious sailor that had taken him in as an orphan child had paid the sa'necari to do it. That sa'necari, posing as an apostate priest, had intended to return and kill the child, but Branch had warded him by placing a lock of Josh's hair inside his totem pole.

Branch shook his head slowly – this was not right. He remembered again how Josh had played with his grandchildren as a child. Josh had once spent weeks collecting seashells and other pretty things that washed up on the beach and tried to give them to Bluewings, Branch's granddaughter. When she refused to pick through them, Josh had dumped them on her head rather than take 'no' for an answer. They had been eight year olds. He had always been a good boy. He did not deserve this. A raven flew onto Branch's shoulder and regarded Josh quietly. Then it spread its wings and hopped down onto the unconscious mon. It danced and images formed across the bed as if drawn in smoke. Branch watched until finally the raven flew back to his shoulder.

"Ahhhhh."

Josiah stirred, licking at his dry lips, glassy-eyed. "Branch?"

Branch touched his forehead, shifting his pillows. "Do you hurt? Where is your medicine?"

"There is none."

"None!"

"Healers ... apothecaries ... won't sell ... to us... Posi – Posidea's banned us."

"That one will answer to me!"

Branch returned to the sitting room long after it was dark with his raven on his shoulder. "Tell me everything, leaving nothing out."

They spoke until dawn with Laurelyanne stopping several times to provide food and beverage. Branch asked few questions, preferring simply to listen. Only when the sun rose did he begin to speak.

"The blood on the snow is my proof of your words. That and my bird's vision. I have known Josh since he was a boy. He would not harm someone. Save in self-defense."

"I am a mage, not a healer," Laurelyanne said. "Although working in earth, I've picked some of that up. Posidea refuses to allow a healer to see him. She also refuses to allow anyone to sell me the herbs and medicines he needs. None of us, not even Tag, can get in to see Aejs."

"The king will speak with me." Branch rose and left without another word.

Branch strode from Laurelyanne's house, setting a steady pace. His surface thoughts were stilled and it was almost as if he did not think at all. The inner mind worked in reflection. People paused to watch the shaman pass for Branch rarely left his village on the edge of the city, but mostly they watched the ravens swirling in greater and greater numbers above him, flying sweeps, wheeling and turning, filling the air with their raucous cries. The raven was his totem. According to the lore of his people, the spirit-totem called Raven had found his people in a clamshell and been so delighted with what he had found that he stole fire from heaven to keep them warm. The flock of ravens had grown to hundreds by the time Branch reached the keep, as if their numbers reflected the anger burning deep beneath the still surface of his thoughts.

He entered the outer bailey and crossed through unopposed, recognized by all who saw him. When he reached the inner courtyard he nodded at the totem pole. The eyes lit and the figures seemed to smile briefly at him. Then he took a cedar and

whalebone rattle from his belt, shook it at the doors and blew them open. Shouts of alarm and surprise came forth. Branch heard people running, shouting, and wondering whether it was some incredible wind or an assault. The legion of birds swept in ahead of him and Branch followed, determined to make the entrance an impressive one. He would talk to the king.

He found the Great Hall awash in ravens; and soldiers, pages, squires, ha'taren, servants, everyone looking uneasily at the birds. Soren, followed by Omer and Laelyn came forward to meet him.

"What's the meaning of this?" Soren demanded.

"I wish to speak to the king."

"Let him," Omer said. "Or you'll have more trouble than you can possibly imagine."

"Because he's a mage?" Soren growled.

"No," Omer said. "Shaman. Holy mon. This isn't Shaurone. This is the Blood Coast. Furthermore, Aejs respects him. So do I and every Vorgen here. When it gets back to Aejs – and it most certainly will – that you did not immediately send him up she'll lock you in irons, *General*."

Soren gave him a long, hard look, suggesting that he would probably be scrubbing privies for the rest of his life. Omer met that look and defied it – at some point these hard-assed Sharani had to start learning how things worked on the Coast.

"When a shaman asks to see the king, it's the same as a high priest. You send him up. Especially if it's Branch."

Soren considered. "She has called a council, I was on my way there. You may come with me." She turned, gesturing for Branch to follow. The ravens took flight and swept into the upper halls with them.

Laelyn turned to Omer. "I guess we deserved that."

"You did. Aejs needs to put more of the locals in high position if she wants to make this work. Too many newcomers and we'll have wars with the locals."

Laelyn nodded. "I agree. My grandma'aram is a bit stiff-necked. I think I'll try to spend some time learning the local customs."

"Take a few months leave, ride up the coast with a good guide and learn to see the world the way the tribes do. Aejs lived among them for several years."

"I will."

* * *

Aejys sat at the head table and there were two lines of tables one to each side of her. Several seats were empty. Posidea and Skree sat to her left and Tamlestari to her right. Meenaleigh and Maranya sat on Tamlestari's side. Soren took her place beside Posidea. Branch moved to stand in the aisle between the tables. His gaze swept the chamber and then fixed on Aejys. The king rose, smiling at him.

"Branch, it's good to see you."

The ravens swept into the room before the squire at the door could close it and everyone stared.

"Too many faces are missing," the shaman said, bluntly.

"What?"

"Have you grown so proud, O king, that those who once sat upon your councils are now cast from your side?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where is Omer? Tagalong? Becca and Clemmerick? Where is Laurelyanne?"

Aejys glanced at Tamlestari and then Posidea. "Tomiolytyn!" She called the squire. "Send runners immediately, I want all of those he has named sent for."

"Aejys..." Tamlestari began and Aejys cut her off.

"Stari, if this is your doing, then I suggest you leave these chambers and think about what you have done. These people were part of my life before you were. I am alive because of their loyalty. This is not how I repay them."

Tamlestari walked stiffly from the council chambers. The others shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"That one." Branch pointed at Posidea. "That one has forbidden all the healers of Rowanhart to treat Josh or to sell medicines for him to Laurelyanne."

Posidea snarled, "An attempted regicide deserves no better."

"You will rescind that order," Aejys commanded.

"I have evidence to the contrary, Aejys," Branch said. "But it is for your ears alone."

"Then we'll go to my study and discuss it in a moment. Would you accept a

permanent place on my council so that this never happens again?"

Branch considered and then gave a small nod. "Yes."

"Which healer do you want, Branch?"

"Pyne." Branch named a half-Kwaklahmyn healer that he knew.

"Posidea, he wants Pyne. Make it so."

Skree sat in silence, saying nothing.

Aejys left with Branch. They went up to her private study and she sat in her chair by the fire, her face thoughtful, and just a touch sad as she listened to the tale.

"So you see, Aejys," Laurelyanne said. "We can't prove anything without a yuwenghau's examination, one with the right gifts. But there's enough evidence to cast serious doubt on what Posidea's claiming."

"Yes, there is. I saw how he reacted that day. There was definitely something bad wrong with him. It's haunted me. Which is why I won't let anyone hurt him."

"But we don't want him around ya much," Tagalong added. "Until Hanni comes up with a way ta control it."

"I'm glad Hanni showed up," Aejys said, brightening a little. "I'm sorry for the way everyone's been treating all of you. I've put a stop to it. I've missed all of you. I had wondered where you were."

Branch watched them interestedly, then rose and left.

* * *

Pyne wore his long black hair in braids, a shirt and tunic over his buckskin breeches in a style that deliberately flaunted his half-breed heritage. Josh lay curled tightly into a moaning ball, sweat pouring from his face, his body trembling violently. Hanni was on hands and knees on the bed with him, trying to talk him down when Aejys entered with Tagalong and Laurelyanne.

"What's wrong?" Aejys asked.

Pyne looked up at her. "When I got here, he was having violent seizures. I think this is a reaction to that. I can't get anything into him to help. Damn Posidea!"

Aejys walked around to him. "Josiah," she said softly, stroking his face. "Come back, Josiah. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. Come back, Josiah."

She did not know what she did or how she did it, but his eyes cleared and his body relaxed, slowly uncurling. Pyne immediately moved to her side, pressing a glass into her hand.

"Get him to take this."

As she raised Josiah up she could tell that he had lost more weight. He drank and she lowered him back.

* * *

Aejys propped her boots on a chair in the east audience chamber, where she had called a very small council, just Laelyn, Omer, Maranya, Soren, Tagalong, and Tamlestari. She had that familiar stubborn look on her face as she lit her pipe.

"You've taken on too much power and authority, Soren. I'm taking a chunk of it away."

"What do you mean?" Soren demanded.

"You're still my general, but the army doesn't run this kingdom. We have a lot of territory to protect. This is not just a city-state. We have villages as far as the Willowhorn that have asked to be admitted to the kingdom so that they come under our protection. They saw what happened to Timbren. We also have Vorgensburg."

"So?"

"So that's what the hell you're supposed to be doing, not messing up the affairs of my city."

"Aejys..."

"Shut up! Tomorrow Omer gets knighted."

Omer straightened in his chair, his long legs coming smack against it. Tagalong snickered. Laelyn's eyebrows lifted and a tiny grin formed.

"The city guard is more than capable of handling matters in the city. Furthermore, I want Sharani integrated into the ranks so that they can learn from the locals. No more hard-assed nonsense. This is the Blood Coast, not Shaurone. We do things differently out here and I'm not going to have you starting wars when we don't need them. Omer is in charge here. He is now Knight-Captain of Rowanhart and your equal in council. No more stupid shit."

Aejys rose and walked to the table, pipe in hand. She pointed to the maps. "Soren, I want you to start making patrols and sweeps. I want two Kwaklahmyn liaisons and one Vorgen assigned to every one of them. I want our people to start learning the

languages and customs. These people are to be consulted and listened to."

They began to gather around her, studying the land she marked. When they were all close, she paused. "And one last thing." Her voice went low and hard. "No one touches Josiah. No one."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WRATHSCAR

Hanni proved to be Josiah's staunchest ally once he understood the situation. Josiah found himself opening up to the bluff dwarf mage as he not to anyone other than Clemmerick. In fact he opened up far more to Hanni than he had to Clemmerick because they shared the magic. They also shared a troubled love life. Hanni had met Tag when they were both a mere fifteen on a summer's holiday. Tagalong had been the first girl he ever encountered who knew her way around a forge as well as he did and was instantly smitten with her. They exchanged a years worth of embarrassingly passionate letters after he went home, which dried to a trickle and then ended entirely. Absence, in Tag's case, had not made the heart grow fonder. Hanni got on with his life, did all the things a young, talented dwarf was expected to do and then went looking for her: because, in his case, absence had made the heart grow fonder. But he had had one devil of a time finding her; Hanni had been forever arriving after she had moved on. Josiah listened sympathetically and Hanni bonded firmly to him as a result. Up until then every single mon to whom Hanni had previously poured out his long tale of hopeless love had told him to forget her and get on with his life.

"What you need is a worry stone," Hanni said, stroking the long stem of his pipe across his lip. He had a bristling black beard and wild hair that he wore in several thick plaits.

"A worry stone? I don't know much about stone magic," Josiah admitted. He was sober for the first time in weeks. Sitting and talking to Hanni took the stress off. Hanni had also helped Laurelyanne shield the house. Josiah had responded far better to Pyne's ministrations than anyone had initially expected. Hanni now had his wagon parked in Laurelyanne's backyard and was living out of it.

Hanni guffawed loudly. "Imagine that! Josiah Abelard doesn't know something!" Then he thumped Josiah soundly, but good-naturedly on the back.

"Well, I know a little. Year ago I charged some stones for Aejys to protect her from a sa'necari. But what you're talking about is very different."

"Don't doubt it is. You're a generalist and I'm a specialist. Big differences."

"Absolutely. You think with this stone of yours I could safely move back in with

Aejys? If she'll have me?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't take those cords off until we figure out what is doing this."

"I understand."

Hanni arranged the meeting between Aejys and Josiah. It took place at Laurelyanne's. Hanni's worry stone worked perfectly. However, except for Laurelyanne, Hanni, and Tagalong, disapproval of the reconciliation was unanimous. One single factor had been left out of all the arguments made against Josiah: Zyne. Posidea had chosen to make Zyne a private matter for her own people to handle. Maranya kept her own counsel. She made her feelings known to those she sought to enlist, but not to Aejys. Her gut instinct was that Zyne and Josiah were not working alone against the king. If she watched them long enough, she would discover the others. Then Tagalong and Laurelyanne would be forced to stop shielding him.

* * *

"I think its time Maranya went ta Janine fer finishin'," Tagalong said, sitting in the parlor with Aejys. She did not like coming to the keep these days because she had started to get some of the same hard looks that Josiah got, as if she had turned traitor for defending him constantly. It pleased Tagalong to see that he was holding up better than expected. She knew he was still doing things that would eventually hurt Aejys, but the dwarf had begun to see Josiah more in the light of her father who had dearly loved her mother in spite of having a wandering member at times – at least he had always come home to dinner. Furthermore, if Josiah needed to have an extra female in his life when he did not have much life left – well, fine. She would defend his right to do it. That last attack had pretty much brought that home to her.

"In that case set it up."

"Fine. Tomorrow." Tagalong stood up, heading for the door.

"You're not going to stay?" Aejys sounded disappointed.

"I'm not. I don't feel welcome anymore. This dust-up over Josiah." She walked off before Aejys could say anything else.

* * *

Jumpfree had not seen Aejys since the day of the battle. He had caught a glimpse of her just before those archers shot him out of the sky. He Jumped instinctively as he blacked out and woke the next morning in the little village at Blue Dog Pass, being tended by Sugar Maple and fussed over by many of his childhood friends who were still children. Instinct had taken him to the place he loved best and felt safest. A message was sent to Rowanhart that they were not to worry about him and the Badree Nym held onto him as long as they could.

Skelly had missed him intensely. The poor dragon had taken some rough handling fighting Mephistis. The healers had no idea how to treat his wounds and injuries, so Clemmerick came over from Vorgensburg and instructed several volunteers, mostly members of the orphan-brigade, on the care and feeding of suffering dragons. The children loved Skelly and played checkers with him every day, but no one could really take Jumpfree's place. Hence, Skelly was overjoyed when Jumpfree returned.

Jumpfree still had one injured arm resting in a sling and his wings would not heal enough to fly for months. He had been very fortunate, considering how close he had come to being killed. That afternoon he took his first walk on the beach in weeks just to feel the wet sand squish between his toes along with the melting snow. Everyone thought he was crazy because snow was cold. A side effect of his teleportation affinity was that his feet could handle nearly anything for a little while because they never knew what they might land in. Nonetheless he had tied his boots to his belt because his feet would eventually get cold.

"Hello, Oh feathered mon, would you like to see my tail?" a soft, sensual voice asked.

Jumpfree turned around and frowned at the woman emerging from around a rock. She wore leathers, but went barefoot, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet.

"I would *not* like to see you with your clothes off," he replied, puzzled.

"I have a very pretty tail," she purred, stalking closer to him.

Jumpfree sighed. "You've got dead leaves in your hair." He retreated.

Anksha stopped in her tracks, dragging her fingers frantically through her hair. "What's wrong with that?"

"You look like a dirty child."

She opened her shirt, flashing her lovely breasts at him. "Does this look like a child?"

"Don't do that!"

"Why not? Don't you want to touch them?"

For answer, Jumpfree scooped up some snow and a small rock, formed a ball and smacked her in the face. "You're ruining my walk!" Then he Jumped.

* * *

Maranya was sitting on a bench in the hall as Tagalong left, and returned to the

parlor when the dwarf was gone from earshot. "Something wrong?" she asked, catching the look in Aejys' eye.

"No," Aejys responded quickly. "Tagalong will be taking you over to Vorgensburg in the morning to study the game under Janine."

"So we're back to that?"

"Yes. I'd like Bryngaryn to take your place here."

"She can handle it. She's of the Order."

"It must get hard on Soren having two of you in it."

"Sometimes. But she's got seven grandchildren. She can afford to lose a few."

"That's a hard thing to say," Aejys said softly, moving to the window and staring out of it at the islands in the bay.

"Considering how many would have died in that attack if some of us did not accept the sacrifices of a few, can you still suggest I should not say it."

"No. I didn't mean it that way."

"Well, I've got something harder to say. Since you've taken him back and I will not be around..."

"I do not want to hear this."

"I don't want to say it. But it would be better if you heard it from someone who cares about you, rather than someone who doesn't. You are probably the only mon in the entire city who doesn't know. He has a mistress. He has had one since before I came to the coast. You can ask Skree."

Aejys' throat tightened. She had wanted a child by him, knowing how perilously short his days had become; yet he had not touched her in months. "Who is she?"

"A triton."

"Which one?" Aejys' voice turned cold.

Maranya saw the hurt showing, but decided not to give her the name, let her get it from an unimpeachable source, someone who could not be accused of having a grudge against the mon. "I don't know. You would have to ask Skree."

"You're absolutely certain of this?"

"Yes. Too many people I trust have seen it."

Maranya had an odd feeling that there was more to this than a bedroom betrayal. Too many things had happened during the battle to have been chance – like how had they known to concentrate on Skree's house when so very few people knew the children were Aeijys' nephews. Rumor had it that Zyne was Josiah's leman. So far Tagalong had refused to either confirm or deny those rumors. Omer swore that Zyne was Josiah's mistress. Tonight Maranya would confirm the rumors for herself and, perhaps confirm whether they plotted together against the king, as she suspected. It had to be tonight, since Tagalong – possibly at Josiah's urging – had just persuaded Aeijys to send her away.

* * *

The warm currents, even this far north along the Gulf Stream, meant that ships traveled year round here – which was something they could not do much along the east coast. As word went out of the defeat of Mephistis' undead army, the fame of Rowanhart's Sacred King spread and the city – even though it was now the depth of winter – gradually acquired the one group of immigrants it had sorely lacked, and with them the shops catering to them: mages. Hanni was responsible for that. He knew which cities the expatriates of Charas had gathered in and sent the news to them by the fastest couriers he could hire: Wind folk. Otherwise it might have taken several seasons to reach them. The mages arrived by ship and by spell, since winter had shut down the overland trade routes.

Hanni and Tagalong met most of the new mages at the taverns around the city, which was where most people met to pick up gossip and news; others, those that Hanni had contacted directly and had put out the news for him, came to Laurelyanne's to see him. Hinkty Molly's became a popular spot. Josiah occasionally went with them, wearing long cuffed leather gloves and voluminous sleeves to hide the cords. The mages would never have spoken to him if they had seen them. Corded mages were not allowed into mage shops either. They were marked felons and no one wanted to hear their excuses. Those were pleasant evenings and Josiah actually dreaded going back to the keep, even though it meant being near Aeijys.

The newcomers, not yet aware of who he was, spoke to him and he bought them drinks and dinner. Many of them knew Laurelyanne. The earthmage had a good reputation in Rowanhart and was putting together a loose Guild of mages to help them find patrons and other means of livelihoods. There was talk of patronage from the crown to build a library and, perhaps, a school. Josiah had surrendered all his dreams and pretensions of achieving anything important. He felt too depressed and worn out. The games were still being played in the keep and gradually he stopped trying to see Aeijys, since the squires rarely let him get past them to see her, returning to his rooms only to sleep and rarely even then. He chose not to tell Tagalong and the others this, knowing one of them would certainly go rushing to Aeijys with the information. Most nights he slept at Zyne's. Some nights he slept at Laurelyanne's on

one invented premise or another. And, yet he had not moved out again, not wanting to entirely admit defeat either. His love for Aeijys burned like a searing blade through his heart and soul. He thought about her every waking moment.

* * *

Miccan sat on the couch, trying hard not to stare at the cords on Josiah's wrists. Hanni had decided to take a chance at last. He had known Miccan for ten years and the fire mage was level headed. Miccan was already establishing himself as one of the leaders and thinkers among the young mages Hanni's letters had drawn to Rowanhart.

"Your friend's been corded," the mage said suspiciously, uneasily.

"Josiah Abelard." Laurelyanne said. "He is the mage-master himself. Brought back. All of his knowledge is intact."

"He's the one tried to kill the king. I won't have anything to do with him." The mage rose.

"I could have had them off," Josiah said. "The king ordered them taken off. But I refused to allow it."

Miccan looked shocked. "You refused?"

"Because I'm terrified."

"Please, Miccan," Laurelyanne pleaded, lightly touching his arm with her worn fingers. "He's damaged. I think someone has been in his mind. Check him. Give me an opinion. Hanni and I both vouch for him."

Miccan wavered before the naked distress in her old eyes. Hanni had sent for him because terrible things were happening here; not just because he wanted to found a school to compete with Charas. The school had been the bait. This was the real purpose. These people needed help. Miccan knew that Hanni would not be running with rogues. There had to be something real here.

"Please," Josiah begged. "I can't hurt anyone with the cords on. For my sanity's sake, I need to know. And I need to know if it can be fixed."

Miccan capitulated. It would not hurt to look. Miccan moved to Josiah's side, put his hands on his temples, and initiated rapport. What he saw shook him to his depths. "Gods, there's so much damage. He can't protect himself. You're right. Someone has been here. It could be argued either way, of course, but there seems to be too much of a pattern to it. Someone could still be here, but in all this mess they would be hard to find. It would take a yuwenghau. Far as I know, none of the mages here are one. I'll ask around. We will need a lot of help with this."

"Could you get some of the others to come over and meet him?"

Miccan nodded. "Tomorrow night? And I'll talk to the storeowners. They'll let him come in and make purchases. They'll make an exception for him, once they know the circumstances."

"Thank you, Miccan. I'll bake cookies."

Miccan laughed and excused himself.

* * *

Josiah heard about the cluster of shops in the taverns. He was not supposed to go out alone, but waiting at Laurelyanne's or Hinkty Molly's for someone to walk with him grated after awhile and he became impatient – and no one at the keep wanted to bother with him. So he tended to put aside his promises and simply go out after a time. He chose one called The Manticore Bones and went inside. A young woman moved the gray goose feathers of a duster across the items on the shelves and counters in delicate strokes as if it were a wand, swishing away the dust without disturbing anything else. A manticore skull sat upon the floor near the door, the tanned skin draped over it, the stinger, claws and teeth strung on a leather thong and run through the empty eye sockets. Josiah spied three different kinds of hands of glory in one glass cabinet; one clearly orc and the other two of species he had never seen before: dark things in that cabinet. He shivered. This shop was a mix, a neutral place, he had been told: Full of things of both light and of darkness and of everything in between and of things that would not bear the king's notice. The owner was a Badonthian, one who believed in turning the tools of the hellgod against him and so acquired them from time to time – such as those hands – though she did not make them.

Another glass cabinet was filled with stones, both raw and polished.

"Can I help you?" the young woman asked.

Josiah started from his thoughts. "I'm looking for a memory stone."

"I can't imagine why. You don't look like you have any happy thoughts."

Josiah sighed. "Its for my lover. I want her to remember our first kiss." He tried to smile, but it came out sad.

"An apology?"

"Yes, that's it. It's winter and I can't send her flowers... I forgot her birthday."

The woman brightened. "I have just the thing." She went to the case of stones and

brought out a bit of white stone or bone – Josiah was not certain which since she had not put it in his hand – that looked very much like a piece Josiah would have used for scrimshaw. "Its narwhal ivory, but it takes a memory charge even better than what the life mages used for their rings. Winter mages use it for mother beads. You know the ones mage parents give their children when they come of age so they never forget they are loved."

As she started to put it in his hand, his sleeve came far enough from his wrist for her to see that spellcord and she stiffened for a moment. "Are you Josiah?"

"Yes." The entire lovely pretense dropped away. Depression swept over him with the expectation of being ordered from the shop.

She relaxed then, and placed it in his hand. "It's a gift." She folded his fingers over it. "A bit of advice for your old age, grandfather. The Sharani have a habit of establishing branch clans. First they hyphenate and then they drop the older name."

"What has this to do with a stone?"

"Nothing at all," she said, pushing him toward the door. "Only the Willidars were a branch clan of the Rowans as were the Abelards or rather the Abelari as they were originally called. So when you obsess on being the last of your lineage, remember that the Willidars are actually Abelards also, a branch clan of your descendants." She almost had him to the door. "And you are all Rowans. And Hoon is obsessed, since the day of his blood birth, with eating Rowans. It is not safe for you to be here alone. Come back with Hanni." She pulled the door open and pushed him out.

Josiah hesitated. "What's your name?"

"Amberlin Willidar. Now go home as fast as you can. Or to Hinkty Molly's. It's closer."

* * *

Birdie had been going over the ledgers, balancing their purchases against their profits. It did not do for anyone to realize how wealthy the temple and the orphanage were thanks to Dynanna's generosity. Nonetheless, she was already planning to hold a huge celebration when she came of age next spring. She had been functioning for nearly two years as if she were already of age, while having Blackbird add her signature to purchase orders just for simple legalities. Next spring that nonsense would end.

She felt the chill of Arruth's arrival before she saw her.

"*He isn't gone*," Arruth said.

Birdie was beginning to become accustomed to her sister's ghostly visits. The first

visit had been the hardest, for Arruth had still looked as she had when Wrathscar discarded her body on the Creeyan training grounds. Now she looked much as she had in life. "I didn't think he was. I figured he'd lay low and come back."

"I can't rest, Birdie. You must destroy him."

"I'll get him, Arruth."

Birdie reached under her desk, bringing out a can of paint. She had retrieved it from the barns the day before, once all of the fires were out. They had not had any fires, but they had helped put out the ones among their nearest neighbors. She carried it into the first of the girls' bedrooms on the second floor. Using her fingers, she painted the question mark symbol of Dynanna on each window and above each door, blessing them as she did so. She paused only to eat and let the babies suckle, and then went back to her work. No vampire was getting into her home. He would not get another chance at one of the children.

Mathryn followed her sullenly as she worked. "Don't do this," she growled, far back in her throat like an animal.

Birdie sat the can down and rounded on her. "Do you want him to hurt you? Do you want him to kill you?"

"You're evil!" Mathryn kicked the can over. "You're evil. I hate you."

Birdie grabbed the can, righting it before all the contents could spill. "Stop that. I love you."

"I hate you," Mathryn growled again.

Birdie smacked her face. "That's enough of that."

Mathryn sprang at Birdie, clawing and biting. Birdie wrestled her down and got bitten twice more. Mathryn twisted free, running from the room, shrieking. Birdie chased her.

"Stop her! Don't let her get out the door."

Mathryn dodged around Paunys, darting between Zarim's legs. Blackbird caught her and was bitten. She released Mathryn with a curse. Mathryn got as far as the front sitting room before six of the other children pulled her down. They tied her up.

"What's wrong with her?" Blackbird asked, sucking the side of her bitten hand.

"He's in her mind," Birdie said. "And I don't know how to get him out." Then she went back to her work and, as an added precaution, she nailed the windows shut.

* * *

Zyne sang Josiah to the cottage. He let himself in and settled on the ground before the hearth, his eyes glazed by the growing intensity of her songs that wrapped through his mind. He no longer tried to resist her, sitting there with his expression dulled as if by drugs while she bound him tighter and tighter. She shoved more wood onto the fire, getting the cottage quite warm. Then she walked widdershins about him, singing softly so that it would not carry beyond her walls: tritons would recognize a seiryn's song. Hoon had shared more of his knowledge of the arts of fascination with her over the past weeks, since she had become his, and she put it to good use. When she completed the next binding, she coupled with him on the floor until, replete, she fell asleep in his arms.

Crouched beneath a window of Zyne's cottage, Maranya listened to the sex play. There had been no talk; just that strange singing in a language her keen ear said was not exactly triton. The mist rolled in swiftly from the sea and snow began to fall. The temperature dropped. The light around the street lamps dwindled, narrowing in the deepening curtain of gray. Maranya rose quietly, moving to the path.

"What have we here?" a low male voice seemed to slide out of the stillness.

Maranya turned slowly, listening for his movement, gauging his distance before reacting. She saw him; standing beside a boulder, not yet close enough to make out his features in the mist. "Who are you?" she asked, keeping her voice soft and tentative.

"People who listen beneath windows should answer the question first," he said, silkily.

Maranya giggled, dropping her eyes and watching him come closer through her lashes. "Thought they might take the ride—" She saw from the corners of her eyes four more shapes emerge from the mist. "I just wondered ... what ... you know..."

"What it might be like, young one?" The mon asked.

She could see him clearly now. He was large, bearded. His nearness sent a prickle of alarm along her spine, as did the others drawing in around her. Soon he would be close enough to see the sword concealed beneath her cloak and know the childish innocence for a sham. "I ... I need to go. Mama's waiting."

"I think she'll wait ... forever." He reached for her.

Maranya ducked beneath his arm, drawing and slashing. The mon shrieked. The others rushed in. Maranya gutted the first one to reach her, kicked the female off the blade, and ran. She could hear them coming behind her.

The street branched. Ahead of her, ten blocks down Dock Street, lay the keep. To

the right ran the street to the market square. She saw figures moving dimly in the mist from the direction of the keep and while logic said to move in that direction, instinct said to take the branch. She went with her instincts and ran. A cluster of wagons stood before a warehouse. She jumped over the tongue of the middle wagon and crouched, watching her pursuers pause at the branching path to speak with those who had come walking from the direction of the keep.

"Ya made a good choice, lass," said an age-cracked, male voice.

She twisted, bringing her blade to bear. A strong hand pressed her wrist, stopping the blade and a light was briefly unshielded, revealing an old man she had noticed many times watching her from a table in Hinkty Molly's. "Who are you?"

"I be tha gaffer."

"Gaffer?"

"Come on," he nodded at the side of the building and she followed. He rapped a soft rhythm on the wall and it slid open. He pushed her shoulder lightly and she entered with him following. The wall slid back. Whoever had opened the wall was not there when the gaffer unshielded the lantern. The small room was all barrels. A small, square table flanked by a pair of worn wooden chairs sat in the center and against the corner of the far wall a narrow stair with a crude rail on one side led to a trap door in the ceiling. "Ya made a good choice, lass," the gaffer said again, sitting and motioning for her to do so also. He put the lantern in the middle. "What was chasing ya was undead. What blows ya got in did 'em nay lastin' harm."

"You saw me?"

Gaffer nodded. "Ya want ta tell me what a ha'taren captain be doin' listenin' under folks' windows?"

"I was just wandering around... Heard something interesting and decided to listen. Just curious."

"Ya been followin' tha prince-consort since he left Hinkty Molly's."

Maranya studied her hands.

"Aejys ask ya ta check out tha rumors?"

"No."

"Tagalong?"

"No." She got up and climbed the stairs.

"Ya can't get out tha way," Gaffer said, grinning, showing his great white teeth and overbite. "An' tha hidden door on tha side only opens in, not out."

"What do you mean?" Maranya halted with her hand on the trapdoor.

"There a big awful tub a whale oil sittin' on top of tha. They won't move it till mornin'."

"I'm supposed to be at court!"

"Better late than dead, lass. Tha's a lesser blood huntin' party out there. Lot's of 'em. Can't enter a house unless it's invited. Sunlight destroys 'em. There's some royals out there too. Haven't found them yet. But I will. We stick tha lesser bloods every time we find one. An' there's somethin' else, a wee small she-creature tha's tha worst of 'em. She bites a mon's spine in half. I seen ya fight in tha big battle. Yer good. But ya weren't fightin' a pack a royals. It'd a been a pack a royals ye'd be fightin' if ya'd stayed ta fight. An' in all tha fog ya'd not know they was thar till they bit ya."

"Royals?" Maranya came down the stairs, returning to her seat. The gaffer had her attention.

"Lemyari. Ancients. Maybe even some lycans. Tha sa'necari an' all tha undead an' demon royals be poised ta seize power in many realms. What chanced in Shaurone an', most recently, in Creeya is but a taste a days ta come. Be wary. Now ya want ta tell me who ya are?"

"An exchange of identities?" Maranya gave him a shrewd, measuring glance.

"Yes," The gaffer extended his hand. Maranya grasped it and they shook. "I'm Armetus Hornbow."

"Wilstryn's sire?"

"Ya knew her?"

"Knew her? I – I loved her. She taught me..."

"Then yer Maranya Deontaramei." The gaffer reached across the table and hugged her. They held each other for a long time, silently sharing their grief at the loss of Wilstryn a year ago. Maranya had been a very special student. She had trained with Wilstryn while attending the temple school in private classes. Through Wilstryn, Maranya gained the knack of appearing far younger and more harmless than she was. With Sonden's cooperation she was presented to the school as a mon Laeoli's age so that she could befriend Laeoli and keep her safe. They became inseparable. The only time she had not ridden out to hunt with Laeoli, the shifters attacked, killing Laeoli, Maranya's lover, Wilstryn, and wounding Ladonys who died weeks later.

"Fer tha sake a Wilstry'n's mem'ry, I'm tellin' ya, yer king'll get nae help from tha' Guild on her quest."

"Why? You've helped her before."

"Guild's been bled near white by treachery. We've pulled outta tha city-states includin' Charas. We're jest not there. I'm sorry. Takhalme Gee is dead and his heirs also. The branch clan sits the throne of Creeya. Grand Master Ceejorn Osterbridge is playing it cautious. An' I'd rather this not be known. Too many folks'd come after us if they knew. Now, since we're gonna be stuck here till dawn, an' we got lots a time ta talk...tell me...do ya really think poor Josh tried ta kill tha king?"

"Tag and Stari think it was just panic and a damaged mind...but yes, I do."

"Tell me about it."

* * *

Hoon stood over Josiah and Zyne, watching them sleep. Seeing the mage humbled and impotent amused him. Five hundred year ago, Hoon had assembled an invincible army of trolls, the only time Anksha had managed to tame and control so many at once. He would have taken the southern city-states with them. The trolls destroyed the powerful army of the Sharani enclave near Charas. He captured and tortured their ha'taren general Shularrien Willidar, trying to force her to renounce her god that he might turn her. She died instead. Then Shularrien's ba'halaef, who until then had been a nameless mage of no importance, developed the first true spell of conflagration. He came after Hoon's army alone and destroyed it. Soon after that people began to speak of the mage-master, a pan-elementalist who wielded all the magics and not just one or two, mage-paladin to Kalirion: Josiah Abelard.

The vampire straddled the mage, caught him by the hair, and twisted his head back. "Josiah, it's time to remember again."

Zyne woke, grabbed her discarded breast band, and shoved it into Josiah's mouth to stifle his scream. She lifted her eyes to Hoon's, frightened. "You promised. You said you would let me run off with him."

"And I will. However, I will have my games and pleasures first." Hoon threw the blankets back. "I will give Josiah, a small taste of what I gave Shularrien."

Josiah struggled to get free to no avail. Hoon pinned him firmly on his belly and then shoved his cock into Josiah's body, riding him savagely. Zyne backed away from them, shaking her head, sweat oozing between her scales, palms wet with fear and nervousness.

"You promised—"

Hoon grunted as he finished, looked up at her and laughed. "I promised." Then he bit Josiah's neck and drank.

* * *

Tamlestari heard one of her halaefs moving about in the little adjoining parlor, opened her eyes and glanced at the window. It was still dark outside, so she knew it had to be Aejs, which meant that something was bothering her. She got up and padded out.

Aejys sat at the table, smoking. Her eyes looked faraway and the line of her mouth troubled. There was an open bottle of whiskey on the table, partnered by a small glass, half-full. The last time Tamlestari had seen Aejs take a drink in the wee hours had been just after learning of the deaths of her daughter and na'halaef, Laeoli and Ladonys. Whatever was wrong had to be very bad.

"What are you thinking about?" Tamlestari asked, joining her.

Aejys set her pipe aside, downed the whiskey in one swallow, and refilled the glass. "Where does he go at night?"

"Josiah? Walking on the beaches, probably."

Aejys shook her head. "No, I've looked for him every night for the past two weeks."

"The grotto?"

"I've checked there. Used to be he couldn't get enough of me. Now he makes excuses."

"What do you mean?"

"He hasn't touched me since the night we pulled the tapestries. That's over three months."

Tamlestari frowned. "I hadn't realized. I've been so caught up in the children." *And I don't really care whether he touches me or not.*

"At least I always know where to find you. You're always there when I need you." Aejs downed the whiskey and refilled the glass.

"Talk to Skree."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't? If you don't, then I will and I will probably lose my temper. You know what a disaster that usually is."

Aejys gave her a long, hard look. "Maranya says he's sleeping with someone. On top of everything else ... it's becoming more than I can handle." *"Did he try to kill me for her sake? I want to believe that he didn't...that Hoon had touched him. But there's no proof. No real proof. So am I lying to myself again? Is it all illusion?"*

A storm formed in Tamlestari's face. "If he is, I'll gut him."

"No. Please." Aejys grabbed her hand. "Let me talk to Skree first."

* * *

Mathryn sat beside the warded window in the dark, watching for Wrathscar. He had hurt her bad last time, but she still wanted him. It had become a hunger the child did not understand. She no longer played with the other children. She simply sat on her bed all day in a listless fashion, thinking about him. It bothered her that her ma'aram tried to force a promise not to answer him if he called. She promised, but never intended to keep the promise. Weeks had passed and he had not come for her. She worried that something had happened to him. Perhaps the soldiers and warriors had gotten him. Or one of those evil swan-mays. She did not want that to have happened. She picked at her food each day. Birdie said she would waste away if she did not eat. Mathryn did not care. She did not want to eat.

She watched the moon rise, staring at the round, full orb of it; the way the snow reflected the light and made the night bright. Then she saw someone standing in the yard. Her pulse quickened and her heart raced. His lips moved, but she could not hear him. She knew he was trying to reach her with his mind, but Birdie's wards kept him out. She looked about for something to scrape the rune off the window. She found a wooden block the little ones played with and began to quietly scratch the ward with the edge. A piece flaked off, and then another. Soon the top of the rune was gone.

< Hello, little slut. Come down to me. >

< I can't get out. They've locked me in.>

< Open the window. >

< Birdie nailed it shut. >

Wrathscar snarled. He was hungry for the sisters. He crawled up the wall, broke the glass, and dragged Mathryn through it. The sound of the shattering glass woke the other children who began to wail and scream. Wrathscar threw Mathryn over his shoulder and dropped to the ground, racing away. The gryphons in the barn shrieked to be let out. He heard movement there, someone was loosing the

gryphons. Wrathscar fled faster. Lights went on in the house. People poured out. The gryphons circled and searched, but Wrathscar had vanished.

Birdie got a search going and sent word to the keep. Everyone who was still hale turned out across the city. They found Mathryn on the beach: dead. Birdie's face tightened into a grim mask, refusing to weep until she was alone. As deep as her grief was, her anger was deeper and as chill as the arctic waters. She lifted the little nude body in her arms and walked home.

* * *

Aejys brought two priests to Birdie's home the next day: Methys, a senior priest of Aroana, and Posidea. Maranya accompanied them. Zarim let them in. Paunys sat in a rocking chair, clutching her dead child and sobbing as she rocked slowly. Blackbird looked up from the couch, haggard with grief.

"They need to examine the body," Aejys told them in a quiet, regretful voice. "I'm sorry." She had had too much experience with the taint of undeath, both in herself and others – she had twice nearly become undead in unholy rites, surviving only because of the intervention of her friends. The possibility that the child's corpse had been tainted and would rise to feed on her family was strong. Aejys felt the old nightmares breathing through her heart and locked them down hard.

Blackbird and Zarim approached Paunys. "Let me have her," Blackbird said.

"No," Paunys sobbed, clutching the battered body more tightly, bending over her.

Blackbird and Zarim exchanged glances, and then Blackbird held Paunys as Zarim pried the dead child from her arms. Paunys screamed and struggled.

Aejys closed her eyes briefly, flashing back to her own grief when she learned of the death of her daughter, Laeoli. Watching this hurt her, but as King of Rowanhart she needed to be there, both to enforce her decision and to let her old friends know, by her presence, that she respected their grief. She had never been one to spare herself at the price of others.

Zarim put the body into Posidea's arms. "Is there someplace we can go?" the priest asked him.

Zarim nodded and led them to another sitting room where the children normally played. The priest laid Mathryn on the couch, kneeling beside her. The child's body was still nude and bloody. When Birdie brought her home, Paunys had seized her and refused to let anyone touch her. Posidea extended her awareness into the cold body. "The taint is there. We must take her heart. Is there something we can wrap her in?"

Tears filled Zarim's eyes as he fetched a sheet. He helped them wrap the body.

"You'll bring her back when you're done?"

"Yes," Aeijys told him. "You have my promise. If there is anything you need, just send word to the keep."

Aeijys followed Posidea to the Temple of the Waves, while Methys remained behind to offer comfort to the grieving family. Aeijys thought of Laeoli and tears threatened the edges of her eyes, but did not emerge. She thought of Ivander and Elynnis who were learning to pull themselves up on the furniture and take tottering steps. She imagined what it would feel like to lose them, of how much she loved them and their wombmother. Then she thought of how close they had come to losing Wolff and Fauxx, her nephews of whom she was fond. Why did the darkness always go after the innocents? Why wouldn't they fight someone their own size?

"I am going to get them," Aeijys murmured softly.

"Majesty," Maranya gave her a deferential bow of her head and shoulders. "What happens here has nothing to do with Hoon and everything to do with Creeya. They have merely become fellow travelers for a time. Hoon sees the destruction of the Guild, your allies, as a way of weakening you."

"And he is right. Without the Guild I would have been lost several times over the last few years. There are debts owed."

At Maranya's nod, Aeijys followed her to a place on the beach near the temple steps and they sat for a time while Maranya told her the whole tale of what had happened in Creeya and how Wrathscar stalked Birdie's family. "That is a grim tale, Maranya. I'll be sending you to Vorgensburg soon, along with Tag. You'll study under Janine. She'll teach you to pass for non-Sharani in formal situations, and gather intelligence. Play the game as it is done on the Coast."

* * *

Later that evening, Maranya found Aeijys sleeping when she let herself into the king's room and sat down to guard her. She had delayed and delayed her departure to Vorgensburg, but Tagalong was pressing harder and harder. Day by day the King seemed to grow more troubled and vulnerable emotionally. Her continuing weakness did not help. Fusaaki's antidote had hastened her recovery, but not nearly enough to suit Maranya. Aeijys loved Josiah and was stubbornly resisting all of Posidea's efforts to have him arrested and executed. The prince suspected, but none of them had confirmed it and Tamlestari would not act until someone did. Maranya wished she could simply kill the mage and get it done with.

Then she noticed the bit of ivory sitting on the nightstand atop a note. She moved the ivory and picked up the note.

Aeijys,

This is to remind you that I love you,

Josiah

Maranya took the note and the ivory, carried them to the walnut chest in the corner of the room, and tossed them in. "If there's any magic in it, it won't hurt her once he's dead. Cockwhore."

* * *

Aejys returned Mathryn's body the next day in a small coffin assembled by one of the keep's carpenters. The Priest of Nerindalori had carefully wrapped the child's body in sea-silk with just her face showing, to conceal the further mutilation they had been forced to commit to free her soul.

People from throughout Rowanhart streamed through with cooked food. Some stayed to help with the children and comfort the parents and siblings. An undercurrent of rage seethed through Rowanhart. All children were indoors before dark and no unsupervised play was allowed anywhere in the city. The hunt began with mixed parties of the guard and citizenry. Priests from all of the temples started out from Birdie's home and worked in a widening circle, marking and blessing the doors and windows of every house and building. Several priests also promised to teach Birdie more of priest magic and craft, for although they served different gods, there was much overlap in technique.

Although Tagalong bristled at the thought of not getting a shot at the vampire that had killed the child, Aejys bundled her and Maranya off to Vorgensburg the next day to get them set up with Janine.

* * *

"Bryndel, wake up!"

Bryndel rolled over and sat, blinking blearily. Arruth stood next to his bed. The ghost was agitated, her hair blowing wildly in a private wind. "What is it?"

"Wrathscar is in Rowanhart. He killed my little sister."

The information hit Bryndel like a blow to the solar plexus and he struggled to breathe for a moment. "Dear gods, have mercy." He no longer used hard language, having schooled his tongue as part of his new efforts to bring his darker side to heel. "I'll throw a few things together and go."

Bryndel moved to his writing desk and quickly penned a letter, sanded it to dry the ink, folded it up and addressed it to Grand Master Osterbridge. He was leaving his lands and titles to Alora. He had tried to tell her that the only thing keeping him alive

was his need for vengeance, but she did not want to hear it. When that was accomplished, he intended to finish what he had begun with his wrists last summer. There was simply too much grief and guilt in his heart for him to deal with it in any other way. He would not show less courage than his sister, Belyla, had when she immolated herself at her lover's tomb rather than take a life out of appetite. Then he filled his backpack and dressed, pulling on the light leather armor he wore when he practiced and buckling on his sword.

He woke people, dragging them from bed as he called in the few favors people owed him. Gaffer Hornbow's roc, Bright Eyes, was in Creeya at the moment. The roc was one of the few birds that could handle the winter storms. By morning, Bryndel was on his way to Rowanhart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A SON'S VENGEANCE

Tagalong considered introducing Maranya around Vorgensburg first and then changed her mind, having finally decided that Maranya could make her own way considering how she was treating Josiah. The more discomfort and trouble she could cause Maranya the better. "Go ta tha Cock and Boar, only if its an emergency. Ya ever been there?"

"No."

Tagalong sighed. "Ya've already picked my brain ta puddin' an' I want ta get back ta Rowanhart quick. So, just find yer way ta the wharves and ya'll find tha Cock and Boar. Ask fer either Raim or Grymlyken an' tell 'em I sent ya."

"I thought you were taking me to Janine." Maranya watched the street with the wide-eyed openness that only the very innocent and inexperienced could get away with. She looked like an overly tall, gawky, somewhat awkward young woman in patched wool trousers, shirt, and cloak with a pair of carpetbags hanging from shoulder straps crossing her body. Anyone looking at them would have taken her for an unschooled yokel, possibly brought along as a servant by the sturdy dwarf.

The Bought Ladies Quarter was awash in bright colors. Too cold outside to display their charms on the streets, the prostitutes did so from their windows, posing their half-clad bodies in tantalizing turns and stroking themselves invitingly. Those that did go out on the streets tended to lean in doorways and draw their skirts up when customers passed, while pimps cried out the charms of their ladies like fishwives on the wharves. Since Aeijys took over Vorgensburg – or more precisely Becca acting in her name – prostitution had become heavily licensed, taxed, and regulated; the last for the protection of the prostitutes as much as for the customers. Becca had also opened two of the finest restaurants in the city in the Bought Ladies Quarter as well

as increasing the city guards patrols through it, giving it cache and glitter as well as safety. Hanni had wanted to come along to goggle and Tagalong had thrown a fit, firmly backing him down.

"I thought you were taking me to Janine," Maranya repeated.

"I am," Tagalong answered. "She's a madam. Owns seven brothels." The dwarf carried a warhammer shoved through her belt, a sword at one shoulder and another pair, conspicuously large and long, too large and long for someone her size to handle at her other shoulder – those belonged to Maranya, but Tagalong felt it looked better if Maranya did not carry it, considering what she was passing as, although more Vorgeni women were carrying and learning to use weapons since Aejs came to power. The Sharani influence could be seen everywhere: fewer dresses and more pants.

"A madam? I'm going to be..."

"Working in a whore house." Tagalong grinned, watching for her reaction with smug satisfaction. Actually she would not be, but that was where Janine had her main offices. Tagalong could have arranged for Maranya to meet Janine in a nicer place, but had seen this as a way of taking the paladin down a few pegs. Janine also owned a fine house on Emerald Street where she held a discreet salon for her wealthier clients.

"But..." she protested, dropping her eyes with a small flutter and a tiny hardening at the edges.

Tagalong's grin widened. Maranya was good. Very good. No one but Tagalong would have caught that last nuance. She was definitely not the usual pudding head Tagalong ran into among the paladins. Tagalong was impressed, but not so impressed that she would not try putting subtle tacks in Maranya's chair from time to time to see what kind of rise she got out of her when she sat on them. Tagalong was very pissed with Maranya.

The buildings stood wall to wall, broken only by the occasional alley and street. When they had gardens and yards, they were in back, unseen. They came to a wide windowed three-storied brick building, women displaying themselves from every window to good advantage in a wide assortment of racial types: green-skinned triton; black-skinned Jedruan; pale, pale, blonde and wisp-like. Then Maranya noticed a male, a single male, half-clad, stroking himself in the uppermost left hand window. Maranya shook her head as if to say 'surely Aejs does not expect me to do any of this.'

The daytime maid opened the door to them wearing a demure long black dress and white bib apron, a feather duster clutched in one hand. She smiled politely at seeing them and for a brief moment was almost pretty, though her nose was a shade too strong and her lips a bit too wide.

"Are you here for the ladies or the lads?" Emilyn asked.

"We're here to see Janine," Tagalong said.

Emilyn's eyes widened and she actually looked at the dwarf, letting her face register. "Master Tagalong?"

"Forget what I look like in a year, Emilyn?" Tagalong growled.

Emilyn forgot her manners long enough to drop to her knees and hug Tagalong briefly, accidentally tickling the dwarf's nose with the duster. Tagalong gave a snort and a sneeze, fending off Emilyn in a dither.

Maranya laughed.

Emilyn straightened and led them through the house to Janine's sitting room where she sat at a long table reading over a cup of tea. She folded the reports when she saw she had guests. Emilyn announced Tagalong, but she had not bothered to take Maranya's name, believing her to be a servant. The fire had been built up and the room was very warm. An elegant couch with delicate end tables graced one wall. The central table dominated with six down-stuffed chairs along it.

Janine rose, extending her hand to Tagalong. The dwarf took it firmly. The madam was not as soft as she looked and her grip was strong. She was a striking woman in sky-blue brocade pants and vest over a lacy white shirt that emphasized her large breasts and a midnight blue, fringed sash around her tiny waist. She wore her glossy white hair piled atop her head in an intricate style, held in place with a glittering array of combs and pins, some of them as long as small daggers. There was a hungry sensuality to her face and a gliding, cat-like quality to her movement. Maranya experienced a flash of fantasy watching her.

Tagalong slammed the encumbering swords down on the table and passed Aeijys' letter to Janine. "I gotta get back. We got vampire problems in Rowanhart."

"Still?" Janine frowned.

"Yah. Killed a child." Tagalong stalked out.

Janine closed and locked the doors before returning to Maranya. "Before I begin to teach you," Janine said, "I need to have some idea of what you will and will not do. I understand you are a paladin of Aroana. Honor is an issue in the gathering of intelligence some times. I will not ask you to whore. I have whores, trusted and skilled at their arts; trained in intelligence gathering since the moment they first grew hair between their legs. That is how I have kept me and mine safe in a dangerous world. My network has spanned the length of the coast for the last ten years. Omer suspected it, but it was Becca who ferreted that information out," Janine gave a small

smile of approval and satisfaction, making it clear that she thought highly of Becca.

Maranya nodded. "There are secret orders among the paladins, as there are among the priests, known only to a few. I am of the Order of the Hidden Shield. I will not harm a child, a pregnant woman, or an innocent. Other than that, it depends on the situation. I am commanded to protect the innocent and my liege-lord by whatever means necessary. Primarily we are catchers of spies, assassins, traitors, and sa'necari, those who work in secret to cause harm, or strike from hiding. The Order places us where they feel there is the greatest need."

Janine motioned for Maranya to rise. "I assume you are fast and prepared for anything?" The madam walked around the paladin, running her eyes over her thoughtfully. She pulled at her hair, which was piled on her head and held in place by a wealth of pins, as she came around the second time, still casually measuring Maranya, her hand drew a comb from her hair. A long strand of hair slithered down to her shoulder, attracting Maranya's eyes. The comb glittered for an instant and then came for Maranya's throat – before the paladin even realized it was a weapon, the razor edge lay against her skin, and Maranya froze, not even daring to breathe.

"Learn that because it is pretty and the woman looks soft, does not mean it is not deadly." Janine caught the strands of her hair up with a twist and replaced the comb. "Most women of the Blood Coast are not taught to fight. It is considered unwomanly. Aejustrys' influence will change that. But for now, they will keep to the old ways. Among the upper classes, poison is favored. Or the combs and pins. Just because we are not taught to fight does not mean we do not or cannot kill and murder. We just do it differently. And it is not just along the coast, but also all across the continent. Sit."

Maranya sucked in a deep breath and obeyed. She watched Janine take her hair down and spread her glittering ornaments out, every one of them deadly.

"Be careful with the blue ones," Janine said, pointing to the long dagger-like pins. "They're poisoned and they'll take out a Sharani."

"Take out a Sharani!" A thread of suspicion and alarm ran through Maranya.

"Margren was Sharani. I'm taking no chances. I saw what she did to Aejustys. I suspect they'll take out a sa'necari. I hope so. Because I'm going to give you some of the poison. Omer did not destroy that sa'necari's vipers, as he claimed to have. I have them. I milk them and make a concentrate from the venom. My family were snake handlers in Larquental on the east coast."

"Why are you telling me all of this," Maranya suspected that Janine had never opened up to anyone before. She did not seem like the type.

"Because I like what Aejustys is doing for Vorgensburg and the coast. I like what she has done for me. When Omer came to me a year ago, asking me for information, he

knew it might mean I would have to take my girls and flee – I run my brothel like a holding, a family, I would not abandon them – so he brought me, from Aeijys, a necklace. It was worth more than some merchant princes. It would have more than paid for the safety of my girls and myself. I knew immediately that Aeijys had taken that into consideration when she sent it. Aeijys also sent word that should the conflict go against her; one of her ships would be ready to take us to safety. To wherever we wished to go. That is a lord that I will serve."

"As will I."

Janine smiled. "I have had a lot of calls for Sharani as armed escorts, ornate bodyguards, if you will. No sex, just appear on their arms, dance with them, dine with them and be prepared to cut someone's throat if they attack. They're not nobility. It's unfashionable to appear with too much ugly muscle in tow. And some of the 'nose in a book' types cannot persuade a lady to accompany them in the first place. So if you can put a polite disguise on it and still get safely to the party, while making yourself look good, well then, that's perfect. Up until now, I've had no one to offer them. Now I have. You'll be doing a lot of this type of rubbing elbows now that Aeijys is holding formal court. It's all the males we have out here," Janine gave her a smug smile. "You'll get used to it. Especially if we're going to change things. You need to know the rules before you know how to break them and make it stick. Show me your clothing so I can decide whether I need to send for the seamers. We need to make you look dangerous, barbaric and Blood Coast female all at the same time. That will take some doing."

Maranya dumped the contents of the carpetbags onto the table and started passing things to Janine. "What if they ask for sex?"

"Remind them it is not part of the package. If they then make you a side offer, that's up to you. If it were I, I'd set the price so high they would never ask twice. If they complain, send them to me. That's my job. If they get rough, well, try not to damage them too much. Necessary force only. If examples need to be made, I will make them. Or Becca will, since this is Vorgensburg. And I always require that they sign contracts."

* * *

The gaffer was on the beach waiting for them when Bryndel arrived. He gave the young male a hard, appraising look. "They didn't tell me, I'd have company," he said.

The rider helped Bryndel unfasten the straps and the gaffer extended his hand to help Bryndel down. For people unused to getting on and off the roc, it was a difficult thing to achieve without landing on their butts in the sand. Bryndel accepted the gnarled old hand, discovering that the gaffer was surprisingly strong despite his obvious age.

As soon as Bryndel got to the beach, he extended the gaffer his hand in greeting. "I'm Bryndel. I'm here about the vampire stalking Arruth's sisters."

Gaffer Hornbow gripped his hand briefly. "Yer a Hunter?"

"No. I'm neither Guild nor Taladrim." Bryndel opened his collar, displaying the scar on his throat. "I can identify him. I'm one of the survivors."

"Well, most call me the gaffer."

"Do you know them? Arruth's family, I mean."

"Yah, I be knowin' 'em."

Gaffer Hornbow took him to Birdie's from Vorgensburg as soon as it was light enough to get a boat across the bay to Rowanhart.

The yard was filled with children, playing quietly. They all wore black armbands. The gaffer took him up to the door and knocked. Zarim answered. Bryndel saw something of Jysy in his face and his cap of tightly curled hair; guessing Zarim to be her sire. "I've brought ya someone ta help." He thumbed at Bryndel.

Zarim looked Bryndel over for a moment, taking in the young man's light armor and weapons. "A hunter?"

Bryndel shook his head. "I'm a survivor. I can recognize him."

Zarim showed them in. The little coffin rested on a table in the sitting room. Bryndel felt a sharp pang of sadness. From the size of it, the child could not have been over ten years old.

Two women sat on the nearby couch, holding each other. One of them wept brokenly. A youth of fourteen rose from a chair. "Are you Bryndel?"

"Yes," he said, amazed that she knew his name since no messages had gone out.

"I'm Birdie, Priest of Dynanna. Arruth was my sister. Come upstairs to my study and we'll talk. Thank you for bringing him, Gaffer."

* * *

There was a hard edge to the youth and grief in her eyes. "I had five sisters," Birdie told him, sitting at her desk. "Now I have three. And I almost lost Jysy."

"I had four sisters. Our father turned them and the Guild destroyed them. I would have helped, but I was in no shape to at the time. Can I show you?"

Birdie nodded. "This vampire is your father?"

Bryndel pulled his shirt off. "Yes."

Birdie's eyes ran across the vampire scars, settling finally on the scars on his wrists. "You tried to kill yourself?"

"Yes."

"How can I trust you? You're his kin."

"I was in love with Talons. They murdered her on our handfasting day." Bryndel's face tightened as grief washed over it.

Birdie looked into his eyes and saw the sorrow, so much like her own – there was no denying that he had loved Talons. "She was my friend." She watched the shadows deepen still more in his face, which brought the priest part of her to the fore, pushing back her grief for her sisters and her friend. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm all right," Bryndel said quickly, clasping his hands together so tightly the knuckles whitened. "No. No, I'm not all right. I won't be until this monster is destroyed ... and Talons is avenged." *And Belyla* .

"I have twin sisters, eight years old and a brother who is seven. My 'lasah is still fragile from a long illness. I think another death would kill her. So, how are we going to stop this monster?"

* * *

The vampire stood in the shadows at the edge of a house at the far end of the block. There were only two houses on the block, with deep lots spanning several acres back and spread in split wood-railed fences to either side: Rowanhart had a tremendous amount of land sealed within its walls. Wrathscar watched his son enter Birdie's house. He had always known his son was a traitor, weak and disgusting. Wrathscar felt certain that Bryndel had betrayed Galee and himself. He would kill him.

He was hungry again. He wanted another sister. The house was warded and the twins never came out. He watched Birdie and Bryndel leave. That sister was a priest. Priests were dangerous. But he was so hungry. His eyes raked her breasts, wondering what it would feel like to part her legs as he sucked the life from her, the way that he had done his daughters. That one was nearly a woman. She would last a long time. Perhaps he could even turn her and keep her. It would be nice to have a woman that he could climb into whenever he felt like it. He used to have many women, many sweet warm places to nest himself in. He missed it. He had eaten them all in Creeya, one by one, and then been unhappy when they were gone. Galee had not liked his appetites turning in that direction. She had beaten him for it repeatedly.

But Galee was destroyed. He could do with his appetites what he wanted now; and he wanted another taste of sister.

Wrathscar followed them for several days as they walked around the city. Birdie did all the things she usually did and Bryndel was ever at her side. Before it had always been Lizard. Wrathscar wondered at that at first, then decided that, since Birdie was a slut like the others, she had simply become bored with Lizard. Wrathscar had not yet gotten a good opportunity to take them. He imagined his son moving between her legs. Bryndel knew he wanted her and had probably seduced her just to spite him. Bryndel would do that, the filthy little bastard. Once he had gotten enough of a taste of sister to hold him, he would kill his son. Bryndel's blood would taste as good as his sisters' had.

* * *

Anksha watched Wrathscar while he watched Bryndel. That was a foolish vampire. They would catch him and kill him. She pulled at her pants. She hated clothes, yet Hoon insisted on them. She had to bind her tail up to wear them and that was very uncomfortable. He had promised that someone would take her shopping to make up for it, that there would be many pretties, but no one had done so yet. She was getting bored. Anksha slipped along through the shadows. In clothing she could have simply walked the streets, but that did not appeal to her.

She made her way to Zyne's cottage, sniffing around it. The dying mage was back. Anksha lingered there, listening to them, then went on again, restlessly. Skree's home was nearby and she went there next. It would be so easy to climb in through a window and steal one of the children. Mephistis had promised her one of them. But that would create a furor and Hoon would be unhappy with her. Anksha sighed. The best meals it seemed were the ones she could not eat.

A shadow passed along the water and drew her eye. Gryphon. People who rode gryphons were usually Guild. Anksha trotted closer to the beach, then dropped onto the strand, and crouched, running close to the ground, finally crawling. Someone climbed off the beast to talk to someone who was waiting. Yes. Guild. Must be. The mon who had been waiting walked as if he was very old, but he smelled much younger. That was interesting. She followed them back to Hinky Molly's, and then ran off into the night. Hoon would want to know that she had found Guild in Rowanhart.

* * *

Birdie found herself liking Bryndel. He was interesting – when she could get him to talk. He knew hundreds of stories about Talons and numerous tales of the escapades of her sisters, Jysy and Arruth. She laughed so hard at his chagrined description of how Arruth shoved the wet noodles down his pants that her sides ached. He never told her the dark stories, refusing to discuss either his father or Galee.

They stopped at the smith's to pick up a staff he was making her. The smithy was loud with the clang of metal being forged and pleasantly hot. The smith was a stout, gnarled dwarf; a cousin of Tagalong's from Iradrim, with a bristling black beard tucked into his belt and braided red hair. He had relocated his entire smithy and staff to Rowanhart early last summer after getting a letter from Tagalong.

The staff leaned in a corner near a batch of finished pole arms. Aejs had ordered lots of pole arms because of an encounter she had had over a year ago with harpies and demons. The king always learned from her experiences, unlike some the smith could name. The shaft was wood with a metal grip in the middle and the rune of Dynanna on one end. Hogarth put it proudly in Birdie's hands and stood back to see her reaction.

"Try it," Hogarth encouraged, grinning broadly and showing his big, buckteeth.

There were two pieces; one set inside the other, to the grip. Birdie tested the balance and then gave the grip a solid twist, hearing something click. The rune slid aside and two feet of sharp, slender steel emerged.

"That ought ta kill a vampire, don't ya think?" The smith asked, obviously pleased with his efforts.

"Yes, I do," Birdie replied, her face thoughtful. "You frequent the taverns much?"

"Some. Why?"

"Which one do you think I should go to tonight, if I wanted to attract the vampire?"

"Well, let's see." he thought for a minute. "Tha Blue Bull, down by tha new docks. And then there's all that stretch a lonely beach."

Birdie nodded. It sounded like a good bet for drawing Wrathscar from his hiding place. There were still details to be worked out, people waiting to hear from her as she baited her trap. She was bait with a bite.

"Ya be careful, Birdie. I don't want ta lose my favorite priest."

Birdie grinned. "I grew up on the streets. I know what I'm doing."

"Ya sure ya don't want me ta come along? I could squire ya around real fine."

Birdie laughed softly, contradicting the hard look in her eyes. "I wouldn't want to lose my favorite smith."

Once back home, Birdie immediately set to writing notes. He must be getting starved for a taste of sister, she thought as she finished the last of them, and sent for the older children who would be carrying them. She painted the Rune of Dynanna on

their foreheads, blessed them, and sent them out. She had told them to run as fast as they could with the notes, stopping for nothing. The answers were back before evening. Then she dressed herself in holiday clothing and, when the sky darkened toward evening, linked arms with Bryndel and set off for the Blue Bull.

They settled at a table, ordered food, and a tankard for each of them, but hardly touched the fare. Birdie could feel tension curling through her stomach, making little knots. Not since that grim game of tag and run to expose the shifter in Armaten had she felt this tight inside. She had almost lost that gambit before Talons and Dynarien rescued her. Talons. The memory hurt. It was still so hard to think about her being dead. This vampire was one of those responsible for her friend's death as well as for her sisters. *This is for you, also, Talons.* Birdie spied Tagalong and Omer at one side, Raim and one of the new mages, a fellow named Miccan, on the other. When Birdie decided that sufficient time had passed, she and Bryndel left for a walk on the beach. The others would give it to a count of five and then follow.

* * *

Wrathscar concealed himself under the edge of the quay, watching them. He had waited for the little one to rise and she had not. They must have taken her heart. That angered him. The little one had been his. They had had no right to do that. He would turn the sister, the priest. This time, he would carry off the body and guard it until it rose. She wore bright red wool and a black and flame cloak, looking every bit the slut he knew she was. Bryndel walked with his arm linked in hers as they entered the Blue Bull. Wrathscar waited. *Dirty, filthy, treacherous son. Dirty, nasty, gutter-screwing Bryndel – tasting what's mine. How many times has he had her? How many? I'll kill them both.* They left the tavern, walking down the beach, talking low. The vampire emerged, pulled his cloak around his face, and moved toward them.

Omer, standing in the shadows beside the tavern saw Wrathscar first. He unhooked the crossbow from his back and sighted. It could be innocent. But it was an awfully cold night for a walk on the beach. Wrathscar was within ten feet of them when Omer loosed the bolt. The vampire turned slightly, as if he had heard the movement, and the bolt caught him in the shoulder. Wrathscar roared, ripping the bolt free and throwing it aside. Then he covered the distance between him and Birdie in a single leap. Omer dropped the crossbow; certain that he would not get another clear shot, drew his sword, and ran. He heard the others coming: Tagalong bellowing a warcry; Raim shouting something at him.

Birdie clicked the staff and pivoted. Wrathscar grabbed Bryndel, dragging him off his feet and holding him with arms pinned like a shield. Birdie could not strike without endangering Bryndel. Wrathscar threw Bryndel into Omer, caught the staff as Birdie brought it to bear, and ripped it from her hands. He dropped the staff, cuffed Birdie in the head hard enough to stun her, and threw her over his shoulder, running off into the darkness. Miccan summoned light, turning the rocky beach to

day, but Wrathscar was nowhere to be seen.

Bryndel picked up the staff, running in the direction he had seen his father flee. "You're not taking another one, father!" He bent and searched around the first pilings of the fishing piers close to where the strand met the sea.

"The rocks, Bryndel. He's got her under the rocks." Arruth shimmered in a bit of shadow.

Bryndel went to the rocks beyond the pilings. His heart hammered. It looked as if something had been dragged against them and then vanished. He squatted down. There was a separation between two pieces of the boulder, barely enough to squeeze past. He tossed the spear in and then squirmed through. The rocks scraped his arms and legs even through the heavy winter clothing, tearing the cloth. He could hear animal grunting in the darkness. Cracks further down let in a slender lance of light from Miccan's spell. Something moved. Bryndel picked up the staff and walked cautiously toward them. His father was already on top of her, sating himself. Bryndel gave a shout of rage. His father reared up, his face smeared with Birdie's blood, and Bryndel drove two feet of steel through his heart. The monster died. Bryndel shoved him aside, kneeling by Birdie.

"Took your time, didn't you?" Birdie said and fainted.

* * *

The sitting room smelled of funnel cakes and sausages wafting in from the kitchen as Zarim cooked. There was still more food than they knew what to do with sitting on the tables in the dining room. The children were slowly devouring the neighbors' offerings, but Zarim insisted on breakfast being done right. They always split the meals: Zarim made breakfast; Blackbird made lunch; and Paunys made dinner. Spring would be interesting since Zarim had decided on having a garden. Rowanhart had lots of space, because Becca had simply decreed this is "Rowanhart" and run the original wall from the mountain to the bay, enclosing potential farmland as well as true city, since she only had to build on two sides. The seneschal of Vorgensburg had lots of foresight. Birdie had only met her twice, but liked her.

That morning some of the pall had left the family and their charges with the destruction of the vampire the previous night. The children were laughing and hollering again, running through the halls and playing in the snow out front. Birdie answered the knock and let the gaffer in.

He had an odd, unreadable expression as he sat down on Birdie's couch. "Where's Bryndel?"

"Said he was going for a walk on the beach. Why?" Birdie regarded him closely. The gaffer never made social calls, so something had to be up.

"Well, storms delayed the message, so I didn't get it until now. Bryndel left a suicide note behind in Creeya. Said as soon as the monster was dead..."

Birdie sprang to her feet. "We've got to find him." She snatched her cloak from the closet and ran out.

* * *

Bryndel liked the rocky beach, the contrast of solid brown rock and shifting golden sands with the blue water stretching out forever. He found a sheltered spot, where the wind could not get him. It was over now. The last of the vampires, those who had forced him into unspeakable acts, was destroyed. That gave him a little peace, but not enough. He laid the long dagger by his knee, removed his cloak and shirt, folding them carefully. He picked up the dagger, pressing the point just beneath his breastbone. He did not want instant death, putting it through his heart, but quick death. He wanted to feel it. He wanted the pain, as if that would wash away some of the guilt. He had considered ripping his stomach open and taking a long time dying. But he did not want that either – he was not brave enough. Then he thought about how Talons had died. She had said she was dying a better death than she had been. Tulik had shoved the blade in just under her breastbone and dragged it across. That seemed suddenly appropriate – to die in the same manner as the woman he had loved. He thought briefly of his children, who now dwelled in Imralon, wishing for an instant that he could have known them. He had surrendered his rights to them after receiving Edouina's letter. The blade felt cold against his skin, chilled by the wind until it was like ice. He shivered, almost losing his nerve. He drew a deep, steadying breath.

"Can I talk you out of this?"

He looked up and saw Birdie. "No. But you can pray for me. In the beginning, before I knew what was happening, I fetched Arruth to him..."

Birdie took another step closer. "She forgave you. So do I."

He saw her tense slightly, sensing her determination to take the blade from him. "Don't!"

Birdie lunged. He turned away from her, shoving the blade in with a savage twist. It ripped through his lungs. Bryndel steeled himself and drew the blade back across, using both hands to sever his spleen. He grimaced, falling back against the rock, his hands sliding away from the blade in his body. A fit of coughing took him, bringing up blood. It ran from his mouth.

Birdie knelt beside him, her eyes resting briefly on the blade before she cradled him. "You were a good mon." She pulled a small vial of violet powder from her pocket, administering it to his nostrils and gums.

The pollendine hit his system instantly. The pain departed. Bryndel blinked and then sighed heavily. He told her all the terrible things he had done while under Galee's influence, his voice fading slowly to nothing as he died.

Bryndel's soul tried to rise from his body only to be pulled back into the dead flesh. He screamed in silence, unheard, realizing that Galee must have given him her blood – in three days time he would rise as the very monster he had destroyed.

* * *

Once more a search began through Rowanhart, people spreading through all the lonely, likely places where someone might have chosen to die. Aejs spotted Birdie first, dropping out of the sky to land lightly before her. "Are you all right?"

Birdie nodded, her face thoughtful, sad. "He's dead. I couldn't stop him. Maybe if I had had most experience as a priest..."

"From what the gaffer says you could not have stopped him. It was his second attempt. Even if you had stopped him, he would have tried again."

Birdie blinked back tears. "I just keep thinking..."

Aejs lifted him up, walking back beside Birdie. "I can understand why he did it."

"You can?" Birdie was surprised; the king seemed so together.

"Yes. I made a vow that I would not do a single thing, however slightly, against my sister. My life be forfeit to my god if I broke that vow. Margren was evil. Sa'necari. She murdered my halaefs and our daughter. I seriously considered killing Margren, knowing full well that, for my honor's sake, I would then have to take my own life."

"What happened?"

"She got me first. My ma'aram released me from that vow. Then I was able to destroy her in Norendel."

"If you had not been released, would you still have destroyed her?"

"Yes."

"And would you have taken your own life?"

"Yes, Birdie, I would have." *And I will die before I let Hoon touch me ever again .*
"Do we take him to your shrine or another's temple, young priest?"

Birdie thought. "They fed on him for a year or more. We should take him to Nerindalori's temple. Have Posidea Read his body for the taint. I'm not experienced

enough to do that yet."

Other searchers spied them, forming a procession behind them. Posidea was waiting for them, as if somehow she knew to expect them. She stood beneath the white stone scrollwork portico between the slender fluted columns of Nerindalori's Temple of the Waves. Posidea saw the marks on his body and Read him without being asked. "The taint is there," she told them. "Place him on the altar and I will free his soul."

They followed her in and Aejs laid Bryndel's corpse on the slab. Birdie cried, turning away, not wanting to watch. Aejs gathered her in her arms, pressing her face into her shoulder. Posidea drew an obsidian blade, reaching into Bryndel's chest cavity, cutting away the organ.

Bryndel felt the link between his body and his soul snap. He rose upward, drifting above them. Bryndel watched Birdie weep. He regretted causing her pain, but he did not regret taking his own life. It was better this way. He could finally stop hurting. His fear of rising undead was ended also.

"*Thank you*," he said to Posidea and was faintly surprised to see her lift her head in his direction.

"You are welcome," she said.

A new figure floated into the temple, extending her hand to him. Bryndel drifted near to her.

"*It's time to go*," Arruth took his hand and they passed through the walls of the temple, walking out across the water.

* * *

"I want to see him buried in the Heroes Field," Aejs told Posidea. It sent an ache through her, knowing that Rowanhart was barely a year old and they already had a Heroes Field. There would be no peace for any of them unless she could find a way to make it so.

"I will see it done."

Aejs turned, faltering in her stride. She caught at the edge of a pew and sat down, color fading from her face. She felt dizzy and exhausted. Her body hurt. Birdie went to her.

"Lord Aejs?"

Aejs shook her head, waving her off.

Omer drew Birdie away to a small alcove. "Let her be. I'll get her back. She isn't completely well yet. The Lemyari venom hurt her." *And that cockwhore mage's spells – someone ought to cut his throat. Why the hell is she protecting him?*

"But..."

"Pride, Birdie, and concern for you and your family."

* * *

Josiah turned the knob on Zyne's cottage door. It was unlocked. He let himself in. There was no light. He could barely see Zyne on the bed.

She stirred, raising herself on her elbows; she was tired, Hoon came to her more often now that he had bound her. The pressure of his bindings made her head and heart ache. She wondered briefly if this was how Josiah had felt when she first sang the chains in his mind and heart. "Josiah?"

He crossed the room. "Zyne, I ...I couldn't tell them. I know you want me to tell them."

"Skree brought me another warning," she said, her voice as tired as her body from Hoon's feeding. "That's why I didn't meet you yesterday on the beach." She had been trying to get him driven out of the keep again without Hoon being able to blame her for it. A guilty confession would have done it.

"I can't think ... there's so much noise in my head when I try ... that I take another drink and another."

"Then don't think," Zyne said, forcing the weariness away, wrapping her arms around him, and pulling him down on top of her. She kissed him deeply and he found himself responding. She opened his shirt, licking him. Josiah shivered at the touch of her rough tongue. She worked her way from his throat to his belt, unfastening it. She pushed his pants down, fondling him to hardness and then closed her mouth around him, taking him deeper and deeper into her throat until her lips pressed the base of his shaft. Her tongue wrapped around him as she sucked. Josiah moaned like a woman and then came. Zyne swallowed the salty juices and pushed him onto his back. She slipped out of her sleeping robes and straddled him, rubbing her breasts up and down his body. Josiah caught one and began to play with her nipple.

Zyne gave a small, languorous laugh, reaching back to feel his member. It had hardened again. She fingered her loins, spreading their lips wide and eased herself down onto his shaft. She rotated herself slowly, moving him inside her.

Hoon was right. Landsmyn were far easier to trap than she had ever suspected. Her people relied too heavily upon their songs, when simple wiles set just as strong a

snare. And combining them both? Well, look at how the mighty had fallen. How the mighty had fallen...the words repeated through her mind and the feelings of victory faded to nothing. She had fallen too. She thought of Hoon and shivered, praying he would not arrive to ruin this one as he had the last. He always seemed to know when he would find Josiah at her cottage. His feedings were weakening the mage, making his body fail swifter. Zyne wished she knew what Hoon was really planning. She began to doubt the vampire intended to let her escape with him.

* * *

Aejys sat on a rock at the edge of the beach, the tide eddying around her bare feet. Her clothes were rumpled from sleeping in them. She had not bathed in days. She thought about the dead child; the young man who had taken his own life; and then Josiah. Where was he? She rarely saw him even though she had moved him back into the keep. Who was he with? Did someone know? A lot of someones? Were they laughing behind her back? The king's a cuckold. Maranya had never brought up the subject of Josiah again, but she had to be right. Maranya would never have brought her so serious a charge against Josiah without knowing for certain that it was true.

She lifted the whiskey bottle to her mouth and drank, taking several long swallows. She started back on foot, weaving slowly. As she passed Skree's house, the door opened and the triton emerged. "Aejys?"

She stared at him. "How did you know?"

"Wolff. He woke up, pointing at the door and hollering your name. Come inside before someone sees you."

"I don't want to." She took two steps and fell to her knees. Skree slipped an arm around her and got her inside. He sat her on the couch.

"You're drunk," Skree observed, disapproval heavy in his voice. "I've heard you have started drinking. Why?"

Taun came downstairs, having gotten Wolff back to bed. He looked surprised and concerned. "What's wrong with her?"

Skree pointed at the bottle as Aejys raised it to her mouth again.

Taun settled next to her. "Aejys, this isn't helping whatever's bothering you."

"I know it."

"Aejys," Skree said, sternly. "You are the king. Act like one."

"I don' wanna be," her speech started to slur. She took another long pull. "I wan

my...my tavern back. I don' wanna be king."

"Well, it is too late. You are."

"What's bothering you?" Taun asked.

"You should know! It's yer fucking godson."

"Josiah?" Taun glanced at Skree.

Skree nodded, but said nothing.

"Don' love me anymore. Never did." Aejs started to cry and then to sob hard.
"Teach me to love someone."

Taun moved closer, holding her, shaking his head. Her sobbing gradually faded. She closed her eyes and passed out, sliding against him. Taun laid her down, and then went for a blanket. He covered her and removed the whiskey, which he took to the kitchen and hid behind some jars.

"Being Tori and Merann's son does not make him a good man," Skree said when Taun rejoined him.

"What do you mean? What's going on? I don't understand any of this."

"His love for Aejs seemed genuine a year ago. Maybe he is just a good liar. I spent twenty years looking for him after his parents' murder. Now I wish I had not."

"Skree!"

"He is sleeping with Zyne. Has been since she first got here. She carries his child."

Taun glanced at Aejs. "Does she know?"

"No. She suspects that there is another woman or women."

Taun sighed unhappily. "You go on to bed. I'm going to sit down here. She'll be sick in the morning."

"One more thing, Taun. This one weighs on my heart as nothing has in years. The rumors about what he did to Aejs are true. Taun, Josiah was going to cast shared life using Aejs blood and life force to save Zyne – in full knowledge that doing so would kill Aejs. As things stand ... his spell did far more damage than her wounds – it was his spells that nearly killed her. Posidea insisted that I Read her. The damage was extensive. Far beyond what shared life should have done. Then when I Read her more deeply there was evidence that at least three and possibly four spells were cast. I am convinced that he meant to kill her. That is why we have left him corded."

Taun's sensitive face filled with dismay. "Josiah would not--"

"Josiah did! She can lie to herself and say he did it unconsciously or that maybe someone – as Laurelyanne is claiming with no proof – got into his mind; but once he has been shown to have a motive for hurting her, she will have to face what he did. The only reason we have not pulled him under the waves...is because the same day he hurt her, he also saved you."

Taun was quiet for a long time, not knowing what to say. "Are you going to tell her?"

"Only if she asks me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHARAS

Isranon held himself apart from the others on the journey to Charas. Mephistis grew steadily more angry the longer he was away from Anksha's influence. There was a confrontation with Timon at the estate near Minnoras that left Isranon with a bad taste in his mouth. The prince had tried to dominate the royals and failed miserably. They took the trade route through the city-states until it faded away to nothing and then the sa'necari were forced to take from their bottles or do without. So long as they had cities to hunt in the sa'necari would slide into the slums to hunt.

Few people traveled from the north to the City of Magic. Charas traded to the south through the sylvan kingdom of Galeador and to the east by way of a narrow mountain pass with the Euzadi nomads, but not to the north, so the roads were not kept up. Charas also had a funnel spell so that mages could not simply Jump into the city. Anyone attempting it found themselves in a large dungeon where they were questioned before being either released or imprisoned. And, once inside the city, many spots could not be Jumped into or out of within the city limits themselves. Jumping in general was disapproved of within the city limits; most mages set up various wards against it, although certain scoundrel yuwenghaus had a talent for sliding around the vast majority of the lesser workings. They did not encourage visitors without connections in the city. Charas was paranoid of the outside world. They also valued their extreme privacy as it allowed for a breadth of experimentation that would have terrified kings and princes.

Charas loomed suddenly out of the forest like a twisted monstrosity of uneven creation. The red brick battlemented wall that swept to the right of the white stone towers of guard at the gates stood a good six feet taller than the grey stone wall that extended to the left. The forest pressed against the walls in places, tree branches, and vines trailing. Mephistis scowled deeply, riding closer. There were no myn on

the walls, which looked abandoned. Then he saw the bones lying in heaps along the base. He could feel the power rising from them. The prince opened his awareness to the walls and discovered that, after a fashion, they lived rather as the undead did.

"Stay away from the walls, if you value your lives," a mage shouted, approaching from the gates with two more following him.

"So I see," Mephistis answered, his words laced with arrogance. "I am Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, Prince of Waejontor."

"State your business."

"I wish to see Charas, City of Magic."

"Curiosity? You've ridden all this way out of curiosity? Is that your only reason?"

Mephistis stared, his face burning. "Do I need another?"

"You'll need to declare yourselves at the Hall of Words. Have a better one than that when you get there or turn yourselves around and leave."

Mephistis started to make a hot retort when Isranon touched his arm. "My Prince has come to seek an audience with Lord Darmungaard."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

Mephistis shrugged and they were allowed to ride in. When they were far enough down the street to not be overheard, Mephistis leaned close and whispered to Isranon, "That is not what Timon said, he said that Lord Darmungaard sometimes received sa'necari who came to Charas."

"I know, my prince, but at least it is a name. Tell them the same thing when we get to this Hall of Words. They seem to have no respect for foreign princes here."

* * *

Isranon walked his horse beside Mephistis', traveling the narrow streets towards the Hall of Words, which held the council chambers. It was required that newcomers make themselves known. The cautious paranoia of the city's customs impressed Isranon.

The Hall of Words lay in the exact center of Charas, with the mansion of Lord Darmungaard wrapped through a walled compound to the north of it. Isranon paused to read the stone plaque before the Hall of Words containing the ten prophecies of Ishladrie concerning Charas. The one that he came back to was this:

"Know ye wise ones, that in the last days a sign shall come to pass that in the

middle of summer, on the hottest day of the year, the day shall be struck by cold and it will snow and hail as in the dead of winter; Be thereby certain and without doubt, that no more than three seasons shall pass before the city and all within it will surely die."

"Isranon?" Mephistis called back to him and he caught up to his prince.

They left their horses tied to sturdy rails with water troughs lining them. Isranon stayed six paces behind Mephistis as they traveled the marbled corridors of the Hall of Words into the heart of the convoluted Charisian bureaucracy, looking for the Office of Introductions where they were expected to present their papers and make themselves known. Males and females dressed alike in ankle-length robes of bright hues. A soft, diffusive aura of déjà vu overlay everything Isranon saw, pulling at his mind seductively, whispering to him that he had been here before, although he knew he had not. It was almost as if he had someone else's memories haunting the back of his mind and his instincts seemed to be full of lies.

They found the office and the wizened old man, who was the secretary, spent the first several minutes staring at Isranon while Mephistis created documents stating their reasons for being there – though not all of them – just enough to provide cover for some of their activities, including an application for establishing an embassy, all the sundry silly details that the Charisians demanded. "My, my, my," he murmured, licking his lips. "How nice to meet you, Prince Mephistis."

"Can we get on with this?" Mephistis demanded. "I have other things to do."

"Yes, of course." He took the papers from his hand, scanning them quickly. "It looks in order."

"I want to find the life mages."

"There aren't any."

"I need to see the council."

"You'll have to get an appointment. I don't handle that. Out that door to your right. Down the hall to the end. Take a left. Then four doors on your left, talk to Zorrance. While you are here, you will find there are many, many accommodations suited to sa'necari of your rank, including nibari brothels."

"You have a map of the city?"

"Yes, of course," he said, digging in his desk and coming out with it. "This is the one for visiting sa'necari. Everything that might interest you is marked."

* * *

They stood before the secretary to the High Council of Mages, rulers of Charas. Mephistis had been arguing with him for hours, trying to gain an audience with either the president of the council or the council itself. Just as they had suspected from their initial greeting at the gates, The Charisians did not seem to think much of foreign princes,

The room was lushly appointed: Walnut paneling polished to a high sheen; deep set windows with scrollwork sills and fine linen curtains; cedar cabinets and a mahogany desk; silk brocade covered chairs; thick carpets with intricate designs. If this was the domain of a mere secretary what must the offices of the councilors look like? The palaces of emperors?

"As I have said, you may have an appointment in three weeks. There are no openings in their schedules before that," he said, in an officious bluestocking manner, having ignored the prince's arguments and gone round and round in his tiresome repetitions. His entire ambience made Isranon uncomfortable. His face was roundly angelic; his pale blonde hair curled around his cheeks and temples; his eyes and manner, when he was not repeating his practiced screed, held a blasé decadence: all in all a kind of off kilter beauty. "However, we do have a wealth of social events, balls and such that should offer you some opportunity to make their acquaintances. Do you dance?"

"Dance?" Mephistis' voice rose in irritation.

"The parties are where one meets people. So you wish an appointment? And some invitations?"

"Then make it for me. What about the life-mages? Where can I find them?"

The secretary gave an eloquent shrug. "No one knows. Shall I send the invitations to the main sa'necari inn? While you are finding a house? Say for seven to each of our little gatherings?"

This should be interesting. Parties in a city of the gods of light? No, Isranon corrected himself. *This is a city in shades of gray. Darkest gray.*

"Yes, that will be fine," Mephistis schooled the irritation from his voice, seeing that it was getting him nowhere.

* * *

Mephistis did not lack for gold. He had appropriated what he wished when Timbren fell and kept it. He acquired a house and servants, in the best section of town, near the Hall of Words. He was free with that gold, sharing it with Isranon most freely of all. Charas was the first city where Isranon had been free to simply walk about. In Waejontor he had kept ever at his prince's side, never willing to risk the treachery of his own kind by venturing alone into the cities Mephistis traveled. Nevin and Olin

accompanied him everywhere: parks, libraries, taverns, and theaters. New things overflowed.

They saw, from a distance, the large, golden tower, onion-domed with sun symbols drawn large on its sides, which had belonged to Josiah Abelard in his first life and still did since only those of the mage's bloodline could get past the wards there. Clearly Josiah Abelard was a follower of Kalirion. Isranon wondered why the man had never said anything of this to him. He could have asked him about the gods of light – especially the Sun Lord. If Josiah came to Charas, would he allow Isranon to visit him? He thought of Josiah often, the only man he had ever met who served the light, ever had a chance to really speak with and now he saw how many more questions that man could have answered.

They eventually found the temple of Dynanna, whom Hoon had attempted unsuccessfully to capture near that little village. Dynanna God of Cussedness always built her temples in interesting locations, and as they walked up to it, Isranon could see that this one was no exception. It stood at the juncture of the Poor Quarter, the absolute slums, and the warehouse district. A bright hedge enveloped the walls to the point of rendering them invisible, growing together from both sides, and joining at the top.

"Don't eat them, they're poison," Nevin growled, pointing to the thick patches of bright red berries amid dark green leaves of the incredible twelve foot hedge surrounding the temple grounds. "Don't touch any of it." His nose wrinkled. "It's magically enhanced firethorn. Vicious thorns, stings like hell, infects quickly."

Isranon drew his hand back. "It's no wonder no one has been able to breach her walls. This is the only place those life-mages could possibly be concealed. All the other temples have been destroyed."

"Except for Bellocar's. I'm certain the Hellgod has one hidden here somewhere."

"I'm not looking for it." his mouth twisted around the words with distaste. "They say she succors pariahs..." He nodded at Dynanna's temple.

"She's a god of light, Isranon."

He sighed, turning away. She would never accept him, anymore than the others would.

* * *

Mephistis took his time about contacting this Lord Darmungaard and was pleased that he had. Hoon and Timon were not to be trusted at all. Darmungaard did not receive any sa'necari who came to him without references and Timon had not given him any. As to the necromancer's guild, they were Trethian. He would have gotten a cold shoulder there. Better to discreetly make his own contacts and connections.

Sooner or later Hoon would show up and with him Anksha. He shuddered to think about her. She had made him a blood-slave. He would never be free. Even thinking of her, he could almost feel her sucking, her fangs lodged in his body. His loins quickened. Anksha. How could terror and revulsion bring that response? "I hate you."

Isranon came into the sitting room "You're holding a rite this evening?"

Mephistis nodded, turning from the window. "Yes. I expect that means you want to be away from here?"

"Nevin and Olin also."

"So be it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TAMLESTARI'S TEMPER

Maranya became extremely popular very quickly. Winter was the height of party season along the coast. Janine's taste proved impeccable. She dressed the wild Sharani in gold-studded leather boots and long bracers, silk brocade trousers shot through with golden thread, matching vest, and a lacy white silk blouse with a plunging neckline – that last took some getting used to. At least she had a Kwaklahmyn jacket and a heavy cloak in the cloakroom so that she would not freeze leaving this place. So far she had accompanied this same gem syndic on five occasions, foiling two different sets of thieves and decking seven would-be swains who put their hands where they did not belong or who refused to take no for an answer – she guessed it was the costume that incited them; but the syndic loved it, always encouraging her to blend in, since once they arrived at the party there was little, if any, danger. She found herself dancing with the ladies – which she preferred – as well as with the males. She earned more in one night than most paladins and soldiers saw in a year and spent none of it, sending it all home to her grandma'aram to hold for her.

All the while she longed to be in Rowanhart, guarding Aejys' back. She had a feeling that this lull was just that, a lull, and that eventually it would break and Aejys would need her. Most of all she hated knowing that Aejys still allowed her treacherous mate to come near her.

Maranya gave the young man a small, lop-sided smile as he appeared, bowing in front of her and asked her to dance. He was the syndic's hopeful son. Yesterday he sent her an expensive bracelet of ivory and emeralds along with a clumsy poem of undying love. She masked a sigh, took his hand, and began to dance.

When the dance completed, Norwen suggested they sit near the window and Maranya shrugged.

"Maranya, do you have a family?" he asked, his voice filled with sharp interest.

"Yes," Maranya felt distracted, an odd pulling at her attention, as if something were happening, something bad building in the direction of Rowanhart. It could not be the vampire, for Wrathscar had perished. More and more she felt she had to get back. Surely she had learned enough about how to function among the societies of the coast, even if only superficially. Maybe it was time to end it tonight.

"Are you married? Triaded?"

"No."

"Would you ... would you accept my suit?"

"Norwen, I only took this job to discreetly learn more about your society. Not because I needed employment. My grandma'aram would never consider your family worthy to marry into ours."

His eyes saucered. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a Deontaramei. I'll be gone after tonight. I've been called back to Rowanhart. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone, my grandma'aram would think I'd been slumming." She cupped his chin, tilted his head up, and kissed him thoroughly.

A throat cleared and they looked up. Norwen flushed.

"Well, well, well," said the syndic, smiling at his son.

"It's not what you think," Norwen said, and then fled.

The syndic glanced at Maranya, who shrugged, and then he went after his son.

* * *

Posidea's bans had done nothing to stop Zyne's liaison with Josiah. If anything it appeared to have strengthened their relationship. Kanaloë, Zyne's grandmother, did all of her shopping so that there were no more incidents of landsmon violence against her. She also received visits from the little landsmon priest who ministered to outcasts. Skree did not like to meddle. He thought of himself as being above such pettiness. Yet, as the weeks had worn on and he had watched his king's – yes, his king, he had to admit that now, although he had never given his formal allegiance to the landsmon – loyal heart breaking at his godson's betrayal of her bed and vows, he had to do more to try and affect the situation. He had spoken to Josiah and Zyne to no avail, so now he would speak to Zyne's grandmother, Kanaloë. Furthermore, at

some point, even Aeijys would have to stop being so blinded by love as to suspect that the harm he had done her had not been caused by simple panic or Laurelyanne's preposterous claims of the enemy's having taken his mind, but possibly of an actual desire to be rid of her in favor of Zyne.

Skree watched the children leaving the schoolroom with their scribing books in hand. Some of them paused to look at him, but most simply rushed out. Some had chores and others had more classes. There were several mage-born among them as well as Readers, Menders and a single possible Life-Mage when she grew into her powers.

When all the children had gone, Skree stepped into the schoolroom. The teacher, a tall, slender triton female, whose hair had gone white with age stood before the chalkboard, wiping it off.

"Kanaloë, I need to speak to you about your granddaughter."

"What has Zyne done now?"

"You must stop her from sleeping with the prince-consort."

"Skree, she will tire of him eventually."

"She carries his child. She went to the Ishlani temple for the fertility potion."

Kanaloë thought for a while. "She has always preferred males who belonged to others. But she had never gone so far as to get a child by them before. Someone should have mentioned this to me sooner."

"I have talked to them both many times – to no avail."

"I will speak to her, Skree, but I cannot promise anything. About males, she does not listen. Posidea's bans just make her more stubborn."

* * *

Zyne built up a small fire, throwing incense and cedar chips into the flames. She wrote his name on a bit of bark and threw it into the flames with a small chant. Then she brushed her hair, changing into a landsmyn dress that slipped suggestively off her shoulders and revealed the tops of her fine breasts.

There was a knock at the door and she turned. "Come in."

Kanaloë entered, raking Zyne with her eyes, sniffing at the incense. "You have called him again, have you not?"

"Yes," Zyne answered petulantly, her lower lip sliding forward in a defiant pout.

"Let him go. He is Skree's godson, as well as the prince-consort."

Zyne glared. "I have had kings and princes before. I want this one."

"No. If Skree found out what you are he would destroy you for taking his godson. Release him, Zyne. Skree might forgive you, if you release him. However, if you leave the sea-mage no other choice, he will destroy you for taking Josiah."

"No. I stick to the letter of the truce. I do not sing the seafolk to me. I sing the landsmyn."

"Josiah is a special case. He might as well be seafolk. Furthermore, this trading enclave exists solely on the king's sufferance. You will destroy us all."

"Never. Skree's adopted sons are an abomination. They should be destroyed. Seafolk do not raise landschildren."

Kanaloë felt suddenly chilled. "You told the vampires how to get into Skree's house, didn't you?"

Zyne arched her back and cocked her head. "I told Hoon."

"Skree will kill you when he finds out. For what you have done to Taun as well as Josiah."

"But you will not tell him, will you grandmother?"

"No, Zyne, I will not tell him. Skree told me you carry his child. If you are so intent on the old ways, then why have you not killed him?"

"I intend to keep Josiah as long as possible. I am not going to kill him."

"Hsaaaaa! You cannot hold his mind forever. He is too strong. When he gets free he will know what you are. What you have done to him. He will destroy you. That is why we have always killed the males – especially the strong ones. Once you have sung a male to you, he knows what you are."

"They corded him. There is nothing he can do," Zyne said, coldly.

The door opened and Josiah stood there. He was sober and confused, glancing from one to the other.

"Grandmother was just leaving," Zyne said with oily sweetness.

"Remember what I said, Zyne," she told her and left.

Josiah held his hands at his sides. He hurt and could not think, could barely stand. "I don't know why I came – it was as if I heard you calling me." *Had she called him* ?

"Perhaps you simply felt my need. It happens when two people are very close."

"I guess it does." The last time the mages had met at Laurelyanne's home they had discussed bonds of this kind. everyone had agreed it generally was built around love. He was certain he did not love Zyne. He loved Aejs. He was fond of Stari, but he loved Aejs. Each of the mages had placed wards on his mind and the magic centers according to their affinities and knowledge. If Zyne had powers and a hold on him it was something they had not encountered, something that slid around those wards. Oh gods, what was wrong with him? What hold did Zyne have on him? He had never been a man who was slave to the dictates of his body's lusts before. His hand crept to Hanni's worry stone in his pocket and he prayed for clarity. Was it the child? Was it guilt? But no, the hold had been there before that. They said that Hoon could have been in his mind. He did not want to believe that either. He was not supposed to go out alone; yet, when he felt the need to go to her, he could not stop himself.

Zyne rubbed against him, then pirouetted. "You like?"

"The dress?" Josiah asked, his voice shaking as hard as his body.

She nodded, singing softly to him, singing his thoughts away to nothing.

Josiah gazed into her cleavage. "Yes." He reached into the bodice, bringing one of her full, sweet breasts free. He kissed it, mouthing the nipple. Zyne opened his pants, playing with his member. Then she pushed her skirt up – she wore nothing underneath – and rubbed him against her mound. She pulled him down with her as she settled on the floor. She wiggled close, wrapped her legs around him, and brought him inside.

* * *

Maranya had packed everything, except the little bracelet of ivory and emerald. She felt she ought to send that back to Norwen, but that would be adding insult to injury, where she had left him with one of those hopeless legends of the unreachable ladies to console himself with. Give him time to recover and then send it back or find some other less painful way to return it so it did not come as a slap in the face.

"Leaving?"

Janine sat on the bed beside her.

"I've been called back."

"I hadn't heard," her eyes were hard.

"A premonition. One minute I'm talking to Norwen, the next I'm feeling this indescribable darkness..." she shivered. "Last time I felt that someone I loved died."

Janine's eyes softened, yet she asked, "What about the contracts?"

"I'll send someone to take my place, maybe make a regular thing of it. Keep you supplied. I'll send letters with them. Start something, call it 'discreetly armed escort service'. Basically it's just finishing school for Sharani cutthroats."

"Hmnnnn!" Janine's face got what Maranya called her "greedy" look. "I like that. We train them to party, manipulate, and maneuver. They already know how to cut throats. I'll open a new office on the nicer side of town."

"Janine, your customs on the coast are weird. What I liked best was dancing half-naked with feathers in my hair and paint on my face."

She laughed. "You like the Kwaklahmyn?"

"Yes. If I survive all this bullshit, I'm invited to a potlatch."

* * *

Maranya made a single change to the shirts Janine created for her wardrobe: a bit of silk to cover her breasts. Otherwise she left everything intact and made a fashion statement among the younger Sharani. She rotated some of those who needed extra money through Janine doing discreetly armed escort work during their free periods, which came up twice each month. Most of those were not being trained for intelligence work, although they were promised bonuses if they happened to discover anything useful. Janine bought a new office for them to work out of, distancing their services from her brothels so that no one would misunderstand the nature of the work.

That night Maranya haunted the taverns watching for the gaffer. She ended up at Hinkty Molly's toward midnight. Like most of the taverns in Rowanhart it was a two-story chinked log structure that had gone up fast and was slowly being partitioned and paneled on the inside. It was not so much a matter of finding the gaffer as of letting him find her once he knew she was looking.

"Ah, but ye're a sight fer an old man's eye," a cracked voice said behind her.

Maranya swiveled in her seat. "I need a private word, old man."

The gaffer nodded. "There be private rooms in tha back, come along, and don't mind me wanderin' eyes."

"Look all you want," Maranya laughed. "Just remember you've not been invited to touch."

The gaffer took her to a room behind the bar and locked the door. There was a small dingy desk and two chairs. Wine racks lined two walls and barrels were stacked to the ceiling on the third. "So, what be this about?"

"Vampires. I know they're still out there. Tell me what you know."

"Lemyari and lesser bloods. They don't feed here. Nor in Vorgensburg. I don't know where. We're spread too thin since the heir's murder."

"I understand that."

"One of them visits Zyne regular."

"Could she have betrayed the children? Could Josiah have been in on it?"

"Aye, she betrayed the children. Josiah may have been in on it. It seems unlikely. The two of them never talk. They screw and she sings to him. But he has been there when the vampire visited."

Maranya did not like the sound of that. "Do you know what Lord Hoon looks like?"

"Aye. It's him visits her. I've heard her call his name. What I think is this. Hoon wants tha king. He'll make his move tha day Zyne tries to run off with Josiah."

"The best day to do that will be New Years. That gives us little over a week and a half to figure out a way to stop him. I'll talk to Tamlestari."

The gaffer gave her a long look. He knew she and his daughter, Wilstryn had been lovers on and off for years, but there had never been children between them. "You're of the Order, aren't you?"

Maranya considered for a moment. She had shared it with Janine in a moment of intimate camaraderie and confiding of mutual secrets on a need to know basis. Janine had needed to know that she could trust Maranya to do what needed to be done. Aejys knew, because she was her liege-lord and that was custom. The gaffer was the local Guild chieftain and an ally. "Yes. I am one of those who live to die. To stand between my liege and the blades of the unseen foe. I am not just an intelligence officer."

"Wilstryn knew?"

"She understood."

"How long have you been with the Order?"

"I was pledged to the order at birth." Maranya's eyes took on a fierce light as she spoke. "My ma'aram died at the moment of my birth. My family's liege-lord's castle was attacked just as my 'lasah went into labor with me. My ma'aram was of the Order. She took a blade for our liege. They laid her next to my 'lasah and they held hands as she died and I was born in the same moment. My lasah pledged me to the Order as soon as they laid me at her breast. My duty is to die that others might live, to stand between my liege and the hidden blades of the enemy."

"You have a hard philosophy."

Maranya smiled thinly. "It is the only one I know."

"Walk down ta tha beach with me. I got ta wait fer someone. Used ta be I had lots of people with me. Now we're stretched so thin. Ya don't have ta stay. Just make it look like I still got myn ta call on."

"Certainly."

* * *

Anksha watched them leave Hinkty Molly's and followed. The female dropped something. It looked like a scarf and the male picked it up, grinning, stuffing it into his pocket, and laughing. The female let him keep it. After awhile she left. Anksha guessed he was waiting for a gryphon rider. She emerged from the shadows of the rocks. "Old one who isn't," she hissed. "Guildsmon."

The gaffer whirled, throwing stars flashing from his fist as he moved. Anksha darted aside and came on. Before the Guild's ranks had been bled so thin by Galee's treachery he had always had myn at his back. The stilettos came from his armsheaths and he retreated. This was not a fight he could win and he knew it.

"I can take you hard or I can take you easy," she said. "Choose."

The gaffer said nothing.

She circled, her fangs catching the moonlight as she grinned. She darted at him, and then twisted away in a deft feint. As his blades moved with her, she kicked sideways, knocking his hand aside; flipped backwards and raked his face with her claws, catching his eyes. The gaffer screamed. She ripped his hands and he lost his blades. Then she knocked him down for a bit of wrestling before sinking her fangs into his throat and draining him. Anksha deposited the corpse across the threshold of Hinkty Molly's.

The rider arrived shortly after, just as the sun came up. He found the blood, the blades and stars, but not the mon. So he went to Hinkty Molly's, pounding on the back door. It was not until he and Hinkty Molly went around to the front that they

found the body.

* * *

Working as an escort had put rough polish on Maranya's ability to tavern dance and she could cut through a Blood Coast common room to the source of whatever she wanted with slick ease. Some of the places people had wanted to go had not been high-class parties but the seedier side of towns, places that frightened them without a protector. Maranya had served quite nicely and learned a lot. They would slide out of the parties and into the slums for a scary time. So she instantly picked up on the troubled mood in the Blue Bull that evening. It was too quiet. She spotted Tagalong and Hanni. Although they were not exactly friends any longer because of Josiah, she still did not count them enemies because of Aejs, just friendly opposition. So she slid onto the bench opposite.

"What's going on? Would you know where I could find the gaffer?"

Tagalong's brow was heavily creased and her mouth drawn tightly together as she pulled Maranya's now bloody silk scarf from her pocket and shoved it across the table. "Gaffer's dead an' he was carrying this. Ya were tha last one ta see him. Ya walked down ta tha beach with him. That's where it killed him."

Maranya exhaled heavily. "Dead ... how?"

Tagalong reached for Hanni's hand and he caught hers in both of his. "It was tha Beast. It calls itself Anksha. Jumpfree has seen it an' spoken with it. Apparently it speaks ta its intended victims."

"How'd he get away?"

"Jumped. It blinded the gaffer an' then ripped his throat out, drained him. Left his corpse on Hinkty Molly's front step. She found him."

"I'm sorry." Maranya shook her head. That was ugly.

"What did ya talk about?" Tagalong asked. "I'm going ta find out anyway. Guild owes me. They don't owe ya diddly. I put tha word out they won't talk ta ya."

Maranya's eyes narrowed. "You've been an excellent teacher. And I've had some good ones. I'd rather you did not make this a war over Josiah, because I am going to kill him."

"He's already dying, Maranya, for gods' sake. Let him be!"

"And Fusaaki said he could last a year or more."

"Cut tha crap, Maranya. What did tha gaffer say?"

"Zyne is fucking Hoon. Josiah and Zyne have both been meeting with Hoon."

Tagalong sat shocked into speechlessness. So Hanni who charged into the breach. "why haven't ya grabbed her? Huh? How d'ya know Josiah was a willin' participant?"

"Because, if I don't get Hoon, whatever he's plotting still happens. At least this way, sooner or later, Zyne or Josiah should eventually lead me to Hoon."

"So yer having them both watched?"

"Exactly. Then I get to kill Josiah for what he did that night – for hurting her."

"Yer a bloody fuckin' idiot, Maranya," Tagalong snarled. "Yer not even a good paladin. Yer just crazy."

Maranya leaned across the table with a strange, indescribable light in her eyes, gleaming wetly; desperate anguish in her voice. "No, Tag, we see threats in different places. I am trying hard to keep her alive. I love her. She's my sister. I'm..." she sighed, a crack coming in her armor and caustic manner. "I'm afraid that even the best I can offer isn't going to be enough. Whether Josiah acted on his own initiative or whether Hoon got in his head doesn't matter." Her voice hoarsened to a whisper. "What matters is that he got past me. He got past me and Aeijys almost died. That's not how it's supposed to be. I'm there to step between her and the blade, the spell or whatever. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the fucking way it's supposed to be!" She slammed away from the table, overturning the bench as she came to her feet and rushed out of the tavern.

"She's crazy," Tagalong observed softly.

"Nah," Hanni said. "She's fey. Purely fey."

He leaned against Tagalong, pulling her closer, kissing the side of her head. At first she stiffened, but quickly relaxed, willing herself to. Her knowledge of love, despite her salacious vocabulary and bawdy stories, was all secondhand. She had done only the tiniest bit of adolescent groping which she later magnified in the telling and in her own mind. Confronted with Hanni, she was now paring it down to truthful levels, admitting even to her own self-deceptions. She was not the wild sexual adventuress she had often presented herself as. Tagalong had had, in truth, only two consummated encounters, and they had proved to be highly unsatisfying, which increased her feelings of trepidation regarding Hanni, who had done nothing to earn it. Poor Hanni and those letters. Still cursed, over twenty-five years later, by the actions of a fifteen-year's old's vivid imagination.

* * *

Tagalong and Hanni knocked at a side door to Hinky Molly's and gestured through

a window to a server who let them in after several exchanges. They would be closed until the afternoon of the wake. Then two days later they would go back to normal hours. Hinkty Molly was an old campaigner and grief might make her falter a few steps in her stride, but she would not lose it completely. She fetched them all a tankard of ale and sat down with them to talk.

"Who's takin' over fer him?" Tagalong asked.

"No one," Hinkty Molly said, sipping her ale. The shadows were heavy around her eyes and her cheeks were tear-streaked.

"But who do I go ta?"

"If you need information you go to Birdie. That young Dynannan knows everything that happens in this town. There are no Guildsmyn left in either Vorgensburg or Rowanhart. Gaffer should have told you, but he wanted to play it close to the cuff. The treachery in Creeya bled the Guild nearly dry. The new Grand Master is being cautious until he knows the full extent of it. They're some true believers here. Worshippers of Hadjys like myself. But no Guildsmyn. We're trying to get someone, but we don't know if she'll take it yet."

Tagalong was stunned. All her life she had been able to go to the Guild for help. Ever since she and Aejs, while just a pair of teenage rascallions, had helped Wilstry Hornbow destroy a merchant trafficking in stolen children, they had been able to go to the Guild. The Guild had come riding in force to the aid of Shaurone during the war, disguised as a mercenary company called John Dawn's Legion in the employ of an unknown benefactor. They had helped Aejs and Tagalong escape from Aejs' mad sister ten years ago. They had helped Aejs destroy her sister. They had saved both Aejs' and Tagalong's lives many times over. Tagalong could not think. Hanni's hand stole across her own and squeezed it comfortingly. She glanced up at him, tears streaking her face. She leaned against him, letting him put his arm around her shoulders. The gaffer had been a friend. He had been Wilstry's father.

Hinkty Molly was crying. "Wake's tomorrow. Funeral day after. Birdie's doing it. King's letting us put him in the Heroes Field. Oh sweet justice, Tag, I found him. That – that creature left him on my doorstep – it – it—" her voice started to break up.

Tagalong moved from her seat to put her arms around Hinkty Molly and Hanni followed. They held her a long while. Rumor had it that Hinkty Molly and the gaffer had been more than friends and partners in the tavern. As she slowly cried herself out, Hanni reached in his pocket and pulled out a string of stones, putting them over Hinkty Molly's head. She touched them and her hands tingled.

"What's this?"

"Worry beads," Hanni said, sounding pleased and embarrassed at the same time.

"I'm a stone mage. I make things ta help people. It's a gift ta help ya through. It's just comfort magic. Steadies the spirit a bit and no hangover like ale."

Hinkty Molly smiled. "You're a good one, Hanni. Thank you." Then she turned to Tagalong. "No one's even gotten a good look at the creature."

"Actually, someone has," Tagalong told her.

Hinkty Molly tensed. "Who? Are they still alive?"

"Yes, and ye'd never believe who it is. It's so unlikely."

Hinkty Molly frowned. "Who?"

"Jumpfree. Carries a sword, but what does he do? He hits her with a snowball."

"It's a her? That's for certain?"

"Yes," Tagalong said, and began to give her Jumpfree's description of Anksha.

"At least we can discreetly warn people, prevent more deaths," she said.

"I can't tell ya why I believe Josiah's innocent, but Hanni here can if ya promise not ta let it get beyond tha circle of true believers."

"You've got proof?"

"Pretty close an' it's a whole lot like what happened in Creeya."

Hinkty Molly gasped, then fingered her beads and felt the comforting warmth spread through her. "Tell me, Hanni. We may not be Guild, but we'll do what we can."

* * *

Aejys walked the beaches in the wee hours before dawn, but this time she left the whiskey bottle at home. Tamlestari and Maranya had cornered her the night before and gotten her promise, on her honor that she would talk to Skree that morning. One of them knew what she would learn and one of them did not. They considered it best that she get this news from Skree because what he said could not be accused of bias or prejudice; which anything they said could be. Skree was Josiah's godfather and, if anything, he would want to protect Josiah out of the love he had borne the man's father, his beloved spirit-brother, Tori Stormbird. However, Skree was a man of uncompromising standards and, once asked, he would answer straightforwardly.

It had always been easier for Aejys to fight a battle of the blade, than of the heart. Death was far less terrifying than rejection by those she loved most; and for many

years she had built a lock box in her heart and exiled her insecurities, loneliness, and outright terrors there. Then circumstances had forced her to open it up and the experience had nearly driven her mad, only Tamlestari's and later Josiah's love had kept her sane. Yet now Josiah had betrayed her; she knew it to be true in her mind, even while her heart wanted desperately to deny it. She had even begun to question whether the injury he had done to her had been unintentional; whether someone had been in his head as Laurelyanne claimed or whether he had meant to do it so that he could have this other woman. Had his love disappeared so completely? Certainly he had been acting very strange for months now. She had spent the night awake, finding her courage to talk to Skree and confront it.

Aejys pounded on Skree's door in the early hours of the morning. She meant to simply knock, but everything she did mirrored her growing desperation. Skree let her in. Standing in the entryway, she could see Taun in the kitchen with the boys at the table in highchairs, feeding them rice and nori. Since the day of the attack they had matured to their proper age group and sprouted teeth. Taun still tired easily from his ordeal. Posidea had taken over all of the little nerien's tasks as healer and teacher.

"Has anyone seen Josiah?" Aejys asked, a fraying crack breaking through her voice as she tried to hold it together. "He has not been home in days."

Skree's eyes turned cold, the line of his mouth and jaw tightened. "I know where to find him and you will not like it."

"Where?"

"Come into the sitting room away from the children. They understand far more than they should and I will not upset them." Aejys followed Skree and sat on a chair near the couch as Skree settled there. "I cannot keep protecting Josiah. Godson or not. He is with Zyne."

A wounded look came in her eyes, her lips twisted into a tight little ball in the center and a deep sigh shuddered up from her chest as all her suspicions were confirmed. It was not only another woman; but it was the woman for whom he had nearly killed her with a twisted version of shared life. She wished she had not asked. "How ... long has – has this been–"

"Since last summer. That is when I first discovered it. Possibly since she first got here a year ago. I do not know. I have not been able to get a straight answer from either of them."

Aejys clenched her eyes shut, her mouth now a tight line. After a moment she opened her eyes and turned, heading for the door.

"Aejys! Wait, another thing you should know. She carries his child."

Aejys paled and shook with anger. All this time she had been trying to get a child

from him and he had gotten one on Zyne instead. The child she wanted. The child that should have been hers. That one small piece of him that she would have to hold onto after he died. Why should it matter what happened to him? Why should she care?

She went to the cottage, pulled the door open without knocking, and stared. Josiah and Zyne were wrapped in each other's arms beneath the blankets, their bodies moving together. Light from the open door fell across their faces. They glanced and saw her. Aeijys turned without speaking, spread her wings, and took flight. By rights, she could have shoved a sword through them, but she could not bear the thought of killing Josiah. She flew for a long time; past Vorgensburg to the bluffs where she had buried Brendorn. She landed, folding her wings and sat beside the grave.

"I should never have fallen in love again. Why did he agree to a triading if it was Zyne he wanted all along? Prestige? Position? Power? Is that what he saw in me? Is that what he wanted? What will I tell Tamlestari? How will I tell her? We thought he loved us."

"So, the king has been cuckolded?" A sharp, bitter laugh followed the words. "The betrayer has been betrayed. You chose the wrong lover."

Aeijys sprang to her feet, Spiritdancer clearing the sheath as she spun, retreating to find the best ground to fight on. She did not want them dancing across her beloved's grave. "As you chose the wrong wives?"

Hoon dressed impeccably, the soul of elegance in black and crimson, a sword at his hip. He moved smoothly, approaching her in a direct manner. The vampire smiled. "I would love you for eternity."

"You don't know how to love." She advanced on him, sword weaving a threatening pattern. "If you truly loved your wives, you would have sent them away. Not murdered them. I will send Josiah away. I will not kill him."

Hoon back away. "No? He tried to kill you? You killed your sister? You loved her." He moved further from her, staying out of reach of her blade.

"She was evil. Josiah committed a single misguided act. He has never hurt anyone else."

"Are you sure?"

"Move away from there, Hoon," she ordered as she watched him nearly step onto Brendorn's grave. The thought of his defiling that ground incensed her.

Hoon glanced down and saw the headstone. "Still mourning for your little, lost gardener? How do you know he was not cheating, just like Abelard?" Then he stepped full onto the grave. "Perhaps I should call him out of there and let you ask?"

Aejys shrieked wordlessly, lunging, driving the blade at him. Hoon barely managed to evade her strike. She whipped back, continuing her attack in a whirling pattern so skilled and relentless that he could only flee, finally throwing himself from the cliff. He shape-shifted and fled.

She let him go, sheathing her sword as she sagged to her knees sobbing and cursing. "I hate you! I hate both of you."

But she knew she lied. Her love for Josiah was still there, shoved into that lockbox in the bottom of her heart, hurting and anguished. She swore never to let anyone else in. She still had Tamlestari and the children. That would be enough.

* * *

Tamlestari returned from the nursery to change. She would be working out with Omer soon and she wanted to get into her scruffiest clothing. It did not pay to take a tumble in the dirt wearing something nice. Omer knew an incredible amount about hand-to-hand and knife fighting and he was a good teacher. She was soaking it up. She found Aejys at the table, staring into another glass of whiskey. Her eyes were red rimmed.

"What's wrong?" Tamlestari sat beside her.

"I finally did what you asked and talked to Skree. I wish I hadn't." It had been one thing to have suspicions and another thing entirely to have confirmations, especially with her own eyes.

"Why? What did he say?" She reached for Aejys' hand. The paladin flinched, turning away from her.

"I found Josiah."

"What's happened to him?"

"It's not what's happened to him!" Aejys snarled. "It's where I found him." She refilled her glass, knocked it down, and filled it again. "He's sleeping with Zyne. She carries his child – the one I wanted." her face crumpled. "They've been carrying on for a year now."

"Aejys, are you sure?" Tamlestari had listened to Maranya and Omer's veiled hints for months now. She had known this was coming, had been ready in her mind, but not her heart.

A low, sob emerged from the middle of Aejys' body. "I walked in on them. He was riding her... I thought he loved me." Her eyes filled. "Gods! I was so lonely. You were still in Shaurone. Ladonys and Brendorn were dead. I was so fucking lonely. I

feel so humiliated. If he had just told me in the beginning. I would never—" She choked, sucked in a deep breath, and drank the next glass. "I don't know why he married us."

* * *

"I'm not giving her up," Josiah repeated obstinately, trailing Tamlestari across the bailey. Tamlestari was dressed for a fight: chain mail and surcoat with her own device of a rose nestled in a crown, red and gold on white. A longsword hung at her shoulder from a baldric; and Quadenlas, the solar disk of the fireborn, hung upon its chain around her neck. Quadenlas could meet and best nearly all magics, especially that of the undead. All work stopped as everyone turned to watch the spectacle, Rowanhart's crude, frontier origins showing most plainly.

"You get him!" someone shouted.

another yelled, "Give him a hot one up the toot!"

"Put a blade through both of them!"

"Tar and feathers!"

"Shove a pole up his ass!"

Tamlestari ignored the bystanders. "Hmnp! maybe she's giving you up," Tamlestari glared hard. "Or maybe we're giving you up. I never really wanted you. But I still can't believe you did this to Aejs." "

"What about yourself? Aren't you angry at me for your own self?"

"No. I'm eighteen to Aejs' forty something. But I've had probably ten times as many lovers. Aejs, on the other hand, has always been the type who committed herself to her partners. She was celibate for seven years after abandoning Brendorn and Ladonys when she fled Rowanslea. She is not one who gives her heart easily. She only became involved with us after they died. She trusted you. We married you! And all the while you were screwing that filthy triton whore!"

"Don't call her that!" Josiah snarled, grabbing Tamlestari's arm. Tamlestari whirled, her fist connected with his jaw; and he tumbled ass over teakettle to the prince's intense satisfaction. Tamlestari stalked on before he could regain his feet. Josiah scrambled up and ran after her. The effort hurt, but he was beginning to feel some adrenaline himself. He felt frightened, some of that same desperation and panic that had led to the misbegotten act of magic in Aejs' bedchamber that nearly killed her and he recognized it enough – thanks to the worry stone in his pocket – to thank his gods for the spellcord banding his wrists.

She heard his footsteps near and paused, turning to face him again. "Touch me and

"I'll take you apart. You're good, but I'm better."

Josiah slowed, holding his hands palms up and outward. He was not certain who was better, but he did not want to put it to the test. He did not want to hurt her. "I'm not going to do anything. I promise."

"You're just a cheap, gutter-screwing, cockwhore sot! You disgust me."

Josiah slowed still more. He trailed her at a walk. He could not think clearly, but he felt deeply ashamed. He did not understand how he could be so drawn to Zyne, when he loved Aejs. The thought of giving up Zyne made his heart and body ache with a strange, indefinable heaviness. Tamlestari was going to make him choose. He did not want to choose. The thought of choosing frightened him. His stomach tightened and turned sour, bile rising in his throat. He would finally lose that last small lingering tie to them. It had been over for months. His mind knew it, but his heart had not wanted to let go. That was why some of his things were still in his bedroom in the keep.

Tamlestari went to the school first. Kanaloë turned from the slate board at the sound of the door slamming open. All the children looked up, watching her curiously.

"I need to talk to you, dismiss the class," Tamlestari ordered her.

Kanaloë looked frightened, she saw the artifact hanging from Tamlestari's throat and knew the prince had come for a fight. She had to be expecting magic to be put into play. Kanaloë's gifts would never equal what that artifact could do – even had Tamlestari been male. She shooed the children out.

"You tell Zyne that Josiah belongs to me. Release him."

Kanaloë stifled a gasp at the word 'release'. Did the prince know? "I will tell her. But she will not listen. Are you threatening her?"

"Not exactly," Tamlestari's voice had a sarcastic lilt. "I'll see him dead before I'll let her keep him. Furthermore, your people are going to have a war with the fireborn. I'll scorch your beaches, your nesting grounds. You'll never be able to leave the water. I'll make the genocide of the life-mages look like a party game by the time I'm through with your people. I'll put a bounty on your skins. I'll open the armories of the fireborn and distribute the artifacts to ocean-going mages in exchange for your heads."

Kanaloë paled, trembling violently. She backed away from Tamlestari, reached the door, and fled past Josiah who waited outside. Josiah watched her go. "What did you say to her?" He demanded as Tamlestari left the school.

"That I'd gut you before I'd let Zyne keep you. You're dying anyway so what does it matter if I make it a little more interesting to watch?"

"Tamlestari, you don't mean that."

"Don't I?" She snarled, grabbing him by the collar, "Don't I?"

Josiah stiffened, feeling a sharp point of steel press against his stomach: he had not even seen her draw it. "Stari—"

"You hurt Aejs. Broke her heart. Humiliated her. No one hurts Aejs."

The blade pricked him, bringing a bead of blood through his shirt. He said nothing, staring down at it, afraid to move and provoke her. She released him, running after Kanaloë.

* * *

"You must let him go. She knows!" Kanaloë shrieked in panic. "The prince knows."

"No," Zyne said in a flat tone that suggested she felt that her grandmother was overreacting. "I'm taking him with me." Zyne finished with the wood chips, putting her tools away, and turning to face Kanaloë.

"You cannot. And you cannot kill him either. The tritons will recognize a seiryne kill. They will hunt us down."

"They will never catch me."

"They will. You were not there. You do not know what it was like – being hunted by the tritons. And the fireborn will join in. You have broken the truce. Our own people will not have you. They will give you up to them."

"Get out!" Zyne snatched up her halberd, brandishing it at her grandmother. "I know what I'm doing. I'm stealing the Abelard heritage for our people. We'll be too strong for the tritons. Imagine a generation of seiryne with the Abelard gifts – the power."

Kanaloë fell silent, struck dumb by the immensity of Zyne's ambition. "It is still wrong," she said softly. "Skree is my friend."

The door opened and Tamlestari came in, followed closely by Josiah. Tamlestari shot Zyne a hot glance and whirled. She caught Josiah and threw him across the room. "This is your last day with him. I catch him here again and I'll kill him. You try to run off with him and I'll kill you both. My myn are watching you."

Tamlestari left, slamming the door behind her.

Zyne smelled blood. She knelt by Josiah, opening his shirt to find a tiny wound.

"She cut you?"

"Yes."

"Why did you let her do it?"

"I love her." The strength he had found to follow Tamlestari around faded. His eyes closed and he swayed on his knees. Zyne watched him, frowning, wondering now if he would last long enough for her to escape with him or if all her scheming would come undone by the simple failing of his body. If they had not corded him there were things she could have tried with that spell of his to keep him going. But there was no way to get them off without killing him. Everything was complicated and Hoon was not helping. Then there was that Anksha of his that kept coming around and making her nervous. Zyne caught Josiah as he started to topple over, got the medicine from his pocket, and persuaded some of it down his throat. After a few minutes his breathing improved.

Zyne wrapped Josiah in her arms, singing softly into his ear. His face relaxed. "You will go back to them now. You will not come here until I call you."

* * *

Josiah returned to his rooms in the keep and found Tamlestari throwing his things from the window. "What are you doing?" he grabbed at the box of scrimshaw. Her foot caught him in the stomach, knocking him down and the box sailed out the window.

"Tamlestari?" He staggered to his feet, went to the window, and stared down. A crowd had gathered. Someone pointed at him and the whole group laughed.

Omer was there. He stared up at Josiah, saying in a loud voice, "If I had caught them, I would have shoved a sword through them both! It's what they deserve."

Josiah winced, flushing with shame and humiliation. It was all over the keep and probably the city. But then, he had not exactly made a secret of it from anyone except Aeijys. It was almost as if he had wanted to be caught. Nothing that he had done made sense. He did not know himself any longer.

"You don't live here anymore," Tamlestari snarled.

"Have you discussed this with Aeijys?" He trailed after her.

"Not exactly."

"I'm going to talk to her."

"Won't help any."

"Why not?"

"She's in the bedroom, look for yourself."

Josiah did not like the sound of that. He found her door open and went in. She lay half on her side, one hand trailing the floor, her fingers just touching the empty whiskey bottle. He knelt beside her and started to cry.

* * *

As soon as Tamlestari's actions demonstrated a withdrawal of royal protection from him, the populace began to pay Josiah back for his betrayals of their beloved king. When he reached his belongings, which Tamlestari had sailed from the window, Josiah found that everything had either been stolen or destroyed. No one would speak to him. No one would answer him. He walked from the keep with the clothes on his back and a few coins in his pocket.

Josiah headed toward the wharves and the dockside taverns that he knew had a few rooms to let. He could manage for a few days, and then he would send to the keep for his stipend, which pre-dated his marriage to Aejs. She had granted it to him for his aid in killing the archenwyrms years ago. Aejs' honor would not let her deny him that much. He wanted time away from his friends; otherwise he would have gone to Laurelyanne's. He got as far as the corner near the Blue Bull when the pain started in his hands and feet and he realized he was having an attack. He collapsed in the gutter, groaning and whimpering. Someone bent over him.

"It's the prince-asshole."

After that no one stopped again. He passed out.

* * *

Josiah woke in a warm, sunny room. It felt, rather than looked, familiar. The delicate blown glass chimneys of the lamps on the bedside tables were done in a motif of brown stems and green leaves at the base. The wall hangings were all gentle forest scenes and the coverlets he lay beneath were done in earth tones. It conjured to mind a single mon. As he thought of her, she opened the door and peered quietly in at him.

"Laurelyanne."

The old earthmage smiled, the corners of her eyes and mouth crinkling kindly. "I am glad to see you are awake finally. I was beginning to worry."

"How long?"

"Two days. Hanni and I found you in the gutter near the Blue Bull. We heard what had happened and we all went looking for you, Hanni and I, Tagalong, the mages, the Hadjysi. All in little groups. Not everyone thinks you're evil. Just most folks."

"I'm sorry I've become a burden." Josiah said.

"Don't be. We don't mind. None of us. It's kind of 'there, but for the grace of our gods go I' so we thank our gods and pitch in. Things have become very strange over the last two days, Josiah."

"How?"

"First, let me tell you what's come to light since the gaffer's death. Tag's had a lot of long conversations with Hinkty Molly. There is no Guild in either Rowanhart or Vorgensburg. The gaffer wanted it to seem like there still was, but there wasn't. Hasn't been for months. Secondly, the gaffer had evidence linking Zyne to Hoon."

"Someone has to tell Aejs!" Josiah threw the covers back and slid out of bed, only to stagger and fall.

"No. Josiah – Josiah, there is also evidence linking you to Hoon. You were there since before the battle."

Hanni thundered up the stairs at the sound of the impact and helped get him back to bed, then sat in another chair, listening.

"If we tell Aejs this," Laurelyanne continued. "They'll kill you."

"I did not do anything."

"But ya did, lad, ya very definitely tried an' very nearly killed tha king. An' none of us can find any sign of sways, triggers, or coercions in tha mess of a mind and magic of yers. Just some anomalies and odd tastes. Which doesn't mean it isn't there. Jest tha we haven't found it."

Tears welled up in Josiah's eyes and ran freely down his face. "I should tell her anyway. Fusaaki said I might have as little as a few months... Hoon," violent chills seized him. "There is something I should know, but my mind slides away from it, cannot grasp it as if the information has been blocked..."

"Or as much as a few years, if you're careful," Laurelyanne pointed out. "And while there is life, there is hope. Besides, while you are alive, there is a chance of stopping whatever Hoon has planned for Aejs."

"An' ya do still love her, don't ya?" Hanni asked, rhetorically.

"Of course."

"Well, let's finish up," he said.

"All right, here's how things stand with us in the middle. We have Maranya's camp which wants to chop your head off. Hoon and Zyne's, which want both yours and Aejys' heads. Then we have our little conspiracy. Under no circumstances does anyone talk to Birdie or Lizard, they're in Maranya's camp. So are Posidea and Skree." Laurelyanne began to tick names off on her hands as she spoke.

The one area of magic they did not have access to was that of the sea folk and since Josiah had become a pariah she could not directly inquire. Maybe she could find some books on the seafolk if she got all the mages digging through those books Tagalong had piled up in that warehouse in Rowanhart. There were simply too many books for one mon to do it alone. It was incredible how many books had been in that wyrm's hoard.

"Another thing..." Josiah said, sinking deeper into the bed, fighting for the words, to get his mouth and mind around them, his speech slurring with the effort, "Lemyari ... someone search the books ... Lemyari." A wave of pain crested over him as he finally forced the words past the coercions. "Important." Then he fainted.

* * *

Zyne did not call Josiah to her. Instead she sang him dreams of her. She knew they were watched and Tamlestari's anger made her nervous. The time had not yet come to simply take him and run. Hoon also watched. He had not forbidden her Josiah. If he did would she be able to defy him? The bonds seemed so tight when she tested them. She dreamed of the taste of his blood sliding down her throat, feeling him inside her, mind and body. She shuddered. *No. No. No! My gift is like to his, he cannot hold me* . But he did. With the blood. He did. If she died, she would rise.

The scratching came at the door. Tears sprang to Zyne's eyes. He must have sensed her testing the bonds. The scratching came louder, demanding. She shrank across the room, shaking her head, pressing her back into the corner of the farthest wall.

The door rattled, but she had dropped the bar before she began to strain against his bindings. It was not right. No one could bind a seiryn. No one. She would not answer.

<Come to me. Open the door . > His mind entered hers, commanding and harsh.

"No."

<Open the door. You want me. > Only Aejys Rowan had been strong enough to deny his call when she climbed the sacred mountain after the sword. She still defied him and the more she defied him; the more he wanted her.

"No," she whimpered, feeling the pull in her muscles.

<Open the door. You belong to me . >

Her throat remembered the sweet, salt taste of his blood and she swallowed. Yearning filled her for the taste, the way it warmed her throat and body like strong liquor. She bit her lip, focusing on the pain, trying not to think of him.

<Open the door. >

Her eyes teared up and she began to crawl forward on her belly. Then she lay before the door, her hand reaching up of its own accord and she removed the bar.

Hoon slammed the door open, striking her with it. She rolled, sobbing to the side. His face was a study in rage. Zyne cringed as he tangled his fingers in her hair, dragging her to her knees. "Disobey me again, and I will rip your belly open, feed your unborn child to Anksha and watch you die."

Zyne wept. "Please, I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I promise."

"An object lesson is needed. I will let you run away with Abelard. But you will do so when I tell you to. Only then."

"Yes. When you tell me to."

He pulled a bit of cloth from his pocket and stuffed it in her mouth, tying a bit of rope around it. Anksha scampered into the cottage, climbed onto the table, knocking everything onto the floor in a crash of shattering pottery and sat laughing.

Zyne's eyes bulged, not comprehending why he did this, but frightened nonetheless. He smiled slowly, his eyes burning with eagerness. He bit savagely into her throat. Her scream could not get past the gag. Anksha crept down from the table and tangled her fingers in Zyne's hair, combing it out and braiding, then combing it out and braiding it again while Hoon savaged the seiryn; which made it all the more frightening. Hoon drank for a long time. Then he sealed the wound with his blood and bit her in the arm with the same fury. All night long he tore at her and then sealed it so there would be no mark, but she would remember the pain. He took her as a woman also. Zyne learned quickly. And all that time Anksha kept braiding and combing.

* * *

"Laurelyanne?"

She barely heard him, his voice raised scarcely above a whisper. It was the odd, pained catch in it that pulled her like a summons as she came down the stairs and into the sitting room. Josiah stood before the large picture window, gazing across the

brown sere patches of her garden in its slowly vanishing winter blanket. His shoulders were bowed as if under a tremendous weight which was slowly crushing the life and breath from his body. She went to him, taking his arms and holding him.

"Laurelyanne. I'm frightened. I'm terribly frightened. I don't know who I am ... or even what I am anymore..." His voice was like the earth after a quake, full of cracks and exposed faults, open tears, and oozing ruptures. "Something bad is happening. I sense it ... like a swirling cloud, closing around me – around everything... I'm standing at the eye." He sagged against her and she realized he was crying softly.

The old mage brought him to the couch, sat him down, and settled beside him.

"There are so many spells I need to pass on ... but I don't have enough time left. My books are in Charas and there are only three people who can pass the wards. Shularrien, Nariya and myself. Our incarnations. Aejs is Shularrien. I don't know where or even if Nariya has returned. In the tower, face the painting of Shularrien by the door, say 'the thorn is sharp, the rose is sweet.' And the spirit panels will be revealed. Now get me a book or a crystal. Something I can put a few spells in. Shared life. A few others. If you can learn them, do so. If not, find someone who can. Get Hanni to help, since I can't do magic with these damned cords on." He began to breathe rapidly, struggling, almost panting as he doubled over. "Help me ... it's a bad one."

Laurelyanne caught him before he could fall. "The medicine?"

"In my room."

She eased him onto his back and ran upstairs. "Hanni! Tag!"

* * *

"My instinct is this," Laurelyanne said, taking Osbert off the windowsill. The little golem had sat silent for weeks. Unless she woke him he was just a little porcelain doll. She hugged Osbert to her as she spoke. "My instinct is that at some point in the chaos and confusion of New Years Day, Zyne will attempt to call Josiah to her and run away. That will draw Aejs and the others to the beach and Hoon will ambush them. I think he wants both Aejs and Zyne. And he wants Josiah dead, last of the Abelards."

"How is Josiah?" asked a young woman, Mari.

"Resting. This last one was bad. I believe the most positive estimate was inaccurate. Anyway, I know what Zyne is."

A surprised murmur ran among the assembled mages and Hadjsi.

"She's seiryn. Do any of you know what that is?"

"Well, some of us know tales, but not any hard facts," Miccan said.

"Thanks to Josiah's stipend, which Aeijys has so generously continued, I have been able to acquire some books. I have marked the relevant passages." Laurelyanne handed them around. Amberlin Willidar, owner of the Manticore Bones, had found the books and sold them to her. "It will take a yuwenghau to get the sways and triggers out of his mind. They don't work with coercions. They are very subtle, which is why we could not find them."

Tagalong's eyes glistened and her face twisted with anger. "I knew it! I knew it!"

Hanni patted her arm. "Where are we goin' find a yuwenghau?"

Laurelyanne smiled, both sad and sweet, faintly knowing. "That's why I'm building an altar. I've met one. Problem is the only mon in Rowanhart with a strong enough connection to call him has sided with Maranya. He loved and lost a Hadjeeshyn paladin. Hence I need the Hadjysi to help call him."

"The attar of roses you borrowed," Hinkty Molly exclaimed. "You're calling Dynarien."

"Exactly. Some of us will have to stand look out so we know when things go down. The rest need to be here calling, steadily until we get him. Once we get him, he may also solve our Guild problem. His other love is also Guild and we might be able to convince her to take the gaffer's place since he was her cousin."

"Who's that?" Tagalong asked.

"Edouina Hornbow. Once we solve our undead problems, Rowanhart might turn out to be a nice place to raise children."

* * *

Hoon watched the mages and Hadjysi come and go in groups, carefully matched for strengths and weaknesses, compensating for the latter. They knew what they were fighting. Laurelyanne, Tagalong, and Hanni were a trio of old foxes who knew their business. Almost. With Josiah discredited so completely, there was little that they could do. However, he still wanted to send them a warning, make certain they did not interfere with his plans. Hoon walked the perimeters of Laurelyanne's property with Anksha, keeping to the edges, the trees and bushes, the alleys and streets. He reached out with his awareness to test the wards. They were strong. Not as well set as a yuwenghau's, but impressive. Each mage had set their own brand of wards according to their school and affinities. They did not begin to understand the power and range of the Lemyari and other vampire royals. Especially Hoon's. Hoon was the first born of Galee and the strongest. And he had been a mage of great power before Galee turned him.

<Come to me, Josiah. It is time to remember. Come to me . >

A side door opened quietly and a figure leaned against the facing. Hoon smiled, wrapped his arms around Josiah and held him like a lover while he fed. When the mage lost consciousness, Hoon carried him to the front door and dumped him on the stoop. He left the wound still oozing, slid a note inside Josiah's nightshirt, and pounded hard on the door until he heard people moving about. Then he slipped away into the darkness.

* * *

Miccan and Hanni had the downstairs watch that night. They answered the pounding on the doors and found Josiah. Hanni held the light while Miccan knelt beside him. The fire mage lifted two fingers from the wound in Josiah's neck, the fresh blood gleaming wetly.

"We know what has been going on now for certain," Miccan said grimly. "Hoon has decided to quit hiding it. They'll never believe that this is anything but a cover-up. Put the light down, Hanni. We won't need it." Miccan summoned light, filling the porch. He was not a large man, being slender and average in height. He was already struggling with Josiah when Hanni returned. The stout dwarf simply lifted the unconscious man and carried him in.

Hanni put Josiah on the couch. "Wake Laurelyanne and Tag."

Josiah stirred weakly, his heaving, raspy efforts to breath worried Hanni. He needed shared life, but he was the only one who could cast it and he was corded. Small, animal noises of pain emerged from deep in his throat. "I ... remember," Josiah whispered. "Hoon has ... he has let me ... remember ... he's taunting us. Unnnnnhh." A long, shuddering breath, half-whimper forced its way from his throat. "Hurts."

"Josiah!" Laurelyanne appeared, wrapped in a modest brown dressing robe. She immediately Read him and her face turned grave. "If only those horrible cords—"

"No," Josiah rasped. "Then Hoon would ... turn the magic ... on her ... again. I can't fight him ... too weak ... He's in too ... deep."

Miccan drew two chairs close and sat, leaning in to hear. "At least we know what has been going on."

"Stay with him," Laurelyanne ordered, rising to fetch some medicines.

"Not the — the half of it," Josiah said.

"Rest," Miccan told him.

"No."

When Laurelyanne returned, Josiah began to slowly pour it all out to their horrified ears. Toward the end of the tale, Miccan spotted the paper and pulled it out.

Laurelyanne,

Your efforts, while admirable, are doomed. Abelard is mine. When I no longer have use for him, he will die. He is dying anyway. Why prolong it? As you can see, your wards cannot keep me out. There are no yuwenghau among you. Had you discovered my presence earlier, you might have fared better. What a shame. I want it understood, however, if you continue in this wise, next time you will find him dead on your doorstep as Hinkty Molly found the gaffer. Anksha says the gaffer's blood was delicious. He was a very easy kill. Do not involve the Guild. No Guildsmon is a match for Anksha.

Lord Hoon

"Miccan," Josiah whispered, unable to force his voice louder. "Fetch the others. Lemyari set their..." he struggled to breathe for a moment and Laurelyanne gave him more amphereon. "They set their coercions very deep. You'll never find them. However, he opened my memories and left them that way to torment me. Maybe, we can find clues--"

"Are you sure?" Miccan asked.

Josiah smiled wearily. "All he can do is kill me."

* * *

Hoon stood on the beach, sheltering beneath an overhang. Four Lemyari stood with him. A slender, dark female with pointed aristocratic features and straight black hair, moved closer to him. Anksha crouched beside him, watching, looking more animal than woman. She went through phases, moods, sometimes shifting rapidly, sometimes slowly, rotating like the earth through its seasons; the same, but never exactly the same; the same colors, the same shapes and foliage; but never in exactly the same patterns, the same places. She fascinated Hoon endlessly. Every time he thought he had her figured out she did something new, something different. Hoon tousled her hair and she purred.

"What now, Lord Hoon," the dark vampire asked. "How long do we wait?"

"Soon, Kalida. With the turning of the month, Zyne will call Abelard to her. She will try to carry him off. Tamlestari's spies will alert her to this. Aejsys will come winging down. You will hide beneath the sands, Kalida. You will put a measure of two – no, three – into Abelard and then tear the child from Zyne's belly. There will be no more Abelards. Her body will come with us. She will rise. Abelard will be left to rise here.

You three will also be beneath the sands with the rest of my army. I want at least a measure of ten shoved into Aejys. That should get past her enhanced resistance. I will carry her off, break, and turn her. I will bottle her blood and share it with you. That should be a rare feast. We will abandon the lesser bloods, the sword-fodder I brought with me. Let them fight the tritons and soldiers."

Then Hoon reached into his cloak, bringing out four preserving bottles. "You'll like this. It's a Valdren-catkin blend. A very fine blood with a certain piquant quality."

"What about me, Hoon? What about me?" Anksha demanded.

"Stay at the edges. Don't risk yourself. You have done much already. Come, walk with me." Hoon moved far down the beach and around another rocky outcropping. "I want you to understand how urgent my reasons are for keeping you out of this combat, Anksha. The day the prince confronted Zyne, I happened to be near and saw something that alarmed me."

"What? What is there to fear from a simple fireborn prince? I have eaten them before."

"Ah, but this one is wearing Quadenlas by right. I have blades that destroy her kind. And two of them will be brought into play. But it will be a race. Once Quadenlas is invoked none of us will be able to get within striking distance of her. We must hope that Aejys makes her usual heedless charge and we can kill her before Quadenlas can be invoked. If the holiday crowds hold Tamlestari back long enough from reaching us, all will go well. If not then we die the true death."

Anksha growled.

"Promise me, if we fall that you will go to Timon."

Anksha growled deeper.

"Promise."

"I promise."

* * *

Zyne lay unconscious on the floor of her cottage for two days before her grandmother came looking for her and found her there, lying in her own wastes. Kanaloë put her to bed and summoned a healer. Posidea's ban forbade healers from attending Zyne. Only a few stood outside her edict. Laurelyanne refused. Lizard, pressured by Birdie, came. Someone, who had been careful not to strike her where it would harm the child, had beaten Zyne savagely. Lizard suspected that Josiah had worked himself into a drunken rage and done this. Zyne regained consciousness under his ministrations.

She cried, and when she could talk again, asked, "The child?"

"The child is fine," Lizard told her. "Do you love him?"

"Josiah?"

"Yes."

"More than anything," she said in a voice both sad and sweet, appealing to the kindness in the young healer.

Lizard considered that. He was a gentle mon by nature, but at that moment he wanted to beat Josiah severely for hurting Zyne; for hurting Aeijys; for making such a mess of things. Zyne had become a pariah and his na'halaef ministered to pariahs. That was why, when he initially refused to come she had pressured him into it. "I'll come back tomorrow and check on you."

* * *

Josiah slipped out of the house alone that morning with a list of what he wanted from the Manticore Bones in his pocket. He went alone because he wanted no one to know what he was buying. Assuming Amberlin would even sell them to him. He wore his cloak with the hood pulled tight around his face and his gloves hiding the cords on his wrists. The street was nearly empty at that hour, the stores just barely beginning to open. A dray rolled past him with logs on it, splattering muddy snow over him. He said nothing, wiping his face off and continuing on until he reached the mage store. Amberlin had the lamps lit and was rolling up the blinds in preparation for opening when he knocked on the door and rattled the knob briefly.

She let him in. When he shook back his hood, her eyes narrowed, and an expression of concern followed. Amberlin drew him further into the store, hissing softly. "I've told you not to come alone, grandfather. It's dangerous for you to be out like this."

Josiah fumbled with the paper in his pocket, shoving it at her. She took it, reading quickly. Only a Badonthian might have what Josiah needed and he watched her closely. "Please," he said. "Sell these to me."

"Hoon is going to catch and kill you. If your condition doesn't do so first."

"I know. Now will you sell me what I need?"

"Sanguine Rose with angel's tears and Blue Moon's Mourning added. A measure of wiros flower and Bloody Sun." She read it aloud, continuing down the list and studying his face. "You know what you're asking for? The sa'necari ancients used Sanguine Rose to keep them alive when all else was failing. This is a dark arcane

you're asking for. Most of the other ingredients are also."

"I know. Can you get them for me?"

Amberlin remained silent for a long time. Then she nodded. "I have them. And what are you going to do with that much Pollendine? Six ounces of the most concentrated form? That's enough to kill yourself with."

Desperation laid hold of Josiah's heart. "Break the Pollendine up into three bottles."

"What are you going to do with it?" Amberlin repeated, her eyes narrowing again.

"Oh, gods ... don't ask. I'm—" Josiah sucked in a deep breath, struggling to keep his voice from breaking. "I'm unclean... Hoon."

Amberlin's face softened as she saw him sway. She caught his arm, helping him to a chair. "I'm sorry. Does anyone else know?"

"Yes. They will not let me rise."

Amberlin's eyes closed briefly as she nodded. "Just sit here while I fill your order. One more thing, if we're going to continue doing business, I want something from you."

"Name it and you have it."

"I'm glad you're so agreeable. I will consider you bound by your word." Amberlin dug around in one of the cabinets and came up with a small box. She set it on the counter and lifted the lid off. Inside were twenty crystals such as the Hadjysi healers used to preserve tissue samples from victims of questionable deaths. "I want your seed in each of them. Don't come back to my shop without it."

Josiah left Amberlin's shop with the bottles carefully packed in a small box and the box tucked into his satchel. He kept his deep hood around his face, hoping no one would recognize him. He turned down Dock Street, heading for Laurelyanne's when the feather touch of a mind slid into his.

<Come to me, Josiah. >

"No. Please, no," Josiah murmured. His heart raced with terror.

<Come to me! > Hoon demanded.

Josiah staggered, nearly falling. He caught the edge of a tie up rail beside a water trough filled with slowly melting snow. His will crumpled. Then he straightened and started walking, turning down an alley. Three blocks further he reached the back door of the house and entered. Hoon sat upon an elegant couch with three other

Lemyari.

Hoon brandished his hand before Josiah's face as the mage knelt obediently on the carpet. Venom beaded on Hoon's nails. "Resist me and I'll stick you. I assure you, Josiah, it is an ugly way to die."

Josiah bowed his head, closing his eyes. All the strength left him as he faded into Josh. Tears ran down his face as they tore the clothes from him. Hoon dragged him across a table and the four Lemyari took turns with him, laughing while they hurt him. They ripped him inside with their roughness, making his ass bleed. Then they fed, each taking a limb while Hoon sank his fangs savagely into Josh's neck. A sob and a half-strangled scream emerged from Josh's throat. Blackness claimed him.

* * *

"I cannot find Josiah," Laurelyanne told Tagalong. The mage led her friend out the back door, heading for Hanni's wagon. They roused Hanni, who was sleeping late, and the three of them went around the house and then the yard. Laurelyanne invoked the earth. Sparrows and crows responded, leading them to an alley on Duckworth Street near the rear of the Blue Bull.

Hanni moved to the front of them. "Point me in tha direction. But let me lead." He loosened his hammer in his belt, pulling it a few inches. "If we cross trouble, I'd be tha best ta handle it. Ya lassies jest stay back."

Laurelyanne nodded. She could feel her age whenever she used her magic; so she was grateful to have Hanni's strength and youth between her and the darkness. Especially since she did not want Tagalong at risk either, considering the defiant fragility of the young dwarf woman since her head injury of nearly a year past – it would not take much of a blow to kill her if it struck right.

The slushy ground of the alley made every step a hazard and they traveled slowly. Behind the Blue Bull a wealth of wagon tracks had left brown dirty furrows in the melting snow, evidence of pick-ups and deliveries. They walked past a stack of barrels lining the back wall of the tavern. In the shadows thrown by the building and the barrels in the mid-morning sun, Hanni spotted something laying against the wall and waved the two women back.

Hanni knelt, heedless of getting his pants soaked, reaching out for what he saw and said softly, "I've found him."

Laurelyanne's heart skipped a beat and then seemed to rise into her constricting throat. "Is he – is – he alive?"

"I cannae tell yet."

Laurelyanne and Tagalong came closer, watching Hanni turn Josiah over.

"Looks like they dumped him here," Hanni said.

"Damned, fucking, cockwhore shits," Tagalong cursed, reaching hard for the worst things to say she could think of.

"Aye, they're thaht." Hanni touched the seat of Josiah's pants, indicating the blood. Then he felt deeper with his Reader's gift, which, while attuned primarily to mage-energies, was still enough to detect life. "He's alive. Barely."

As Hanni lifted Josiah, Tagalong saw the satchel laying beneath him and picked it up. "They'll take his life, but not his things," she muttered.

Laurelyanne found that a painful irony.

* * *

Hoon took Josiah several times from under the Azure Circle's – as they had begun to call themselves – noses at different times of the day and night, leaving him to be found in different places, making them hunt for him, making them wonder each time if they would find him dead. Hoon had added rape into the mix, making certain that Josiah's finders would be able to read the evidence of it, systematically piling humiliation upon humiliation. They had come to care for him, watching him fight so hard. What he tried desperately not to show them was the growing despair and depression eating at the core of him. The three who knew him best, Tagalong, Laurelyanne, and Hanni could see it, although they said nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ZYNE'S DEFEAT

The first day of the New Year dawned bright and clear. The merchants had erected booths on the common the night before. Benches, risers and other equipment for the New Year's games rose on the far side of the huge green. A special spot had been set aside for Skelly to watch. Skelly had even managed to get an event for himself with the children. The children, well padded and armored, would climb aboard and hold on while he raced around trying to shake them off. It was timed and when the gong was struck at the end all children still aboard got prizes for dragon riding. The adult tournaments started after the children's with boxing, wrestling, dueling with blunted weapons, jousting and other events. Aeijys and Tamlestari spent most of the day watching and giving out prizes. Aeijys' only serious disappointment had been that Tagalong still refused to have anything to do with her over Josiah. All the dark times past went forgotten for the day. At full dark, some mages would be putting on shows and fireworks.

Hoon had agreed that all the distractions made it the perfect day for Zyne to run off with Josiah. She walked slowly through the crowds watching the fireworks. No one spoke to her, although she knew nearly all of them. She would never feel good about being snubbed. The Blue Bull was the only tavern that would still serve her. But that was coming to an end. She would be going home soon. Hoon had promised to let her go. She felt tired and worn. Only part came from Hoon's feeding on her. Part of it was that people treated her with chill disdain like a plague-carrier. She had not realized until too late how good it had been to be part of the people here, the way they talked and listened, the way they laughed and shared little, trivial secrets; the camaraderie; the caring. It was just as well that she was finally leaving. She should have left months ago, when she first got the child, before Hoon could bind her. She should have kept the ancient ways; killed Josiah and returned to her people. Then no one would have been the wiser. She ached inside with loneliness. Her grand plans and great ambitions all tasted of dust now. She was Hoon's pawn in a game she no longer understood. Her hand moved to stroke her swollen belly. This was the child that would give her people greatness.

She reached her cottage and pulled out the bags in which she had stowed her belongings. Her eyes searched the now empty cottage. The straw mattresses on the bed were bare. Her quilts were rolled up, tied, and thrown in the boat she had hidden beneath a rocky outcropping. She carried the bags to the boat, moving slowly in the moonlight. A loud crack and whoosh made her glance up and she saw the sparkling fireworks explode above the ocean in glowing patterns of flowers and animals. It was beautiful. Her people did not have such things. Zyne settled the bags in the bow of the little craft. She intended to swim and pull it with Josiah and her things aboard. She had fashioned a suitable leather and rope harness, fastening it to the prow. It would be a simple task. She finished and hid the boat again. Then she walked back to her cottage.

The tritons, not knowing then what she was, had helped her build the cottage. She had never expected that. She had caught fish and fed all her helpers, cooking it over an open fire on the beach with herbs and seasonings that several landsmyn, who already had their houses up, had brought to welcome her. It had been pleasant. She went in and built up the fire. She had kept out just what she needed to summon Josiah from Laurelyanne's home. The earth-mage had shielded her home, but did not understand the way a seiryn's songs and magic worked so she could not ward against them. What a futile thing, warding for what you know when the enemy is something you don't know. Zyne threw incense in the fire. The fragrant smoke lifted her spirits and the weariness departed. She wrote his name on a cedar chip, threw it into the fire, and began to sing.

Hoon listened to Zyne's song. What a clear sweet voice she had and so much power. With her seiryn's gifts she would make a very powerful Lemyari. Tonight she would die and in three days she would rise. But for the need to kill the child outright – because of the magics involved – he would have taken her directly from life into undeath. She would give him Aeijys Rowan and sing for him for eternity. He would

have both of them. Abelard would die and there would be no more Abelards. How sweet this night would prove. He moved back into the shadows of a rocky overhang to wait for Zyne.

* * *

When the boys tired, falling asleep on their fathers' shoulders, Skree and Taun left the festivities to take them home. They got them into their sleeping robes with a minimum of disruption, tucked them in, and went downstairs. Taun headed for the kitchen to throw a small meal together and Skree moved to the couch to mull over the things he had seen at his first landsmyns' New Year's festival. He had been surprised at the numbers of his people who actually participated in the events. A triton took the gold in wrestling. A Valdren claimed the prize for archery. Except for those the Sharanis swept the events.

A frantic knocking tore Skree from his thoughts. He found Kanaloë on his doorstep. Skree would have refused to let her in, but for the desperate look in her eyes.

"What is wrong?" Skree asked, standing aside for her to pass. She hesitated and he gestured emphatically. So she went to the sitting room and sat, wringing her hands.

"You've got to stop Zyne," her voice was hushed and strained.

"From what?" Skree asked suspiciously.

"From running away with Josiah."

Skree shrugged, his voice emotionless as he said, "She has been warned not to do that. The prince will kill Josiah and Zyne both."

Kanaloë's response was to babble, her words rushing forth in near panic. "That won't stop them. I didn't want to tell you. We've lived in peace for so long. I've enjoyed teaching the children. I know how you feel about our kind after what we did to your grandfather—"

"Explain this to me," Skree ordered, suspicion growing in his tone.

"We're not tritons. We're seiryn." Then she poured the whole story out.

Skree's expression turned grim. "If the vampires intervene, I'll need to rouse the keep and all of our people. We can't let her take Josiah."

"There isn't time. She has already begun her song."

"Can't you out sing her? Buy me time?"

"I'll try. For the sake of my people and yours. I'll try." Kanaloë jumped to her feet and ran.

* * *

"You can't do this!" Kanaloë protested.

"I can and I will," Zyne replied, returning to her song, throwing the last of her incense into the fire.

Josiah emerged from the shadows into the middle of the path, approaching the cottage. He was dull eyed and haggard, his stride unsteady. He seemed scarcely aware of what he was doing there. Kanaloë placed herself in his path. She sang loudly, challenging Zyne for control of Josiah and determined to wake the entire triton enclave.

Josiah hesitated, glancing from Kanaloë to the cottage door. Zyne slammed the door open and sang. Josiah turned toward her. Kanaloë's voice turned a delicate trilled crescendo. Josiah reached out to her. Zyne drew a blade and lunged, shoving it into her grandmother's heart with a savage twist that stilled it. Kanaloë crumpled. Zyne followed her down and turned the blade again for good measure. She sheathed the blade and bound his hands together with rope, being careful not to disturb the spellcords or the runes, and then dragged him toward the water.

* * *

Skree found Omer, who had returned to the keep, and was changing from his dress clothes. "Zyne is running away with Josiah."

"The Prince wants this stopped." Omer buckled his blades on. "They'll just execute him later. I'll get the myn mounted."

"Females only. Zyne is a seiryn."

"The Prince deployed the Ha'taren Guard this morning. For what, I don't know... I – okay. I'll see how many Sharani and others I have and send them in your direction."

"Don't lead them yourself."

"I'm not a sailor, but I know what a seiryn is."

Skree turned toward the green, regretting that he had not gone in that direction to start with. It made sense that Aeijys and Tamlestari would still be out there. After all it was a festival. It would go on until midnight. The noise was intense. Music, singing, and dancing. The parade from the common had begun. Ahead of him the battle between the unicorn and the dragon was played out in endless dancing repetitions

through the streets – a metaphor for the struggle between Shaurone and Waejontor. It took seven people, concealed inside, to operate the gaudy puppet of the dragon and three the less complex unicorn. Skree pushed along the edges, watching for a side street he could turn into. There were no dead ends in Rowanhart, but not everything came out where he wanted it to.

* * *

A small boy came to Tamlestari. By his large, waif-like black eyes and patched-kneed pants, he looked as if he might have come to beg a copper from the prince as he tugged her sleeve. She stooped to put a coin in his hand. He whispered quickly in her ear, "Birdie says it's happening. Tip of the Shadow." Then he put the coin in his pocket and scampered.

Tamlestari was no fool and had been expecting this all day. She had held back as much of the Ha'taren Guard as she could on a holiday, turning them loose in quarters with special passes for those who were participating in the athletic events. "Get to the mounts," she turned to one of the officers accompanying them. "Alert the others. Tip of the Shadow."

"What's going on?" Aejs asked.

"Zyne's taking Josiah."

The crowds were still thick: mostly shoppers at the festival booths, families with older children watching the last of the fireworks; people looking to hoist a final pint of cheer for New Year's Day. The parade was setting out from the green. It was too congested for Aejs to spread her wings and fly.

"Majesty," Maranya touched her arm. "Stay with us. Zyne is leagued with Hoon. This must be an trap set for you."

Aejs looked from Maranya to Tamlestari to Bryngaryn. "You did not tell me."

"Aejs," Bryngaryn said. "You have not been clear about Josiah for months. We wanted to protect you."

That stung, but she never faulted anyone for simple honesty. "Let's get over there."

"Bryngaryn," Tamlestari ordered. "Get Taun and the boys into the dragon barn with Skelly just in case."

"On it." Bryngaryn jogged through the crowds.

Aejs understood why Tamlestari had insisted they bring their mounts when she had simply wanted to walk to the festival from the keep. It was for this. They mounted, fighting crowds and working their way through the side streets whenever possible;

now slowly; now swiftly; but always steadily. They came on Skree when they neared the dockside of Rowanhart, still far from the tip of the rainshadow.

"Zyne's taken Josiah," Skree told them. "She's seiryn."

Aejys had heard the old sailors' tales and, though she knew a seiryn's song should never have been strong enough to take Josiah Abelard, it broke something loose. She rose in the stirrups, spread her wings, and took flight before anyone could stop her. Her pride would never let her take him back, but if there were even the smallest possibility that he did not go willingly, then she would not see him taken. Pyros screamed protests and bolted after her, shouldering his way through the crowds.

"Aejys," Tamlestari shouted. "Don't get too far ahead of us!"

"Majesty!" Maranya bolted ahead of the others, struggling vainly to keep pace with her king, certain that she flew into an ambush. People scattered from her path as she charged screaming down at them to get out of her way, forcing through. The others fell behind, unable to keep up.

Aejys outdistanced the racing soldiers, winged down, and landed, running toward Zyne. Her anger burned bright as her thoughts turned to other aspects of all that had happened over the past months. Zyne had stolen what was hers and now thought to run off with him. Zyne and Josiah had humiliated her. Josiah did not look like a willing participant, thrown over her shoulder that way and it cut through Aejys with a host of doubts. Could Josiah have been influenced or even held all these months by seiryn magic? Was there any way to know for certain? "Release him."

Josiah stared dully at Aejys, his mind befuddled by Zyne's magic. He shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to think. Zyne laughed. She hefted Josiah more securely across her shoulders, running down the strand toward a small boat.

Aejys ran after her. A heavy weight hit her from behind. She staggered, drawing her sword. Claws closed on her shoulders, tearing at her. Ambush! It was as Maranya had warned her. "Hell Shitting Damnation!" Aejys cursed through gritted teeth as she threw them off, whirled, and beheaded the creature. Another rose from the sand beneath her feet, sinking claws into her flesh. She felt the burn of venom, jerked away, and slashed. The Lemyari rolled to the side and danced away from her.

"How much punishment can you take?" Hoon stepped from the shadows snarling, his lips drawn back from his teeth and his nose wrinkling. "What does it take to bring you down, bitch?"

Vampires swarmed from the sands, clawing and biting. The bright sword sang angrily, chopping and slashing as fast as they emerged. Aejys danced across the sands and rocks, too crowded by their sheer numbers to take flight and rise beyond their reach. Another pounced upon her back. Aejys hooked her fingers in his nose, ripping him loose and throwing him across the beach into the water. "More than you

can mete out."

She lunged at Hoon. He darted aside, drawing a long blade. Sand stirred beneath her feet. No matter where she moved there were vampires rising around her like soldier ants from a mound. A small, slender female rose up behind her. Ten long, venomous nails shoved into the king's body. Two more grabbed her, pulling her down. Another caught her sword arm, preventing her from striking. They held her long enough for the Lemyari to get the full load into her. A second one stuck her with all ten nails. More creatures piled onto her to be certain she did not get free too soon. She stiffened, and then collapsed on her face, rolling onto her side as they released her, fighting to shake it off. A third stood over her, watching, ready to stick her if she moved; surely she would not; surely she must be dying; they had gotten enough venom into her to kill a hundred myn. Hoon knelt, caught her hair, and twisted her head around to expose her throat. "You are mine."

"No!" Josiah began to struggle, for the sight of Aeijys fallen had broken Zyne's hold on his mind. His bound wrists came up and his fingers closed on the seiryne's throat. They went down in the sand together, kicking and gouging, though Josiah was at a distinct disadvantage because he did not wish to harm the child, while Zyne had no such compunctions.

Hoon's fangs broke the skin on Aeijys' throat. "No." She struggled against the darkness closing around her awareness, summoned Spiritdancer to her hand, and smashed the pommel in Hoon's face with as much of her fading strength as she could manage. The touch of the sacred hilt burned Hoon's face and he released her, shrieking hate.

Aeijys struggled to her knees and as she did her other hand opened, revealing the brand of Kalirion. Hoon's face darkened. She could not be turned. If he could not possess her, then he would take her life instead. "Kill her! Kill her."

More nails plunged into her from all directions, sending their venom home. She turned her thoughts to her god and Kalirion's brand kindled to brightness in her hand, fighting the venom as if by the touch of the god himself. Aeijys shoved past her pain and weakness with an act of will worthy of her legends. She was the paladin of two gods; the Lion of Rowanhart; yuwenghau of the lineage of Willodarus. "I will conquer!"

She beat them with her wings, kicked, and twisted, striking with her sword. She severed heads and ruptured hearts. Lemyari perished. Through it all Hoon stayed out of her reach, cursing as he realized that, although the venom slowed her down, it could not stop her.

"Retreat!" Hoon screamed and fled.

* * *

Maranya's wynderjyn reached the end of the street at the same time as Pyros. Boulders, rocks, and stony outcroppings littered the strand in a broad swath before it gave way to a narrow ribbon of unbroken gold. It would be too easy for her mount to break a leg in that maze of sand and rock. Maranya dismounted, giving Tovari's shoulder a pat and sent him back with a thought through their link. Pyros plunged onto the beach, willing to risk it. Maranya saw Aejs fighting ahead of her and adrenaline fired her blood with a rush of rage. She had been right, it was an ambush. The king fought well, but she would surely fall if help did not come soon. Maranya drew the swords at her shoulders. She fought in the two-sword style of her Aluintrei ma'aramlasah's people, which required great upper body strength – and she had it in full measure in her broad shoulders and heavy arms, which did nothing to detract from her speed: in all she was an excellent example of Ishla's genetic tinkering.

The King's Shield hit the vampires silently and without warning, arriving unlooked for and unexpected. The blades whirled in deadly patterns, precisely coordinated. One always returning to guard as the other struck or both striking together and then beginning the pattern again. Outwardly the patterns changed as the situations demanded, but the dynamic remained unchanging. Had they come at her with weapons other than their bodies, her tactics would have been different. She danced from rock to rock, not giving the creatures a wide space from which to swarm up around her as they were doing with her liege. Maranya moved in the dance of the sword with a sure grace, speed, and power, pure action and reflex, without thought or planning as the deeper mind of her training acted faster than her surface comprehension. She fought like one possessed, desperate to reach her king. Then she saw Aejs dragged to the sand, saw her lying still against the gold, and loosed a cry of rage and grief.

* * *

A vampire chased along the beach, bending over the struggling Josiah and Zyne. "Good-bye, Abelard," he said, stabbing two nails into the artery in Josiah's arm, holding onto it tightly until the last of the venom had entered. Josiah stiffened and then fell back to lie unmoving on the sand. Zyne screamed. The vampire caught Zyne's arm, spinning her around. His claws shot out to rip her stomach open.

"The master wants you, but not the child."

Zyne blocked his thrust, crossing her forearms in front of her belly. The claws tore a long strip of flesh loose. She screamed again, this time in anger. Her arms came apart in a twisting grab before the vampire could draw back to strike again. She bent him over by the arm and a foot to his back, then wrenched the arm from the socket and spun it far into the waves.

The vampire shrieked and spun, backing away from her.

"Did you think I was a weakling landswoman?" Zyne snarled.

Tamlestari and her soldiers reached the beach. At Tamlestari's nod, the Ha'taren Guard spread into a skirmish line, following her through the remains of dozens of butchered vampires that had fallen before the onslaught of the king and the King's Shield. When they neared the stretch where the struggle still raged, Tamlestari pulled the solar disk, Quadenlas, from beneath her shirt.

"Die, hell-spawn!" she shouted. Quadenlas filled the night with the dancing colors of flame. The vampires shrieked and fled. The ones closest to Tamlestari perished, others staggered blinded into the water. Zyne plunged into the waves, pursued by tritons and neriens.

Aejys sank to her knees, giving in at last to the pain and exhaustion. Maranya, having fought like one possessed, just to reach the king in time, caught her as she fell. She cradled Aejys, her face a tight-lipped mask through which her eyes blazed fiercely. "How ... can ... I..." she gritted out between clenched teeth, "protect you ... when you will not listen to me?"

Aejys' first instinct was to make a small, derisive quip. It died unsaid. In that merest flash of an instant it seemed as if she had known Maranya all her life. Yet she knew she had not. She had never met Maranya before Norendel; Maranya had been reared with her 'lasah's people in Aluintrei and never visited Soren in Rowanslea that Aejys knew of. "Won't ... do it ... again ... promise," Aejys gasped, struggling for each breath. Dozens of tiny punctures throbbed and burned throughout her body. The venom could not kill her, but it would give her many days, possibly weeks, of misery. She would deal with it. And then she would go after Hoon ... and Mephistis...

Maranya felt an inexplicable urge to kiss her and mastered it. Then she was pushed aside as Skree lifted Aejys in his arms. Tamlestari stood beside him.

"I told you not to get too far ahead," Tamlestari chided, stroking Aejys' face, as she walked beside Skree who bore her off the field. Maranya walked six paces behind them, her face unreadable, watching for any further threats to her king. The Ha'taren Guard formed up behind them. The vampires had fled, leaving behind those too badly crippled to escape. The Orphan-Brigade already moved along the strand dispatching these and taking heads in a disciplined manner.

"I do not understand how even a seiryn, wicked as they are, could ally with vampires," Skree's voice was cold, flat. "She betrayed my sons."

"A pact among devils. The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Tamlestari told him. "I don't know what the limits are to Aejys' resistance are, but I'd say she's close to reaching them. We need to get her back."

"I'm in no danger," Aejys said, opening her eyes to gaze fondly at Tamlestari. "So stop talking about me and let me rest." Then she remembered the spellcord on Josiah's hands. "Skree, Could she have ... have forced him ... to her bed?"

"Perhaps in the end he did not intend to run away with her. But force him to her bed? No, Aejs. His shields are too strong. He went willingly. I am sorry."

"Someone should go back for him."

"Let him get loose on his own, damn it!" Skree cursed. "I will not help him! My mate nearly died because of his hell-spawned leman!"

Aejys closed her eyes and quit fighting the exhaustion, sliding into a welcome oblivion.

Tamlestari and Skree walked the rest of the way to the keep in silence. They saw to Aejs' needs and summoned Posidea, while getting her settled in bed and left Maranya to guard her. Tamlestari and Skree returned to the little parlor.

"Do you think Josiah knew what she was when they became involved?" Tamlestari asked Skree.

"No. Josiah is not a foolish mon."

"Is there absolutely no possibility that she could have spelled him into her bed?" Tamlestari repeated Aejs' earlier question, hoping for her sake that this might be true, that Josiah might not have willingly betrayed her na'halaef.

Skree shook his head tiredly. "I have seen the kinds of natural shields Josiah possesses – last spring when I worked with him, trying to mend the shaukras – they are nothing short of formidable. Any other male mage, I would say 'yes'. But Josiah? No. She could never have taken him by magic. Had he been an adult, rather than a child at the time, Dinger would never have been able to burn the magic out of him."

"Zyne wanted Josiah, Hoon still wants Aejs, and Mephistis wants the children."

"I understand that. Zyne became their spy in our midst."

"I lost my temper. I told Kanaloë and Zyne both that I would rather see Josiah dead than give him up. Then they had to do something. So I set a watch on them."

"The children?"

"Yes."

"It is fortunate that you did. Kanaloë's generation fought a war with my ancestors. Their songs could not affect our women and our women defeated them, forcing them to the truce-pact."

"I want Zyne caught. That child she carries in an Abelard. If the Abelard lineage and

its powers could become merged with the blood of the surviving seiryns, we could all be in trouble within a few generations. I doubt even the fireborn could stop them."

"I will do what I can," Skree said, adding, "Kanaloë tried to stop her. I would like to give her a proper burial."

Tamlestari nodded. "That is fit."

* * *

Laurelyanne went to the keep, searching for Josiah. She had already spoken to the tritons. Omer saw her and came over. "As I understand it," he told her. "He's probably still wandering the beach. What does it matter? They'll probably execute him anyway. He's a traitor"

"She was seiryn. She spelled him. He did not deliberately betray Aejys. Someone should have helped him."

"He's the mage-master. If he did not want to be seduced by a seiryn, he would not have been. Nothing could hold him unless he wanted to be held."

Laurelyanne turned on her heel and stalked out. Omer was only saying what everyone else said. No one was willing to believe that a seiryn could take Josiah Abelard against his will. So therefore he must have gone willingly into her bed and spells. She headed for the beach to look for him. Most of their small group was still at the altar trying to call Dynarien, but she and a few others had set out to try and find Josiah in case he had been injured.

* * *

Some how in all the confusion – the rescue of Aejys; the fight with the vampires; the pursuit of the escaping Zyne – they all missed Josiah. Perhaps they did not care anymore. Certainly he did not deserve for them to care. He had betrayed Aejys. Water eddied around him, tugged at him. Sand gritted his eyes closed. It got into his mouth. He made no effort to spit it out. He felt very cold. His body twisted, jerked, and went still again. He could see the gulls turning and diving, skimming the surface of the water in his narrowing vision.

"There's another body on the beach," a young boy called. He was a Vorgeni orphan, newly come to the ranks of the Brigade. "Shall I stick him, Birdie?"

"If it's a vampire, yes." Birdie followed the boy with her staff ready. Quadenlas had blinded and stunned as many vampires as it had destroyed. The Orphan-Brigade knew everything that happened in Rowanhart. They had followed Tamlestari without her knowledge and, when the fight ended, groups of children ages ten to thirteen went happily about staking the crippled vampires and cutting their heads off. Birdie intended to pike the skulls round the temple-orphanage as a warning to anything or

anyone who might consider hurting the children.

The boy raised his spear. Josiah's head shifted and Birdie saw his face. "No!" Then she raced toward them.

The boy hesitated. Birdie reached him and dropped to her knees. "Josiah. Josiah!"

Josiah's lips moved, but no sound came out. Another convulsion took him.

"The prince-consort?"

"Yes."

"Why'd they leave him?"

"I don't know. Maybe because this is his entire fault. Fetch the others. We've got to get him to the temple." *I can't leave him here. I owe him for Jysy. I owe for the time he saved Mathryn. I owe him. I pay my debts. And he must be the world's greatest pariah. Dynanna help me.*

* * *

Laurelyanne found the beach awash in dead vampires, most of them headless. It chilled her. She worried that one of them might not have been a vampire, might have been Josiah taken by mistake. She touched each and every one of them, checking to determine what they had been with her mage senses. It sickened her. Had they lain on soil other than ocean-washed sand, she would have called on the earth to take them in a spell of cleansing. She was a mage of green growing things, of bright life and joyous places. She was exhausted when she finished. Eventually someone would think to send the guard to clean it up, if the waves did not do it first, dragging their remains out to sea.

She returned home and stepped into the sitting room to the sound of the chanting. Her friends had not faltered, but there was an almost palpable feeling of distress and failing hope. They had tried to help him, to help themselves, and so far the yuwenghau had not answered. Someone must have spilled the rose oil, because Laurelyanne did not remember its being this strong before. She saw someone standing by the window, holding Osbert, and examining the little sleeping golem. If they kept picking him up, sooner or later someone would drop him and break him.

"Would you please put Osbert down? Carefully," she hissed, very softly, not wanting to interrupt the chanting and then gasped. "Lord Dynarien!"

The old mage walked quickly across the room, stepping around startled petitioners, to fall to her knees at his feet in a display of need and reverence she had never done before. It embarrassed both of them, coming as it did from a sudden outpouring of desperation. "Dynarien," she said, her voice softer. Then she remembered herself

enough to turn to the others and say, "He has come!"

"Just plain Dynarien will do fine. Titles make me uncomfortable," he said. No one had ever built an altar to him before and summoned him in this fashion – other than the catkin. Altars and stuff were for his sister, God of Cussedness and Perversity. He felt a little awed and awkward. He could have refused to answer, but their need and desperation had been impossible to ignore.

The older, more experienced folk, held the younger ones back from simply rushing Dynarien and trying to touch him. The mages all knew how to behave. It was the younger Hadjysi who had never seen a yuwenghau before and were too excited for words that tried hardest to reach him. The older ones would be spending many hours over the next few days teaching them etiquette. What they would not need to teach them was discretion – that was bred into Hadjysi from birth. They tended to not even tell people what their religion was, going to worship services, in those places where they had temples, with their faces covered: except in Creeya. Not all did. But many.

"Dynarien," Laurelyanne called his attention back.

Dynarien shook his head, frowning. "We're friends. You don't have to get on your knees to me." He knelt, putting his hands on her thin shoulders.

"Josiah. He could be dead or dying. You must find him."

Dynarien frown turned into one of consternation and anger. "I'll find him."

* * *

When Dynarien walked into the yard the first thing he noticed was Birdie huddled all alone under the big tree in front of the house with her knees drawn up and her chin propped on them. Her troubled expression made her look like a very small child. There seemed to be nothing left of the brash street girl he had gotten a child on two years ago.

"Birdie? What's wrong?" Dynarien dropped down on his haunches, looking into her face, trying to discern what had happened.

She shook her head at him.

"You know where Josiah is?"

She jerked her head toward the backyard. "In the barn. He may have finished dying by now."

Dynarien saw then she had tears streaking her face. "Why?"

"They won't let me help him. Won't let me near the altar to call Dynanna. I hate him. But I owe him. He saved Jysy. They won't let me do the right thing. Ganged up on me. Including Lizard. Didn't know Posidea had banned me until I tried to get some antidote. Get the asshole out of here."

"Come on, Birdie. Let me tell you about the things I've seen in Creeya and then I dare you to tell me you still hate him."

Dynarien walked to the barn and found Josiah, his eyes hardening at the sealed spellcords on his wrists. He immediately cast shared life to pass his own immunities to the suffering mage and strengthen him, then lifted him in his arms.

"Dynarien," Josiah's awareness flared for a moment. "Hoon..." He turned his head, showing the scars along his neck. "I'm unclean." Then he slid back into darkness.

Dynarien cursed. "I should have come sooner!"

He carried him back to Laurelyanne's; covering Josiah's face with a corner of the blanket to avoid drawing angry stares from the people they passed who would have recognized him. Birdie went with them.

* * *

Laurelyanne felt spent as she let Dynarien into the house with Josiah and they got him upstairs. She had told Dynarien nothing before sending him out to search. The situation had been too desperate by then. Most of the Hadjysi, except for Hinkty Molly, had left by the time he returned. Tagalong and Hanni, Miccan and Dana, still waited for him in the sitting room. The other mages had gone home, promising to return later in shifts. They were certain that there would still be matters to resolve.

"I'll need to bring my na'halaef out for a few days," Dynarien told Laurelyanne. "To help with him. That means the babies also. We have three of them. We'll need a place to stay. Can you suggest one?"

"Well, right here! I've got the room. I don't know why I built it so big – call it an old woman's wishful intuition."

* * *

Josiah balled up under the brown and green comforter. Sunlight played through the windows and set a glow around Dynarien's bright hair as he sat on the edge of the bed, reaching for the mage. Shame, guilt, and terror advanced and retreated through Josiah's face as he burrowed there, sweating and pale on the cool spring morning. Edouina sat on the other side of the bed, having tried twice without success to get Josiah to allow her to touch him.

So far as anyone could discover, Hoon was well and truly gone. Josiah's need to

fight and hold himself together seemed to have left with the vampire: whether that was something the vampire had done or simply the let down in the wake of the ambush, no one could say. But the effect on Josiah was evident to all.

"Go away," Josiah told them, in a quiet, listless manner. "I don't want help. I want to die. I wish you had not saved me... I wish Birdie had left me on the beach." He was tired of fighting it, of stretching it out. What did it matter whether he died now or weeks from now. His condition was as bad as it had been in Norendel when Laurelyanne had started giving him pollonae. No healer in their right mind would sell him an unending supply of Pollendine, the highly refined form of pollonae, but he could get it on the black market. He could buy it from Amberlin at the Manticore Bones mage shop. He could keep himself going on Pollendine or he could take enough of it to end it painlessly. Aejs would be giving him his next stipend soon. He could replenish his supply. So far Amberlin had not refused to sell him anything that he requested, no matter how arcane, dark, and dangerous the substances were.

* * *

Edouina shook her head when Dynarien lifted his eyes to hers. "If he refuses to let me touch him, there is nothing I can do."

Without skin-to-skin contact she could not invoke the bi-kyndi and take him through the pleasure centers long enough to ease him. The depression, the sways, triggers and other mess – it was all too deep to be handled safely unless she could first sooth him. Otherwise the process could stop his heart. She regarded the way Josiah clutched at the covers in a twisted ball of misery. He would not let either of them get a hand on him without violence. She rose from the bed and walked out. Dynarien followed her downstairs.

Dynarien sighed. "I screwed up his life. I should have kept an eye on him growing up. He's got an incredible reputation since word got out that he was Josiah Abelard. Everyone thinks him too strong for a seiryn to take and bend. They give lip service to the fact that the magic is damaged in its channels and then leave it out of their equations. Even Aejs; and she should know better."

Edouina nodded. "Reputations cut both ways. There's no Guild here. Guild's been bled white. My cousin's dead. Guild and Molly both want me to take over. Swore I wouldn't, but I'm tempted. How would you feel about living in Rowanhart?"

"Why are you tempted?" Dynarien asked curiously.

Edouina walked through the hallway, her attention turned inward, without answering. They found Hanni and Hinky Molly waiting in the sitting room, playing with the babies. Edouina felt smacked in the forehead by the hopeful gazes they lifted in her direction when she and Dynarien entered. *How can I say no to them?*

A sigh came out of Edouina in a long resigned whoosh. *"Because I'm looking at all*

this mess, especially Josiah and it makes me angry. One of my specialties is cleaning up messes," she said in night-elf, adding in common, "Honey, I'm a cleaning woman." she grinned at the joke, drawing one of her blades, and pretending it was a broom.

Hanni and Hinky Molly goggled a moment and then laughed. Edouina thought that was a nice sound. She hadn't laughed much since Talons' death.

"Could we build a castle on the mountain over there?" Dynarien asked, pointing to the bluffs that formed the south talon, a glowing eagerness rising in his voice.

"Sounds fun."

"Any luck?" Hanni asked as Edouina sheathed her sword and they settled onto the couch together.

Edouina leaned back into Dynarien's arms, her head on his chest, feeling the sheltering strength of him. "None, Hanni. However, Molly, you've got your Guild. I'll take the position. But I'll need a lot of cooperation and I'll expect you to sell me the gaffer's interest in your place."

Hinky Molly positively glowed. "Done! He'd have wanted that anyway. You're family."

"In fact, honey," she drawled, smugly. "I'll take all the gaffer's holdings, including Bright Eyes. I don't think the Guild's in any position to refuse. Furthermore, Molly, if this creature comes calling again, she'll find this Guildsmon a whole lot tougher than the last one. This is not to leave this room, but when Dynarien and I tied the knot, the Nine sent wedding presents. You understand the implications?" A tiny sadness, that quickly vanished, passed through, a wishing that Talons had been alive to make it a triad. They had pledged her their triad the night before she died.

"You've become yuwenghau," Hinky Molly breathed.

"We understand each other." Edouina nestled deeper into Dynarien's arms. "I think I will have to ambush Josiah while he's asleep to put him under enough for Dynarien to deal with the sways and triggers. Hoon may have laid some coercions. We won't know until we get into his magic centers and his head. If it's as bad as it was with Bryndel, I'll have to keep him calmed or the process of getting him free could kill him – if any of it is based in fear. From the description of that panic in the Aejs' chambers it might be. Meanwhile I need to deal with Maranya and this idiot king of yours. I've never met Aejs, but Maranya and I have butted heads a few times when we were younger. I need to make certain she does not have Josiah hauled in and chopped before I can start to get things straightened out."

* * *

Aejys hurt and she was more than a little dizzy that first morning after the battle, but it was nothing she could not handle as she slid out of bed and dressed. Tamlestari hovered over her frowning. "Are you sure you want to be doing this? I mean..."

"I'm fine," Aejys replied crossly. "Did we lose anyone yesterday?"

"Kanaloë."

"Then the children no longer have a teacher. See what can be done about that, Stari."

Aejys buckled on Spiritdancer and stepped out into the parlor. Instantly everyone came to their feet in astonishment. "Breakfast!" She barked at Tomio, startling the squire out of her paralyzation of surprise. "Bryngaryn, I want Skree and Posidea here for luncheon. It is not an invitation, it is a summons. Maranya," Aejys pivoted sharply, pinning her shield-sister with a sharp glance. "I want to know what has been going on behind my back, especially concerning Josiah. All of it. The rest of you get the hell out of here." Then she sank into a chair at the table and let the sudden exhaustion and pain wash over her. "Maranya, get me a little something to make it better first. Not enough to knock me out. And my pipe."

"You know what this means?" Maranya said, setting smoking materials and a small glass of holadil beside the king's hands.

"What means, Maranya?"

"Your being up like this so fast."

"What?"

"It means that what hurt you so bad last time was not the venom. It was Josiah."

Aejys felt still more tired and suddenly cold and sad also. "I know."

"I want permission to arrest him. I think it should be very clear by now that he plotted with Hoon and Zyne to take your life."

"When I have had time to be certain he acted of his own free will..."

"Skree has already said Zyne could never have taken him."

"Stop! I want to talk to him again and to Posidea also."

Maranya shook her head and said nothing more.

* * *

Josiah thought about the last bottle of Pollendine stashed in the closet with the rest of his drugs, herbs, and potions. That Pollendine was the most potently concentrated type that existed. It would only require two ounces to kill him. Then there would be no more guilt. No more shame. No more pain.

He crawled from the bed onto the floor, swaying on his hands and knees, having to focus hard simply to drag himself forward. The bottom edge of the closet door was a dark line of shadow, blade straight. Bryndel had done it the hard way. He thought about how the current slang for suicide was 'bryndeling'. The carpet was rough on his palms and legs. His knee caught on the edge of his robes, tangling him for an instant. Josiah pulled the robe up to his waist, exposing himself to the cold air that slipped along his legs and across his damaged anus. The touch of the air was like the touch of Hoon's hands. Cold hands. A flashback of violation took him and he doubled up on the floor, riding it out with tears of anger mixed with anguish running down his face. He struggled to master himself until he was able to uncurl and creep forward again. Josiah reached the closet, walking his hands up the door to grasp the knob. His satchel and a small chest seemed to stare at him when he opened the closet door. His fingers fumbled with the buckle on the satchel, awkward in his desperation. He got it open and grasped the bottle of Pollendine, hugging it to his chest. No one had touched his things. Laurelyanne and the others trusted him.

Josiah heard people on the stairs. The possibility of them catching him with the precious bottle sent him back to bed faster than he left it. He shoved the bottle between the mattresses. Josiah crawled back under the blankets, fighting to calm his breathing. Peace. Peace, without dreams, without nightmares, without pain, lay between the mattresses, but only if they did not catch him.

* * *

Maranya had a drink at Hinkty Molly's. The place was oddly quiet, despite its being full. The ambush had ruined the last of the holiday cheer, leaving the populace sobered and reflective for days afterward in some places and angry in others. She spotted a new face and wandered over. The woman reminded her of Wilstryn and the gaffer. She wore two swords at her back in the Aluin style, same as Maranya, and sat with an incredibly handsome young male with red gold hair hanging down his back.

"Edouina?" Maranya asked, coming closer.

"Hello, Maranya," Edouina replied, her tone all ice. "We figured you'd show up here. I'm telling you to back off. Josiah is under Guild protection. Your king will be formally contacted tomorrow and this matter will be resolved."

"You're the new chieftain?" Maranya remembered Edouina as a little scrapper, two years younger, who was constantly getting into fights with her. In one of those misguided childhood interpretations of reputation, eight-year-old Edouina had

decided that Maranya was a bully and appointed herself the bully-basher – Maranya was not then and never had been a bully; nor had she initiated their childhood combats. Edouina could not whip Maranya, but she would drag herself up again each and every time Maranya knocked her down (Maranya never wanted to hit her in the first place), always with such iron determination that eventually Edouina would manage to land a solid punch on the older child's nose, bloodying it before collapsing. Although Maranya never said it, she had always been a little spooked by that – and eventually became convinced that Edouina was just plain crazy. She wondered whether Edouina had out grown that trait or gotten worse. The last time they had seen each other, Wilstryn, who had been the oldest, had dunked both of them in the horse trough to put an end to the combats.

"What do *you* think, honey?" Edouina drawled with just a tiny bit more warmth. She had not wanted to take an assignment with the Guild again, much less a position after watching the way Talons died. However, after seeing what happened to Josiah and listening to the Hadjysi, especially Hinkty Molly, Edouina had finally agreed. Her only stipulation had been that it be permanent and hereditary. That meant a whole lot more considering her new status than the Guild realized.

"Let me buy you a round while you explain the Guild's position on this?"

"Why not?" Edouina shrugged. "This is my ba'halaef, Darien. You should meet the children."

"Then you triaded..." Maranya saw the shadow pass over their faces and added, "I'm sorry. You must have loved her very much." Then she noted that Edouina had not cut her hair, which was the traditional sign of sorrow and wondered at that.

"We did. Her name was Talons Trollbane," Edouina gave the name deliberately to see if it provoked a reaction. "She was a friend to King Aejystrys."

With all that had happened, the name did not immediately register, then Maranya remembered the tapestry, the young woman who had been poisoned and chosen to die in battle instead. "She was very brave."

"I know." Edouina told Maranya about all the people she had seen with coercions in their heads and different centers in their bodies and neural nets in Creeya; of how the flesh on Bryndel's hands had cracked open and bled as they were taking out the coercions and his heart nearly stopped. They talked for hours. Edouina knew how Maranya's head worked. They argued, reasoned, and persuaded. In the end there was only one issue that could not be resolved: no matter the cause, Josiah had still, under the letter of his marital agreement committed flagrant adultery. Aejys could not take him back. Had she been anyone but the king, she could simply have beat hell out of him and reconciled. But not the king. He had become an embarrassment. A political liability. Maranya would quietly move to have all charges of treason dropped against him. She would order Posidea to remove the spellcords. In exchange they

would keep Josiah from all contact with Aeijys on pain of death. Maranya was still not completely convinced, but willing to grant him the benefit of the doubt.

Edouina blinked tiredly, leaning against Dynarien when they got all of that out of the way. "So, Maranya," she asked, changing the subject at last, "How long have you been King's Shield?"

Maranya did not so much as blink. "How long have you known?"

"Since before we got here. I have sources you can't imagine. Everyone knows you're Aeijys' shield-sister and a Captain of Ha'taren Guard. However, my sources say intelligence officer. So it's logical to suspect the Order's here."

"Since Sonden found out she was alive. It took time for the Order to get me in place and decide when to tell Aeijys that the Order was going to Rowanhart. Until now the Order has only existed in Shaurone. This has been a big step."

"The vampires are gone. So's Hoon. I'd get an army down to Timbren and burn it. There may be some lesser bloods still living there."

Maranya nodded, took another swallow of ale. "I'll tell the king. Thanks for the suggestion."

"Another thing you should know. Rumor has it we are on the edge of a godwar. And the king is a pivot of some kind."

Maranya closed her eyes briefly as a hard chill swept over her. "Godwar ... damn it!"

"What do you expect, Maranya? She is the sacred king."

* * *

Dynarien curled around Edouina as she took the babies to her breasts, watching them feed. Since they had three, Mariko had sent a wet nurse along to take the third and they alternated them. They did not speak, feeling worn by the long evening with Maranya. Many things had been resolved, yet others still remained to be resolved. They needed to approach Josiah again before morning. The babies fell asleep about the time that Midori reappeared, bowing politely before entering, to take them to the nursery.

"I guess it's time," Edouina said, closing her tunic and rising. They walked down the hall and entered his room. Josiah lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Edouina glanced at Dynarien, frowning, wondering if they were going to have another fight with him. Then she sat beside Josiah and touched his face. He was hot, fevered. He turned his face away, yet offered no other protest, almost as if he had become too weak.

"Hanni told me that Josiah had another attack this afternoon," Dynarien said. "I think that is why he's like this."

Edouina moved to the other side of the bed, climbed onto it and opened his shirt so she could put her hands on his stomach. "I hate to say it, but the attack may have been a good thing."

Josiah offered no resistance, not so much as a word. Edouina extended the bi-kyndi through him as a warm, languor in his pleasure centers. He could not find the strength to resist her. The seiryn damage to his body shone clear to her, for Edouina was saer'kali bi-kyndi – one of the secret masters of the Sharani sex magic.

"Go ahead, honey," she drawled in a deep, throatily sensual voice.

Dynarien put his hands on Josiah's temples, Reading, and reaching into his mind. "Deep sways and triggers – deepest I've seen – Hell, yes. Hoon was here. Coercions everywhere. This is ugly. Hoon's touch is heavy, harsh, and cruel. Worse than Galee's. Take him down the rest of the way, Edouina."

The soothing warmth deepened through the pleasure centers of Josiah's body and he slipped into slumber. Edouina nodded at that. "She's put a lot of pressure in his pleasure centers. I'll sweep them out."

Dynarien put his hands on Josiah's temples again, reaching back into him. He removed the sways, triggers, and coercions with a delicate, precise touch. Then Dynarien set a ward and blessing upon him so that no one would ever be able to scry him or get into his being again. The yuwenghau could feel the way Fusaaki's work was coming undone, that Josiah was dying, and it grieved him. He had so little time to try and set Josiah's life right, but he was determined to try. "She can't call him now. Neither can Hoon. I'm going to befriend him. I'm going to try and help him. Aejs should know better. She shouldn't be so unforgiving."

"It's her pride that's hurt. That's a thorny thing at best." Edouina kissed him. "You going to do this sneaky or you going to do this straight?"

Dynarien grinned. "Sneaky." As Edouina watched Dynarien changed, but it was mostly color. He was a chameleon rather than a true shifter like his sister. He was still six feet, but his skin was now dark brown; his straight hair black hanging loose to his waist; still built as much for power as for speed, narrow-hipped and broad chested.

"Can't avoid handsome, can you?" she drawled, grinning. "Well, honey, if you need me, you know where to find me. Just remember, next time you come crawling into my bed, I'd prefer you wore your own face. This one's pretty, but I like the other better. Now come along and give me some." She waggled her finger at him.

* * *

"I won't take him back," Aejs said. She stood on the parapet of the highest tower of the keep, looking out at the sea, watching the whitecaps form, breaking and merging in restless movement. She had steeled her heart for this conversation, shoving everything down and sealing it in a tiny lockbox in the darkest corner of her heart.

Laurelyanne looked unhappy. "It was not his fault."

"He betrayed me. Once we triaded, it became betrayal. Betrayal of trust."

"She spelled him. She is seiryn."

"And he is Josiah Abelard. No one could take him that way unless he was willing. Skree assures me that Josiah's natural shields were too strong for him to have been forcibly taken by a seiryn and he should know. He worked with Josiah at length last year. He went to her bed willingly long before those shields became so tattered that she was able to force him to hurt me. So I find him innocent of one and guilty of the other. At least he gets to live. By all rights, I should have had him impaled."

Laurelyanne sighed. The conversation went round and round without variation. "He's dying."

"I don't care. Had he told me about Zyne, before the marriage, I could have issued a special dispensation to allow them to continue. He knew that. I went over all the variations and rules in Sharani triading with him. Yet he said nothing. So, oblivious to all that was happening we declared it a sealed mating. He said we were the only ones he wanted. I suspect he never wanted either one of us."

"He loves you."

"I don't want to hear that."

"So be it. You are making a mistake, but I wash my hands of it." Laurelyanne turned, re-entered the tower and left.

Aejys closed her eyes against the hurt and said, "Josiah."

* * *

Lizard spent weeks looking for Birdie before a shopkeeper mentioned seeing her with Laurelyanne. She had been showing up once or twice each week to hold services and tend to business, and then she disappeared after refusing to speak to him or her parents. He tried to follow her, but he had never been her match on the streets. He could not understand how she could put Josiah above him and her family.

He hesitated before the door, screwed his courage up, and knocked.

A slender mage answered, wearing brown robes trimmed in all the colors of flame, little patches of embroidered signs and symbols indicating his affinities sewn along the sleeves and shoulders. He was a fire mage.

"What do you want?" Miccan asked, quietly hostile.

"Is Birdie here?"

"Yes, she is. But she does not want to see you."

"Please, ask her."

"Go away, Lizard. You've hurt her enough."

"Miccan?" Birdie appeared, sliding under Miccan's arm and leaning against him. "Lizard."

Lizard's eyes and face filled with a mix of sadness and fury. "Oh, I see. You like him better, Birdie?"

"No, you don't see!" Birdie erupted from beneath Miccan's arm, striking Lizard open-handed in the chest, both palms landing together and slamming him backwards from the doorway. "You don't see. I'm a priest of Dynanna. I preach to rogues, pariahs, and outcasts. How much more of a pariah could Josiah get? I found him on the beach, left to die. I brought him home to my temple to help him. He saved my sister. I owed him a debt and the benefit of the doubt, both for my sister and by the tenants of my faith."

"Birdie—"

"No!" Birdie gave him another staggering open handed shove. "Hoon bit him! Hoon was in his mind! It was ugly. You saw what such things did to Mathryn. You saw it in Bryndel. I want nothing more to do with you, Lizard! I'm dissolving the marriage. Find a new place to live. I'll have the papers in hand tomorrow. My parents would never have argued with my debts and my faith, if you had not jumped in. You violated everything I believe in. Everything that was precious to me. Get out of here!"

"Birdie, please!"

"Get out. I'll arrange visiting privileges with the children so long as you behave."

"Birdie!" Tears started in Lizard's eyes.

A hollow calm entered Birdie's face and voice. "I thought I would always love you. But you betrayed me. No matter how good things might be between us, that moment

of betrayal will always lie there taking the joy out. You nearly killed an innocent man. Nearly forced me to be a party to his death. Go away, Lizard."

Lizard grabbed Birdie in desperation, not meaning to hurt her. She cried out and then Lizard released her, reeling away, batting at his burning sleeves.

Miccan stepped to Birdie's side, slipping a protective arm around her. "Don't touch her, healer, unless she asks you to."

Two days later Lizard moved into a rooming house and Birdie moved home, firmly in control once more. It was the first time since his sister's death when he was a very small child that he had ever been alone; the first time he had been separated from the Urchins and he felt abandoned – which he was.

* * *

Laurelyanne tried to be as gentle as she could, sitting in the backyard with Josiah, on a stone bench. The trees were just starting to green; the air pleasantly crisp. "They cannot take you back, Josiah," she told him. "They're dissolving the marriage. Furthermore, a decree has been issued that you are not to approach or attempt to see Aejs for any reason. If you do, Maranya will kill you. It will be considered a legal execution."

Josiah swallowed and nodded, rubbing his wrists in a nervous, self-conscious manner. The spellcords were gone. Maranya had proved as good as her word: a priest from the Temple of the Waves had arrived the next afternoon and removed them. "I understand."

"We're not out of the woods yet. The mood in Rowanhart is uneven. So I'd prefer you stayed home or kept to Hinkty Molly's. But if you're going to Hinkty Molly's get someone to go with you. Don't go alone. Even the ones who accept that it was not entirely your fault don't want to talk to you. That includes Skree. It would be too easy for you to find yourself on the wrong end of a stick."

Josiah winced. His body had started to deteriorate again because of the shock to his system. All Fusaaki's work had been for nothing. "Zyne?" he asked softly.

"They haven't caught her yet. When they do they'll sever her vocal chords so she can't sing. They will probably hold her until the child is born and then execute her. Although there are a good many of them want the child killed also. Skree is trying to get them to give him the child. But it doesn't look likely. The seafolk are hard. If they make their cases strongly enough, the child will die.'

Josiah stood up and walked away, unable to deal with it, staring at his feet, brushing dirt off the walk with his shoes. With the sways gone, he felt distanced from Zyne, but he still felt uncertain about the child. His relationship with Aejs ended, the only family he had left was that unborn child and the odds were very good that the tritons

would order it destroyed. He could hear Hanni rummaging about in the back of his huge wagon. The doors stood open. Josiah almost drifted over there and then changed his mind. He did not want to deal with the stone mage's earthy optimism. Josiah's thoughts ran in unhappy circles, grimly resisting everyone's efforts to pull him out of it. He had gotten himself here and here he would stay. He had hurt Aeijys, destroyed their marriage, and allowed himself to be drawn into a web of terror ruled by his old foe, Hoon. *No*, Josiah thought bitterly, *I have gotten what I deserved, for stupidity if nothing else. The Great and Clever Josiah Abelard a seiryn's bloody puppet and a vampire's doxy.* He touched the scars on his neck, wincing.

Dynarien listened to Laurelyanne and Josiah's conversation from the edge of the barn. He had been on his way over to talk to Josiah when he saw them together and withdrew to the edge of the wall, listening and peering around. They had not noticed him. Laurelyanne was a very strong mage. Dynarien, Tagalong, and Hanni had not included her in their plot to pull Josiah out of his depression. He wore the new face he had shown Edouina the night they took the sways, triggers, and coercions out of Josiah and did not feel ready to test his new face on Laurelyanne yet, lest she recognize him in Josiah's presence.

Laurelyanne walked back into the house and Dynarien emerged. "Hello, Josiah," he said, pleasantly, smiling.

"You visited me a few weeks ago, didn't you?" Josiah frowned with concentration, trying to pull the images together, it was all so fuzzy.

"Yes. My name is Darien. I'm a battle-mage from Charas. I was on my way home when I heard about the troubles in Rowanhart and decided to have a look. See if I could help."

"You took the sways out?"

"Yes. How are you feeling?"

"Strange. Empty. Chunks of last year seem like a dream – like I was not really there."

"Do you still feel anything for her?"

"Zyne? No. Mostly I think about my son, wondering if the tritons will let him be born." Josiah walked the flagstone path toward the front of the house. "Would you like to get a pint at Hinkty Molly's I haven't had one in weeks."

"Sure. Do you drink much?"

"Not like I used to. But I've had some news that would go down better with one."

When they had reached Hinkty Molly's and found a table, Edouina came by briefly

just to say "hi" and then went on. It had been let out that she had inherited the gaffer's share of Hinkty Molly's place and with her looks – plainly a Hornbow – no one questioned it. She was there most days from opening to closing, wearing her blades and sipping at a well-watered tankard, listening to the gossip and sharing stories. Hinkty Molly and she had turned one of the back rooms into a nursery and Midori coped good-naturedly, for which Dynarien was grateful, considering how caught up his mother's night-elf ladies were with propriety and appearance.

After a few rounds Josiah opened up about what was troubling him and Dynarien listened.

"I've wanted a family – a real family – for most of my life. My foster parents never let me forget that I was adopted. They thought I owed them something – something I couldn't give them. I remember my previous life in its entirety. It's hard to conceive that I've returned as the last of my descendants. The vampires and sa'necari got them all. If the tritons kill my child—" He closed his eyes, his lips tightening as he fought down a wave of grief,

Dynarien moved next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I scryed for what happened to them. The son that Shularrien and I had – Hoon butchered him." Josiah pulled his flask of whiskey from his pocket, taking a long pull of it. "Sa'necari got the others. If I could just get one of them... Just one of them."

"Maybe you can. You aren't exactly the last, my friend. Of the Abelards, yes. But remember your daughter, the lineage called Willidar. I know there is at least one of them left. Possibly two. When Hoon and Mephistis started murdering the Abelards, the Willidars went into hiding."

"There's a Willidar in Rowanhart. But I don't know if she's one of mine. Amberlin. She owns a mage shop."

"She's a cousin of mine."

"Is she one of mine? She keeps calling me 'grandfather'. Are you?"

"I'm not. She might be. I don't know. I know one of yours with a habit of wandering the uncleansed lands and I've heard of another in Jedrua who serves one of the Black Kings."

"Branch clans."

"A fine Sharani habit. That little lost enclave near Charas has been very discreet for five hundred years."

* * *

"Whom did you go with?" Laurelyanne asked, placing more of the medicine for him on the nightstand.

Josiah regarded her a long time before he answered. They were treating him like a damaged child who had to be constantly supervised. Part of him understood it; part of him resented it. "Darien."

He thought about the bottle laying between the mattresses. There were more bottles in the closet. He could kill himself a dozen times over with the cache he had accumulated. Darien's visits kept making him waver each time he felt like reaching for that bottle. They would sit and talk, sometimes joining Tagalong and Hanni, sometimes with the others; Miccan and Birdie; Edouina and Hinkty Molly; the young people; whoever they ran into at Hinkty Molly's.

"Darien?" Laurelyanne studied his face as if she could see the levels of his increasing depression. That bothered Josiah, making him feel naked and exposed.

Josiah answered. "Darien's the one who got the sways out."

"The dark young man who looks half fae?"

"Yes. He's a friend."

"You know you must be careful, Josiah. Careful who you trust."

Josiah's head dropped until his chin rested on his chest. "He helps me... He understands what happened to me. No one's ever gotten inside me ... that way ... before... It's ... it's like being raped. Feeling so helpless." He pulled his whiskey bottle from his pocket and laid it beside the scrimshaw on the pillow. His whole body tightened up ... he had not told anyone about Hoon's raping him. Josiah shivered, remembering the touch of Hoon's cold hands as the Lemyari dragged him across the table. He struggled to turn his mind away from the memory and started to shake hard. The whiskey leaning against his pillow called to him, promising sleep, and forgetfulness. It would light a brief fire in his veins and then raise a wall between him and his memories. He picked the bottle up, with hands trembling so violently he could not get the cork out at first and it required several tries to get it open. When he had taken several long pulls he began to steady.

"Josiah..." Laurelyanne put her hand over his.

"It doesn't matter what I do. It's too late to be careful."

Laurelyanne closed her eyes and was silent for a moment, and then opened them. "You're right. Go ahead."

* * *

Zyne fled northeast across the open seas. She entered a trance state that allowed her to swim without resting for several days. When she could no longer maintain the pace, she climbed on one of the little atolls forming the outer core of the ten thousand islands of the Neridians; found a nest among the scrubby plants and slept for a day. Then she swam again. Another week and she reached her mother's island.

The seiryns were out in the waters around the coral reefs with their spears and nets, fishing. They stopped and swam in behind her, following silently. Zyne did not notice. Several people on the beach looked up from beating soaked bark stretched over logs into tapa. They laid their work aside and followed. Zyne glanced over her shoulder at them. They eyed her silently. Normally greetings would already have been exchanged. Zyne waited for a moment, wondering nervously. Still no one spoke. She walked quickly on, seeing the palm-frond roofs of the village huts ahead of her. People emerged from the huts and stood without speaking, staring at her in a flat emotionless way. She saw her mother's hut to the side near the central fire pit where the village cooked catches too large for the small private hearths in their homes. Zyne bolted inside. It was a single room with sleeping mats piled in one corner, a couple of wicker chests, nets, and fishing spears on the walls. Her mother rose from stirring a pot on the hearth, turning to face her.

"Zyne?" Her mother's mouth was set in a tight line. She struck Zyne in the chest with the flat of her hands, in a hard, solid push that sent Zyne back through the door before she could answer and into the arms of the crowd that had gathered. They seized her roughly, binding her hands behind her. The seiryns returned her to her mother, forcing her to her knees in the hut.

Tears rolled down Zyne's face. She knew what they were going to do. Her grandmother had been right.

"You have broken the truce," her mother told her, in the tone of one pronouncing sentence. "Each day for the last two weeks the tritons have come and taken three of us away for sacrifice on the altar of Nerindalori. Each day we hear them screaming as they die. When we give you to them, they will leave us alone."

"Mother, please. Please! I have brought our people a great bounty. The Abelard heritage."

"Gag her."

The women shoved a ball of cloth in her mouth and bound it with rope. Zyne's mother pulled a knife from the fire, the blade glowing with heat. She deftly cut Zyne's vocal cords and cauterized the wound. Zyne fainted.

* * *

Josiah set off for the Manticore Bones early that morning, depression dogged his heels, and he could not free himself of it. As he turned up Dock Street, heading for

the section of town that was already becoming known as the Mage Quarter, Darien appeared at his elbow.

"Where are you going, Josiah?" The young man asked him.

"Manticore Bones. Private business." Josiah tried to cover his unease at finding himself with company – especially Darien. While the mage felt no shame at what he was doing, he did not wish to deal with possible disapprobation from his new friend.

"That's a Badonthian shop," Dynarien said.

"I know."

"I'll walk with you."

"I'd rather you didn't. It's private." Josiah gripped the list in his pocket, unintentionally crumpling it, his sweating hand leaving splotches on the paper.

"I have some business there myself this morning. I'm picking up a few things Amberlin found for me."

Josiah's eyes dropped from Dynarien's face to his own feet. "I feel like you're following me... I don't need a nursemaid."

"I really am picking up a package from Amberlin. She got some new things in last night. And she's my cousin, I told you that."

Josiah had forgotten, and the information eased his feelings of being watched constantly. He felt a pang of worry that his precious bottle of Pollendine might have been discovered and then Laurelyanne would decide to search through the rest of his things. He reminded himself that he had shoved the bottle far enough back that it would not be found by anyone who decided to change the sheets on the bed. *It's safe. It's safe. It's safe;* his mind silently chanted the words. The bottle was becoming a talisman: it was his way out if matters worsened. "I want my private matters, kept private. Don't take this wrong, but I'd like to see Amberlin without you or anyone else along."

Dynarien frowned and then shrugged. "I feel the same about my business with her. Tell you what, you go in first, and I'll wait outside. Then I'll go in and you wait outside. And then we'll be close enough to have a beer with lunch at Hinky Molly's. I want to make some improper suggestions to the woman who's dealing cards there."

"She's married with children," Josiah told him, recalling the thin, dark Sharani. He scarcely noticed the careful change of subject, falling into it.

Dynarien laughed. "That's never proved a barrier for me."

Josiah laughed back at that. "And her husband's a Valdren battlemage."

"The Valdren are some of the best ... however, I'm not exactly small potatoes."

"You remind me of him." Josiah felt as if he had known Darien all his life at that instant.

"The husband? Dynarien arn Hornbow?"

Josiah shook his head. "No. Willodarusson."

Dynarien quieted at that. "How so?"

"I can't quite figure it out, but you do."

"Because I'm trying to kiss everything wearing skirts?"

Josiah chuckled. "There is that, but no. I meant it as a compliment."

"Ahhhh. Then that's all right. Though I'd rather be compared to Dynarien Fire-heart, the Battle-Master."

"I've heard about that one. Never met him."

They reached the shop sooner than Josiah expected and Dynarien waited outside while Josiah went in. Amberlin shoved some tiny drawers back into a tall cabinet behind the display cases, heard the bell jingle on the door, and turned to look at Josiah.

Josiah handed her his list. The scars on his wrists from having worn the spellcords too long and too tight showed whitely in a shaft of morning sun through the windows. "This should be the last of it," he told her.

"Grandfather, it looks like you're trying to bryndel yourself."

"Would that be such a bad thing, Amberlin? After all that's happened?"

Amberlin refused to meet his eyes or answer.

"Amberlin?" Josiah asked again. "Amberlin, do I even want what few months remain to me?"

"Did you bring me what I wanted?"

Josiah sighed and put the box of twenty crystals on the counter. Amberlin checked each of them, verifying the contents.

"These will bring a good price. I'll fill your order." She halted in mid-stride, returning to ask, "Are you traveling alone?"

"No. My friend's waiting outside."

Amberlin glanced and saw Dynarien. "Good. Hoon's gone, but there are others waiting to shove a pole up your ass."

Josiah winced at her frankness. "I know it."

* * *

"What are you selling him?" Dynarien asked.

"You know I cannot tell you." Amberlin picked up her duster.

"When is Lokynen returning?"

"Not for several months, why?" Amberlin's eyes widened suddenly. "Oh, no. You are not thinking about giving someone else his features again? He swore he'd beat hell out of you if you did, Dynarien. This time he means it."

"You couldn't talk him out of it one more time?"

"No. My husband is very, very serious about it. And your sister is seriously angry with you also. She checked her potions and found some missing. So she investigated and found that you'd used one to turn Lord Channadar's little 'firefly' into a trueblood fae. That bottle was promised to me."

Dynarien sighed. He simply could not win for losing, decided retreat was his best choice, and changed the subject. "You have what I asked for?"

"Yes." Amberlin lifted a small chest from behind the counter onto her display case, draping her arm across it. "But I'll have your gold or whatever you've brought to trade first."

Dynarien unshouldered his pack, took out a small crystal orb, and tapped it three times. "Everything out!"

The floor was suddenly awash in things looted from Wrathscar and Galee by his catkins the previous autumn: potions, bottled blood, pieces of monsters, herbs and vials of strange ichors; journals, treatises, books and grimoires; arms, armor and a small catapult.

"Well?"

"Okay," Amberlin replied, sending the chest into the crystal orb. "I will come up

with an estimate and then write up the leftovers as a credit to you for next time."

* * *

The tritons had removed Zyne to the beach near Vorgensburg, imprisoning her in a little house. By triton law the sacrifice had to be made close to the place where her crimes had been committed. Skree had argued for weeks for them to spare the child. Aejs, too, had pleaded with them to no avail. Six tritons entered. Two wore dark robes and hooded their faces. The child was innocent, so they would not kill it in the same rite that would take Zyne's life the next day. It would perish first. The child, the tritons felt, was too dangerous to live: a seiryne with the Abelard heritage of magic.

"Strip and tie her," said one of the hooded ones.

Zyne thrashed as the tritons gripped her, forcing her onto the bed. They tied her to the bedposts, spread-eagle. A hooded one stroked her belly, Reading her. The other began a prayer for the dead. The first one sent power into Zyne's belly. There was searing pain and then she cramped up. She knew her child was dead. They had killed it. Tears ran down her face. Her body shook with contractions as they forced the dead fetus from her. She felt as though she had wet herself as first water, then blood and finally the unfinished child slid from her. Her lips moved in a long scream, but no sounds came out. They untied her and left her there, after wrapping the fetus up and carrying it away.

* * *

Aejys sat in the softest wing chair in the parlor, additional pillows shoved to her back and sides, her feet propped up. A chessboard sat in the middle of the table. Omer opposed her, moving the black pieces. Skree and Maranya watched the match.

"A Shardith taught me," Aejs said, holding forth on the subject. "In the east, some tribes will settle their differences with a game rather than drawn swords."

Tamlestari came in with a glass of golden liquid, sitting it next to Aejs' hands.

Aejys rolled her eyes. "Not now, I'm winning."

A knock came at the door. Omer started to rise, but Tamlestari shook her head. "I'll get it."

She came back after a moment, her eyes glittering with tears. "The tritons have killed the child." Then she fled the room.

Aejys' face tightened. "None of us really thought about how this would play out in the end. Otherwise we would have handled it differently. If I had been thinking straight, I would have taken Zyne in hand in the beginning and hidden her away. I

never wanted to harm Josiah's child."

"None of us suspected she was seiryn, majesty," Maranya said, her hand stealing across Aeijys' fingers. "Had she been triton, they would have spared the child."

"Damn it all! Can't I make a right decision!" She rose to her feet, slamming her fist into the chessboard and sweeping the pieces onto the floor. The glass of holadil upset. Maranya barely had time to catch it before it could spill. King's Shield stood, moving to support her liege as she saw her features pale with returning pain.

"Drink this. I'll sit with you."

Aeijys nodded, accepted the glass and drank, then allowed Maranya to help her to her room.

Omer dropped to his knees, crawling over the floor after the pieces. Skree joined him.

* * *

The house stood up the coast from Vorgensburg with bars on the windows of a single room. Tritons moved about it, patrolling, standing in pairs around the front and back doors. An altar was going up on the beach. It could not be anything else.

"I told you, Hoon," Anksha purred. "Zyne is here. They have hurt her. I smelled blood last night and death."

"But you are certain she is still alive?"

"Yes. Why else finish the altar? Why else still guard?"

"Then I will not be leaving Rowanhart empty-handed after all. Let us eat triton."

"We will have to kill some before we get to eat."

"Yes."

Hoon drew his sword and moved down out of the trees, Anksha at his heels. They approached from the rear, stepped into the open – there was nothing to do for it – and walked up to the first pair. The tritons shouted for them to stop. Hoon did not reply. His sword tangled the trident as it came to bear on him. He kicked the triton into the wall while ripping the trident from his hand. The triton recovered instantly. Hoon caught his wrist, stepped in and threw him onto his back, stepped on his throat and crushed it. The triton lay still. Hoon could hear guards from the front coming.

Anksha laughed at the big triton. He stood more than two feet taller than the little

she-creature. The trident jabbed at her. She jumped onto his broad arm, ran up it to his shoulder, and sank her fangs into his throat, ripping a huge chunk loose. The triton screamed, staggering backwards. Anksha released him, dropping behind him. She rolled between his legs, came up in front of him, spun to face him, and unsheathed her claws to rip his stomach open. She watched his entrails spill out in a disinterested fashion, and then turned away to face the new arrivals. Entrails were the best parts, which she usually ate first, but there would be plenty to eat soon.

Hoon spitted the first one nicely. Anksha approved. She darted beneath the second guard's thrust, coming up in his face to take him in the throat. The throat was such a tasty spot, no bones to get in the way and a wonderful rush of blood in her mouth. She worried him for a minute, and then saw that Hoon had entered the house and dropped him to follow after a regretful look at the entrails – they would be cold when she returned. They swept the house, finding several locked doors. Anksha entered one more room with him, before becoming bored. Tritons were easy prey, unlike the landsmyn who knew what they were fighting. Anksha blinded a triton and played with him like a cat, slowly crippling and devouring him as he struggled.

Hoon laughed at her. "My pet, would you like tritons included in our cattle?"

She looked up at him with a mouthful of entrails and spoke around them. "Yes, Hoon. Tastes almost as good as demons."

* * *

Zyne wept. Her loins and stomach muscles hurt. She felt weak and exhausted. They had taken her voice, killed her unborn child, and tomorrow they would have her life. It would be a ritual of sacrifice to the stern, unrelenting god they worshipped. That was the way of the sea. The sea had no mercy and neither did its denizens. She could hear them constructing the altar and once she had looked from her barred window. She would die the death of one thousand cuts, with little pieces of her being thrown to the fish while she watched. The arts of the sea-mages would force her to remain conscious until they took her heart out.

There came a familiar scratching at her door. She cocked her head, scarcely able to breathe. She knelt by the door, reached for the knob, and turned it: it was still locked. The scratching came again. She knocked softly at it, desperately wishing she could speak, to call out to this mon or thing. Could it be Hoon? Could it possibly be Hoon? In her terror of the tritons, she had lost her terror of Hoon. The room was warded. He could not reach her with his mind.

She knocked again, altering the rhythm.

"Lovely little seiryn, is that you?"

She knocked frantically. The door opened and Lord Hoon went to his knees before her. He touched the scar on her throat. "They took your voice?"

Zyne nodded.

Hoon must have sensed her weakness because he lifted her as if she weighed nothing and carried her out into the night. Anksha appeared at his side. They passed the drained, gray corpses of the triton guards. He had horses waiting. Anksha sprang onto her pillion pad, riding crouched like a great cat. They rode inland for several days. Zyne grew more and more frightened the further they went from the sea. Although she offered herself to him, he would not touch her – not so much as a sip of her blood or a taste of her loins. He started teaching her to sign. He was incredibly patient with her. She fell in love with him.

They came, at last, to a small village. Before they entered, Hoon cast a glamour on her, giving her the appearance of a young human woman. Anksha disappeared into the night and did not come back until they left. He disliked letting anyone, even Zyne, know more of his talents, but he saw no way around it. Like Galee, he hoarded and concealed his powers and gifts, using them sparingly. They stayed three days at the village before riding on with fresh horses, remounts, and pack animals. They continued inland, finally turning south in the middle of their second week of travel.

* * *

Laurelyanne knocked on Josiah's door the morning that Zyne escaped. "Josiah?"

He rolled over and looked at her.

"Josiah, Zyne escaped. Hoon rescued her." Word had come quickly and Laurelyanne would rather he heard it from her than someone else, possibly to have it thrown in his face on the street. Despite Aejs' public proclamation of his innocence, most people still believed in his guilt.

Josiah felt chilled. "Do they think she will come after me again?"

Laurelyanne shook her head. "They severed her vocal cords. She can't access her magics. The child is dead. They killed it yesterday, I'm sorry."

Josiah folded up, hurting with every fiber of his being. Life seemed suddenly pointless and empty. He thought about the Pollendine. Maybe once she left...

Laurelyanne put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Come down. Hanni and some of the others have heard about what's happened. It might be better if you had some friends around. Maybe you could spend some time at Hinkty Molly's. Darien's supposed to bring that book you wanted this afternoon."

"I'll be down in a little while. Is Aejs still leaving for Charas next week?"

"As far as I know, yes. Go on, get dressed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A FEW TRUTHS

Josiah made it narrowly through the next day, although he got drunk and stayed that way. His friends kept him at Hinkty Molly's from opening until well past closing, and then dumped him into bed, confident that he would stay there. All night he dreamed of Aejs, Zyne and the murdered child, awakening in cold sweats, crying brokenly, his body hurting in the ways that suggested he was not far from having another attack. He could not think straight. He just hurt and hurt and hurt. It never seemed to stop.

A glass and the bottle of medicine sat on the nightstand near the lamp. The ever-present bottle of whiskey resided for the moment beneath the stand. Josiah nearly fell as he climbed out of bed and knelt, feeling between the mattresses until he found the vial of Pollendine. There was more in his satchel in the closet, but he did not require that much to do what needed to be done. Josiah poured the whiskey in first, then the entire contents of the vial. It made it syrupy, so he added more whiskey. He stirred it with his finger, and then hid the vial in the drawer.

Josiah drank it down in a single, long chug. It hit fast on his empty stomach. He tried to sit on the bed, but his balance and perceptions were off. As a result his hip caught the edge and he slid down, striking his elbow on the nightstand first and his head second. He scarcely felt it. He neither heard nor cared that the glass and the bottle of medicine crashed to the floor in a tinkle of splintering breakage. The rush was incredible: sweet, warm, and intense, spiraling him into a never-never land from which there would be no awakening. No fear, no pain, no sorrow. He floated in a sea of dwindling consciousness as he slid to the floor and wedged half-sitting between the nightstand and the bed.

Then his psyche struck a rock. Satori. His spirit and heart started to fight its way back up out of the pit he had allowed himself to sink into. This was a futile, purposeless death. He was letting the Josh side of his personality dominate too much. It was the Josh part of him that had let Zyne get inside in the first place. They were not merged nearly as well as he sometimes believed. He wavered, unconsciously, between the two. Josh wanted to die; Josiah did not, at least not this way, not a death without purpose. His child was dead. His soul would never again return to this world to find his beloved Shularrien and their Nariya. Shularrien had been the sun, and he and Nariya the planets circling it in utter and complete worship and devotion. Such an intense and powerful triad had never been before or since. If he must part forever with them, then at least let it be for some greater purpose. He had only a few months in which to avenge his family and destroy Hoon. He would make a suicide run against Hoon. That was the proper way to die. He would protect Aejs. If only he could have found Nariya, too, before he died. How sweet that

would have been!

Josiah fought the lethargy. Usually by that time of day there was someone awake in the house. Then he remembered that Dynarien was supposed to come that morning. "Help me!" He folded forward, forcing himself to crawl toward the door.

Although he had not heard the glass and bottle break, others had. "Josiah! Are you all right?"

It was Hanni with Dynarien right behind him.

Then they were lifting him up.

"Pollendine ... two ounces ... with whiskey."

"Laurelyanne!" Dynarien shouted. "Get me some ipecac and amphereon."

"What?" The old mage rushed into the room.

"Josiah's tried to kill himself."

Laurelyanne ran back out. Dynarien shoved his fingers down Josiah's throat.

* * *

"We all make mistakes," Dynarien told Josiah, carefully setting the change on him. The yuwenghau had made the changes at the last minute so that Amberlin would not catch him. Lokynen and Amberlin were dangerous when provoked. Lokynen was a son of the war god, Badonth, by a granddaughter of the original Josiah Abelard. Amberlin was yuwenghau also, Lokynen's niece ten generations removed along the Willidar lineage and half-sister by way of Badonth in a classic example of divine incest. Although Dynarien would never forget the last beating Lokynen had given him, he could not resist recreating Lokynen's ugly face one more time. In many ways he was far more like his sister the God of Cussedness, than he would ever admit.

When he finished Josiah had become a dark skinned, black-haired man with a large scar cutting across his forehead, nose and down the side of his face. Even without the scar he would have been plain ugly. A too large, mobile mouth dominated his seamed, jowly face. His eyes were deeply set, black as night, with dark purple shadows beneath. His bushy eyebrows sat on a heavy ridge. His nose looked like it had been broken more than once. His height was average and his body broad and blocky, with thick, massive arms. "After seeing how much damage a vampire's coercions can do to a man, I can imagine how much more havoc a seiryn could wreak.

"I'm grateful you do," Josiah said softly. "You're certain this can't be broken, Darien?"

"I'm part yuwenghau. The only thing that can break this is your own spell of revelation."

"She'll never take me back," Josiah said.

"It isn't a matter of her taking you back or not. It's about taking a last shot at Hoon. It's a matter of keeping her alive. I think Hoon was trying to find the limitations of this new body of hers. Then he'll move in and either kill or turn her. If he did take her down and you did nothing to stop him, how would you feel?"

"Like pulling a bryndel."

"Exactly." He pulled a mirror from his pack, handing it to Josiah. "Take a good look at my cousin Tori Willidar."

"Ugly cuss," Josiah said and grinned.

"Well, let's get out of here before they leave without us. I had a hard time convincing Aejs to take us along."

"Give me just a second." He put a large sealed envelope on his pillow.

Dynarien looked at it curiously. "What's that?"

"For Laurelyanne. Since she doesn't know I'm leaving, much less in this face, I don't want her to worry."

"Good man."

Then they left and headed for the southwest gate. Dynarien had convinced Aejs that, of all the mages she could take on the journey to Charas, a pair of experienced battle-mages was the best. Skree had agreed, which clenched it and she hired them. Tagalong and Hanni were going also, and, other than Dynarien, were the only ones in on the plot to give Josiah a last shot at taking Hoon.

"Laurelyanne likes to mother me. I didn't want her to worry." Josiah repeated it. The letter would put closure on a lot of matters, but he did not want to say that. He wanted to be long away from Rowanhart before the contents became known. Josiah had begun nightly meditations to completely control all aspects of Josh's behavior patterns. It was one thing to have his memories; it was another thing to let them push him into self-destructive actions. On this journey he had to be wholly and entirely Josiah Abelard and not, to the even the smallest most infinitesimal fraction, Josh Stormbird.

Dynarien nodded. Josiah was a good man and deserving of whatever aid he could give him.

The column was longer than they had expected. Aejs was only taking forty soldiers, fifteen auxiliaries handling the wagons and supplies, and six scouts led by Borian Silverwing. They would be taking the trade routes, much of which would be well patrolled by the various city-states along the way. However two merchant companies had decided to ride along with an eye to safety in numbers. They rode up to the front so that Dynarien could introduce his cousin to Aejs.

"So you're Tori Willidar," Aejs said dryly, appraising him with a rake of her eye. "Somehow I thought you'd be taller."

"Not everyone is Sharani," he said pointedly.

Aejs favored him with a smile. "You'll do."

* * *

The southeast road from Rowanhart linked up with the main route to the Fords of Hillora at midday. Spring brought everyone out and the roads were thick with people. Grey-robed pilgrims walked in small groups, counting off their prayer beads in soft reverent voices. Wagons rolled with trade goods, wheels and harnesses creaking amid the noisy clomp of horses' shod hooves on the hard-packed dirt. Tradesmen in search of better employment led donkeys down the road. A large carriage and a retinue of knights flashed along, ordering everyone out of their way. Their outriders started to shout at Aejs' company until they saw the banners and recognized the device. The riders slowed, one of them dropping back to the carriage, consulting with the occupants. Then he rode forward again, drawing even with Aejs.

"Majesty," he said politely, "My Lord Kanz of Darr requests the pleasure of your company when we camp tonight at Merkreth's Crossing."

"Granted," Aejs told him. "That is where we had planned to camp as well."

The outrider gave her a polite dip of his head and shoulders before returning to the carriage. Then they picked up speed again and passed Aejs.

Josiah watched the exchange from where he rode farther back in the column beside Dynarien. His heart missed her, the warmth of her company; his mind missed her, the banter and conversation; his body missed her, the taste of her lips and the intensity of their passion. So he tried to think of something else.

"It's been five hundred years since I last saw Charas," Josiah told Dynarien, speaking softly as they rode. "It's probably changed a lot."

"Less than you'd think," Dynarien grinned. "You know how mages are. They like stability. They get stuck in ruts. Furthermore, no one's ever been able to get into

your tower."

"Hoon did." Hoon and Mephistis would both be in Charas. He was already dying, it would be nothing to die a little earlier, to catch them in a room together and cast some explosive spell like conflagration, taking them with him.

"His talisman. I suspect, from what you described, that he did not make it. I think it must have been something left over from the last godwar – possibly something of Galee's."

"You know about her?" Josiah knew only what he had learned from books and from Dynarien that first day after the ambush on the beach. He had never encountered her. For that he thanked the Nine.

"I ought to – my liege-gods are Dynanna and Dynarien. They sent me to Rowanhart."

The surprised Josiah for a moment as most, though not all, battle-mages served Badonth, god of aggressive warfare and vengeance. Then he grinned. "That figures. I guess they felt I needed you. I would hate to find myself in the midst of a godwar."

"Tori, my friend and cousin, I think we're already in the midst of one."

Josiah gave an exaggerated sigh and said, "I wish you hadn't told me that."

* * *

Aejys camped her company outside the town of Merkreth's Crossing. The main southeast trade route passed through it and a lesser one leading to the coast and Ocealay. Lord Kanz had taken a room at the best inn and awaited her there. Aejys drew every eye as she rode in beside Tagalong and Maranya. She found the inn, a riot of brightly lit windows, without trouble. A polite and liveried stableman took their mounts and she tipped him generously. The common room was immense, done in costly mahogany, the long tables bracketing on four sides a central dais for performers. Smaller tables lined the sides and the bar took up the back. Women in wide, tightly cinched belts and white blouses, their loosely gathered necks exposing the sweet mounds of their breasts, skirts short enough to reveal ample lengths of well turned ankles and shapely calves moved among the tables dispensing food and drink from polished trays.

Lord Kanz spotted her immediately – it was hard not to – rising from his table to take her hand and kiss it. "Majesty, the angel of Rowanhart."

"Lion, Lord Kanz. Lion." Aejys smiled thinly.

Lord Kanz ignored the mild reproof, indicating that she and her companions should sit with a broad sweep of his hand. He was a wiry, hawkish man; his spiky, gingery

hair clipped close to his head; his face dominated by a thick under lip that gave him a pouting look, whether he was or not. He dressed like a dandy in wine-red velvet; but he moved like a swordsmon.

Introductions were made and orders given to the woman who came to their table. Aejs' eyes strayed briefly across the woman's breasts and she thought of Tamlestari, missing the touch of her body. Then, inescapably she experienced a remembered flash of Josiah and felt thoroughly lonely.

"So, how far do you travel, majesty?"

"Charas."

"Business or pleasure?" Lord Kanz's hand strayed across hers.

"Business. Private business." Aejs could not stifle a small sigh.

"Ah, my ladies," Lord Kanz said smoothly.

Tagalong winced, Aejs scowled and Kanz blinked – wondering what he had said – as Maranya leaned across the table. "We don't use that term."

"Whyever not?" Kanz's myn leaned in closer with him just to hear well.

"First, when you put the gender on things, it translates as a diminutive. Secondly, we've seen what you mean by that word. A lady is a female who, from the day she develops menses to the day they finally desert her, spends nine months out of every 12 belly swollen, is owned like property, has no public voice in anything. Shall I continue?"

"Well, it's not quite that bad," Kanz protested. "Some of that's custom, not law, you know."

The tavern master, standing and listening at the nearest corner of his bar, nodded agreement. "Yeah, that's right. And there's some right decent perks ta make up—" his words broke off suddenly as his large wife smacked him with a huge ladle.

"What would you know, John Lawrence Simms? What would you know?"

"Why'd ya do that for?"

"If anything happens to you, Jim'd get the place and he's a wastrel'd throw his own ma in the street, he would." She hit him again. The common exploded in laughter.

Kanz looked embarrassed.

"You know what we call a husband?" Maranya asked.

Kanz shook his head, clearly wondering if he wanted to know.

"Someone too tired to get it up, his hands blistered from too many chores, and hoping his na'halaefs aren't going to beat him for not getting breakfast ready quick enough or keeping the kiddies quiet."

Tamlestari had insisted Aeijys scratch her itch with as wide a variety of males as possible on this journey, saying that had she been more experienced with males she would never have plunged into a committed relationship so soon after Brendorn's death and thus made such a poor match as Josiah. Tamlestari was probably right. Aeijys had had only two males in her entire life: Brendorn and Josiah. With that in mind, she ended up in Lord Kanz's bed that night, but left before dawn without waking him, feeling vaguely dissatisfied.

As Aeijys stepped into the hallway she found Maranya sitting with her back to the wall, dozing lightly. She closed the door very softly. Aeijys thought it too soft to wake the ha'taren, but Maranya regarded her with one eye open, a raised eyebrow, and a smirk.

"I thought I got away from you," Aeijys said, feigning annoyance at discovering Maranya's presence.

"You should have known better. I checked the bedroom while you slept before camping here, majesty." Maranya drew a piece of Lord Kanz's underwear out of her shirt and flicked it at Aeijys contemptuously. She was picking up some of Tagalong's bad manners. "I'm going to embarrass the life out of you until you start letting me protect you better."

Aeijys sighed. Lord Kanz would get all the wrong ideas from this, if he thought she had taken his underwear as a token of their brief liaison.

* * *

Being around Aeijys all day had left Josiah feeling sad and uncomfortable. He made every effort to avoid her and remain as far back in the line as possible. He knew everyone in the column from the soldiers – she brought only Ha'taren Guard – to the Valdren scouts led by Borian, the drivers, the grooms, the orderlies, and servants. Josiah walked into the trees to relieve himself in the pre-dawn hours and, as he finished, heard someone else moving about. He stepped cautiously forward and found himself face to face with Aeijys. His heart skipped a beat and he swallowed.

"I'm glad you're ugly," she said, an odd catch in her voice. "Makes it easier to look at you."

"Because of Abelard? They say he was not bad looking." Josiah's voice was cautious. He worked hard to school all of Josh's mannerisms and reactions out of

his consciousness now that he was aware of how much power they had over him: Hoon and Zyne had deliberately brought them to the fore to cripple him. For his sanity's sake, he had to be Josiah at all times and not slide into thinking and reacting like Josh.

She gave a short, bitter bark of laughter. "You've heard the gossip."

"Hard not to. Most of Rowanhart wants to burn him at the stake or shove a pole up his ass just to watch him dance." Josiah's voice turned very hard.

"There is that." she pulled out a flask and took a long drink, then sat down and looked at him again. "Gods, you're ugly. I expected better, considering what a handsome cousin you've got." She pulled out her pipe and smoked thoughtfully.

"I've heard that before. Tell me something new," Josiah said testily.

"What do you look like with your clothes off?"

"I think you've been taking too many sips from that flask."

"Why?"

"Because you are the most beautiful woman in creation and I'm an ugly, back-water battle-mage." *And I love you more than life itself and I'm afraid to touch you.*

"I'm not asking for a relationship. I'm asking you to scratch my itch. My na'halaef suggested I do that on this journey. She wants me to sow some wild oats that I've never had. I promised her I would. She says I might have handled things better if I had done so when I was younger."

"You've already had a scratching. You and Maranya stayed with Lord Kanz all night."

"Are you turning me down?" She opened her clothing.

All he could think of then was of how much he wanted her and how unworthy he was. "No."

* * *

The camp was up and moving when Josiah returned. Dynarien had both horses saddled and their gear in place. He gave Josiah a long, appraising look. "Found a woman that fast?"

Josiah's face burned. He checked the saddle straps and mounted without answering.

"A pretty one?"

Josiah muttered something so softly that Dynarien was not certain what he had said.
"What?"

Josiah repeated himself a little louder. "Aejys."

Dynarien chuckled, stepped into the stirrup, and mounted.

* * *

Aejys sent her orderly back down the line to bring Josiah up so they could talk. They rode in silence for a while and then Aejys asked him, "Were you ever married, Tori?"

"Yes."

"Still are?"

"No."

"What happened?"

"They died. They were Sharani. Nariya and Shularri. Shularrien, actually, but you know how Sharani are about nicknames. We triaded." Josiah slowly began to tell Aejys about his marriage in his past life, leaving out the fact that he knew her to be the reincarnation of Shularrien. Josiah had never spoken to her about his previous life, so it was all new. There was a kind of desperation and sadness in her voice at times, as if in talking to him about his marriage she might find the clues as to what had gone wrong with her own. She did not appear to completely credit the power of the seiryn's song.

He stayed with her all day, telling tales that made him smile, the funny stuff. He had grown up with Shularrien and met Nariya later. He told her how Shularrien, then just twelve, had stacked crates to get at the last apple in a tree. As she was stepping back, the crates tumbled. She fell, but caught her leg just right in the tree's crotch so that she could neither get up nor down until he fetched her amita – aunt – to get her free.

As they made camp, Aejys asked him, "Was there never anyone else?"

"One. I've always been drawn to Sharani. I failed her and she left me. It was my fault. I should have recognized what was happening before it was too late, but I didn't."

"I'm sorry," she said and never asked about it again.

* * *

Maranya settled in a folding chair in the command tent as Aejs was pulling off her boots. The tent held a table, six crude chairs, and the bed in the far side where Aejs slept with a chest at the end with her clothing and sundries in it. A lamp sat in the middle of the table, a bottle of wine, and some glasses. Maranya poured herself a glass.

"Do you know much about the two mages you hired?" Maranya asked, sipping.

"They came with very good references from the Dynannan temple. Why?"

"Just you seem to be getting close to the ugly one."

"He interests me ... in a sad way."

"Because you're sad?"

"Yes," Aejs' voice softened.

"You mind if I share?"

"Business or pleasure?"

"A little of both. Did you bring your chess board?"

Aejs grinned. "I'll get it out."

* * *

Tagalong spent most of her time riding with Hanni, her pony tied to the back of his wagon. Hanni had lightened his load, leaving all the heaviest of his things, such as his anvil, at Laurelyanne's, and his wagon had no trouble keeping pace with the others. In fact, his huge oxen managed better than the horses.

"How's he doing, Tag?" Hanni asked. Josiah spent most of his time with the soldiers and officers, rather than Hanni and the auxiliaries, since he was not supposed to know Hanni. What a wonderful conceit this game was, played by and on Josiah.

"He's holdin' up just fine. This is tha best I've seen him since Norendel."

"Tha's good. He's a fine man at heart. An' Aejs?"

"She's lonely. Sharani are odd, being triadic."

Hanni leaned over and kissed the side of Tagalong's head. She flinched away from him sharply with a cry. "Don't!"

"I – I'm sorry," he stammered, confused. She had been letting him kiss her hair for weeks.

Tagalong shook her head. "That's the side with the scar. You hurt me. It's tender."

Hanni tucked the reins under his knee and parted her hair carefully with his hands. Scars when they crossed certain types of nerve endings never completely stopped being tender. By luck he had been missing it all these weeks. "Ooooch," he said when he saw it. "What hit you?"

"A horde of undead. I don't remember getting hit. Battle of Sweetwillow." That was the other name for the Battle of Hoon's Valley.

"I'll be very careful with ya, my dear, sweet, brave Tagalong. An' when we get back ta Rowanhart, I'll make ya a helm nothing can dent. Push yer shirt up an' let me see yer chain, yer wearing some aren't ya?"

Tag did so and he fingered the links. "Yah, I can do better. I'll make ya a fine suit when we get back.

Tagalong grinned, leaned over and kissed him. "Have ya ever been to Charas, Hanni?"

"Several times. Don't like it. They're stuffy. Dwarves don't really fit in."

"Why not?"

"They're in ta beauty an' power. If ya don't have one or tha other ya don't count fer nothin'. There's dozens an' dozens a talented mages an' mage-gifted folk livin' in tha slums, workin' as servants cuz they don't know nothin' else an' haven't got tha nerve ta move someplace they've never been. They're like me. Decent enough mages, but not one a tha greats. So they don't count in Charas. They get beat down. What I see ya an' I doin in Charas, Tag, is this. We bring 'em to see Aejs. Aejs sees the possibilities in folks others overlook. Put enough of 'em together an' those greats don't have a prayer."

"I like tha way yer mind works, Hanni."

Hanni grinned. "Another thing, Tag. Over tha last twenty years someone has been destroyin' temples. They're huntin' someone's been given sanctuary. I'm thinkin' it's some survivin' life mages. Last time I was there, there were only three temples left. One of those temples belongs ta someone I put a lot of faith in. Perverse Dynanna."

* * *

Josiah settled his tack and rubbed his mount down. He had brought plenty of Laurelyanne's brews and Fusaaki's medicines to ease his suffering body and keep his

strength up. She had added the herbs that Fusaaki brought last summer to her own brews and more that had come in by gryphon-back. So it helped a bit. He had also brought seven ounces of pure Pollendine, but did not intend to do anything stupid with it. If he had another attack he would need it. And there were the more arcane substances that would have appalled Laurelyanne had she known he was preparing to resort to them. Some of them were things she never even dreamed existed. One way or another he intended to hold body and soul together long enough to destroy Hoon and Mephistis.

The more he talked about his previous life, the more that he allowed himself to slide into his original patterns and memories, the more firmly he became Josiah Abelard. Josh's life and memories faded into a bad dream. He regained an edge and strength in his mind and heart that had not been there before in this life. The emotional vulnerabilities were still there, but he guarded them better: they were the things that had let Zyne get into his heart to control him, to ruin his life with Aejs.

He decided that some of the things Aejs had done to him in the aftermath of that terrible day on the beach were unfair; but he did not blame her. Part of him wanted to hear her admit their unfairness. He no longer simply wanted her forgiveness. He also needed her understanding. One without the other would not be enough.

So he decided to hold himself apart from her emotionally. Josiah Abelard was strong enough to do so; Josh never would have been – Josh was too tragically desperate for acceptance. What had begun as a pretense was gradually becoming a reality.

"I see you've spent the day talking to her." Dynarien tethered his horse beside Josiah's and began to comb her. "How did it feel?"

"Strange. She's been hurt by what I did, so she probes my own experiences in love and life – as if she could find solutions there."

"What have you been telling her?"

"I've been careful. I've been telling her about Shularrien and Nariya. The Sharani have forgotten they had soldiers fighting on both fronts. Sometimes I almost give it away, forgetting to entirely disguise the fact that it was the War of the Three Queens and not the latest one. Then I catch myself and cover up."

"Should you be talking to her at all?" Dynarien asked.

"Probably not. But she is the king, even if she still insists on informality of speech, and when a king says come and talk, you go and talk." Josiah stretched and yawned. He took his flask out, taking a small swallow and then put it back. "Just enough to keep the magic awake and not a drop more," he said to Dynarien's questioning glance.

"If faces were horses, ya'd be walkin'," said a coarse female voice.

They turned and saw Tagalong Smith standing there with her hands on her hips. "Aejys wants ta see tha ugly one. But jest between us, I'm warning ya, ya do anthin' at all ta upset her and I'll plant one on yer chin."

"She's paying our wages," Josiah replied. "Whatever she wants she can have."

That seemed to please the crusty dwarf and she grinned. "Course I always say ya can't judge a horse by its face, ya gotta check out his legs and other such."

Josiah winced.

"Awww! Tag, give him a break." Dynarien moaned.

* * *

"This isn't entirely pleasure," Aejys told him when he entered the tent.

Borian Silverwing, her Valdren Captain of Scouts, sat at the table with her, across from Maranya, whose position in Aejys' household Josiah had never fully understood.

"As you know, or ought to, I've been surprised once too often over the past two years. So now I keep outriders and scouts moving ahead of us at all times."

Josiah sat down. "I'm aware of that."

"They just reported in. There's a village half a days ride ahead. Rather, what remains of one. The destruction looks recent. I want you and your cousin to ride out with Borian and have a look at it at first light."

"It appears to be the work of vampires and sa'necari," Borian told him, that odd lilting twist of Valdren accent twining around his common. "But we're not sure. It needs a mage or a priest to confirm."

"We will handle that," Josiah responded.

"Good," Borian replied. "Is there anything else, majesty?"

"No. You and your myn should get some rest."

Borian gave her a short bow and left. Maranya followed him.

Josiah started to rise, but she gestured for him to remain.

"Have you seen this kind of shit before?" Aejys asked him. "I have."

"Yes. In the last war. There is a small Sharani enclave living near Charas. They've been there since the War of the Three Queens."

"I never dreamed—" Aeijys said, surprised.

"That's where I grew up. Where I met Nariya and Shularrien. Lord Hoon has holdings and hiding throughout the trade routes on the east side of the Hillora from Shaurone to Galeador. His forces hit one of the villages. Shularrien led an attempt to trap him. Hoon killed her, decimated her troops. So, yes, in a word, I've seen it." Hoon had had some kind of creature that could tame trolls and assembled an army of them. The trolls ripped Shularrien's elite force apart. Josiah, half out of his mind with grief, developed one of the most powerful fire spells of all time and nearly incinerated himself while destroying the entire army in a single blow shortly afterward.

"So, he could hit us anywhere between here and Charas?"

"Yes, but it's more likely once we've crossed the Hillora."

Aeijys picked up her pipe and smoked for a while, reflecting. "Tori, will you come to my bed?"

Josiah turned his face away. "That is not a good idea."

"Why?"

"I've already told you my reasons."

Aeijys went to a chest at the end of her cot, bringing forth two glasses and a bottle of good brandy. She set them on the table, filling the glasses. "I don't want to hear them again. I want my itch scratched and I want you to do the scratching."

"And what will you do if I refuse?" Josiah demanded testily.

Aeijys glared at him furiously for a moment, and then groaned. "I'll have to tell Stari that this game of itch scratching is a lot harder than it sounded."

"Not at all. I imagine every male from the front of the line to the merchants camping on our heels would agree to give you a good scratching and that includes my cousin Darien."

"But not you."

"That's right. Not me. Another thing, your majesty, I don't want to hear another word about this husband of yours and how he wouldn't touch you. Did it ever occur to you that he might have felt too dirty to deserve you? Maybe that's why he wouldn't touch you? Go play your stupid games with someone else." Josiah picked

up the glass of brandy, knocked it down, slammed the glass onto the table, and walked out.

Aejys sat in stunned silence for a long time. Then she folded her arms onto the table, pressed her face into them, and wept.

* * *

As Josiah woke, preparing to ride with the scouts, he was hit by a wave of dizziness, his face going pale as he realized he was having another attack. The pain was like hot, heavy wires being pulled through all the veins in his body. *Oh gods, no. Not now.* He caught at the saddle, pressing his face against it. "Uhhhh. Uhhhh."

Dynarien's arm slid around him and held him. "Let me help you," Dynarien said, his voice pitched low so that only Josiah could hear.

"You can't. No one can... I have some Pollendine in my saddle bags ... help me."

"I know. I Read you that day when I took the coercions out. You don't have to say it. I can't heal you, but I can strengthen you a bit. Your head will be clearer than with Pollendine. For Aejys' sake?"

"Do it."

Dynarien pressed their forearms together and cast the spell. Josiah was stunned to recognize a modified version of his own spell of shared life. Strength and energy flooded into him. Dynarien saw the way he looked at him. "I learned it from a mutual friend."

"Dynarien?"

"My liege-god."

Josiah and Dynarien rode out with Borian and four other Valdren while the rest of the camp was just starting to awaken. The rest of the scouts silently fell in behind them as they passed on the road. Josiah sipped on his whiskey at infrequent intervals along the ride. He hoped he could find a way to repair the magic centers on reaching Charas. Maybe if the magic had been healed and whole he would not have fallen prey to the seiryn. He had stopped setting a name to Zyne – the past did not hurt as bad without a name. Euphemisms lent distance and unreality to it all. The more he dehumanized her, the easier it was to think clearly.

They arrived at the village in late morning. Josiah signaled a halt just outside it.

"Did you leave anyone here?" Josiah asked Borian.

"No. It seemed wiser to pull back."

"It was."

Josiah and Dynarien dismounted, throwing their reins to one of the scouts. "Wait here. We'll go in. If we're not back by noon, fetch Aejs and burn it down."

They walked on. The village ached with silence. Ahead of them, in the square stood a forest of poles. As they got closer, they saw the bodies nailed to them, hanging head down with their throats cut. They were all either young children or old people.

Josiah cursed softly. He called fire and incinerated them. "Can you sense anything living in this place?"

Dynarien extended his senses, allowing his awareness to enter the earth and spread outward. "No."

"Can you sense undead?"

"I'm not a life-mage or a priest to sense their taint."

Josiah drew his sword and entered the nearest house. He found nothing there. As he started to leave, his boot heel clicked across something with a hollow sound. He dropped to his knees, pushing aside dirt and straw, pulling open a trap door. He heard a rustling sound, summoned a mage light, and found himself peering into hungry faces with red eyes and long teeth.

"Shit!" He dropped the door, fleeing into the sunlight. "Dynarien. It's a trap!"

"What?" Dynarien drew a long, golden sword, turning toward Josiah.

"Undead under the house."

"Hoon's get?"

"No. They'd be on us by now. Lemyari don't fear the light. Galee's bloodline does not make mass turnings. They hoard their powers." Josiah took a long pull from his flask, stoking the power higher. He sheathed his blade, lifting both hands with a word of command. Heat swelled across the village, filling it. Then the houses, one after another began to explode in flames. Shrieks and wails rose around them, but none of the vampires came out.

"Come on." Josiah grabbed Dynarien and jumped to the edge of the village, shouting to the scouts, "Back! Everyone get back." He sprang into the saddle, galloping the way they had come. Everyone followed. A loud whoosh came behind them and a hot wind followed it. They rode harder.

"What was it?" Borian asked as Josiah finally slowed his sweating mount to a walk.

"Vampires under the houses. They're destroyed by now, but the houses will be burning awhile. We won't be able to pass until it burns out."

Borian nodded. "What spell? Or is it a trade secret?"

"Conflagration. Biggest fire spell there is. Everything burns. Get caught in the middle and you go up with it." That was how he had taken out the troll army. *And that is how I intend to take out Hoon and Mephistis. All of them will burn.*

* * *

They sat around the table. Josiah to one side of Aejs and Maranya to the other with Borian and Dynarien across from her and Tagalong sitting on the chest at the end of the bed with Hanni.

"I will never get used to this," Josiah said, visibly shaken. He rested an elbow on the table, his forehead pressed into his hand covering his eyes. "The sight of the children on those poles..." It was more than that. He kept feeling Hoon's fangs in his neck, the taste of his blood, and the anguish of being raped. Dynarien had removed all the coercions. Hoon could not call him or take his mind now – yet the memory made his body itch, sent a tickle along his throat.

Borian nodded, sharing his feelings. "We did not go into all of the houses. We checked the first two after seeing those poles and withdrew."

"It's a good thing you did," Josiah replied, struggling to control his rapid breathing. "If there had been less light coming through those broken windows they might have come up and gotten you."

"It is good Aejs brought you with us," Maranya said, her tone grim.

"It looks like they drained those folk for their preserving bottles. Then they sated themselves on the others, the ones they turned. The strong ones. It was left there as a trap for anyone pursuing them. I don't think it was specifically set for you."

"What are the odds of stumbling on something like that again?" Maranya asked.

"Remote," Dynarien told her. "As Tori said, they were drained for the bottles by the look of it. That means the Lemyari and sa'necari intended to travel a fair distance before they needed to feed again. Sa'necari drain their victims like vampires because they like it. They find the whole process of death and terror – and the taste of warm blood – pleasurable. They could get along just fine without it, eating as we do for long periods. Hence they invented the bottles. Vampires on the other hand must have blood in large quantities periodically or smaller quantities regularly or they wither."

"And leaving too long a trail of bodies would be like hanging out a banner saying

'we're here'. That is how the Sharani tracked Mephistis and his followers to Hoon's valley," Josiah added. "Furthermore there's nothing on this side of the Hillora that Hoon wants. He doesn't dare get too close to Treth. Bohannon's hougans have bested him many, many times."

"With the exception of Rowanhart," Aejs said.

Josiah gave her a long, considered look. "It isn't Rowanhart he wants – it's you."

All eyes turned first to Josiah and then Aejs.

"Is this true?" Borian asked.

"Yes." Aejs scanned the faces, giving each a sharp appraising look. She laid her hands, palms up on the table, letting them all see the mark of Kalirion on one palm and Aroana's rune on the other. "Hoon wanted to possess me, to turn me. He wants a bride that he can make into a powerful paladin of darkness. When he tried to take me on the beach, he saw the mark. I can't be turned. Now he simply wants me dead. Especially since I destroyed his stronghold."

"Hell fuckin' damnation," Tagalong cursed. "we're riding right into him. He'll be at Charas with Mephistis. I know it. And tha guild ain't gonna be there ta help us."

"Hoon and Mephistis are why we are going to Charas," Aejs said, again scanning the faces. "My gods have given me the task of destroying them and rescuing the last of the life-mages."

Dynarien put his hand on Aejs'. "I put my life between you and them – Hoon and Mephistis."

The rest of those at the table added their hands and repeated the words.

"My power, my estates, my life and my honor I pledge to the defense of you and yours," Aejs replied. Then she allowed herself a small, bitter smile. "At least I'm damned hard to kill these days."

The meeting broke up and all but one departed.

Josiah lingered. There was a difference between suspecting something and actually voicing it as she had done. "You are a fine king and a good woman."

"I've been thinking about what you said yesterday. If I were still the soldier who owned the tavern in Vorgensburg, I would take him back. I would probably beat the hell out of him first, but I would take him back. As king, I must preserve my honor and he has dishonored me. I simply cannot do it."

"What about his child? Did you have to let the tritons kill it?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "I asked them to let me send a bi-kyndi master to take it from her. They threatened to declare war on our shipping and raid the coastline, if I tried to take Zyne and the child by force. Had I known she was seiryn, I would have handled it differently so that she never could have fallen into their hands in the first place. But until the ambush on the beach, I didn't. Then my hands were tied. There was nothing I could do. Tamlestari cried herself to sleep that night. I had desperately wanted a child by him and, for that reason alone, would have fought to get it. But all those lives depend on me and I could not put a single child before them. Even his." Aeijys sighed and her eyes filled. "He damaged himself to save me in Norendel. He's dying. The thought of having nothing left of him when he was gone – breaks my heart."

Josiah listened to her sorrow. "You still love him?"

"Yes. I still love him. Now I'll never have his child to comfort me when he is gone. I kept hoping they would let me save that child – let me keep that small piece of him."

"You have a great and good heart, Aeijstrys Rowan. I was wrong about you." He leaned in and kissed her.

"Tori, will you come to my bed and comfort me?"

"Yes."

* * *

There were two notes in the envelope that Laurelyanne found on the bed. She had carried it down to the table in the sitting room, and lost it among some other papers while she and the other mages were in the middle of pulling together the details for their new school and library: Tagalong was funding it. She had found the envelope that morning. Inside it were two sealed letters. One of them was addressed to herself and the other to Skree. Laurelyanne read hers in silence, sitting at her parlor table, feeling an anger building in her with a strong lacing of grief. Finally she rose, got her staff, and walked out, gesturing at Birdie, who had become a frequent visitor, and Miccanto follow. By the time she reached Skree's door she was shaking.

Skree answered and she shoved it wordlessly in his face. He took it and gestured for her to enter. She walked past him and sat on the couch, her face a study in outrage. Birdie followed and took a chair nearby.

"I got one too and I assume they're much the same," Laurelyanne said.

The sea-mage opened his and read:

"Skree,

I have thought long and hard about how all of you left me to die on the beach. I am certain that I deserved it. Sometimes I wish Birdie had not found me. I do not have much time left, but I am going to try and do the right thing at last, so I am leaving."

Josiah

"What does this mean?" Skree demanded of Birdie and Laurelyanne.

The two women looked at each other and then Laurelyanne spoke. "I've known for nearly a year that he was dying. He knew it too." Then slowly they told Skree everything that had happened over the last year, especially the incident during the battle on the beach and the way that his shields and magic had deteriorated as a result of the spell he cast to rescue Aeijys. Miccan detailed everything their mage group had discovered concerning the damage and deterioration, as well as Dynarien's discoveries. Slowly the whole story came out to Skree's vast shame. Skree, although he had been very young, had seen enough of the seiryn wars that, had he bothered to actually examine Josiah after the revelations started to come out, could have spared his godson much grief.

Skree went for a bowl and water, settling it on the table in the sitting room. Try as he might, he could not scry Josiah. No picture would appear. Skree sat back, his eyes strange, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "He's dead ... this can only mean he's dead. On the beach ... I never knew he was hurt. Bound, yes ... but not hurt."

"As damaged as he was physically and magically, Skree," Laurelyanne said, knowing full well that her words would wound. "He was easy prey to Zyne's magic. He did not enter her spell willingly. He did not have the strength to fight it. Then she betrayed him to Hoon. They split him into Josh and Josiah. Hoon laid the coercions that caused his attempt upon Aeijys. Hoon tormented, tortured, and raped him. Until the day they corded him, Josiah forbade me to tell anyone of his condition for fear of the very thing happening that did. You and only you would have recognized the seiryn hold on the day they corded him. But you would not look. Josiah was just another treacherous landsmon in your eyes. Now the damage is done."

The proud triton covered his face with his hands and wept in shame and grief.

* * *

Aeijys ignored Josiah the next day. He felt gratified to be off the hook with her; yet discomfited and insecure at the same time. That night one of the merchants, a slender young man with auburn hair visited her and did not leave until morning.

"She is definitely trying to keep her promise to Stari," Josiah observed morosely as they mounted up again.

"What promise?" Dynarien asked.

"That she scratch her itch with a lot of different myn instead of getting too involved with one."

"Oh, that one. You are not here to sleep with her. We're supposed to be protecting her."

"I know."

The day proved quiet until they made camp. Josiah watched the auburn-haired merchant return to Aejs' tent and sighed heavily, stretching out on his bedroll. Dynarien had sentry duty and was off near the other end of camp. Aejs provoked such intense conflicts within him. He knew he should stay away from her, and yet he was drawn irresistibly back to her, loving her as desperately as ever, burning with shame for the way he had hurt her.

"Wishing it were you going to her tent, ugly man?"

Josiah started in spite of himself. He had not heard Maranya come up.

"No shame in wishing, ugly man," Maranya went on, almost purring, watching him closely. "I wonder myself some times."

"She is beautiful."

"I have had no one in my bed since my lover died. Nearly two years now."

"That surprises me. You are a fine looking woman."

"I rather thought you might be willing to ... how is it they put it here on the Blood Coast? Scratch my itch?"

Josiah tensed. Maranya was the one man he most desperately needed to stay away from. Although Dynarien assured him that nothing could disrupt the change spell, should Maranya discover his identity she would kill him. Had he been in the fullness of his strength and health, he could have matched her – he had been a fine swordsmen – but not now. "That would not be a good idea."

"If you're worried about the king, I asked permission. She said fine."

"You would be disappointed."

"I doubt that. I seriously doubt that." Maranya's dark eyes connected with Josiah's and a spark passed between them. Recognition? No. That was not possible. Josiah was certain he had never met her before. And yet, what could it possibly be? And why now? He had been around her for a year. Was it because he was more firmly Josiah in his mind? Was she someone he had known before?

Maranya kissed him and he experienced a flash of intuition. "You're of the Order. You're making certain I'm safe to be with the king."

"You're brilliant, ugly mage. The Order came to Rowanhart. Our God favors Aejustrys Rowan."

"You're King's Shield."

"The key players are discovering that. So you must be one. Come to my tent?"

"Yes."

* * *

Tamlestari sat at her desk in the northwest wing of the keep. The wastebasket filled with torn up paper. She had been trying for three days to word a letter to Aejusts telling her that Josiah was dead and that he had apparently taken his own life. She had a scribe make copies of the note he had written to Skree. She had a wind-folk courier, the only kind who would be able to find Aejusts' company on the road to Charas and deliver it, waiting to take wing in pursuit of them. Her eyes were red and puffy, her nose the same. She had been cruel to him. They had all been. But she had been the worst.

* * *

They reached the Ford of Hillora two weeks after passing the ruined village. Josiah drank discreetly, just enough to keep the magic awake and no more. He doubted at first that he could do it, and it took great effort for the first few days, but he managed by trying to stay in the Josiah part of his brain and memories rather than the Josh parts. Hoon and Zyne had awakened too much of Josh within him to ever be wholly Josiah again.

They turned south toward Minnoras two days later. Josiah woke in the wee hours and went to relieve himself. Again, he found himself face to face with Aejusts.

"Majesty," he said politely. She rose from her prayers and regarded him.

"So formal now? No one else is around."

"I ... uh ... I didn't expect you."

"Nor I, you." She came to him, bent slightly, and kissed him. "So far, you are the most fun. I think I'll keep you."

Josiah tensed.

"Oh, I don't mean it that way. Just until someone more interesting comes along."

Josiah forced himself to relax. "As you wish."

"Precisely. As I wish. Come back to my tent with me."

"What about Maranya?"

"I don't own you, Tori. Now, are you coming?"

"Yes."

* * *

Zyne wore her hair braided and wound about her head. She dressed in a split riding skirt and long over tunic like the landsfolk about them. She ached for the sea, but Hoon's presence reassured her. They crossed the Hillora by boat. After that he dropped the glamour on her and began to deliberately exert his power to make permanent changes in her appearance. It was based on his knowledge of shape changing. He gradually removed her scales, revealing a warm brown skin beneath. He let her keep that, darkening her green hair to black. He could do nothing for her gills so he left them largely intact, but hidden. The absence of her voice and the scar he would blame on an attack by bandits in her childhood. That would get her sympathy in the right quarter, especially with her being rich and beautiful. He hid the scar and gills with a ribbon around her throat.

"I need a kingdom," he told her. "And you will get me one."

:*How?* : she signed.

"You shall see."

They arrived at his estate near Minnoras a week past the equinox. Timon came out to meet them. He always knew when his father was near.

Hoon helped Zyne dismount.

"This is my son, Timon," Hoon said. "Timon, this is Zyne."

Zyne smiled at him, inclining her head briefly and signed. :*It is good to meet you* :

Timon raised an eyebrow at his father.

"They severed her vocal chords," Hoon told him, gesturing at the servants to take her to rooms and see to her needs. Then he headed for his rooms. "Mephistis came through here?"

Timon followed him. "Yes, father. He's grown very powerful. We had some trouble

with him."

"What kind of trouble?" Hoon changed from his riding clothes, pulling off his boots and stretching his legs as he tossed them in a corner where one of the nibari would clean them. The black silk pants felt fine on his legs after so many weeks in leather.

"The usual. He wanted lives. He had seven rather strong sa'necari with him. Fortunately I had anticipated what he might be like once healed and had brought in royals from several of our holdings. Where's Anksha?"

"Hunting. She'll be along." Hoon did not bother with a shirt as he headed for his garden, forcing Timon to follow him about until he finally settled on his favorite bench.

"What is Zyne, Father? She smelled different."

"She's seiryn. That's why they severed her vocal chords. A nice, deft job they did of it too."

"What are you going to do with her?"

"Turn her eventually. Now summon some nibblets. When I've fed, we'll discuss Mephistis further."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CALLING HER NAME

A diverted flow from the nearby artesian spring fed the huge indoor pool. Zyne frolicked, happy to find herself in water at last, even if it was fresh and not salt. Anksha joined her, laughing and splashing. Despite her similarity to a cat, Anksha swam like an otter. A handful of Hoon's loveliest nibari added to the assortment of satisfying nudity like a collection of water nymphs. Potted plants surrounded it. Hoon and Timon picked up the threads of their previous conversation concerning Mephistis.

"So he wanted lives. Did you have to fight him?"

"No. Not directly. I sent the nibari to the secure courts when we first sighted them. Then I invited them into the main hall, offered them a conventional dinner with lycans serving and only royals attending. They became demanding. Mephistis attempted to dominate me and discovered he couldn't." Timon laughed, but there was a bitter edge to it. "His power tasted like Waejonan's."

"So what then?"

"I threw him out!" Timon said indignantly.

"Did you give him any references?"

Timon gave his father a sly, sidewise glance that made him look distinctly like a fox. "I told him to make his own way to Charas. But I did tell him that Lord Darmungaard occasionally made appointments with sa'necari newcomers, but that I did not know him personally, and pointed out that there was a necromancer's guild in Charas. That otherwise I could not help him."

Hoon made a choking sound and then exploded into laughter. Darmungaard was one of Hoon's aliases that specifically would not allow uninvited sa'necari past the doors. Unless Mephistis could give them the right name as referring them, they would not let him in and Timon had clearly not given it to him. The necromancer's guild was comprised solely of houngans out of Treth who despised the sa'necari; they were speakers for the dead, channels, spiritualists, and mediums. Mephistis would get a cold, if not outright hostile welcome. Hoon would know where to find him when he got there.

His people had destroyed the towers and school of the life mages of Charas in an exchange of favors from Aurean the Banewitch Queen of Waejontor during the Great War, partly to turn aside their inquiring too far south and perhaps uncovering his own extensive holdings and networks. All the sa'necari, until he had revealed himself to Mephistis – who because of Anksha's bindings would never reveal it – believed that Brandrahoon had perished long ago. Instead they simply knew him under other names and guises, in many unconnected places.

He had goals and infinite patience: pry his children's souls out of the Legacy and free them to the wheel; seize the rest of the Legacy's power for his own; and destroy Waejontor, replacing it with his own dark kingdom so that it would be as if his brother's realm had never been. Then his vengeance upon his brother would be complete. "Once there were three brothers," Hoon muttered under his breath the words that had become a litany for him, "Brandrahoon, Isranon Dawnhand, and Waejonan the Accursed."

* * *

Aejys' company entered Thrice-Walled-Minnoras, the City of Spirits, as the day waned. The walls had been restored and strengthened in the fifteen years since the city nearly fell to Zol, a southern ally of Waejontor. No one knew what had roused the ancient spirits to save the city that day. Kalestari Desharen, Tamlestari's ma'aram, had been there when the city was nearly overrun, fighting her way free with her companions as the spirits roused. It had been the Horn of Sephree sounded by a wind-spirit who had followed that company that called them from their sleep. The roused spirits had then possessed and transformed the citizens physically into the ancient warriors they had been and the army of Zol was destroyed to the last mon.

Afterward, Minnoras was called the City of Spirits, although the spirits now slept again.

Aejys settled her company for the night on the central commons, where most of the merchant caravans set up. Then she went down to the inn to get a meal and whatever news she could of how the road lay ahead. A little old woman in black robes sat at a table, watching Aejys openly as she entered. Two children sat with the woman eating. She waited until Aejys had found a table and sat down with Tagalong, Maranya, and Josiah, then rose and approached Aejys at a shuffling walk. The old woman's back was humped and she was bent with age; the lines and folds of her face were deep; her nose hooked. The boy looked about nine and the girl twelve. The girl supported a twig broom in the bend of her elbow, never releasing it or setting it aside, even though that would have made it easier to take her meal.

"Majesty," she said in a cracked voice. "I hear you are allowing merchants to ride along behind you for safety."

Aejys regarded her a moment, wondering what kind of merchant the woman could possibly be. "Yes. Are you asking?"

"If it would please, your majesty, yes. I am Dyna, a seller of used magical items. I'm traveling with my grand children, Pie and Sugar."

"You're traveling with children?" Aejys was incredulous. "Just the three of you?"

"Oh, yes. We manage, I assure you. But the road has grown dangerous and, I rather hoped you would let us ride with you. For the children's sake, of course."

Dynanna had just hit a nerve with Aejys, for her liege-god Aroana insisted on the protection of children and her paladins were bound to defend them when they came to her. "Yes, you can travel in the main van as a part of my company where the children will be safest for as long as you need to."

"Thank you," Dynanna said, bowing the best her twisted old body could manage. "We are traveling to Charas."

"So are we," Aejys told her. "Dyna, fetch the children and join us, then we will see you to our camp."

Dynanna brought the children over. Sugar had large, soulful eyes and a quiet manner; her marmalade hair, hanging loose to her waist, had a habit of sliding forward around her delicate face. She was a very pretty child and it touched Aejys in special places, making her want to protect her from all the dangers of the road and see her safely to Charas where lecherous myn and unholy monsters could not touch her.

"Set the broom aside, child," Aejys said. "I'll not let you lose it."

Sugar shook her head, saying in a voice almost too soft to hear, "Lucky broom."

"Two swords?" Pie said, sliding onto the bench beside Maranya and looking up at her with his head craned. "I've never seen anyone carried two swords ... except LorenRain." A sudden tear trickled from one eye and ran along his snub nose. Maranya wiped it off.

"You knew him?"

"Yeah. He visited our village."

"Several of us carry two. It's Aluin style." Maranya liked the boy instantly and began telling him stories. Like many paladins of Aroana, a god devoted to the ferocious protection of the small and helpless, she had a weak spot when confronted by children.

* * *

Dynarien had remained in camp while Aejs went in. She had decided that they could go in in small groups, so he had waited for his turn. He almost choked when he saw the old woman and the two children with their horses and pack animals ride up beside Aejs and the others. It did not matter what form his sister took, he always recognized her. He let the introductions die down and gave up his chance of going in next. As soon as he found the opportunity he took the old woman aside.

"Sis? I thought we were going to Charas separately," he hissed.

She grinned and a different face flashed across her features, long red-blonde hair, and piquant nose. "Told you I was going to be sneaky as hell. What do you think?" She turned around twice and then a third time just to be certain he had taken it all in.

"It's good. It's very good," he said grudgingly. "Is that Pieface and Sugar Maple with you?"

"What do you think? You told me not to go in alone!"

He wanted to be irritated with her, but could not be. "I'm glad you're here." He hugged her and she laughed, hugging him back.

Dynanna walked away to get her two paladins and their animals settled. Dynarien immediately stole back to Hanni's wagon where he found Tagalong with the stone mage. He motioned them into the wagon and huddled them together. "We may have problems or, on the other hand, we may not," he said, in a very, very small voice, sounding almost half panicked, which alarmed both of the dwarves. "My sister's here."

"Your sister's what?" Tagalong's usually coarse voice squeaked.

"Sssh! No so loud. She'll hear you. She's got great hearing. She's joined up. Aejs just put her right in the middle with the auxiliaries. One at a time, peek out the back. See the little old lady?"

They did so and returned.

"That's her. In disguise. The two kids are actually Pieface and Sugar Maple. Paladins."

Hanni laughed, walked over to his bed and sat down, taking out his pipe. "I'll say one thing. This is already the most interestin' trip to Charas I've ever made."

* * *

Two weeks passed without further incident and it now appeared that they would reach Charas in the first week of summer. There were many new faces along the way. The auburn-haired merchant had been left behind at Minnoras, but there were others. Some of them had been quite skilled in bed, but Aejs was losing interest in the game and beginning to question whether Tamlestari had been right about it. The only one she kept coming back to was the ugly man who, more often than not, refused her. She enjoyed being with him, listening to his stories, discussing various matters. His knowledge was great, broad, and interesting. His touch was gentle and skilled. His attitude was infuriating at times, but not unjust. She had been unfair to Josiah. She should have at least explained matters to him herself after the ambush on the beach.

A windfolk courier overtook her with a message from Skree and Laurelyanne. It was several weeks old and when she read it, she wept and told no one what was in it. "I killed him," she cried long into her pillow.

* * *

The house stood in the tradesmyn's quarter, a large stone box, three stories with a basement. Hoon regarded the pattern of the blue rough-hewn stone shot through with grey, the white painted frames of the windows and the heavy white doors, considering whether to knock. Anksha stood beside him. From what his divinator Mondarius and his other officers had been able to tell him, Mephistis had acquired a handful of followers from the lower classes as well as his seven sa'necari soon after moving into this house.

"What do you think, Anksha? Can we do this ourselves? Teach him a lesson?"

Her eyes narrowed in a sleepy feline expression, broken by a faint showing of her fangs. "He's taken the bit in his teeth and thinks he's free."

Hoon laughed softly. "Next time he should wear a check rein, perhaps?"

"Let's knock on the door."

Hoon smiled and did so.

A servant answered. "Lord Darmungaard!"

Hoon inclined his head. "I need to see Prince Mephistis immediately."

The servant showed them into a sitting room, indicating that they should sit. "The prince is engaged in a magical working at the moment."

"Mortgiefan?" Lord Hoon inquired, watching the servant flinch from the word. "I know what he is and what his proclivities are. We're old friends, aren't we, Anksha?"

"Oh, yes," Anksha said, swishing her robes with her hands in a seductive little turn. He had dressed her for an outing at the theater, like a lady of substance in silk and satin, fit to accompany a high lord, and it brought out her prettiness. .

"Please," the servant gestured at the couch and chairs again. "They will finish presently."

Hoon wagged a finger at the servant, with a feral smile. "No. You will take us to them now. Otherwise I will return with my people and I will be even more insistent."

"My Lord Darmungaard, please..."

"Now."

The servant stepped back and walked away without a word. Hoon and Anksha followed. He made a tiny gesture at a door and kept walking. Hoon grinned at Anksha. The vampire put his ear to the door and could hear chanting. He turned to Anksha, his grin spreading wider. Very, very carefully he opened the door and they crept down. Mortgiefan indeed. Three bleeding tables stood in the center with three sa'necari busily sating themselves while four more watched hungrily. The middle one was Mephistis, cursing and moaning, "Anksha. Anksha. Die you stupid beast!" With each thrust of the blade matching the movement of his cock in the dying woman's body.

Anksha's lips writhed back from her fangs and she licked them, slipping up behind him. Hoon drew his sword and came to stand behind the watchers.

"Wishing she were me, O randy prince?"

Mephistis shrieked, climbing the corpse beneath him and rolling over, nearly sliding off. "Anksha!"

"Is this the creature?" One of the sa'necari cried, raising power. This one, Mephistis had found in Charas.

"I wouldn't," Hoon said, prodding him with the point of his blade and making his presence known. The watchers whirled, noticing the vampire lord for the first time.

"Kill one for me, Mephistis," Anksha said, her casual tone belying the savagery with which she snapped the dominance link awake in his mind and body.

Mephistis' eyes glazed, his lips parted, and allowing a trickle of stolen blood to run from the corner. He seized the nearest sa'necari before the mon could move, dragging him close. The prince's fangs extended and he sank them in the hapless sa'necari's throat, sucking the blood, life, and stolen souls out of him. Mephistis let the corpse fall against the table and slip to the floor while he eyed the others.

Anksha smiled. She walked over to the rest, regarding them. There would be no more talk of rebellion. She sniffed them, smelling their power. When she had determined which of them was nearest to Mephistis in strength, she rubbed against him smiling. He shivered, feeling his body react.

"Your name again?" she asked, her eyes meeting his. Her breasts tilted invitingly, the nipples hard and erect against the silk. She could see the way he had to fight his impulse to reach for them. She triggered the primal scent glands in her body so that their fragrance swept over him, into him. This would not be the gradual game she had played with Mephistis.

"Bodramet," the sa'necari answered, breathing hard, his thick member shoving against his pants.

"That is a nice name," Anksha purred, pressing herself against him, rubbing his hardness. "Would you like to walk with me tomorrow?"

Bodramet trembled, his eyes growing large with lust and need. "Yes. Yes, I would like that."

"Come for me at Lord Darmungaard's tomorrow, at noon. Do not be late."

"I won't be."

Anksha walked back to Mephistis. "We need to talk." She crooked her finger at him and they left the basement. "Where are your rooms?"

"You're going to take them all, aren't you?" Mephistis' voice shook.

"Yes," Anksha replied. "One at a time they will all beg me to bite them and I will. There is one missing. Where is the one you call Isranon?"

"Not Isranon. Please not Isranon." Mephistis' voice shook and he caught at her arm. "Please, not Isranon."

Anksha cocked her head at him, her eyes filling with an odd mix of curiosity and anger. "Because you love him?"

"Yes. I love him. He's my only friend."

Anksha growled. "Don't beg. It's too late to beg. I should take him now, simply because you love him. I should make you watch while I tear him apart. Do not anger me and I will leave him for last. Because he is the weakest. I did not like what I found you doing."

Mephistis trembled violently, knowing what was coming as he turned the knob and entered his bedroom. His loins came to attention even as fear shivered through the rest of him and his stomach soured. Anksha had him perfectly conditioned to her will. A table and chairs stood to one side, boasting a bottle of fine wine and three glasses. The broad bed, slightly rumpled red and green covers lay under the window as if daring someone from the street to see what the occupants were doing.

Anksha smiled approvingly as Mephistis disrobed without being asked and stretched out in the middle of the bed to await her pleasure. She poured herself a glass of wine, tasted it, and, deciding the vintage was acceptable, drank it down. Then she rummaged through a dresser and found a silk sash to stuff in his mouth. No need to terrify the others with his screams since she planned to take them all over the next few days. Anksha climbed onto the bed and straddled him carefully, shifting him around inside her until she hit the nub of pleasure just right. She had heard the Sharani built toys that worked as well and did not get tired. She would ask Hoon to buy her one. She had also heard that some Sharani had a power over the male body with which they could force the toy to stay up until they had ridden it to their satisfaction. Anksha wished there were some way to steal that power, it would make life much more pleasant.

He started to weep as soon as he came. Anksha shoved a corner of the sash in his mouth. "Oh troublesome prince, if I had not caught you killing a woman in my name, wishing she were me, I would not be nearly as rough with you now."

* * *

Isranon and his friends, the lycans Nevin and Olin, returned late from watching a comedy performed. He loved the comedies and had begun learning how to laugh freely at last. Nineteen years old, the young sa'necari had spent the first fourteen years of his life running and hiding from his own kind, and the past five struggling to survive among them as the prince's man. Two familiar figures stepped out of the house. Isranon froze.

"See to your prince," Hoon said. "Anksha was a bit rough."

Anksha laughed, bouncing along beside him.

Then Isranon was running. He found Mephistis, lying badly torn in the middle of his bed. Isranon immediately started to cut his wrist and offer it to the prince, but Mephistis stopped him.

"You must flee... Anksha ... she's going to take you all. All my sa'necari." *Oh gods, what have I done? Doomed my only friend ?*

Isranon felt chilled and hollow. "I have nowhere to run to. The beast would merely hunt me down. No one escapes her. The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me. I am your sworn man. I will not abandon you."

"I have been a fool. She caught me riting a woman in her name and this is how she intends to punish me. Anksha ... she wants you especially ... because I love you. Forgive me."

"Always." Isranon cut his wrist, put it to Mephistis' mouth and the prince drank. Isranon remained beside him until the prince slept and then went downstairs where Nevin and Olin waited. They barraged him with questions, but he simply shook his head.

So it has come to this? That all my hopes were ashes. Isranon felt hollowed out. Isranon built the castle in his mind, retreating into it, into the silences, ordering himself not to think about his fate. He was the last of his kind, of his name. There would be no more Dark Brothers of the Light. No more descendants of the Dawnhand. His life wound toward its end and there was no way for him to prevent it. So he took refuge in acceptance, which was, after all, part of the silences.

* * *

"You want to talk about it?" Josiah asked the next day as they rode through a heavily forested valley of elm and willow, crossing several streams.

"No," Aejs' replied, her eyes distant with suppressed hurt, her lips tight.

"It was something bad, wasn't it? Did someone die?" Josiah felt a tremor of worry, thinking of Skree, Taun and Tamlestari. He could not ask about them directly because so far as she knew they had never met.

"No one you knew. Make me think of something else."

So he did. It took every bit of discipline not to probe further.

That night, in his arms, she told him.

"I killed him. He bryndeled. I should have talked to him. Explained why I did what I did ... why I couldn't take him back. Worse. He thinks I left him on the beach to die. He thinks – thought I left him there! If I had known ... if I had only known. Now I can't tell him."

"You didn't kill him." Josiah did not know what to do. He could not tell her that he was alive, that they were together, only to do what he intended to in Charas. That would not be fair. In fact, loving her now, was not fair since he was only going there to die. The only way to be certain of getting both of them was a suicide run. There were places in Charas that could not be Jumped into or out of, such as the council chambers. If he could get them there, then Mephistis and Hoon would perish. He would fill it with all the fires of hell. "He made his choice. You did not make it for him."

* * *

Isranon sat in the garden, playing his flute. He no longer wandered the city. The heart had gone out of him. The music emerged listless and melancholy, resigned and sad. He could no longer play his way out of his depressions, his griefs. More and more he found himself thinking about his father. The elder Isranon had not fought back when the sa'necari came for him. He had attempted, instead, to reason with them and buy the others an opportunity to escape. In the end, only the younger Isranon and his sister – whose name he had not spoken in years – escaped. The teachings had failed his father and his people. So Isranon, playing his flute, found no solace in the teachings either. *Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow*, sang the notes emerging from the flute.

He thought also of the ghost's words to him after he killed Troyes, that one day he would walk with kings and gods of light to Ildyrsetts to find the staff of his ancestor the Dawnhand. He had clung to that foreseeing as a raft in rough waters and now that was gone. No one ever escaped the Beast once she decided to take him as her blood-slave. And he would not spend the rest of his life running in fear of his fate the way his father's people had. He would accept it like a man when it came.

"What bothers you?" Nevin asked, settling on his haunches beside him.

Isranon shook his head. He had retreated into his castle, his silences, retreating even from his clan-brothers.

"What did Mephistis say to you? You have not been the same in days?" Olin growled.

Isranon lowered his flute, yet still said nothing. A scream came from the upper floor. The lycans glanced; Isranon did not, saying in a resigned voice, "Anksha has taken Bodramet." Then he began to play again. Two days later she took Gareth, the second of Mephistis' sa'necari, and the lycans understood Isranon's mood. They

knew then that Anksha was taking them all, one by one.

* * *

"Yer getting' involved with him, Aejs," Tagalong said, watching her closely. She sat at the table with her legs drawn up into the chair, chewing on a piece of bread. This was not supposed to be happening. Josiah was just supposed to be getting one last shot at Hoon before he died. Tagalong knew Josiah wouldn't last much longer. She knew how hard Dynarien had to fight to keep him going. One way or another Aejs was going to get her heart broken all over again. But then it must be awful hard on Josiah just being near her. Shit. So many hard choices.

Aejs sat across from her smoking. Tori had just turned her invitation down again and she was feeling both peeved and hurt, although she could never stay angry at him because his reasons made sense and, she suspected a lot of it had to do with his feelings for his dead na'halaefs. "I'm not. I promise you, I'm not. He only has room in his heart for two women, both Sharani, both dead."

"That bad?" Tagalong softened. Josiah had told her about Aejs and Shularrien being the same mon, of how he had loved her through two lives now. It made it all the harder, made him all the sadder.

"Hoon killed them. And their son."

"Bastard," Tagalong growled. "I see that cockwhore murderin' asshole I'm gonna dint his head in a serious fashion. Period. End of Story." Josiah had not told her that part. Hoon had hurt Josiah over and over, finally taking him completely in Rowanhart and forcing him to hurt Aejs. More and more Tagalong understood Josiah's desperate need to destroy Hoon and she would help him. So would Hanni.

Aejs managed a faint smile at the vehemence in her best friend's voice. "So it can't go anywhere and I know it. So does he."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." *And you don't know the half of it.*

* * *

For the last week the forest had closed about the road in a tightening wall, the clearings grew smaller and smaller, spaced farther and farther apart. The stretch of land in which the company traveled was an unremitting wilderness even along the road. They had to ride far later into the night before finding a decent clearing than Aejs liked, making a circling camp after full dark, and doubling the sentries. As it was the trees seemed to close in around them. The scouts were still out and Borian had had no word from any of them, which worried him.

Aejys sat on a small folding stool beside Borian and Josiah at the center, surrounded by tents. Maranya sat cross-legged on the ground in the shadows of a tent. The birds and crickets fell silent. Borian raised his head, frowning and saw the tiny face, peering around a tent at them, raising a blowgun to its lips a fraction of a second before the king did. Then he threw himself across the intervening distance, knocking Aejys to earth with a grunt, half-falling atop her.

Aejys felt Borian's body jerk, stiffen and then go still. She pushed him off and sat up. She could tell from his face that he was dead with three small darts in his neck and arms. She started shouting orders. "They're all over the place!"

Josiah spotted two more and burned them. Instantly the soldiers, alerted to their presence went after them, charging with their shields up. Maranya's blades whirled, knocking the streaking darts from the air in front of her as she went after them. The creatures died easily once they lost the element of surprise: they were armed only with their darts and wore no armor. She butchered seven of the tiny things in minutes.

Josiah started to turn when pain seared through his upper back and shoulder. He dropped to his knees, getting off one last spell into the forest. Then he collapsed on his face with two small bolts protruding from him.

"Tori! No!" Aejys knelt beside him, feeling for his pulse. It was weak and thready.

Maranya returned, bending at her side. "How is he?"

"Not good." Aejys lifted him in her arms, carrying him into the tent and laid him in her bed. "Borian's dead. What's happening out there?"

"Fight's over. There was a lot of magic in play in moments. Looked like five or six mages, all on our side, not just three, especially with one down almost immediately."

Aejys had had mysterious unidentified mage-support two years ago on the journey to Shaurone that had proved to be Josiah and the High Mage of Winter, Eliahu, who had hired on with her company under the pretenses of being a cook. He had been a very fine cook, but his finest efforts had come as a mage. She wondered how he had fared since going home. Then she thought of Josiah and she felt bereft, comfortless. She touched Tori. He did not belong to her. He belonged to his lost ones.

"What does it look like out there?"

"Too many wounded. Those darts are poisoned."

She forced a breath down, fear clutching at her throat, her lips pressing into a taut line of bitterness, as she remembered telling Tagalong that she was not becoming emotionally involved with him. The lies of a casual dalliance were being thrown back in her face by circumstance. She could not stay with him – her people would

suspect that something had happened to her – but she would come back to him.
"Find someone to tend him and I will see to my people."

Maranya nodded and left.

She could see the creatures now: small, female looking things with twisted faces, pumpkin colored skin and pointed ears.

* * *

Dynanna's eyes saucered as a sentry collapsed not three yards from her. She saw the bolt in her neck and shrieked. "Imps!"

Pieface unhooked his silver pan and sent it whirling into the trees, taking two heads and one stomach before it returned to his hand and he sent it out again. "What'er they doing here?" He shouted, "It's the wrong side of the river!" Imps had a standing feud going with the Badree Nym near both Blue Dog Pass and Pirate's Gap.

Sugar Maple gestured with her broom and trees began to seize and squish them.
"Don't know," she shouted back.

The Trickster's mouth tightened and she fumed "Can't even get... Shit! Asses, Asses, all fall down!"

Seven imps tumbled from the trees screaming and clutching their stomachs.

The skirmish ended as quickly as it had begun. In the stillness, Dynanna stalked to the front of the camp to see how Aejs and her brother had fared.

* * *

"What are these creatures?" Aejs asked, squatting for a closer look at the small body one of her soldiers had dragged in. It was female, roughly four feet tall with pumpkin colored skin and red-orange hair.

"Psycho-amazon war imps from hell with an attitude," Dynanna said wryly, then when everyone looked at her confused, added, "Flagari imps. I've never seen them on this side of the Hillora. They usually mix it up with the Badree Nym on the other side. You were lucky. Only the Queen poisons her bolts with death lotus and riccin. The rest use talrym berries, which is bad, but not as bad. Death lotus is hard to find, takes lots of searching. Talrym, now, anywhere there's swamps..." Dynanna rattled on, giving far more details than anyone needed or wanted to know. Dynarien rolled his eyes and hoped she would stop soon. "Now, if it had been Streganari imps, all the bolts would have been poisoned with death lotus. Streganari are real patient types." The Badree Nym, like Pieface and Sugar Maple, were nearly indestructible and more than a match for the imps who were their arch-nemeses.

"I don't consider any of this luck," Aejys said angrily to the old woman. "I've lost all my scouts, six soldiers and I may yet lose Tori and seven others. The only wounded not affected by the poison are Sharani. And I've got nine of those. They'll be fine if the wounds don't infect. That's thirteen dead and seventeen wounded. All in the space of minutes."

Tagalong sat next to her, looking very grim.

"Imps are tough."

Aejys nodded and walked back to her tent. Tori lay in her bed. The small bolts lay on the table.

"If he didn't have some partial immunity, he'd already be dead." Dynarien told her, rising from the campstool.

"Like Borian and my scouts?"

Dynarien nodded. He did not tell her that Josiah had immunity because of the spell of shared life he had cast to save him from the lemyari venom. That might have given his true identity away. He had solved the problem of the accidental gene bonding later and created a purer form of the spell, something that Josiah, not being a Reader, could never have done. "It works fast."

Aejys sat beside Josiah, gripping his hand. "I'm tired of losing the people I care about," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper, her eyes focused more inward than outward, distracted.

Josiah opened his eyes, as if in response to her voice. She could see the feverish glaze and dilated pupils, the sweat beading his face. "Shularrien," he moaned. "You don't want to go there..."

"His dead mate," Dynarien told her. "Hoon killed her."

"I know." *And I stand in her shadow. I don't think he'll ever love anyone else. Including me. We're travelers in the night. Nothing more.*

"Shularrien..." He began to thrash. Aejys put her hands on his shoulders, pressing him back. "Shularrien... Oh gods, no!" And then he screamed, a terrible animal cry of grief, and went still. Aejys' lips parted and her eyes filled. She touched the pulse point in his neck and found it racing.

Dynarien dug around in the saddlebags he had placed on the table. Half an hour ago he had secretly Jumped to Imralon for the antidotes. Fusaaki told him that even with them there was a less than fifty percent chance of survival, but that was better than nothing. Josiah was never in any real danger from the poison – the transfusions of yuwenghau blood Dynarien had been giving him insured that. However, the stress of

the wounding had driven him into another attack too quickly for Dynarien to prevent it. Dynarien brought out several bottles, pouring them together in a single bottle before Aejs could see that one was the unmistakably pollendine shade of purple and the other the deep blue of amphereon. He put four fingers into a glass and stirred it, then brought it over. "Can you get him sitting up?"

Aejys slid her arm around Josiah, raising him cradled in her arms, his head against her shoulder.

"That's good." By working slowly, putting small amounts in Josiah's mouth and then stroking his throat to trigger involuntary responses, they got him to swallow all of it without choking. "Middle of the night, you need to try and get more of this down him. If you need help, wake me."

"I will."

Aejys climbed into the bed, wrapping herself around him beneath the covers to keep him warm as the fever turned to chills. Several times during the night he seemed aware of her presence and each time he called her "Shularrien."

She found herself feeling vaguely sad, and jealous of a dead woman. In the wee hours of the morning, she left the bed, tucking the blankets tightly around him and moved to the table where she sat smoking and staring through the tent flap, trying to get a handle on what she was feeling and everything that had gone down the previous day. Darien seemed certain that if Tori lived through the night he would survive. Aejs knew she loved him. She also knew that when they reached Charas she intended to let him walk away without telling him how she felt. Memories held so much power – especially his for Shularrien and Nariya. She had no place in his life and no right to. Besides, she had her own memories of Brendorn ... and Josiah.

Aejys realized her pipe had gone out. She opened her tobacco pouch and found it empty, so she went to the chest to refill it. Digging around she felt something tiny and hard like a small stone fallen down the side among the clothes. Curious, she dug deeper and brought out a small smooth piece of ivory. Turning it over, she saw it was a piece of scrimshaw that Josiah must have given her. Aejs' hand closed tighter around the bit of scrimshaw. *She died and then she lived and she opened her eyes in pain and anguish and gazed up at a weather beaten man in a blue-white aura like some incredible avatar of Kalirion and she remembered why she loved him; why she would always love him; and why she loved Tori for being so much like him.* Tears streamed down her face and the intensity of the magic and remembered emotions built to a screaming pitch that slammed through her, she screamed and fainted.

The scream brought people crowding into the tent where they found her laying in a heap beside the bed.

"What's wrong with her?" Maranya demanded.

Dynarien pried over her hand and the stone fell to the ground. He folded a bit of leaf over it. "Looks like a memory stone was mistaken for a bit of ivory, turned into scrimshaw and then accidentally charged too strongly." He pocketed the piece, and then moved her to the bed. "She'll be all right, just needs to sleep it off."

* * *

"The crates are not going to topple, Josiah!" Aejys yelled at him, rolling her eyes in an exaggerated fashion. "I know what I'm doing. I've done this before!"

"Shularrien, these two are not even," Josiah said, squatting and pointing at two middle ones that were turned slightly, but Aejys was already climbing.

"You worry too much!"

"No! I just plan better than you do, you're the one who's always charging in and breaking something." Josiah ran around behind her with his arms outstretched. "If you fall and break your neck, you're ma'aram's going to kill me for getting you those crates again."

"Damn it, Josiah! Will you shut up! You're going to make me fall with all this worrying!" Aejys' hand just barely reached the lowest branches. She gave a small bouncing spring and grabbed the closest one, her fingers scrabbling. Josiah gasped sharply as the crates shook and shifted, and then threw himself around them, hugging desperately at full extension, standing on tiptoe.

"Don't, don't, don't, don't."

Aejys could not hold on and as her fingers slipped she gave another bounce. This time she managed to grasp the branch, which was great good fortune – for her. The crates went tumbling along with Josiah. She swung herself into the branches and sat looking down at him, stifling a giggle.

Josiah, lying amidst the havoc of tumbled crates, glared for a long moment.

"You need to stack them up again," Aejys told him, grinning.

"I know."

"Well, are you going to stack them?"

Josiah heaved a deep sigh. "Yes."

"Are you going to climb up here with me?"

"If we're both up a tree, who will get us down?"

"I will. I will always be there to get us out of trouble."

Josiah laughed and then sobered. "And I will always be there for you, Shularrien, always." Then he started stacking the crates again.

* * *

Dynanna stole into the tent to finally have her first close look at Josiah in over twenty years. She had not seen him since he was a baby this life around. Cautiously she removed her brother's casting and saw him like he really was. He looked old and worn out, far more than his twenty-six years. He had grown a beard and let his hair get long to help conceal the scars Hoon had left him with. She knelt, brushing his hair away from his neck, saw the scars and sighed.

"See what I mean?" Dynarien said, standing suddenly at his sister's side. "We should have kept a closer eye on him."

Dynanna Read him, frowning deeply. "I should have told Kalirion what I'd done when we first brought him back."

"He could have done more for him than we have." Dynarien felt the godmark burning in his palm. Kalirion had heard them. Sooner or later, Dynanna was bound to see it and then she would give Kalirion an angry earful for taking her brother. He was not certain he would survive the aftermath of that.

"So could we. I understand how you feel now. I'm sorry. I'll do what I can."

* * *

They remained camped for nearly a week before moving on because it took that long for Josiah regain the strength to ride. Two more had died in the meantime. The company shifted things from the wagons onto the horses of the slain and moved the worst of the wounded into them. They set an easy pace and, despite Dynarien's best efforts, they lost four more myn. Finally they were camped less than four days from Charas

Aejys woke, as she so often did, in the early hours, and watched Tori's scarred ugly face as he slept. The closer they got to the city the more torn and hollow Aejys began to feel, knowing he would be leaving. She lay on her side with her back to the flap; one wing folded partly beneath her, leaning on her elbow, studying his thickset body, so different from those that usually attracted her. Her finger traced the scar on his face lightly, wondering where he had gotten it. It must have been a miracle that it had missed his eyes. She could not explain what was so appealing about it. Brendorn had been pretty, fair-skinned and auburn-haired; and Josiah had been handsome in a worn, battered fashion; but Tori, even without the scar, would still have been plain ugly. She pulled a robe about her and walked from the tent to squat

by the fire. Her body always remained unblemished, it would not hold a scar no matter how serious the wound; and that made her think briefly of Jaqui of Treth back in Rowanhart, spelled to perfection by her slain lover, Ria Torrundarsdottir.

He opened his eyes at her touch, captured her finger and kissed it.

"I suppose you have a home to go to."

Josiah nodded. He thought about his tower. Dynarien had told him that no one had ever found a way into it. Would it still be as he left it? Or had Hoon torn it apart after he died? Would Shularrien's painting still be there? He had made brushes from Shularrien's and Nariya's hair after they died to make the paintings with. He had finished Shularrien's, but not Nariya's. They were magical artifacts that would always show him what their present incarnations looked like so that he could find them again. He would try to finish Nariya's in whatever time was left him. He would never find them again, but they could find each other.

The nature of the curse he had cast on Hoon with his dying breath, the deal he had made with his god was that so long as an Abelard remained, he would be reborn into his lineage to find them. But if no Abelards remained, then his soul would be cast upon the winds of the worlds. His god did not like curses. He wondered briefly if Willidars might be considered Abelards, but such things tended to be quite literal. Amberlin Willidar had insisted that that might not be the case, but he doubted it. Kalirion had been terribly angered when Josiah demanded that curse of him. The Nine did not deal in curses as a rule and granted them with great reluctance because the rippling effects could not be foreseen and could prove devastating. So Josiah had chosen not to turn to his former liege-god for assistance. He would not ask for forgiveness and aid, he would not beg for healing and relief, since he could not bear to face Kalirion's anger. He would simply do what needed to be done and then, should Kalirion choose to forgive him freely, so be it. He would earn his forgiveness, not beg for it.

"Can I visit?" Aejs asked.

"If a king wants to visit, she visits."

"That's not what I meant. You loved her terribly."

"Shularrien? Yes. You remind me of her." Josiah closed his eyes briefly and sighed. She would know when she saw the painting. "Once I've gotten my tower cleaned up, you can visit. I'll show you her portrait." *I should not be doing this* . He stroked her breasts and she reached for him again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

DAWNLIGHT TOWER

Charas loomed suddenly out of the forest like a twisted monstrosity of uneven creation. The red brick battlemented wall that swept to the right of the white stone towers of guard at the gates stood a good six feet taller than the grey stone wall that extended to the left. The forest pressed against the walls in places, tree branches, and vines trailing. Aejs frowned. She could see no myn on the walls. They looked abandoned. Josiah saw the look on her face.

"They've never manned the walls," he said quickly.

"But look at it, anyone could climb right over..."

Dynarien and Dynanna laughed nervously. "Trust us." Dynarien said. "You don't want to climb over those walls. You don't want to touch those walls."

Sugar tilted her head, looking more waif-like than ever, hugging her broom. "The walls eat people," she said.

Aejys stared at her. "They eat people?"

"Umm humm," Sugar said, her voice soft and detached. "Animals can pass, but people can't. If you look real close you can see the bones. Walls spit the bones out."

Aejys' company limped into Charas with too many empty saddles: nineteen saddle mounts tied to the tails of the wagons and wynderjyns walking along beside. Some of those belonged to Ha'taren Guard currently driving wagons in place of slain auxiliaries.

Maranya rode forward, a little ahead of Aejs, with her banner as the portcullis creaked slowly up and the gate guards, a pair of scrawny mages stepped out to block their path.

"What do you want?" the tallest of the pair demanded testily.

"King Aejs's Rowan of Rowanhart, Prince-Protector of Vorgensburg, has ridden here on Quest," Maranya responded.

"Yes, yes. But why are you here?"

"We seek the last of the life-mages."

"There aren't any. Go away!"

Aejys scowled, pulled off her gloves, and shoved them in her belt. Pyros sauntered forward. She held her hands up, palms out so they could see the brands. "My gods say otherwise. Do you wish to argue with them?" As she spoke the brands glowed,

one white, the other in shifting patterns of flame. Pyros shook his horn in their faces for good measure.

The mages stepped aside and let them pass.

"You won't find any inns that can accommodate you," Dynanna said. "So you'll want to stay at the Temple to Dynanna for the time being, they have plenty of space."

"You have a temple here?" Dynarien hissed at her.

"When's the last time you were in Charas?" she hissed back.

"Uh ... about twenty ... uh..." Dynarien flushed.

"Humph!" Dynanna glared, folding her lower lip briefly under her teeth for a moment. "Teach you. I was right behind you. Sneaky, huh?"

Dynarien almost smacked her. They had frequently gotten into scuffles as children and sometimes forgot they were adults and got into them anyway. They never hit hard enough to injure or more than sting, always holding back that little bit lest they put a wedge between them. And, after all they did not really want to hurt each other, the action was just a physical expression of peeve and pique. Except that to Aejys it looked like a strong, young man about to strike a little, old woman.

"Darren! What the Hell Shitting Damnation are you doing?"

Dynarien flushed and lowered his hand. "I – I– "

"All right, where's the temple?"

Dynanna grinned, wiggled her fingers impishly at her brother and whispered, "Mats and tangles." Then she rode out to lead the way to the temple.

Dynarien grabbed his hair with a groan, feeling the dense, snarled rat's nest under his fingers that would take days and days to comb out. He was bigger and stronger, but one way or another she always won. The only time he ever won was when he caught her napping and glued her hair to the banyan tree. Willodarus punished him severely, spanking him until he could not sit, and then locking him in the dungeons. Dynanna spent that night secretly passing him cookies through the bars, comforting him that her hair would grow out eventually, and after that he never played a trick on her again. Not that he had not wished to since, but his conscience would not let him. Every time he seriously considered hitting back at her, he saw cookies sliding through the dungeon bars flash through his mind. It was hopeless.

As they reached the gates of her temple, Dynanna pointed at the incredible twelve foot hedge surrounding the grounds. It enveloped the walls to the point of rendering

them invisible, growing together from both sides, and joining at the top. "Don't eat them, they're poison," Dynanna said pleasantly, indicating a thick patch of bright red berries amid the dark green leaves. "And don't poke your fingers in or brush against it. Vicious thorns, stings like hell, and infects like crazy. It's enhanced firethorn." Word passed back quickly: "Do not touch the hedges."

Aejys nodded. Once inside they found an area just inside the walls tended by gardeners, comprised of trellised vines of what appeared to be curving fruits in shades ranging from soft yellow through orange to deep red.

"Don't touch them," Dynanna said. "In small quantities they're delightful. But take a bite out of one and neither your mouth nor your stomach will thank you. Don't get the juice in your eyes either. Touch them and then your skin or eyes and ouchies!"

Aejys sucked in a deep fortifying breath and asked the inevitable as warnings once more passed back through the ranks and she wondered what she was walking into entering the grounds of a temple to Dynanna. "What are they? Poison?"

"No. Chilies. Enhanced chili peppers. Perfectly edible. Just hot."

"And we're supposed to be able to camp on the grounds?" This was starting to sound like a very dangerous place to be.

"Next courtyard over. You'll like it. I promise."

"This seems an unpleasant place," Aejys remarked.

"Oh, not at all." Dynanna said, sounding surprised. "It's just a discouraging of uninvited guests coming over the walls. Gates are locked at nights. If they make it past the firethorn, then they're in the chilies and that's a matter of 'scratch yer noses and rub yer eyes, then boys yer in fer a big surprise' and they are! Sa'necari, lycan or what not."

"They expect that kind of trouble here?"

"I'll have to let the abbot explain it."

They found the middle court to be pleasant and Dynanna instructed them to stay there while she went in search of the abbot, Mother Dolorous. The monks appeared to be a race of little people bustling about, impossible to tell for certain whether they were male or female in their voluminous robes and deep-cowled hoods that completely hid their faces. They did not speak, answer or stop. Sugar sat cross-legged to watch, her large dark eyes solemn, limpid and serene as she reflected in silence, cradling her broom in the crook of her arm.

"Glad to be finally in Charas?" Aejys asked, squatting beside her.

She nodded, dreamily, not quite rising from her reflections. "Hmnnn."

"What will you do while you're here?"

"Hmnnn, put a tack in his chair," she said softly, just exactly like another child might have said, "buy a new doll."

"What?"

"Oh?" Sugar giggled. "I didn't mean that! I don't know. It depends on grandmother."

Josiah walked up to Aejs, reins in hand and she stood. "I'm leaving," he said. "You're here. I'll be around. If you need me, just ask for directions to my tower. I am not forgetting my promise to help you. I need to put some things in order first."

Aejs wanted to kiss him, but conscious of all the eyes watching her, did not. "I will." Tamlestari was going to be very unhappy with her, and Tagalong already was, but she had given her heart away again and this time to someone who could never really love anyone but his dead mates.

The trees, shrubs, and plants surrounding the courtyards grew in comfortably wild and calculated disarray, styled to mimic woodland glades in carefully sheltered patterns around small benches, couches, and bowers. The open spaces between them were sufficiently generous to allow the wagons and tents to spread out a bit. Aejs observed the gardeners moving about, cutting back just enough of the branches and vines to prevent the effect from becoming over whelming, but without its being lost entirely. They watched the company guardedly from the corners of their eyes. Aejs even caught them a time or two staring outright when they thought no one was looking. Any other king or noble would have completely disregarded the servants, much less the gardeners, but Aejs felt an odd tickle. There was a contradiction here some place. It itched and she was not certain why or how. It would take some thought.

Then Dynanna reappeared with a small round woman who had let her hood fall back to reveal a huge, oversize slouch hat that completely covered her ears.

"May I present, Mother Dolorous, the abbot," Dynanna said with all officiousness. "Mother Dolorous, Her Majesty Aejsstrys Rowan, King of Rowanhart."

"Hmnn, mnnn, mnn." She stuck out a small chubby hand, swaying her head from side to side thoughtfully. "Welcome. We don't think much of foreign kings in Charas, but you'll do." They shook.

Maranya and Aejs exchanged bemused glances and followed her into the temple.

* * *

Two young men cut away branches of the trees that drooped too low over the wrought iron benches, throwing them into piles and then dragging them toward a larger pile in the center while an older male pruned the bushes with large shears. The youths paused to stare a long time as the company began to set up.

"Look at all the empty saddles," said the darker one.

"And the way some of them move. They've been wounded and they're only half healed," said the sandy haired one.

"Something hit them."

"We can't keep doing nothing. It isn't right."

The older man straightened, his shears hanging at his side, watching them.

"Get back to work," he told them.

"How many have to die, Odanner, before we do what we were meant to do?"

"And who is to say what we were meant to do?" Odanner shot back. "Use your gifts and die?"

"Use my gifts so others can live and if I die so be it!" the sandy haired one replied.

"And what about Britlyn?" Odanner said. "If they know it's you, won't they know it's Britlyn also? Can you speak for Britlyn, Tom?"

Tom turned away, picked up his tools, and disappeared into another section of the grounds.

"They can only kill our bodies once, Odanner, but this cowardice kills our spirits a thousand times a day," said Drew, then he, too, left.

* * *

Dynarien walked his horse beside Josiah's, traveling the narrow streets towards the Hall of Words, which held the council chambers. Newcomers were to make themselves known there. Aejys would so as soon as she had her company settled.

"I'll have to change the wards before you can enter the tower," Josiah told him. "after that you can live there if you wish. I would like the company. It's been years since I lived totally alone. I've gotten used to having people around."

"I'll take you up on that, cousin," Dynarien gave him a slow grin.

"You are welcome, cousin Darien."

They went on in that wise, "cousin" this and "cousin" that all the way to the Hall, drawing the stares of everyone they passed, who could tell from their dress that they were battlemages.

Josiah paused to read the stone plaque before the Hall of Words containing the ten prophecies of Ishladrie concerning Charas. The one that he always came back to was this:

"Know ye wise ones, that in the last days a sign shall come to pass that in the middle of summer, on the hottest day of the year, the day shall be struck by cold and it will snow and hail as in the dead of winter; Be thereby certain and without doubt, that no more than three seasons shall pass before the city and all within it will surely die."

When they reached the Hall of Words, the secretary who took their bona fides was a wizened old man with an officious manner that disintegrated when he heard their names. "Willidar? You're both Willidars?"

Dynarien and Josiah exchanged broad grins, and then Dynarien nudged Josiah. "Yes," Josiah told him.

"Then you'll be opening up Abelard's tower. It hasn't been tenanted in five hundred years."

"I know," Josiah said, with calculated nonchalance. "It's probably a mess. You wouldn't happen to know where I could find someone to clean would you?"

"Oh, of course," he scribbled hastily on a piece of paper. "You might try here. They're very good." He handed the paper to Josiah.

* * *

Maranya stayed six paces behind Aejys as they traveled the marbled corridors of the Hall of Words into the heart of the convoluted Charisian bureaucracy, looking for the Office of Introductions where they were expected to present their papers and make themselves known. Males and females dressed alike in ankle-length robes of bright hues.

They found the office and the wizened old man, who was the secretary, spent the first several minutes staring at Aejys before taking the documents from her hands: the list of who she had brought with her, their stated reasons for being there – though not all of them – just enough to provide cover for some of their activities, her application for establishing an embassy, all the sundry silly details that Dynarien had warned her the Charisians would demand. "My, my, my," he murmured, licking his lips. "How lovely, you are."

"Can we get on with this?" Aeajys lifted an eyebrow. "I have other things to do."

"Yes, of course." He took the papers from her hand, scanning them quickly. "It looks in order."

"I want to find the life mages."

"There aren't any."

"I need to see the council."

"You'll have to get an appointment. I don't handle that. Out that door to your right. Down the hall to the end. Take a left. Then four doors on your left, talk to Zorrance."

As soon as the king left, the old man started digging in his desk muttering frantically, "Now where did I put that illusion of youth spell? Yum, yum, yum."

* * *

Josiah climbed the stairs winding around the outside of his tower to the parapet and the small door beneath the onion dome. The lower doors would not be revealed and open until he reset the wards. While Shularrien and Nariya lived, Dawnlight Tower had been workspace only. Home had been Thorn Hall. Nariya. He experienced a fleeting, uncanny sensation of her nearness, as if he could reach out and touch her. He had only recognized Aeajys as Shularrien because Josh, not knowing any better, had done a complete flesh and bone merge – the most primitive form of shared life – with her that day when he returned from the tobacconist to find her in a seizure. Josiah had only recently figured that out. He wished that he had finished the painting of Nariya, only then he would know for certain if she were nearby and be able to find her.

Nothing remained in place upon the walls in the first room. Shards of broken pottery and shattered glass lay everywhere, amid torn books, and overturned furniture. Hoon must have raged through here, searching for the secret rooms he could not find. The bedroom door stood open. Nothing in either of these rooms had been of value to anyone. Hoon had gotten his death and nothing more five hundred years ago. That gave him a smug satisfaction. Josiah took a long pull from his flask of whiskey and as the power flared hotter, he examined the permanent spells he had placed here. The spell of revelation would need to be modified before it could take down Dynarien's change spell. It would not do for anyone to know that Josiah Abelard still lived.

The mage was halfway through his alterations on the revelation spell when he sensed an exception to his wards. A heavy blow crashed into his head and Josiah knew nothing more. He woke in a chair, his wrists and elbows spellcordered to the arms.

Hoon stood in front of him.

"I thought I had gotten all the Abelards, but one. How did I miss you, ugly man?"

* * *

Aejys stood before the secretary to the High Council of Mages, rulers of Charas. She had been arguing with him an hour, trying to gain an audience with either the president of the council or the council itself. Just as Dolorous had said and Dynarien had warned, They did not seem to think much of foreign kings. She scanned the lushly appointed room Walnut paneling polished to a high sheen; deep set windows with scrollwork sills and fine linen curtains; cedar cabinets and a mahogany desk; silk brocade covered chairs; thick carpets with intricate designs.

"As I have said, you may have an appointment in three weeks. There are no openings in their schedules before that," he said, ignoring her arguments to go round and round in tiresome repetitions. His entire ambience made her uncomfortable. His face was roundly angelic; his pale blonde hair curled around his cheeks and temples; his eyes and the blasé decadence of his manner while repeating his practiced screed. His off-kilter beauty made her distrustful. "However, we have a wealth of social events, balls and such that should offer you opportunity to make their acquaintances. Do you dance?"

Maranya took an instant dislike to him, remembering her lessons in Vorgensburg under Janine. If most males in Charas were like this one, then this was a sick society.

Aejys caught the veiled sweep of his eyes along the curves of her body and threw him a look of absolute disdain. Why could not the Dancer have made her something less than beautiful? "Make it for me. What about the life-mages? Where can I find them?"

The secretary gave an eloquent shrug. "No one knows. Shall I send the invitations to the Dynannan temple? Say for seven to each of our little gatherings? I hear you've brought quite a number of exquisite Sharani."

Exquisite? Maranya rolled her eyes. There was nothing exquisite about Sharani women. They were not butterflies. However, they could be damned interesting.

"Yes, that will be fine," Aejys schooled the irritation from her voice. "Can you at least tell me where to find the tower of Tori Willidar?"

"Ah, yes," the secretary told her. "There's a lot of interest in that fellow."

"Why?" A chill ran down her spine, was it because of his connection to her or was there more to the scarred battlemage than she suspected?

"Because he's an Abelard, of course. Willidar is the surname of the mage-master's

daughter. She took her ma'aram's name just as her brother took his father's. All of her descendants are Willidars and all of her brother's are Abelards."

"Which one is it?" *I've fallen in love with another Abelard?*

"Walk onto the porch with me and I'll point it out for you."

He indicated a large, golden tower, onion-domed with sun symbols drawn large on its sides. She wondered why Josiah had never told her he had been a follower of Kalirion. He had told her so very little about himself. She never really knew him. How could she have fallen in love with him? She knew far more about Tori than she had ever known about Josiah. Aejs spread her wings and flew.

"Damn it!" Maranya muttered darkly in Sharani, running from the room. "How the bloody fucking hell am I supposed to protect you if you keep doing this shit."

"You'll never get in that way!" the secretary shouted after her. "It's warded."

Aejys flew to the little parapet and landed. She found a door and pounded on it. She heard a scream and began to strike the door heavily. It barely yielded. She flew off and away, gaining altitude and then plummeted down, slamming her feet into the door. It shattered and she walked in.

"So much for wards," she muttered, darkly.

The first room was empty. Things had been thrown about a long time ago considering how much dust had settled over the disarray. Had there been a fight when Tori left here, was that why he said he had to clean it with that odd note in his voice? Or had someone gotten into the tower after he left? time later for those questions. Screams came again from a back room. She burst in and found Tori bound to a chair, four vampires feeding on him. His image wavered oddly. He looked terribly weakened, slumped, his head hanging to one side, eyes staring, half-lidded; lips parted. She beheaded the first one and drove Spiritdancer through the heart of the second. The other two fled. She cut him loose, shouldered his arm, and got him to the wide bed, lowering him onto it.

His face shimmered oddly. "Uhhhhnnn ... uhhnn... Shularrien."

"It's Aejs." She gripped his head, finding a broadening lump under her fingers near his left ear. She turned his face, moving a finger in front of it. "Follow my finger?"

Tori's face changed and she found herself looking at Josiah. The breath caught in her chest, tightened in her throat. He had been with her all along, protecting her in secret, pouring his heart out in ways he could not before. She had not killed him. Skree had misunderstood the letter. She must have recognized him in her heart.

"Shularrien," he gasped again.

"Josiah, it's Aejs. Shularrien's dead." She settled next to him, holding him. Fusaaki had told her that a shock to his system could start the deterioration again. Gods! He seemed so weak. "Follow my finger, damn it."

"Portrait," his words were raspy as if he struggled to breathe, let alone speak. "Front room. Touch panel by ... door. Say Thorn is sharp ... rose is ... sweet. Please ... go ... look. Now."

"I don't want to leave you for a moment. You need help." Her eyes were grave, worried.

"Please ... please."

Aejys frowned, but walked into the front room. She touched the wall, said the words. The room shimmered. Suddenly it was more than twice as large as before with three more doors and a wide east window – the window that had given the tower its name. Between the nearest door and the window, hung a life size portrait and it looked exactly as she did at that moment. A silver title plate read "Shularrien Willidar Abelard."

Her eyes widened. She felt as if the wind had been knocked from her lungs. She sucked air, steadying herself, then raced back to him. "Josiah, what does that mean?"

"Portrait ... spelled it ... so I could ... always find you ... again." Josiah's eyes closed as consciousness fled.

Her mind leaped, making all the connections she had missed before, realizing at last how the imps had been defeated when more than half her company lay wounded: If Tori was Josiah, then Darien had to be Dynarien and that meant that Dyna was Dynanna. she had a whole pack of meddling godlings on her hands. They had routed the imps. "Dynarien! Get the hell in here."

"What is it?" Dynarien said, and then he saw Josiah. "Creation!" He knelt and began the spell, giving from himself first.

"Third time's a curse," Dynarien muttered. "You next."

Aejys laid her arm against Josiah's. "What do you mean third time?"

"You ought to know. You left him on the beach to die. If Birdie hadn't found him – we need more donors."

Donors – I can't let Hoon know he's here. "This has to be kept secret."

"Okay. I'll call my sister and her paladins."

Dynanna popped in with Pieface and Sugar Maple in response to Dynarien's summons. Pieface immediately pushed his sleeve up and pressed it to Josiah's without being asked.

"Piece of Pie," he exclaimed smugly, having done this before and knowing there as nothing to it.

Then he moved aside as first Sugar Maple and then Dynanna took his place.

"You three," Aejs said. "No one must know that Josiah is here. Or that anything has happened to him. Agreed? We'll hold a council later, but not now."

They three popped out again.

As soon as they left, Aejs rounded on Dynarien, "Tamlestari wrote me about the beach. I did not know. I would never have left him. I told Tori that."

"That damned Lemyari stuck him. He doesn't have your resistances and his body is already damaged. The Orphan-Brigade was out sticking vampires – the one that Quadenlas stunned or blinded, but didn't quite kill. They found him lying on the sand with the tide coming in around him."

"Oh, gods, Josiah – I didn't know." The image brought tears to her eyes. "Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't someone tell me?"

"I thought you'd done it deliberately. Josiah did, also. He refused to complain because he felt he deserved it. But he didn't. Skree's claims about his shields a year ago – that they could have protected him from Zyne is wrong. I should know. They faded in and out for years. Skree simply never Read him until after Josiah had fully manifested. *Henever* had had a way to keep Zyne out of his mind. By the time he knew what was happening, it was far too late. Zyne betrayed him to Hoon. Hoon fed on him for months. Hoon put the coercions in him that caused him to nearly kill you. But he still blamed himself. He still felt dirty. Then with the whole city thinking he'd deliberately tried to kill you. What a mess."

A long, shuddering sigh forced its way from Aejs' body. "Is he going to be all right?"

"No. His body was so damaged to start with – this is definitely the final insult. I think we've bought him a few days – a week or two at most. I'll try to get Fusaaki out here. Otherwise I'm out of solutions."

"Put your Darien face back on. Go sit guard in the front room while I consider the implications of this charade you and your sister have pulled on me. I need to decide how make it work to my advantage. Does anyone else know about it?"

"Tag and Hanni."

* * *

The girl was elfin slender and tiny, barely half past four feet tall, dark of hair and eye, fair of skin. She carried a basket of woven reeds, the contents covered with a white cloth embroidered with delicate flowers in pastel shades of blues and mauves. She walked through the camp with a tentative stride, watching the large ha'taren tending their animals, she was not sure what they were and felt too shy to ask. They looked like horses, but with a handspan or longer of horn – not enough to be unicorns – some with cloven hooves, but others without. They watched her with intelligent glances as if they wondered why she was there.

Britlyn could feel the pain and infection. It drew her, made her ache inside. She turned about, trying to decide where it was coming from and walked toward two wagons drawn close together. She could hear a man talking.

"The bolt hit in a nest of nerves. I get the infection down, but it comes back."

"Damn it! If you don't do something, she'll lose the arm!"

Britlyn came round the wagon and stood quietly, waiting for one of them to notice her. One was a slender male, dark complected, and the other a female, clearly Sharani in chain with two swords at her shoulders. The male noticed her.

"What do you want, girl?"

"Your pardon, sir, I'm Britlyn. A servant. I've brought you some herbs and potions. Some of them are very good for infection. I thought they might help." She offered him the basket.

"I'm willing to try anything. Are you an herb healer, youngster?"

Britlyn shook her head. "I was an apprentice. My late master was very good."

"Well, lets see what your master taught you. I'm Pyne."

"I'll come back later," the woman said, walking off.

Pyne climbed into the wagon first, indicating that Britlyn should follow. Once inside he indicated the paladin on the bed, lost in fever. "Usually Sharani can shake these things off. For some reason this one isn't. Can you Read?"

Britlyn nodded and Pyne inclined his head. Britlyn took the woman's wrist. As she Read her, Britlyn extended her power along with her awareness and gave the paladin's immune system a nudge. "It's an allergic reaction. I have something for it." She reached into the basket and brought out a brown liquid. It was just a concentrate

of willow bark to cover what she had already done. Britlyn did not want Odanner to catch her healing. "Give her a teaspoon twice a day for three days and you'll have the infection whipped."

"If I want to consult you again, where can I find you?" Pyne asked.

"Ask anyone. I'll be around. I never leave the temple." Britlyn slipped out, feeling triumphant.

Pyne Read the paladin again and blinked, then frowned. He hurried to the back of the wagon, glancing around. He did not see her so he climbed out. She had given him her name, but he had forgotten it. He ran into the middle of the camp.

"That girl," he started asking people, describing her. "Where did she go? I need to find her. I think she might have been a life-mage."

* * *

Josiah lay on the bed, propped up on pillows. He was very weak, but at least he could talk without struggling for every word. "I put a permanent spell of revelation on these chambers. Before I could change that Hoon burst in. He'd managed to create an exception within my wards for Lemyari such as himself. He couldn't penetrate my disguise at first, because Dynarien set it. It started to break down just after you entered."

Aejys pressed a glass of holadil into his hands. "How was I able to get past the wards?"

"Because you're Shularrien. Descendants of Nariya, Shularrien, or myself can get in. Our three incarnations also. You became an Abelard when I cast shared life on you that first time. I didn't know the spell could do that at the time. I don't know why they're all bashing me – it's usually just you," he joked weakly.

"Drink that," Aejys ordered. She would find a way to help him. She would not lose him. There had to be a way. She would not give up on him.

"I never meant to get involved with you. I'll stay in Charas when you leave."

"Why?"

"I dishonored you."

"Josiah Abelard dishonored me. I'm keeping Tori Willidar, because I love him."

"But we're the same man."

"No. We just need to find a way to make that ugly face permanent. Josiah, I was

afraid you could never love me as much as Shularrien. It made me think. Besides, if I could be drawn to you no matter if I thought you someone else—"

"But you're the same woman."

"Yes. Now drink that and I'll deal with our young rakehell."

"Aejys, I'm not going back with you," he said softly.

Her throat tightened. "Why? Everything can be all right now."

"Because I simply am not going back. It will not work."

"Because I slept with all those people? Your pride?" She demanded defensively.

"I love you. We're not married. I have no claim on you. You can do what you like. But I'm not going back."

"You say you love me..."

Her eyes filled and he thought it would break his heart so he lied to her, "If you want me that much, I'll go back."

Aejys blinked back her tears and smile. "Drink that."

Josiah obeyed, but as soon as she left the room, he dragged himself up and reached for his bags that Dynarien had left by the bed. He took out the pollendine and amphereon mixture, poured seven fingers into the slender glass, and drank it. Holadil was not strong enough anymore, but he did not want Aejys to know it. He was now taking nearly twice what he had been taking as recently as two weeks ago. If he lasted another week it would be a miracle – unless he resorted to those arcane drug mixtures he had created that would stain his soul beyond redemption. Then he laid back and slept.

* * *

"What the hell are you trying to do, Britlyn? Get us all killed?" Odanner screamed, his face pale and sweating.

She faced him squarely, her shoulders back and an angle of defiance to her head. "I'm trying to heal, Odanner. I'm trying to do what I was meant to do."

"You will stay in your room until they are gone!"

"No. I will not!"

"Yes, you will!" Odanner's open hand lashed out, striking Britlyn.

Britlyn crumpled, holding her face. "You're a coward. You let them die. You could have reached the staff. The masters didn't have to die."

Odanner shrieked in a paroxysm of grief and shame and rage. "I wasn't strong enough to use it. It would have burned me out. It would have killed me."

"And all the others would have lived." Britlyn said, her tone cold and chill. "I would have paid that price."

"You will stay here."

"I may be only an apprentice, while you are a journeyman, but I will continue to do what I can. If all of us worked together we might equal a master, if you would let us."

Odanner turned and fled.

* * *

Aejys walked into the front room. "As for you, you infuriating, interfering little rakehell yuwenghau! Let me tell you exactly what I think of this little charade of yours."

Dynarien dropped the book he was reading. "Aejys, I was just trying to help."

Aejys stalked to him, glared into his face, her hands on her hips and kissed him. "I know. Thank you. There's a problem. But you've given me the solution. Let me explain it."

He sat down again.

"Once I stopped being angry – I'm a mon who never stays angry, no matter how badly I've been treated – then I knew I never wanted to give him up. But as King of Rowanhart, I could not take him back. I had to save face. A king's honor is the honor of the kingdom. If you can give him that ugly face permanently, then no one will be the wiser."

"I can do that."

"We're not even telling Tamlestari. She does have a habit of holding grudges."

Dynarien nodded.

"I want you to ward this tower so tight that not even a mouse can get in, much less a vampire. Then I want you to fetch Fusaaki. If he can't help Josiah, then I'll try something else. Appeal to Kalirion. Offer him anything he wants."

* * *

Maranya burst from the Hall of Words only to discover that she could not see the tower. Charas was a maze of tall buildings.

"If you need a guide, I would be more than happy to oblige." the voice had a crisp familiarity.

Maranya turned and found herself looking at a face she had seen only once and would never forget. After all she had stolen his underwear. "Lord Kanz! What are you doing here?"

He had an easy smile and a courtier's manner, a dandy's dress and lean swordsmen's body, with a hawkishly aristocratic face. "I have business with your king."

"If you have business with my liege, then you have business with me," Maranya's voice turned guarded and dangerous as a sharp blade.

"I have been sent by an ally. My message is in code. You will not understand it, she will. Can you take me to her?"

"Can you take me to Abelard's Tower?"

"Certainly."

They drew glances as they walked, for Lord Kanz had never, in anyone's memory been there in the summer. His magic was keyed to the seasons and, outside of the precincts of Charas, he was known more for his skills as a soldier than as a mage. Now and again people greeted them and stopped to talk, but Kanz always waved them on with the merest exchange of pleasantries.

"They know you here? Does that mean you're a mage?" Maranya asked.

Kanz sighed in an exaggerated manner. "While I don't like it known, yes."

"Why?" Maranya felt a tickle of suspicion.

"My father. You are aware of the Sharani problems with Beltria and Angrim?"

Maranya nodded. "The one-gods think all magic is demonic."

"Exactly. Around two hundred years ago Beltria annexed half of Darr, what is now called Darrtres following an heir's disputed marriage claim. It gets complicated."

"Politics usually do."

"Well, anyway. My father would rather keep the magic in the family quiet. Very quiet. Darr isn't big enough to put up a real fight if either Beltria or Angrim should start looking for excuses to cross our borders. King Stephen of Gormond's Reach has promised aid should that happen, but—" He shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "Magic could easily become one of those excuses. They've already bitten us once. We would rather it not happen again."

* * *

The day Hoon moved Mephistis and his sa'necari into 'Lord Darmungaard's' mansion, they took their weapons away from them. Isranon felt naked without his blades, but as always, he said nothing. The sprawling mansion covered most of the north block forming a half moon around the Hall of Words where the Charisian ruling council met. When viewed from the highest tower, the ebony-gray, cut stone and mortar palace of Lord Darmungaard spread across the thickly planted grounds like a dark gray bat with open wings. Abutments surmounted by tall pinnacles stood at intervals along the building to receive the weight of the flying buttresses, which channeled rainwater into the leering mouths of the gargoyles on the lower roofs. It was rumored to have several levels of crypts and underground reaches, but no one knew for certain. If anyone had ever known, they had not lived to speak of it.

The high, machicolated outer walls enclosed elegant gardens and courtyards, planted to the edge of wilderness for Anksha's games. The Lord's private solar occupied a central section, set off from the rest, reached only by a single corridor and included a roof top garden, as well as a study, bedrooms, chapel and private audience chamber.

Hoon sat in his favorite chair in his study, cupping a glass of wine. "Willidar is alive?" He had already been answered twice and the repetition made the minion nervous.

Isranon sat beside Mephistis, as impassive as stone, while the prince huddled on a corner of the couch, breathing in rapid catches, fighting an attack of panic. His stomach hurt, a desperate spasmodic clenching, yet he was far better off than his prince who struggled not to send his body's expression of distress spewing across the soft carpets in a stinking acidic mess. Anksha had another of the sa'necari, Ennis, her third one, on the floor behind the potted plants worrying him by the throat as she drank. She had stuffed something in his mouth to keep him from screaming. At least she had promised not to kill any of them – yet. She would let them heal themselves with blood afterward.

"Yes, Lord Darmungaard," the Lemyari said. "Aejys Rowan passed the wards and destroyed two of us."

"Then she must be either Shularrien or Nariya." Hoon finally put an end to the expression of his displeasure in favor of a new one. Shularrien. She had to be

Shularrien. Did that make Tamlestari Nariya? Had the triad found its way back together? It's luck and power had been legendary. They had nearly destroyed him. Shularrien was too dangerous to turn. The luck that he had cursed for keeping Aejs from his grasp, he now blessed. Had he managed to turn Aejs, she would have become too powerful to control – she would have destroyed him and taken his hidden empire. Next time he would put a blade through her. Then he would go after the Valdren prince.

"Better news came last night from Rowanhart. Abelard is dead. She rejected him and it appears he took his own life. He left a note behind."

Josiah! Josiah is dead? Isranon could not get his mind around that. It pained him. Surely the mon's ghost would have come to him? Or had Josiah written him off as merely one more filthy sa'necari?

"But there is still an Abelard left. There must be no more Abelards. Willidar is an Abelard or he could never have gotten into the tower."

"What about Willidar's cousin, Darien. Is he an Abelard?"

Hoon frowned deeply. "Find out."

"I will, Lord."

"Now. And send someone to kill that Valdren prince for me." Hoon rose from his chair and walked out, pausing a moment to glance back with a thin, contemptuous smile as Anksha dragged Mephistis to the floor. The prince was getting a small taste of what he had given to others all his life – what his ancestors had given to Hoon's children. Sooner or later he would find a way to pry their souls out of the Legacy.

Isranon shivered. He was forced to watch, since Anksha had forbidden them to leave without her permission.

* * *

Despite Dynarien's plea that she wait, Aejs focused on her god and said the phrase that would take her to the garden as he had told her she could., "Kalirion, anonadoni."

The garden was incredibly lovely. There was no sign that, up until a few weeks ago, Kalirion's Jesmyrran angels had still been coaxing Dynanna's gophers from it. At Dynanna's insistence, they had released those gophers where they were now harassing the fields and gardens of a particularly nasty tribe of goblins. The garden now bloomed in its full beauty and luxuriant growth. The Idyn tree at its center overflowed with large, iridescent, peacock blue fruit and flowers. Every shade of blue and yellow could be found in a lush riot of color; from blossoms to fruit; on bushes, vines, and trees. The grass grew deep and sweet in a soft carpet over every

open space. The winding paths were paved in topaz and turquoise, the broad stones set in interesting patterns.

He sat on the bench by the Idyn tree. "So you wish a boon?"

"I want Josiah healed."

Kalirion shook his head. "Josiah was my favorite. He turned away from me. He demanded the unthinkable. He demanded a curse. A fog of chaos that obscures even my gift to pierce."

"I love him, he's dying. You must help him."

Kalirion took in the lines of her body, desire for her stirring his loins, and almost relented, then shook his head. "There are other ways for you to have that granted. Come to me last, not first. You have not expended your possibilities. What lies between Josiah and I, is not for you to question or intervene in."

"What possibilities? Tell me where to find them. Whatever you want you can have. I'll beard the hellgod in his den if that's what it takes."

"Open your eyes and see. Open your mouth and speak. Open your ears and listen. The cure exists. If you cannot find it, then come to me last, not first. I have seen in my pool that the game must be played. There is a life mage in Charas who owes me a serious debt. If you can find him, you may be able to pressure him into saving Josiah. I will send him dreams and demands on your behalf. More than that—" the god shrugged. Then he hurled her from the garden.

* * *

Aejys found herself sitting in the chair beside the bed in Josiah's tower, watching him sleep. A moment ago she had been in Kalirion's garden.

"Aejys! Come here, quick!" Dynarien shouted.

Aejys went to see what it was and spied Maranya and Lord Kanz standing on the parapet.

"Ask them in," Dynarien told her, "it's the only way they can get past the wards."

"Welcome to Dawnlight Tower, Maranya and Lord Kanz," Aejys said.

Lord Kanz took Aejys' hand, dropping to one knee and kissing it. Then he stood up and embraced her, fondly remembering their night of love. "This is a dangerous city," he murmured in her ear, as if it were sweet endearments and hot suggestions. "I do not normally come this time of year. But my master felt you might have need of me, especially since hearing of Josiah's death."

"Lord Kanz has a master?"

"The cook sends greetings and is certain you remembered the pole arms."

Aejys stared and then chuckled. "You may speak freely with everyone here." She remembered Eliahu, High Mage of Winter, who had arrived in Vorgensburg as a simple pilgrim claiming to be the son of his armsmaster, written himself a letter of introduction with his own seal and became her cook on the journey to rescue her daughter. He had twice helped to turn imminent defeat into victory. "Send greetings to the armsmaster's son."

Aejys turned to the others. "I need a word in private with Lord Kanz."

Maranya frowned as Aejys led him into one of the side rooms. The room had soft chairs and a couch. The walls were lined with shelves containing books and strange items that shimmered with power. Kanz's eyes grew wide.

"Truly Abelard was an amazing man."

Aejys sat on the couch and gestured for Kanz to sit beside her. He did so, leaning in to kiss her. His tongue parted her lips, sliding in and twining sensually. She set him firmly aside.

"I beg pardon, majesty, if I presume too much on our last encounter," he said, realizing that he had been too forward. "I am unmanned by your beauty. I was a lord and a soldier before I was a mage. My manners are not ... not..."

"I am not offended, but neither am I ... Lord Kanz, I have become involved with someone. But I would like us to be friends. Can you handle that?"

He could not quite school the disappointment from his face, but then shrugged. "I should not have taken so long deciding to come after you."

Aejys smiled, her eyes twinkling at him. "Lord Kanz, I am certain that had you arrived sooner, I would have had eyes only for you. However, it was not I who stole your underwear."

"It wasn't?" He sounded startled and embarrassed. "Who then?"

"Maranya, granddaughter of my general Soren Deontaramei. My companion. She followed us, let herself into the bedroom, liked what she saw and made off with your underwear as a trophy. I found her sitting outside the door the next morning, smug as a cat in the cream."

Lord Kanz brightened. "I could like that one," he said, his gaze sliding to the door and taking her in.

"What I wanted to discuss is this. My mage is injured. Lord Hoon attacked Tori Willidar. Considering that this is the City of Magic, I will need mage support in case of trouble. Can you provide that?"

Lord Kanz sighed. "Not personally. I am a winter mage. The turning of summer is still several days off. However, I may know some people. I can also introduce you around. Possibly help you through my contacts in the city."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A FINE PLACE TO BETRAY A KING

Isranon kept to his rooms with his flute, finding it harder and harder to remain centered, the lycans ever at his side. They separated only when Hoon ordered Isranon into a room without them. Isranon hated staying in Hoon's mansion. He hated Hoon more with each passing day. Isranon felt certain that Hoon's command lay behind Anksha's decision to take them all. He waited for it with the discipline of his people, waiting for it as for death come calling.

Nevin watched him with a look that Isranon could not decipher, a still sorrow, and something else. Isranon thought of Merissa and Claw and Aisha and all of the others at the farm. "She always kills her toys..."

Isranon looked up, pausing in his playing, the flute settling in his lap. "Then you will tell them I died well. And Merissa ... tell her I loved her."

* * *

"I bought us a house!" Tagalong shouted as Aejsys winged down with Josiah in her arms. Dynarien materialized next to them, still wearing his Darien face, carrying the bag with Josiah's medicines on his shoulder. He took Josiah from her. Tagalong sobered. "What happened to Tori?"

"He was attacked in his tower. Tell me about the house. Is it defensible?"

Dynarien lowered Josiah to his feet and supported him. The gardener, a sandy-haired young man, looked up from pruning the bushes with excessive care, and watched them intently, his eyes strangely pained, then turned away as if to hide his face. Another came to stand beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder and they stood whispering.

"Large grounds an' a crenellated wall with a cat-walk. Owner's wanted ta get tha hell out of Charas fer a long time, said trouble's comin'. It's called Thorn Hall."

Josiah's eyes widened and then he began to laugh.

Tagalong glared. "Something wrong with it, mage?"

"No. Something very right. Shularrien built it. I let it go after she died. It's practically a fortress. It's set up like a keep and solid."

Tagalong gave Aejs a long look. "Ya sure yer gonna be comfortable livin' in his dead wife's house?"

Aejys laughed. "Absolutely."

They walked into the temple, following the right side of the outer ambulatory to the laymyn's rooms where the Dynannan Abbot was housing their people. The two gardeners followed them, their eyes on Josiah. A tiny young woman scrubbing the floors looked up, saw how pale the mage looked, tossed her rag into the bucket and walked with the young men. Odanner, emerging from another hallway, saw this and an expression of sheerest panic came over him. He stepped into their path, but they pushed past him without a word.

Tagalong reached for Hanni's hand and tightened on it. Josiah and Aejs had had two lives together and now they were moving by chance into the same house where they had lived together before. It was incredibly romantic and touched her, although she would never admit it to anyone but Hanni and very much in private. She thought back to Jeord and the day he had given her the necklace and the next morning when he brought her the plate of frosted angels. It had been nice being courted. Hanni did that, though in a more rough-hewn dwarven fashion. Hanni fit better than the big human had.

Aejys went to the abbot's study and found Dolorous scribbling on papers spread over her desk. "Is there some place my mage could rest away from every thing?"

"What has happened?" Dolorous asked, laying aside her crayons and glancing at Josiah who leaned heavily on Dynarien.

"He was attacked in his tower. He's very weak."

Dolorous spied Odanner, giving the uneasy gardener an odd smile. "Odanner can show you to a room." Then she went back to her furious scribbling.

* * *

The maid and the gardeners waited until everyone had left the mage alone and then they went into the room and watched him sleep. Dynarien had left the satchel of medicines beside the bed after dosing Josiah again. Soon six more young servants gathered quietly. Britlyn went through the bag, taking out the bottles. All but one was conspicuously full. That one was a deep blue violet. That was the one they must be giving him. She unstopped it, sniffing the contents and then tipping her tongue to

it. Britlyn had an incredibly sweet and tender heart, which broke easily with intense compassion, all of which reflected her budding gifts.

"It's Pollendine and amphereon. He's dying, Odanner. Can't we do something?" She had not Read him, hesitating to provoke Odanner that much again. Odanner was the most senior of them. They were all apprentices, except Odanner. None of them had been older than twelve when the temple of Kalirion where they studied had been destroyed. Odanner had been the only adult to get out. He had led them to the temple of Dynanna. Britlyn, however, was the only one who knew, because she had seen him, that he had been within reach of the sacred Sunfire Staff when the sa'necari attacked. He could have saved them all. She had never spoken of it until that day she confronted him and had never realized how it festered, had tried to understand and forgive. But now, seeing how his fear was letting more and more people suffer and die...

Odanner looked uneasy, wavering violently in a sea of emotion, shame, guilt, longing, fear, need. He went to Josiah, touching his forehead lightly, extending his awareness through the sleeping mage. "It would take a master."

"Can't we try?" There were tears in Britlyn's large dark, doe eyes.

"If we even try, they'll know we're alive, Britlyn. They'll kill us. Besides, he's so far gone, Britlyn. Read him. Even linked – if would probably kill several of us to save him."

Britlyn touched Josiah and, as her finely tuned awareness swept through him, tears ran down her face, "You're right, Odanner. Lord of Light, you're right. But how can we not do this?"

"I won't! I absolutely refuse!" Odanner backed away from Josiah, his face twisted with fear. "I refuse to die for this man."

You owe me a life, Odanner. Reach for the staff with your spirit. A voice whispered in Odanner's mind. Save the mage.

Panic seized the life-mage as he felt the glowing presence and he fled.

Britlyn ran after him, but he had vanished into the thickest part of the gardens.

* * *

Hanni looked glum as he drove his wagon into the outer bailey of Thorn Hall. Tagalong had ridden in silence beside him the entire way.

"Hanni, what's wrong? Didn't I do a good job, buying this place?" Tagalong studied his face, trying to figure out just what she saw in the troubled eyes.

"Naw, it's not tha place, my girl. Not tha place." Hanni locked the brakes up and slid down from the seat with Tagalong following at his heels.

"Then what is it?"

"Josiah. Damn it, all. Did ya get a good look at him?"

Tagalong frowned and nodded, thinking.

"Whatever's goin' down, better go down fast. Or he's not goin' ta see it."

Tagalong's eyes teared up. She helped Hanni get the oxen unhitched and started towards the barns. Then some of the hostlers appeared and took over for them. Tagalong dragged Hanni off to show him the gardens and the walls. The air of misery about him just seemed to grow and grow despite everything Tagalong could do. Without quite realizing what they were doing they found themselves in a tack shed, digging around to see what the previous owner had left behind. Noses bumped, lips met and for a sudden the fifteen year old who had written those naughty letters to a rather sheltered young male re-emerged as they found their way out of their clothing.

Hanni's voluminous beard was surprisingly soft, filling the valley between her large breasts. "I love ya, Tag," he murmured, kissing his way toward her nipples, stroking her sides with his calloused fingers.

"Hanni," Tagalong moaned desperately, "Just do it. You've gone completely over me three times now man. I'm ready, damn it."

"Tag..."

"Hanni!"

"I love you."

"Ahhhhh!" Tagalong wrapped her legs around Hanni's buttocks and finally understood what she had heard listening from beneath Aejs' windows. "I love you, Hanni."

* * *

Aejys walked through the house, feeling its eerie familiarity. The house had high walls enclosing a bailey. The house itself had a crenellated parapet atop it and arrow towers that made Aejs wonder just what Charas might have been like when it was built. The large entry hall gave onto a still larger central hall with offices and private sitting rooms along it, it had been made to function. Then Aejs saw that the room was partitioned by walls that folded up and locked in place so that all of it could become one great ballroom – or large enough to bring the horses inside and stable

them should the enemy get past the outer walls, what a strange thought, or harbor refugees. Aejs thought of a thousand possibilities for that strange room of rooms. At the end of it, two halls swept out to either side and just beyond them a dais framed by a pair of staircases, narrow with stone balustrades and landings. All of it was wood over stone for the most part and kept out drafts reasonably well.

Knowing their truths at last, she and Josiah spoke at length about all the things they had never spoken of before, but should have.

Hoon had never able to get beyond the first two rooms of Dawnlight Tower. The spirit panels had kept them hidden. Everything in the tower had been removed to Thorn Hall. Josiah had better control over Dynarien's changes now, setting, taking down, and resuming it at will. He wore his own form that evening, having fallen asleep sitting up, his fingers between the pages of a book, which had slid down to his lap and then to his side. Someone had moved him to bed and its shifting, as Aejs joined him, woke him.

She leaned over him, rubbing at something on his neck that she had not noticed since he rarely wore his own form. "What is that? Vampire? It looks old."

He knew in an instant what she meant, his breathing and pulse speeding up. "Hoon." He caught her wrist, stopping her with the force of his need, rather than the force of his hand, which did not exist. "He ... he left me on her porch ... half-dead," his lips drew back from his teeth in a savage sneer of self-loathing, rage and terror. She had not seen these things in his face before. "I would not let Laurelyanne tell anyone how badly off I was," he laughed bitterly. "For fear of what happened, happening. Instead I became trapped by a seiryn and betrayed to the one vampire I most feared.." He pulled away from her, turning into the wall, breathing in shuddering sighs as he poured out to her as much as he dared, terrified that she would go after Hoon unprepared.

"Forgive me, I never dreamed," Aejs said.

"Aejs ... forgive me." He started to say more, stiffened abruptly going pale and breathing hard. He caught her arm, falling onto the pillows. "Bottle in the drawer. Find Hanni."

Aejs, eyes wide and worried, got the bottle, put it in his hands and ran out. He did not need Hanni; Josiah simply did not want Aejs smelling the Pollendine. What an insane nest of contradictions. They kept stepping away from what they knew, from the evidence of their eyes. Part of him knew it; part of him played it; part of him denied it; and part of him rebelled against it; but it continued; and sooner or later it would burn them all.

* * *

Tagalong and Hanni sat in Abbot Dolorous' study – at least she called it a study.

There were no books in it. Bookcases lined it, some of them free standing and forming little alcoves. Every shelf contained knick-knacks and bric-a-brac. Mainly little glass and ceramic frogs, lizards, turtles, and butterflies. The desk had stacks of paper, crayons, pastels, and other well-used drawing implements. The papers were covered with doodles, squiggles and notations, which had been written sideways, upside-down, and backwards as if in experimentation.

Dolorous was very short and round, but soft looking and clearly not a dwarf. She wore a huge slouch hat at all times, which never fell off, no matter what position she took and Tagalong suspected it was either magic or glue that held it in place. She also suspected it concealed a pair of very large, Badree Nym ears.

"Like I said," Tagalong began again. "My king is lookin' fer life-mages ta take 'em ta safety in Rowanhart. It's a quest that's been set her by Kalirion himself."

"A quest, oh, my. Lions, and tigers and quests, oh, my. Take my mages and fly."

"Yer mages? Ya have the mages?"

"Mages? What mages? Did I say I have mages? Oh, no, I don't have mages. I have maids and gardeners. However, if you learned to scrub floors you might find mages."

"Will ya stop with tha riddles?"

Hanni reached over and patted her hand. "Don't lose yer temper, darlin'," he cautioned.

"In Charas, everyone's a mage. Even the maids and gardeners. Go scrub my floors and learn my secrets. I just don't trust anyone who can't scrub floors right."

Tagalong stormed out, taking Hanni with her. Dolorous watched them go, then walked over to the nearest bookshelf and took down a particularly pretty lizard. She kissed it. A soft glow spread over the pastel green and yellow creature. It stretched and yawned in her hands.

"Grymlyn, find the Holy One. I would call her, but I'm afraid the evil ones could be listening for such a call and I don't want them to know she's here. I wish I had a secure link like her brother," Dolorous sighed. "Well, fetch."

The lizard jumped from her hand and ran off. Dolorous removed her hat and scratched her huge pointed ears, then put it back in place, securing it with a hat pin. Dolorous was getting very tired of this assignment, her friends were bored with sitting on the shelves and they all wanted to go home.

* * *

Britlyn had searched the temple. She had all of the apprentices looking. Odanner had become nearly impossible to find over the last few days. Now she hunted through the thickest part of the gardens. Muffled weeping and an aura of desperation drew her. She dropped to her knees, crawling through the ivy beside a pond fed by a magical spring that rose from the earth and ran from nowhere to anywhere.

"Odanner?"

The man huddled with a blanket that was soggy at the corners from the damp. He jumped at her voice.

"Go away."

"Odanner? Please, you can't run or hide from what you are."

"He's in my sleep, walking through my dreams. He wants me to heal the mage."

"Kalirion?"

"Yes. He says I owe him a life."

"You do. You're a coward, Odanner. The masters are dead because you would not reach out your hand and take up the staff. You were standing right there. I saw you."

"I was afraid!"

"You murdered the masters with your cowardice."

Odanner screamed and hit her.

Britlyn closed her eyes, crossed her legs, and assumed a posture of meditation. Odanner drew back to hit her again and wavered before her absolute calm. His hand dropped and his shoulders sagged. He grabbed his blanket, crawling past her to return to the temple, feeling defeated and uncertain.

* * *

"If we can't find tha' mages, darlin', let's at least find Aeijys an army," Hanni said, kissing the back of Tagalong's head as they left the temple grounds. His hands sliding and tightening alternating along her arms as they walked made her shiver. She had not changed so much as developed an appetite that made her different at times, more mellow at moments. Her loins tingled in a way they never had before.

"So how are we goin' ta do that, Hanni?" Tagalong asked, putting her around his stout waist. "Ya know Charas. It's like no place I've ever been before."

"We go ta tha top."

"Tha council? They didn't listen ta Aejs."

"Na. Dynarien. He's got ta make his blasted sister do somethin."

"That means goin' back ta Thorn Hall. Can we spend some time in yer wagon first?"

"Ya want ta play some more?" Hanni looked surprised and pleased.

Tagalong flushed three shades of red. "Yeah."

* * *

Josiah lay staring at the diamond-paned skylight in the tower bedroom. A cool breeze blew across his face and he remembered the times he had lain here with Shularrien and Nariya in a mellow half-dream. He turned on his side and watched Aejs sleeping, the gentle rise and fall of her breathing, his blue-winged angel. Since the attack on his tower, there had been no further sign of Hoon. And where was Mephistis? If he did not find them soon he would be too weak to fight them.

The pain started in his feet and tore burning through his body. He cried out, breaking into sweats and struggling to reach the medicine on the table. Aejs woke instantly, rolling out of bed. "Dynarien!" she shouted as she got the bottle open and poured a measure into the glass, helping him to drink it. He watched her closely over the edge of it. It was the first time she had gotten it herself and the smell registered. She looked at him, taking everything that Dynarien had been telling her more firmly than ever to heart as she said, bleakly, "Pollendine?"

She settled him, bolstered by pillows. "Aejs, you keep not hearing what we're saying." Josiah's voice had taken on a soft, distant quality that was only partly the drugs. "I'm not going back. I'm..." He blinked and swallowed, forcing his breathing to remain steady when it faltered. "I'm ... down to days and hours ... if that much. You must find them, Aejs. You must find them quickly."

"Where do I look?"

"The parties. That's where you find people in Charas."

"I'll start tomorrow."

"Another thing. Promise me. You'll find Nariya."

"How?"

"The brushes. That's all you need. You'll know when you touch them."

"I'll do it."

"Aejys? Josiah?" Dynarien opened the door to the tower and came in. He had curtailed his Jumping as much as possible at his sister's insistence because she suspected it left a residue. Too many mages in Charas had tell-tales set to catch Jumpers within the city itself so that while intra-city Jumping was not banned it was hazardous.

"How long have you been giving him Pollendine?" Aejys' voice caught.

"Since before the imps."

Aejys nodded in a distracted manner. "Kalirion said ... he said there ... were other possibilities... I thought he meant..."

"That he had more time?" Dynarien asked.

Aejys nodded again, broken, comfortless. Josiah, too weak to rise and hold her, touched her hand. Dynarien put his arm around her shoulders. She shook him off and fled.

She ran down the stairs into the hall, blinded by tears, and into the first room before she thought, standing confused and befuddled by grief in the middle of the floor. Maranya sat up and lit the lamp. "Majesty?" she asked, then seeing the state of her, "Aejys?" She rose, guiding the stricken king to the couch under the window and held her while she cried herself out. Then Aejys told Maranya the full story of Josiah and Zyne. King's Shield felt cold with horror both at what had been done to the mage by Zyne and at what she had nearly done to him herself in her mistaken assessment of him.

* * *

In the guise of establishing an embassy, the Sacred King of Rowanhart had entered the city in pursuit of Hoon and Mephistis. For two years she had bested them at every turn. Tonight Hoon had learned that the rabble had risen to her banner and Isranon wondered how that might affect matters.

"The wards are down, the tower emptied. All the rooms we could never find are open and have been emptied." The lesser blood vampire, an Ylesgaire, cursed.

Hoon sat in his wing chair, his fingers steepled, regarding the lesser blood with arrogant contempt. Three of his royals flanked him standing; Anksha curled at his feet running her gaze hungrily across Mephistis and his six surviving sa'necari seated on the couches. "If you had not mismanaged Willidar's death and turning, those things would have been ours."

"Why didn't you turn Abelard the first time?" Mephistis demanded, crossly.

Hoon gave him a furious glance, hot and contemptuous. "Kalirion marked his first incarnation. It wasn't something obvious. He may not even have been aware of it. The last Abelard was of his bloodline but was not marked. That should have left a nasty surprise, though I have not heard. Willidar should not be marked. He can be turned if I can catch him again. According to the rumors of the times, there were artifacts of great power and incomparable spell books in those rooms. I want them. And I do not want them turned against us."

"Then we take Thorn Hall."

"Easier said than done. I will need to bring a divinator into play. Hell knows what might have been in those rooms."

"Margren was one of the best, but she is gone." Mephistis turned to look at Hoon as he spoke.

"She was unstable. Nearly useless," Hoon said, disparagingly, impatiently.

Isranon listened uneasily, seated across from the prince. There was now only two sa'necari left who had not fallen to her. Anksha had taken Petros over a week ago. She had insisted on having all six present for this little gathering. She had decided to play games with these last two. Mephistis and the other four wore neither shirt nor tunic, so that their scars from her feedings would show. She no longer bothered to stifle their screams: she made the other two listen and sometimes watch. Witnessing it sickened Isranon. But so did the constant stream of muffled whimpering coming from Yoris.

"Do not take that tone with me, Hoon!" Mephistis snapped in an unexpected flaring of temper, which only Margren's name or mention of his sons could bring on.

Anksha snarled, nostrils flaring, and he subsided.

"I apologize," Mephistis said, his gaze sliding over the other sa'necari.

Anksha rose and walked slowly around the chairs, smiling in a calculating fashion, her hands behind her back like a child planning naughtiness. Isranon suspected his prince's outburst had provoked something in her.

Isranon felt detached from all the people speaking around him, no longer putting names to voices. Words were empty things. He watched Yoris blubber, trembling uncontrollably as Anksha picked one of the others and pulled him down, dragging him over to that one's feet. The sa'necari were accustomed to having cattle, not being cattle. They bred and kept nibari herds, genetically altered humans, to satisfy their arcane appetites. This made finding themselves as the cattle all the more difficult and terrifying to endure.

"Watch, Yoris," she purred. "Watch closely. See what I intend for you."

Yoris cringed away from her, his eyes saucer-ing in panic, whimpering like a small creature pinned beneath a cat's claws.

"What I intend to do..." Another royal spoke somewhere to the left of Isranon.

"Anksha, I can't stand it any longer," Yoris wept, opening his shirt and shoving his chair away as he sank to his knees beside his compliant fellow. "Bite me, I beg you. Get it over with. You'll do it anyway. Please, do it now. I can't stand this waiting, this not knowing when...or if I'll be next."

Isranon experienced a sharp surge of contempt for Yoris' cowardice, the first emotion to break through his walls completely. He would not go down like this, whimpering in terror. Yoris had always survived at Mephistis' court by playing one mon off against another. Isranon understood the pattern of Anksha's depredations: she had taken the strongest of them first, working her way through their ranks to the weakest and the weakest of them all was himself. Had he believed it would achieve anything, he would have offered himself in their places; but it would not have helped matters any. In fact, it might even have angered her further.

"Are you certain?" Anksha asked, flashing her fangs. "Will you die for me? Can I take all I want? Can I drain you to death?"

"Yes. If that's what you want. Only do it now. Please," Yoris gibbered in terror.

"I will." Anksha leaped onto him.

As her fangs tore into him and her power swept through him, Yoris screamed as shrill as a woman gone mad, "Noooooo!" Then he wet himself.

Mephistis closed his eyes until the screaming stopped. Yoris curled up in a tight, whimpering ball.

Isranon decided it was time to make an end of it with all the courage he could manage, show himself to be a man like his father. He removed his shirt and tunic, kneeling. He drew in a fortifying breath, folding his hands together behind his back.

Hoon paused in his speaking, staring at the multitude of scars on Isranon's body, scars that should not have been there. Sa'necari could heal nearly any wound with blood if they received it in time. Isranon scarred because he had never crossed the line into darkness with the rites.

"Since there is no escaping my fate, Anksha," Isranon said. "Then let me meet it well, rather than whimpering like the others."

Anksha looked at him curiously, taking in the calm stoicism, the proud tilt to his chin, shoulders and back straight. From her expression, the fact that his body bore

the many scars of others feedings, had registered in her mind; yet she did not question what she saw. "You I could like," she said.

"No!" Mephistis shouted. "No, please, Anksha. Not Isranon. He is a good man. He isn't like the rest of us." Mephistis crossed the room, dropping to his knees and pushing between them. "Please. Don't do this! Hoon, please ask her not to do this."

"Move aside," Anksha hissed. "Or I'll not just take him, Mephistis, I'll kill him." She twisted about, tearing her claws deeply across Isranon's chest, gouging him. He bore it well, making not the smallest sound.

Hoon turned his back. "Take him and be done with it, Anksha."

"Do not dishonor me," Isranon said calmly. "The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me." He centered himself in the teachings, waiting for her with his head tilted now like a nibari's before a hungry master, exposing the favored vein. A stoic stillness framed his utter surrender.

Mephistis nodded, withdrawing and burying his face in his hands.

Anksha asked Isranon the same questions she had Yoris, which he answered and then she took him more savagely than the others, tearing him further with her claws as well as her fangs. Isranon's sphincters tightened and his body went rigid with the pain. He fought to stifle the groan that felt as if it were climbing up his throat inch by inch until it escaped past his clenched teeth despite his efforts. But he did not scream. All his hopes and dreams died as his blood welled into her mouth and her power swept through him in a roaring presence, claiming all of him – body and soul. She snapped the dominance-link into place, jerking him hard and then slashing through him with the blade of her mind, cutting him heart and soul. He crumpled and lay unmoving before her. Mephistis cried out at this.

Before Isranon had slipped from consciousness his and Anksha's minds touched fully. She let out an anguished shriek of utter desolation, circling him in a crouch, tearing her hair and keening his name, "Isranon, son of Isranon, son of Isranon."

Hoon spun around, stricken by comprehension. He snatched Anksha up, pressing her face into his shoulder to stifle her noises. "Take Isranon upstairs," the Lemyari ordered his royals as he carried her out. Mephistis followed, his eyes wide.

"Hush her quickly. Please. If the others figure out what she means they'll kill him," Mephistis said. "I discovered him by accident. He's been my only real friend. Every time another sa'necari has stumbled on those of his lineage they have killed them. But they are too proud to change their names. It's probably the only decent thing I ever did. Why did he have to join me at your estate? I told him to stay away."

Hoon's eyes closed briefly. Timon, acting on his orders, had probably altered the letter. He had altered several of Mephistis' letters. Hoon's plots had just doomed the

last surviving male carrying Isranon's name in unbroken succession. His only decent brother. For several generations they had been forced to become sa'necari by performing unspeakable acts with their families held hostage to their compliance. But after awhile they began to be born sa'necari. Then the killing started as they refused to continue. They fled and disappeared. Hoon assumed they had all been slain at last. Yet here was Isranon and Hoon had ruined him. Bloody tears ran down his face.

"For many years I tried to get close enough to pull them from the House of Waejonan's grasp. By the time I was able to, they were gone. As little power as he possesses, he'll wither and be dead within a fortnight." Hoon stalked off, carrying the still-weeping Anksha.

* * *

Mephistis followed the royals bearing Isranon to his rooms. He had barely managed to hold himself together until they had gotten him onto the bed. Then he could see how badly Anksha had torn him. She had punished Isranon because Mephistis had tried to intervene, clawing his chest as well as biting deeply into his neck.

"Get out! Get out all of you!" Mephistis' voice began to crack with grief and shame even as it rose with rage. When the royals did not move fast enough he threw a chair at them, then he collapsed on his knees, falling forward, bent at waist, his shoulders pressing Isranon's side. His breathing came in sobs and gasps, tears streaming his face. "It's my fault. It's my fault she hurt you. It's my fault she owns you now."

Mephistis pressed his forehead against the edge of Isranon's chest as he wept. Fingers brushed his face.

"My prince?" Isranon's voice was weak and faint.

Mephistis raised his head and seeing that Isranon's eyes were open, he slit his wrist, pressing it to the injured sa'necari's mouth. "Drink, that's my command." Mephistis had never willingly fed anyone in his life.

Isranon drank and the sheer potency of Mephistis' blood closed the wounds in his neck and chest, leaving only scars. Although the blood healed him swiftly, he would still need more. She had not simply taken him, she had broken him.

"I was going to be free. A ghost promised me..." Isranon's voice came out jagged, beaten, and haunted as he finally released himself to despair. "She promised I would walk with gods and the kings of light to Ildyrsetts. That ... that they would give me the staff of Dawnhand... Now, I'll never be free. Never! She's a roaring noise in my head! Oh gods, it hurts so." Isranon covered his head, balling up and rolling into the corner, pressing himself into the wall as if he had lost his mind.

"The pain will lessen with time. At least you met your fate like a man. Better than the

rest of us. And you were right. She would have come for you eventually. Anksha left you for last, not because I cared for you, but because you were the weakest."

A knock preceded Nevin and Olin's entrance. They came close, glancing from Mephistis to Isranon. "What?"

"Anksha took him." Mephistis went very still, his arms around Isranon. "When Anksha tires of her toys she kills them," his voice grew ever softer. "Isranon may be an exception to this, but Hoon words were 'I've doomed him.' I don't like the sound of that. It does not bode well for any of us who have been bitten. I have heard that even those she does not kill outright, wither and die from simply being in her presence. Isranon is the weakest of us, so I can only believe that he will go first. Hoon says he'll wither and die within a fortnight. Olin, locate a bottle of sanguine rose. Maybe if we could get some of that into him." *"My hubris killed my wife, cost me my sons, and now my only friend is dying."* Fresh tears welled in his eyes and ran unhindered down his face.

Olin obeyed and they dosed Isranon. The two lycans, in wolf form, slept with him. He drifted in and out of drugged slumber, weeping for his loss, but by morning he had built his castle again and retreated into it, finding that armored center of reason, acceptance and discipline. He hurt, but he would wall himself in and survive.

* * *

Nevin woke in the night, changed, and sat beside Isranon, watching over him with a deep poignant pain in his chest. He stroked the young man's dark hair with touches so feather light that Isranon did not wake to them. The old wolf had always believed he would lose him eventually, yet never dreamed it would be this way. Isranon had been eight when his father first left him in Claw's valley, hidden away among the lycan while he searched for a new refuge for his people. Nevin had loved Isranon from the start, but fallen *in* love with him when the boy was fourteen and first starting to run with the wolves to hunt. He had never said anything, and he would not now. He had taught him to hunt and fish, to track and trap, to ride like a lycan. He had taught him to fight, to use his blades. It was wrong for the mentor to fall in love with the student, especially with such a difference in their ages. So he would love him in silence. Anksha's blood-slaves always withered when she did not kill them outright. As weak a sa'necari as Isranon was, he would wither swiftly. When he died ... when he died, Nevin would return to the clan and write a song about him. They would howl his name beneath the full moon; add his name to the list of those great hearted who had dwelled among them. Then Nevin bent, and gently, oh so gently, kissed Isranon without waking him.

"And I'll raise your child as if he were my own. I swear it. I will take your body home and bury it where you were happiest, near the cave where you and Merissa trusted."

Nevin wished they had told Isranon about the child Merissa carried. Now it seemed wrong to do so. It would give him one more thing to mourn for: the child he would never know.

* * *

Dynanna sat at Dolorous' desk, flanked by Pieface and Sugar Maple. Odanner sat in the chair facing her. The abbot herself sat on the floor coloring with bright pastels on colored paper. The six apprentices, including Britlyn, with Tom's arm around her shoulders, stood behind them. "I haven't told anyone you're here," she said. "This isn't our decision to make, Odanner, it's yours. Those are the rules of sanctuary and I cannot break them. I haven't even told my brother. And I won't. When the masters were murdered you came to me for sanctuary and I granted it. So long as you and the apprentices remain on the temple grounds you are under my protection. I have enough Badree Nym here to knock the city down if need be. I would rather not do that."

Odanner sighed, looking troubled. "I understand, Holy One."

"Aejys isn't here just to take you to safety. She's here to fight the myn who hurt me. She isn't leaving until she finds them. You show yourselves now, you'll be leaving my protection for hers. This needs to be handled sneakily. We're on the verge of a godwar."

Odanner's head came up and he looked frightened. "Holy One?"

"You heard me. Think about it. Should you find your courage ... I will continue to protect you. On the other hand, Kalirion thinks you owe him big time, and you know what I'm talking about. So does Britlyn. You need to think about paying your debts. And, Odanner, paybacks are hell."

Dynanna loved to complicate matters. It tended to move things in the direction it needed to go in a hurry.

"Sit down, boys and girls. This is going to take some time and I'd rather you didn't keel over in a faint when I tell you the rest of it. Folks in Rowanhart think Aejystrys Rowan may be the sacred Kalirioni king."

Odanner turned white and began to shake. "That cannot be."

"Oh, but it can." Dynanna grinned. "She's already cleansed twenty souls. Let me tell you all about it. Sharani tend to play havoc with prophecy."

* * *

Tagalong and Hanni went to Dynarien. Dynarien went to Aejys and Aejys went to the temple. She stalked past all the little people who hovered around her, trying to

turn her aside with their words and the servants who stopped their tasks to follow her. She opened the doors and strode into the abbot's study, bracing the little woman. "I want to talk to Dyna," she told Dolorous.

The abbot sat stroking three of her glass animals alternately amid a pile of colored chalk. Pieface sat on the floor scribbling with pretty shades of azure, mulberry and claret on delicate mauve paper with a rough grain that held the oil pastels well. He was drawing vampires with flowers in their teeth.

"You called?" Dynanna came in grinning largely. She wore an oversized white shirt and cut off ragged pants, riding boots and golden spurs, dismissing everyone but Pieface, Dolorous and Sugar Maple who entered behind her and closed the door.

Aejys sat down and Dynanna took the chair opposite her. "Tagalong is getting no place locating the life mages. But I have greater problems. The Guild has withdrawn from Charas. I haven't enough people to defend Thorn Hall. I haven't enough people to mount an offensive against the city if I need to."

Dynanna's face turned thoughtful. Should she play her cards one at a time or lay them all on the table? She had enough troops hidden away in her temple, which was larger on the inside than it was on the outside – a nice trick which she had learned from the fox-magi, who really were foxes – to knock the city down twice over (she was definitely going to get into trouble over this one no matter what she did) and all the magical rabble of the Poor Quarter and the slums, who, while not much individually could become a force to be reckoned with if taken all together. Maybe she would give Aejys the rabble. Aejys had done very well with the rabble in Vorgensburg and Rowanhart. "You want to hire an army?"

"Yes," Aejys' face was grave. "I must be able to do what needs to be done, whatever that might turn out to be. You have the only temple left in the city. There must be a reason for that."

Dynanna chewed her lower lip. "I can give you an army, but it will cost you."

"What do you want? As I understand it, you asked Birdie to sleep with your brother. If that's your price, I'll pay it."

Dynanna's eyes softened and she sighed. "No, that's one I would not ask."

"Why not? Is there something wrong with me?"

"No. It's my brother. I know he doesn't show it, but he's still grieving for Talons. Until I find someone else to deliver those souls... Guess I ought to start interviewing yuwenghau..." Dynanna's face abruptly teared up, remembering what Hoon and Mephistis had done to her as well. The image of LorenRain caught in that net and her unable to do anything to save him.

Aejys rose from her chair and embraced the little godling, holding her tightly. Dynanna began to sob. She had held it in well, concentrating on her anger. "They killed my babies ... they killed my son, LorenRain ... my friend, Talons..." Dynanna wept.

"I know. And I am going to destroy them." Aejys set Dynanna away from her. "I cannot let you mark me, I'm already paladin to two gods. But I will have you as my bloodsister, my spiritsister. When Josiah cast shared life, using Dynarien's blood and life-force I became yuwenghau of the lineage of Willodarus."

Dynanna's eyes grew wide, her head coming up sharply. "You mean you really are my sister?"

Aejys nodded. She took out her dagger and cut her palm, extending the dagger to Dynanna. "Will you swear blood bond to me, making your enemies my enemies, my sister?"

Dynanna took the blade, cut her palm and they placed their hands together. They spoke the words and the bond was made. It hit Aejys suddenly that she, who had once felt she had no sisters, no real family, had a growing family, many sisters. She wrapped her arms around Dynanna again and they held each other for a very long while.

"I will accept any who will come to my banner as my liegemyn," Aejys said when they finally parted. "I will take them and their families with me to Rowanhart when this deed is done. I have brought more than enough gold to achieve it and Dynarien can jump back for more along the way if need be. Remember I have the wrym's hoard."

"I have a few hoards of my own, sis," Dynanna said, smiling now as she wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "We're a family."

Pieface shoved his pastels into his pouch, gathered his papers into a satchel, and joined them. "Wow! Can I do this too?"

"It stings," Dynanna warned.

"That's okay, I'm tough!" He stuck his hand out.

* * *

"Tori?"

Josiah turned his head to see Maranya, still too weak to rise. "What is it?"

"I've come to apologize and to talk. Aejys told me everything. I know you're Josiah. For months I've believed that you deliberately tried to kill her. I'm the source of

those rumors. I intended to kill you to protect her."

"There is nothing to apologize for. I was not in my right mind. I would rather you had killed me than allowed me to harm her. Did she also tell you that she is Shularrien?"

"Your dead wife?"

"Na'halaef. She was Sharani. The first time Josh cast shared life – it was a very primitive flesh and bone meld – I recognized her. Help me sit. I need the medicine."

Maranya got him sitting and helped him hold the glass.

Once the medicine had steadied him, Josiah began to talk again. "Another thing. Let some others know this so the task does not fall to Aejs. I haven't told her. Once Dynarien cleared my mind, I remembered this. Someone will need to take my head and heart. The way that Zyne and Hoon turned me into a weapon against Aejs – Hoon bit me...forced his blood into me...oh gods!" Josiah fell back against the pillows, breathing heavy. "Please, Maranya ... make certain I do not rise and become a threat to her. Dynarien knows. But I want enough people to know. Without word reaching Aejs."

"Just members of the Order. We'll be discreet. Aejs could cleanse you."

"No ... if I told her ... all of it ... what they did to me ... she might go after them too soon. I know her. Another thing. The other member of our triad was Nariya. There are some brushes with my things. I made them from my na'halaef's hair to make paintings. Magical paintings. The one of Shularrien is finished. The one of Nariya is not. Help her finish that one. Then she can find Nariya. It may be that Tamlestari is Nariya. I want her to be certain. Nariya would be a comfort to her. You understand? When I am gone?"

"I swear it. It may not be I who helps when this is done, but I will see that enough of us know, that one will survive to help."

"Thank you."

"Now, what about your hair?"

Josiah shook his head. "I'm not coming back. I've left no descendants. Condition of the curse ... I must..."

"Do it anyway. Give me some hair, spell it, and tell me how to make them."

Josiah began to laugh and weep softly. "As you wish."

* * *

Aejys allowed Maranya to choose the other five from their ranks who would attend the party with them and she chose with care, picking only Sharani who had done a turn with Janine and knew the steps.

It would be different in Charas, no doubt, but not that much different, Maranya suspected, considering the ratio of male to female. Lord Kanz had shown up with his own entourage.

The mages had turned into butterflies for this event, in gaudy robes and dresses, the women displaying their charms to best advantage and leaving little to the imagination. The Sharani stood out like barbarians and drew every eye in their silk and leather. They ignored the initial twittering of the ladies with a sly, sensual arrogance and conquered the party. Musicians played an exquisite tune and people began to pair up in the center of the garden on a wide tiled dance floor bordered by low well-trimmed hedges.

"Do you dance, Shularrien?"

Aejys turned, startled to hear anyone save Josiah call her that name, and stiffened, "Hoon."

"Ah, but you mistake me," Hoon bowed low, taking her hand. "I am Lord Darmungaard, master of the shifter's guild and a member of the council."

A wave of hatred and anger surged through Aejys at his touch. Hoon had tormented, hurt and nearly killed both her and Josiah, yet there he stood calmly holding her hand in the middle of a party. Every fiber of her being cried out for vengeance, to simply summon Spiritdancer to her hand and kill him. But to do so here and now would be an affront to the council and putting everyone who had come with her in jeopardy. She wanted to hurt him; to hurt him as deeply as possible and in ways from which he would never recover and then – as she allowed him to draw her out onto the dance floor – she remembered the words of the oracle last fall "The oracle of the Willowhorn sends you word, Lord Hoon," Aejys whispered softly, feeling him stiffened. "Your wife, Amalthea did not betray you willingly."

Hoon's expression hardened, he started to pull away, realizing that this might be something he did not want to hear. Now it was Aejys' turn to grab his hand and hold on.

"You know she cannot lie, hear me out. Waejonan took her mind. As Mephistis has taken Linden and Quelyn's." Aejys saw him flinch. She did not know who they were, but she could see the names meant something to him. "Whoever they are, Mephistis will learn their secret on the second full moon of summer and kill them through the link. Furthermore, if you look into Mephistis' mind, through the Legacy, you will find the truth of what his ancestor did to Amalthea there."

"If what you say is true, then I will make your death a far gentler one than I had planned for you."

"One death is as good as another." Aejs shrugged and released him. "But I will have yours first."

Hoon started to turn away and then stopped. "Can my family's souls be pried out of the Legacy?"

"Only if you are willing to give up all hope of possessing its power," Aejs said, her voice hard. "Spiritdancer can free all the souls, but only by destroying the Legacy itself with Mephistis' death."

"May I cut in?"

Aejs smiled at Lord Kanz who had appeared beside them.

Hoon glanced from Kanz to Aejs and backed away, then turned and swept from the room.

The musicians played a slow, romantic tune and the dancers drew close to their partners, swaying in stylized courtship patterns. Aejs' breasts brushed his body as he held her near, one arm around her waist as their hands linked in an upward flourish.

Aejs brushed her lips across Kanz's ear and whispered, "I think we're in trouble, that was Lord Hoon."

Lord Kanz smiled as if she had said something witty. "I've known him for years and never liked him. He calls himself Lord Darmungaard. He's quite influential."

"Could there be a temple to the Hellgod in Charas?"

"Not that I know of. But it would not surprise me if there were."

"Does the council know he's undead?"

"No. But an accusation like that could get you killed."

* * *

"Hoon?" Anksha watched him, her forehead drawn up in little frown lines, her mouth pursed. He had sent the nibari away untouched. Fire burned in a brazier in the center of the pentagram, fragrant smoke billowing forth to fill the room, yet he spoke no words and began neither a rite, a ritual, nor a meditation. Nothing. It was as if he did not quite know what to do.

"Hoon?" Anksha asked again. When he did not answer, she crossed the room and dropped to her knees beside him, tilting her head to gaze up into his face. That was when she saw the tears emerging one at a time from his eyes.

"Anksha," he began to speak at last, and forming each word with slow infinite care. "Anksha, what if Amalthea was innocent? I killed her ... I loved her and I killed her ... and what if she was innocent?"

"But she wasn't, Hoon. I saw it. I summoned you." Anksha leaned her head in closer to his, puzzled mightily at the question, wondering where it could possibly have come from.

"Anksha. What if ... what if Waejonan had gotten into her mind. What if he made her do it?" His voice grew more deeply troubled as he spoke.

Anksha jerked her head back and settled on her haunches, startled, thinking.

Hoon's almond eyes narrowed to slits, scarcely as wide as the trail of a razor between the long, thick lashes. "Can we really know when he first discovered the powers of his mind? When did he lay his first sways and triggers? Whose mind did he capture with that first coercion he ever laid? Could it have been Amalthea? Anksha ... could it have been my wife?"

Anksha blew a soft breath between her teeth. "What would the Legacy taste like, Hoon?"

"Memories. I think it would taste like memories that did not belong. Old memories. And power."

"What has made you think these things, Hoon?"

"Rowan." He wrapped his arms around himself, closing his eyes again. "I decided to play a bold hand tonight, Anksha. I revealed myself. I danced with her. I could feel the power in her. She shared the words of an oracle – told me its words. She said you could find the truth by reading the Legacy which Mephistis holds."

"Then send for him and I will find it," Anksha growled.

"I am afraid."

"Of what?"

"The truth."

* * *

Isranon knelt on the floor, shirtless, awaiting whatever orders Anksha or Hoon

chose to give him, wrists crossed and resting on his knees. Bodramet knelt opposite him in the same posture. Mondarius the divinator returned with Mephistis – he was a skilled, ritual vivisectionist priest, who opened his victims up on his altar, sealing his prophecies like tightly wrapped curses in their bodies and timing their deaths as part of the rite. The divinator was one of the most powerful of Hoon's liegemyn.

Mephistis came, glancing uneasily. Isranon did not allow the prince to catch his eyes, wanting to do nothing that might arouse Anksha's wrath. Anksha and Hoon waited with the others. There were now six in the room, besides the two servants.

This place was much like all of Hoon's other chambers of magic. The pentacle tiled into the floor. The stakes had been set at the points tonight and locked in place. A victim would soon be secured there. Mephistis shuddered. Two low stone tables set at angles to it to hold the tools and bottles for the working. Isranon wondered, fear tightening through him, if they had finally decided to kill his prince.

They all watched him, except Hoon.

"Mephistis," Hoon said, in a hollow, empty voice. "Do you possess the Legacy of Waejonan? Did you take it from Aurean's body?"

"Hoon – I–"

Anksha gave a tiny, wordless growl.

Mephistis trembled, his body and mind jerking in response to that small, dangerous sound. He answered truthfully in a small voice, all which could pass his painfully constricted throat. "Yes."

"Disrobe," Hoon ordered.

Mephistis' gaze swept every face, wondering which one was going to kill him, praying to his dark gods that it would not be Mondarius. "*Mortgiefan*?"

There was no way out of this chamber, except through them. Anksha would take his mind through the dominance-link at the first sign of trouble. He was a captive, wrapped round in chains that could not be seen and, remembering how Isranon had given himself to Anksha, he would not play the coward before him. Mephistis threw his clothing beyond the tables into the far corner of the room and lay down in the center of the pentagram on his stomach – the position for a male to die in a rite of mortgiefan.

"On your back, Mephistis," Hoon said.

The prince's courage faltered. He glanced at Mondarius; certain that this meant the divinator intended to open him up. Mondarius shrugged, as if to say it was not his rite. Mephistis settled on his back, extended his limbs. Mondarius secured him,

speaking soft words that Mephistis did not recognize. The two sa'necari disrobed and took their places, sitting cross-legged to either side of his head. Then Hoon and Mondarius brought their tools and other items of magic to the circle, taking places beside him. Anksha removed her garments tossing them away and sat between his legs.

"What are you going to do?" Mephistis asked.

"Do not speak," Hoon told him.

Anksha slithered on top of him. Hoon and Mondarius placed their hands on Anksha's back. Then she broke the skin in the juncture of the prince's neck and shoulder. As the blood welled into her mouth, her mind slipped into his and then past it.

Hoon watched lives slide swiftly past as Anksha dug through them, clawing like a dog digging into the earth after a long buried bone. Clods of images thrown in chunks and fragments around him.

Mephistis weakened, whimpered. Isranon slit his wrist and put it to the prince's mouth. Mephistis suckled like a babe at its mother's breast, hardly noticing what he did, comforted, lost in Anksha's journey, mindlessly wrapped, and set aside. Isranon fed him uncomplaining, steadfast, and stalwart, until his companion noticed that he swayed with exhaustion, pulled his wrist from the prince's mouth, and shoved a preserving bottle between his shaking hands before taking his place with the prince. Isranon, his shields washed away by weakness, found himself drawn into the vision, into an intimate awareness of what the others saw and felt.

Hoon fought to still his grief and terror as they entered the grounds of his estate in Waejontor; the one he had had while still living. Timon greeted his mother, surprised to see her. Amalthea had a strange expression on her face, unreadable. She gestured and Waejonan stepped from the ranks of her escort. Timon's expression changed to terror, realizing they had been betrayed. He tried to run, but the soldiers rode him down. When they caught him, they bound him and dragged him back. Hoon saw Anksha, then only half grown, fleeing into the forest with arrows in her back. Then they gathered the rest of Hoon's children and one by one Waejonan took them in mortgiefan. Amalthea wept and begged at first, but Waejonan grabbed her by the hair, looked deep into her eyes, and bound her tightly. Afterward she smiled and helped him with it while Timon watched. Finally the soldiers positioned Timon, drove a pole between his legs, through his body and out his shoulder, planting it in the earth. Amalthea never shed a tear as she walked away with Waejonan. Hoon had his answer. Waejonan had taken her mind in stages until he owned it entirely.

Hoon straightened, drawing his hands slowly from Anksha's back and sat weeping. Pain, grief, shame, and finally rage. First at Waejonan and then at Aejystrys Rowan for giving him this new grief. "I will kill her for this..."

"For what, My Lord?" Mondarius asked, quietly as he withdrew from Anksha.

"For telling me. For showing me this."

Mondarius opened the circle and dismissed the others, telling them to take the now unconscious Mephistis with them. Anksha curled around Hoon, watching his face.

"When this game is played," Hoon said, his voice still hollow and flat. "I will have no more use for Mephistis. I will pry my children's souls out of the Legacy."

"And the game?" Mondarius asked.

"I have a king to kill."

"Then I must make a prophecy, read the omens, seal the ones that favor us as a curse upon her."

"What do you need?"

"One who is close to her."

"There is the dwarf, that ha'taren captain who is ever at her side, and the mage that shares her bed."

"Get me one of them. Timing is always of essence in these things. Set a trap for this abominant king so that it closes about her within a day of my work's completion."

"And what do I do, Hoon?" Anksha purred.

Hoon stroked her. "Rest. Tomorrow, reconnoiter. See which of these three might be easiest to catch."

* * *

Aejys sat on the dais, watching the audience chamber of Thorn Hall fill rapidly with a shabby assortment of ragged people. They were all devotees of Dynanna, drawn from the Poor Quarter of Charas, the cast-offs.

A young male came up in crude homespun. He was scarred and battered, limping. He looked as if he had been beaten repeatedly. He dropped to his knees on the lowest step and bowed his head.

"Majesty."

"What is your name and what do you do?"

"Oresstan, majesty. I was a stablemon." His face twisted tightly in anger.

Aejys watched him closely. He had come for something besides employment and he was the first to come forward. Where they all like him? What had Dynanna set her up for? "What do you mean was?"

"I served Lord Darmungaard. One day his favorite horse picked up a stone and was lamed. He said it was my fault, that I had overlooked the stone when I cleaned its hooves. I swear to you, there was no stone. The beast must have picked it up as his lordship rode. For that he did this to me." He pulled up his pants leg and showed her the twisted calf, scarred and ruined. He opened his shirt and showed her the scars from a severe beating.

"Did you complain?" Aejys' hands ached with the memory of her own crippling at the hands of her mad sister.

"There is no law for those of low birth, majesty. Those who complain to the council, die."

"Your body cannot serve me."

The light seemed to fade from his face and he started to turn away.

"However, I am told that nearly everyone in Charas possesses some small magical talent. What is yours?"

"Rope, majesty. I am a minor earthmage with an affinity for vines and ropes."

Aejys gestured at Tagalong. "Get him some rope."

In a few minutes they watched as Oresstan made the rope climb and dance and take strange forms as if it were alive.

"You could set some impressive snares, I imagine," Aejys said with a small smile.

"Yes, majesty. I could." Life crept back into his tone.

"Would you enter my service as my liegemon, same as my myn-at-arms and my paladins? Pledging your life in my service? Be warned, if you speak this oath in bad faith when I touch you with the Spiritdancer, the sacred blade will know."

Oresstan's eyes filled with tears and he shrank from her. "Don't draw the blade. You don't want me."

Aejys left the throne and knelt before the terrified, dejected man. "I know what he is. Tell me what he did to you."

"I cannot..." He tried to rise, but Aejys caught him.

"Darien?"

Dynarien came, pressing his hands to Oresstan's temples. "Would you be free?"

"Yes, lord," he wept.

Dynarien reached into his mind, slicing through the coercions in one swift, practiced stroke. He had become deft at this.

"Oh sweet gods! He forced his blood down my throat and left me to die, but I didn't die... I am unclean."

Aejys raised her hands to heaven with a prayer, invoking her gods. The brands in her hands burned. Light flared around her and as she touched him two shafts poured down through the skylight, one purest white, and the other shimmering dancing flame. It sheathed the man and he cried out. The anguish and distress became peace and calm.

"My soul! My soul is cleansed. My mind is free." He turned to the crowd, crying out in a loud, rejoicing voice, "She is the Sacred King!"

* * *

Although the aristocracy did not realize it, the lowest classes of Charas were quietly preparing for war. The denizens of the slums and the poorest sections of the city were, almost without exception, worshippers of Dynanna. It had not always been that way. Over the course of twenty years Hoon had destroyed nine temples, leaving the poor without a priest. Gradually, they had gravitated to the surviving temples and finally they had been left with only one or worship privately in their homes with no one to tend to their spiritual and other needs. Finally they turned to Dynanna. Abbot Dolorous had provided for their needs in her own quaint and curious fashion, feeding their children when they would have gone hungry, giving them medicine for their ills and blankets to keep them warm during the winters.

Now the people disappeared from those sections of the city. The non-combatants secretly evacuated – most of them to the Sharani enclave west of Charas – a few into the Dynannan temple or Thorn Hall to act as messengers and pages. Those who could fight had been organized into units and were housed in either the temple or Thorn Hall, which was also becoming known as the Temple of the Sacred King.

"In light of what happened a year ago in Vorgensburg, I would not rule out an assault," Aejys said.

"As things stand we have our forces strung out between three places," Dynanna pointed out, "Your tower, Lord Kanz, is the least defensible. I'd think about moving. The fewer places we need to defend the better."

Lord Kanz nodded. "It might be better, since I am already known as your supporter, if I moved my units into Thorn Hall, if you'd have me."

"I'll have you, Lord Kanz," Aeajys said.

"I'm for that," Maranya said, giving him a lecherous glance.

"I've set a watch on the shifter's guild," Dynanna told them.

"I hope they don't notice it," Maranya said. "I'd hate for them to catch any of your people. You know what the sa'necari do to their captives."

Dynanna grinned. "Oh, I'm sneaky as hell." *They'd have to be watching for lizards .*

"Mephistis is the one I'm worried about," Josiah said. "I'm certain there's a temple to the Hellgod here someplace. Find that and we find Mephistis."

"We can't strike at Hoon until we find Mephistis," Maranya said. "We're only going to get one chance. Then we may have to fight our way out of the city." She turned to Dynarien. "As a yuwenghau, can you Jump out of Charas without getting trapped in the funnel spell?"

Dynarien thought about it. "There is a way. I can call to my grandsire and be summoned to him. Aeajys went to Kalirion that way. The funnel spell cannot affect the elder gods."

"Then if we are forced to fight our way out, I want you to get the king out of the city."

Aeajys started to protest, but Maranya silenced her with a look. "My liege, the kingdom needs you. I'll get our people out."

"I'll get your people out," Dynanna told her. "Trust me. I got resources here you wouldn't believe."

"We will not have to fight our way out," Aeajys said suddenly. "If I take the city."

* * *

Day by day an air of tension grew over the streets, the temple and Thorn Hall. No one spoke of it, but it was there. Life went on, but with changes. Aeajys, Maranya and other members of the household, those that Janine had managed to get trained, made the rounds of the parties, listening closely to the gossip and rumor, watching Hoon and those he was observed with. Dynanna gave Aeajys lists of his supporters. They assessed the power of the mages and what they could throw at Aeajys and Dynanna's forces (Dynanna, not wanting to upset Dynarien gave only a very conservative estimate of what she really had hidden in her temple).

The council infuriated Aejs. They had liked what they had seen of her and her Sharani at the parties so much that they had postponed her appointment another six weeks just to be certain of keeping her in Charas as long as possible. Aejs responded by quietly laying siege to Charas from within as only the wyrm's hoard and her own knowledge of business during her brief years as a merchant and tavern owner on the Blood Coast had taught her. She purchased everything the outlying farms had to sell, every pig, cow, chicken and every last vegetable, fruit, and grain. Then she placed agents in the Sharani enclave and outlying villages watching for the approach of merchants heading for Charas with orders to buy, nothing would enter Charas that she did not own. Her reputation as the Sacred King had spread with those she sent to safety and no one wanted to deal with the rest of the Charisians anyway. If the mages in their arrogance wanted to disregard her, then it was at their own peril. If the council would not or could not give Aejs what she wanted: namely the life mages, plus Hoon and Mephistis' heads; then she would simply inform them that they were to immediately surrender the city to her.

The only member of Aejs' company who actually claimed to have encountered a life mage was the healer, Pyne, and although he searched the temple every day he never found Britlyn. No one in the temple would admit that any life-mages, or anyone named Britlyn, could be found there. Tagalong and Hanni went to the temple with him daily. They also saw to buying and transporting supplies from shops and warehouses. They bought in bulk, laying in everything they needed as quickly as they could. It served a double purpose. They prepared for a possible siege and they eliminated more sources of supply for the mages of the upper classes without immediately calling their attention to it – they would discover their lack of goods when their servants came home empty handed from the market. Soldiers went with them.

* * *

"The Poor Quarter has become a ghost town, Lord Hoon," Chondri complained. "My people are being forced to go elsewhere to feed." The lesser blood was a twisted creature, hunch backed and gnarled. It constantly puzzled Hoon why even a lesser blood would have wanted to turn such a one in the first place. But Chondri was clever and ruthless, having clawed his way to top of the lesser bloods' hierarchy.

"What do you mean?" Hoon demanded, suspiciously.

"There is no one there. Not even a mongrel dog. The houses are empty. There is no one on the streets."

"How can a entire section of the city be empty?"

"They have been moved to the Temple of the Sacred King."

"There is no Temple to the Sacred King!" Hoon snarled. "I have destroyed every temple in the city except that of that infuriating little yuwenghau!"

"They have declared Thorn Hall to be the Temple of the Sacred King. King Aejystrys Rowan."

"I will kill her!" Hoon screamed. "Send for Mondarius! Now!"

Anksha uncurled from the couch. "Mondarius will tell you nothing he has not already told you. We must take one for the casting first. The mage never leaves Thorn Hall. The dwarf travels with guards. The Captain goes to the parties with the king, along with five Ha'taren Guard."

"Lord Hoon?" Mondarius entered, bowing to the vampire.

"Get your people together. Anksha, can you get him one?"

"Give me whatever I need and I will have you one in two days time," Anksha promised.

"Make is so, Anksha."

"I have given some thought to perhaps gaining her an earlier council meeting, my lord. I think only your people should show up," Mondarius suggested. "I could wrap the casting around it nicely."

Hoon envisaged the chambers, the way her blood would look washing over the tile mosaic on the floors, splashing on the white marble of the walls and smiled. "Yes, that would work. It has an appropriate artistry. It is a fine place to betray a king."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

FAVORS

"I still can't find her," Pyne sounded frustrated and desperate. "She's a life-mage. Damn it! Why won't they just tell me!"

"Ye know why," Hanni said. "It's called sanctuary. Tha life-mages are there, all right. Every one of 'em. Once Aejys nails Hoon at tha council meetin' they'll come forward an' we'll take 'em ta Rowanhart. Simple as tha an' ye know it." The wagon creaked along, Pyne riding beside Hanni, Tagalong trotting her pony next to them. Six Ha'taren Guard, four behind and two in front accompanied Hanni's wagon. They had cleared out the last of another cheese and wine merchant's stores with this last trip. Tagalong wondered how much longer it would be before someone started to notice. The market square was already starting to look like a ghost town.

Shifters erupted from the alley as Tagalong came abreast of it. "Shit!" Tagalong shouted, seeing no space to jump down and fight on foot in her favored style, hating to try and fight from pony-back. She dropped the reins, pulled her hammer and sword, and simply jumped into the thick mass of bodies grabbing for her. Claws raked harmlessly down her back, tearing her tunic and sliding on her hauberk. Something sprang onto her shoulders, throwing its weight against her head and neck, staggering her as another struck her behind the knees and she went down. Several creatures seized her hands, arms, feet, and legs, carrying her quickly into the alley while she thrashed and twisted. They threw her weapons far from her grasp.

Hanni threw the reins to Pyne, drew his great axe and plunged in with the heedless berserker charge of a battle-mad dwarven warrior, cleaving his way to her. Anksha, watching from a rooftop, blinked in astonishment, then shrieked in rage. Hanni freed Tagalong and the two dwarves headed for the wagon. The paladins were already cutting through shifters that engaged them. Anksha dropped onto Hanni's back, determined to put paid to at least one of them. She snapped at his neck, getting a mouthful of bushy black hair and only grazing the flesh. Hanni roared, reaching back to pull her off. She raked his hands and the side of his face; bit him at the juncture of neck and shoulder. Then Tagalong hit her solidly, sending her rolling into the alley. Anksha sprang to her feet and fled.

"Tha was tha beast," Hanni said, clutching the wound in his neck, he tottered a few steps and then slipped to his knees. Tagalong caught him. "Tha was tha beast."

Bryngaryn and another paladin knelt beside her, watching for shifters. Bryngaryn quickly began applying pressure to the wound as her companion lifted the unconscious dwarf. "Come on, Tag, we've got to get out of here."

* * *

Aejys called an emergency meeting. Dynanna arrived with her paladins followed by two large Sharani with huge barrels hefted to the shoulders. As they lowered them to the ground, Dynanna hovered anxiously about them. "Careful! Careful. Contents are fragile!"

Aejys stood and went over frowning curiously. "What is it?"

"Beast repellent. That thing hasn't got a chance." Dynanna hooked her finger through a hole in the end, twisted it deftly and lifted it off. The barrel was filled with tiny fragile glass globes containing a smoky liquid. "Hit her with them. Bamn! Things break, stuff comes out, Beast runs off. Beast repellent."

"What is this Beast?" Maranya asked, rising from the table.

"No one knows," Dynanna said. "my spies say the sa'necari that came in with Hoon are calling it Brandrahoon's terrible demon-eater."

Dynarien's face went three shades of pale and his hands clenched. "That would mean that Hoon was..." He tried to think, his mind reeling. Brandrahoon had been sylvan, while Hoon appeared to have come from human stock, but that could have been a deliberate alteration. Could they be the same mon? He retained all the memories and knowledge of his first life. Dynanna had been born, mercifully, without them, although they shared pieces of the same soul. Brandrahoon and Waejonan had ended his first life with a savage act of dark magic.

Dynanna settled into the chair next to him, put her arm around him and said. "It's him. I've known it for awhile."

"You think this stuff will stop the Beast?" he asked, trying to shake free of the memories.

"I know it will. My paladins have had run-ins with her before. Now she doesn't mess with them." Dynanna went to the second barrel, opened it. The globes in this one were of two kinds, one containing red liquid and another containing green. "Red is bang juice, green is itchy juice, and black is stinky juice. It's stuff my Badree Nym alchemists have come up with that will make most critters and folk back off in a flash. Issue some of it to people traveling from Thorn Hall and other places." Then she went back to her brother and sat with her arms around him.

Aejys left her place to stand next to them for a minute. "Will you be able to handle this meeting?" she asked the obviously troubled yuwenghau.

"Yes," he nodded, drawing a fortifying breath. "I've fought him before. I didn't know who he was then ... yes ... I'll manage... I want him destroyed."

"Good man," Aejys squeezed his shoulder, before returning to her place. "Bryngaryn, give me an assessment of what they were after."

"Tagalong. Their object, quiet clearly was to take Tagalong. Alive. Pyne and the wagon were left exposed when Hanni jumped down and cut his way to her rescue. They were carrying her down an alley. The shifters ignored the wagon. It was evident from the way they fought us, falling back toward the streets and other alleys that it was simply a holding action to provide cover for the others escape that Tagalong was the objective."

Maranya began to probe for more details. Then Dynanna spoke up. She had spies watching with orders not to engage. She would not say what kind. Dynarien perked up, giving his sister an odd look.

"So this is a kidnapping," Aejys said.

"I got a feeling it's something a whole lot worse," Dynanna said. "but I'm not sure. That's why I brought the goodies. There are some places warded too tough and tight for my spies to get into. Places in the merchants' quarter. Places near my temple.

Places in the Darmungaard's complex. Places in the Hall of Words. There's something real ugly going on in Charas. Be very careful, Aejys."

"Then let's discuss how to be careful."

* * *

Britlyn set her basket on the bed and put a change of clothing in it. She would only be staying overnight, maybe not even that long. She was not certain.

"Where are you going?"

She looked up and saw Odanner in the doorway. "Thorn Hall. Hanni is hurt. You remember the stone mage?"

"You're going to try and heal him?"

"Yes." Britlyn met his gaze unflinching. This time she would not back down. The time had come to make a stand. She was no longer a child. If she truly had faith in her god, then she had to act on that faith and stand on its tenants. She had prayed and searched her soul for weeks now. There could be no denying what she had been born to do in this world.

"I forbid it."

"You have no authority over me. As of right now, Odanner, I consider you to be an apostate."

"You're going to tell them."

"No, Odanner. Not yet. But I can't watch another die and just stand there, doing nothing. I'm going to tell the king what I am. I'm going to help." Then she walked past him. She went to see Dolorous. Pieface and Sugar Maple were with her.

"Mother Abbot," she said, stepping through the open door. "I want to help Hanni. I am hoping someone will walk me to Thorn Hall. I'm going to see the king."

A broad smile spread over Dolorous' face. The abbot laid her crayon down, came from her desk and hugged Britlyn. "I am proud of you." She turned to Pieface and Sugar Maple. "Well, paladins, please escort Mage Britlyn to the king."

"Oh, Mother Abbot, I'm just an apprentice."

Dolorous hugged her again. "No, this day you are a mage."

Britlyn blushed.

"Now, let's pick a friend to go with you. He'll come back and go home with me when this skirmish is all over. But this will give him something to do. My friends are getting bored sitting on the shelves."

Britlyn laughed softly, meaning no offense, but uncertain how to react as the little abbot waved her hands at the shelves of glass animals.

"Pick one. Pick something fierce. Really fierce."

Britlyn walked over, just to humor her, thinking it had to be like choosing a good luck charm. Her eyes swept over all the frogs and lizards, and then noticed the little birds and cats. Then she saw the owls. Nothing on the shelves looked fierce. Everything looked rather cute, even those species considered fierce. It was a matter of depiction.

"Trust me," Dolorous insisted. "Choose something fierce."

Britlyn sighed. She did not want to even touch one of the fragile glass creations for fear of dropping it, lest it break. "Oh Dolorous, I couldn't. What if I hurt it?"

Dolorous caught her arm and drew her down. Britlyn squatted. Dolorous' face grew very serious. Her eyes grew very large, like bright pools of power. She tossed her hat away, revealing her ears. She was Badree Nym without a doubt, but so different, so mature in an odd way.

"Choose," she said and her voice chimed in Britlyn's innermost being. "Hear the voice of simple wisdom, the mage who chooses childhood, who had her wings and gave them up, and does not miss them. Choose." Dolorous laughed suddenly and the spell was broken. "Well, which will it be?"

Britlyn shook herself, not quite certain what had happened. She picked a red-maned hunting cat, a chekaya, from the shelf and handed it to Dolorous.

"Oh, you'll like her!" Dolorous exclaimed happily. "Her name is Felice. And she's quite fierce." Dolorous set the figure on the floor, kissed its nose, stroking it and breathing on it. The figure grew and breathed, became warm. It stretched; flexing its dog-like paws, and yawned.

<What is it today, Dolorous? > Felice sent.

"A life-mage to guard."

<We finally have one again? >

"Yes. She's not fully trained. But she's definitely a life-mage."

Britlyn glowed.

* * *

Pyne wanted to move Hanni into the building, but Tagalong would not allow it. She felt certain that he would be happier in his wagon and she stayed there with him.

"Hello, Pyne," said a new voice.

The healer turned and a smile broke over his face. "Britlyn!"

She swallowed hesitantly. "I'm just an apprentice life-mage. All the masters were killed. But I can try. I've had some training. A good bit really before the temple was destroyed." Before she could say anything else Pyne was dragging her to Hanni.

Britlyn had made the decision to go to Pyne first and the king second, since she feared that every moment might count in saving Hanni from the lingering effects of his encounter with the Beast. When she had done everything she could, she shook her head, looking grave.

"I need to see the king. I've seen this before," she said. "There was one we dragged from the temple that we could not save. The wound went deeper than the body. The Beast bit him. The Beast does not have this effect on women. If Aejiystrys Rowan is indeed the Sacred King, then she can save him."

As they climbed out, Felice emerged from beneath the wagon and Pyne froze. Felice wrapped herself protectively around Britlyn who scratched her head. "It is all right, Pyne. This is Felice; Abbott Dolorous has sent her as my protector until the danger is ended in Charas. Felice, this is Pyne."

<Nice to meet you, Pyne. >

"Uh ... nice to meet you, too."

Britlyn noticed that Thorn Hall was an armed camp. The few children running messages and errands were all hard-eyed, grim youngsters, armed with daggers and slings, a few with bows, going about with steady strides – miniature adults. There were no other children to be seen. A rumor, spoken of in whispers, ran that the king intended to take the city if it did not give her what she wanted and that she would soon lose patience and make that demand of the council, forcing it to their attention. Britlyn could well believe it.

Pyne led her into the main hall where they found Aejiys standing with Maranya and Dynarien talking. Felice drew stares as they walked and Britlyn was grateful to the cat for drawing the eyes away from her.

"Majesty," Pyne said with a trace of satisfaction at finally being able to say this, "I'd like you to meet Britlyn, the young woman I've been looking for."

Britlyn dropped to one knee.

"No formality, please." Aejs extended her hand and as she did so Britlyn saw the faintly glowing brand of Kalirion. Britlyn gasped, almost toppling over.

Aejs caught her. "Please stand up." Aejs brought the overwhelmed young mage to her feet. "I promise I don't bite," she chuckled softly, trying to cover an uncomfortable twinge of embarrassment. "I've never frightened a young mage before – at least not without meaning to."

At first as the introductions were made Aejs experienced a wave of hope for Josiah, but as it became clear that Britlyn was only an apprentice and not the one that Kalirion had told her of, the sadness returned. Under the rules of sanctuary, Britlyn could not give her Odanner's name and Aejs was no closer to saving Josiah. But now she did know where they were hiding: in Dynanna's temple.

* * *

Anksha curled up around Hoon's feet, brooding in utter stillness, Isranon's name running around and around through her thoughts. She had fed upon him again a few hours past and the taste of him was in her mouth and body like a haunting dream. "Take me to the party, Hoon. I'll get that captain."

Hoon tousled her head. "And how will you do that, my pet? Your wiles don't work well with women."

"Lord Kanz and she spend time together. Let me give them a reason to chase me. Set a trap. Lord Kanz can be convinced to chase me. The captain will go with him."

"Ahhh," Hoon smiled then and stroked her dark hair. "Would you like a treat, Anksha? Some fresh caught imps, perhaps?" When Anksha did not immediately respond, the vampire looked and saw that she had tears in her eyes. "Anksha?" he asked, concerned, lifting her into his lap, and holding her. "what is wrong, my pet?"

"I want to go home."

"And we will."

Anksha shook her head. The tears worsened. Hoon touched them, stroking each long wet trail in a puzzled fashion. "What is wrong, Anksha? Why are you crying?"

"Isranon. He does not like it when I make the others scream. He offers himself in their place every time. He is so strange. He is so much like your brother, his ancestor. So much like the Dawnhand."

Hoon closed his eyes and clasped the little demon-eater tightly to his chest. "This

Isranon is not that Isranon. We are not who we were, Anksha. We cannot ever again be who we were. We can only be who we are. I am going to kill that king for reminding me of who I was. The ghosts of the past will be gone."

"Hoon, let me take Isranon and leave. At once. Go home."

"As soon as the rite to destroy the king is finished, Mondarius will take you both to Timon. Midnight."

Anksha wiped the back of her hand across her face to catch her tears. Her blood-slaves always died, even when she did not intend for them too. Isranon was the most fragile slave she had ever taken. He would not last long – no more than a few weeks.

* * *

"Another party," Maranya gritted the words out like dirt between her teeth. "Have you spotted Hoon, yet?" She nodded politely to three lords and turned away, slipping her arm through Kanz's. Allowing people to see them together created an impression that kept would be swains at arms length.

"There," Kanz said, whispering in her ear and nuzzling her cheek.

Maranya gave a soft laugh. "Who is that with him? I've never seen her before."

"Shall we get closer?" Kanz spied a young woman in white who did not look entirely human speaking at length with Hoon.

"Close enough to put a blade through him," Maranya whispered back with a flirtatious smile.

Kanz laughed. They drifted closer with Kanz straining to hear. He stiffened, his hand tightening on Maranya's. "Ambush. I'd swear he said something about an ambush."

The vampire folded a note and handed it to her. Then the young woman walked quickly toward the gate.

"Come on." Kanz set off after the woman.

He has seen the Beast. Follow him, Maranya. It is time. The words slid through her awareness like a voice of the spirits, not of the mind, nor yet of the ears or of any other senses. She knew, in her innermost being, that it was the touch of her god. Peace spread through her as she headed into the streets after Kanz. Some virtue must have been left upon her in the voice's wake, for when she touched him, his eyes cleared.

"She's carrying a message. We need to stop her."

Maranya nodded.

No matter how quickly they walked, the woman in white always seemed to stay tantalizingly just beyond their reach, yet never so far ahead as to lose them, as if she knew they followed. They soon found themselves in the warehouse district near the Dynannan temple.

"Didn't Dynanna say there was a warehouse around here that she could not get into?" Kanz asked.

"Yes," Maranya said. "I don't remember which one."

The woman in white paused a moment at the doors to a cloth merchant's warehouse and then went in.

"You want to bet that's the one?"

"I'm sure it is," Maranya responded. She felt an alteration in her awareness, a settling of destiny and feeling of sliding sideways as if she and reality were separating slightly. "It's time you left, Kanz. If I'm not out by morning, tell Aeijys where I am."

Kanz caught the odd, detached note in her voice, saw the fey light in her eyes: he had never seen it in a woman. "Maranya, I can't let you go in alone."

"Can't?" Maranya's mouth twisted in bittersweet amusement.

"Won't. I'll follow you."

Maranya shook her head. "It's probably a trap."

"So let's see what they throw at us?"

Maranya grinned, shrugged, and walked into the warehouse. Large crates stacked higher than Maranya's head formed aisles with lamps hanging at the intersections. They found a stair leading down and descended. The place was as silent as a pit at midnight. Maranya shook her head, moving along another isle. Further on they found a stair leading down, but Maranya chose to investigate some doors on the far side first. These proved to open on another set of stairs built inside the walls.

"Which one do you want to try?" She asked.

"The one back that there," Kanz nodded behind him. "I don't like the idea of creeping up and down inside a wall."

"Okay."

The air changed as they descended the second stairs. She could feel and smell the dampness of moss on stone. Maranya caught a whiff of incense as her foot touched the floor and she froze, scanning the corridor – no, ambulatory – they were in the hellgod's temple. She did not need to see it, she could feel it. The vibrations crept up her spine with the stench of a thousand deaths. Footsteps echoed from both ends of the ambulatory and she saw them now.

Maranya turned about sharply. "Get out of here, Kanz. We've found the temple."

"Do they see us?" Kanz whispered, crouching on the stairs.

"I don't think so."

"Then I'm not leaving." Kanz crept down past her into the shadows of an alcove. "I heard the woman discussing an ambush. I want to know when and where."

"This is my call, not yours."

"With two of us, there is a better chance that one of will get out to warn the others."

Maranya wanted to argue, but Kanz was right. They worked their way closer to a group of robed myn near a row of pews. The woman in white stood talking to them.

"Tomorrow in the council chambers the king dies," the woman in white said to the myn. Then she turned to where Maranya and Kanz concealed themselves, smiling and flashing her fangs. "and tonight you die, Maranya. Take them."

Maranya straightened, her swords clearing the sheaths. The four myn with Anksha came at Maranya with swords and out of the shadows another with a net. Kanz blinked at that. Maranya cut the first two down easily, evaded the net and they fled to the stairs. The myn at the far side of the ambulatory rushed them, but Kanz had already reached the top and Maranya was close behind him. Kanz burst into the aisle and headed for the next one over that would lead to the stairs to the street level. The narrow stairs beckoned in a patch of shadows. They could hear the pursuit coming up the stairs at the far side and the warehouse watch from the south.

"Kanz, break for the stairs. Count of ten. Up and out. Warn them. I'll follow."

Kanz nodded. Without his magic, he knew he was the lesser of the two and would not compromise them both by arguing. He reached the shadows.

A shout came from several directions and for a moment he thought they had seen him. They came from every aisle, making for Maranya. None of these myn had been there when he and Maranya came through before, he would have sworn it. They engaged her from all sides and she laughed at them, forcing them back, charging and withdrawing. She killed several, throwing them into further confusion, but they did not withdraw, seeming determined to just hold her there. Kanz had a bad feeling.

Apparently so did Maranya. She chose a direction and attacked, slowly forcing her way through them toward another door. She needed to go up one more flight before she would come even with the ground floor.

Then Kanz saw the man in the long black robes with the orange gold belt of strange links from which hung an array of blades and tools. He made a clink and jingle as he strode toward the fight. It was becoming clear that they would not be able to hold Maranya much longer. She was too good – the best Kanz had ever seen. He heard the rattle of crates and looked up to see myn running along them with nets. Then he understood: they intended to take her alive – as they had tried to take Tagalong. Maranya saw him, spun and attacked the ranks between her and the door more strongly. In a moment she would reach the door and the stair built into the wall.

"Stop her!" Mondarius shouted.

Maranya cut down the last mon, quickly sheathed a single blade and grabbed the knob to pull it open.

"Stop her!" The robed man shouted again.

Maranya's body gave a kind of jerk and straightened briefly like a deer caught in mid-leap by the hunter's first shaft. Kanz saw the splotches of blood – too many of them – and the ugly barbed heads catching the light. Myn swarmed over her – he had no idea where they could have come from.

He watched as one of them pinned her head between his knees, pulling her eyes open wide while the man with the belt of ritual tools took a tiny blade and precisely slit her orbs, pressing them to get all the fluids out. The dark eyes turned a pale milky blue. They lifted her up, vanishing in the direction from which they had come.

Kanz fled up the stairs and through the door into the street.

"You are mine, silly mage with no magic," a soft voice purred.

Kanz turned, drawing his sword. "The Beast."

Anksha approached him slowly. "I can take you hard, or I can take you easy. Choose."

Kanz fumbled in his pouch, bringing a handful of the little globes out, not bothering to see which ones he held, knowing he was as doomed as Maranya. He threw them hard at Anksha. She sprang back. A loud bang, a blaze of flame that singed her garments and then a terrible rolling stench erupted. Anksha screamed, pulling at her clothes, ripping them away. She howled, threw herself onto the ground and rolled as if she had gone mad. Kanz's nose wrinkled. The mouth of the street smelled distinctly like skunk, heavily and intensely concentrated. He backed away.

Just one block to sanctuary at the Dynannan temple. He cursed the season. It was weeks before his magic would begin to return with any force.

"Anksha!" Hoon shouted, appearing with a dozen myn at his side. "What have you done to her?" He snarled. "Kill him!"

Kanz ran, turning several times to fight and pitch more of the globes until he ran out. He could see Dynanna's gate and someone looking out. "Help me."

Then Hoon's myn overtook him. There were too many of them. It would be over quickly. He was good, but not half the swordsmon Maranya had been. He caught the thrust on his blade and forced it down. Whipping his own back to gut the man. Two more myn crowded in. He parried and danced back, then stumbled as one found a sheath deep in his side and another in his chest. Kanz fell. He heard someone scream. Power surged around him as the gate to the temple opened and his attackers fled from a rush of shouting little people. He felt someone lift him up, carrying him.

"Warn them..."

"Warn who?" Dynanna asked, walking beside Tom.

"Aejys ... council meeting ... death trap ... hellgod temple under ... cloth warehouse ... they've got Maranya."

"Shit! Pieface, get down there and deface the altar. Icetree go warn Aejys. Sugar Maple, round up the troops. Tom..."

"I'll do what I can for him. It would help if you could curse the weather over the city," Tom said. "He's a winter mage. Make it snow."

"Never done that before," Dynanna said, thoughtfully.

"Just because its never been done, doesn't mean it can't," Dolorous suggested.

Dynanna looked up at the heavens, shrieking angrily. "Charas, I curse you with snow! I curse you with snow, damn it!" Then she began a war dance, shrieking and howling at the skies.

Tom carried Kanz into the temple grounds; laying him near the honeysuckle he loved to smell. If Dynanna's curse worked, then Kanz would need to feel the weather to benefit from it. Odanner saw Tom and came over. Britlyn's had accusations hurt. He was just a mender. The wounds were more than he could handle. The life mages had always told him he had potential, but for some reason he had never been able to reach it.

"Let me try," Odanner said abruptly, drawing a strange glance from Tom. He knelt, trying not to flinch from the man. Tom and Drew were among Britlyn's main

supporters in her growing rebellion. He prayed and reached into Kanz's body with his gifts, feeling wholly inadequate for the man was dying. If only Dynanna's curse would work, Kanz's own powers would flare and he could invoke the winter sleep of healing. Odanner sighed. In sudden inspiration he stuck his fingers into the chest wound to touch the torn lung and focus more closely on it. Slowly it began to close. Too little. Too late. Kanz slipped away from him. Tears ran down Odanner's cheeks, then something colder. He looked up in wonder at the sky. It was snowing in the middle of summer. The God of Cussedness had, for the first time, managed to curse an entire city, even if it had come too late to serve its purpose.

Throughout the city people paused to look up, as Odanner had, as something cold fell on their faces and arms. At first, they thought it was rain. But then they saw that snow was melting on their arms, gathering around their feet and they looked to the sky. Someone remembered the prophecy of Ishladrie, carved into the stone before the Hall of Words: *When it snows at mid-summer, Charas will not last three seasons* . Someone else screamed. Then screams ran through the Charas. Some folks locked themselves in their houses while others grabbed cloaks and stood outside to discuss the omens. Others decided to march on the Hall of Words to demand the council's attention. The city was in an uproar. And still it snowed.

* * *

Aejys sighed as she heard Zorrance's voice at her elbow, turning to see the High Councilor's secretary smiling at her. He waved a note teasingly in front of her nose. "I know you've been getting impatient. Especially when they postponed it. So I pulled a few strings. They'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

Aejys extended her hand for the note. He captured her fingers and kissed them as she took it. Her eyes narrowed. "Don't press your luck, Zorrance. You're nothing more than a pretty face. I appreciate what you've done. I owe you, but not in the bedroom."

He drew back, looking stung.

"However," she said, throwing him a bone. "I might be willing to find a place for you at my court."

"Really?"

"Yes. You know what they say about kings and pretty faces?"

Zorrance beamed and walked off.

"Learning to play the game?" Bryngaryn asked.

Aejys laughed. "I grew up at court. My ma'aram's and the Saer'ajan's. I just don't like doing it. I haven't seen Maranya and Kanz for a while. See if you can find them

and then I want to get out of here."

* * *

The last things Maranya remembered was the blade being drawn across her eyes and the bolts jerked from her body so that they could lay her flat on the altar: she was finished, but they could not claim her soul. It was enough. She knew, through that connection she had with her god, that Kanz had gotten his warning out. Her liege would not walk into an ambush. Her duty was done. As she had told the gaffer she lived to die, it was the way of her order. There was nothing they could do to her.

Her arms had been bound together tightly with drying rawhide strips from the shoulders to her wrists and a hook attached which secured her to a post. The same had been done with her legs. Braziers beneath her outstretched limbs dried the bonds. Ordinarily it would have gradually dislocated her arms and shoulders; hips and knees; as well as cutting off the circulation. However, the divinator did not have a lot of time to spend in the rite – Mephistis and Hoon wanted the results before Aejys' arrival in the council chambers the next day – so the dislocations had been done manually.

Mondarius tested the tension on the bindings, to be certain that she could not inadvertently flinch or move and interfere with the precision of his cutting. Everything had to be perfect. Initially he would split just the layers of skin and fat from groin to chest, and then side cuts to allow him to observe the organs working. Observation would decide the rest.

The blade was so sharp she did not immediately feel pain. Its chill touch startled her, seeming to skim across her upper stomach from left to right, penetrating the layers of skin and fat. Despite the pain, she did not have the strength to react as the blade crossed above her hipbones and then down the middle.

"This should still be a decent reading," a chill voice, male, said.

They folded back the skin on her stomach and began to poke among her entrails, discussing the omens. "Warn the prince. He must not harm the mage until the abominant king has been slain or she will destroy him. And he must not try to take them both together. If he cannot avoid confronting them together, then at all costs, the king must die first. Quickly! Tell him the king is an Abelard in her own right. Josiah was not the last of his lineage. The king is."

"Hasten the dying, master?" Sometimes Mondarius gave the mercy to the ones whose entrails were read or granted the acolytes permission to play with them.

"No." He considered for a moment, then took a smaller blade and opened the arrow wounds a bit more, examining the way they bled in a dispassionate reflective manner. "I do not want to affect the outcome of the foreseeing. However, at the current rate of progression, death will not have been achieved before midnight and that is not

acceptable either. This prophecy must be sealed in such a way that it cannot be healed or stopped. Death must be certain. This is where others go wrong. They do not seal their prophecies and then exceptions and variables creep in." He handed the blade back to his acolyte. "Give me the smallest obsidian. When I have finished I will leave you both to watch her. If she starts to die too fast, fetch me. If you touch her or alter the dying in some way, I will know it when I read the corpse. Then it will be your body on the slab and the rite will be mortgiefan. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Master Mondarius."

He read her body as he worked, bonding small stones inside her, hanging tiny pouches of herbs from her ribs, carving runes into her flesh as he set the necessary spells to time her dying, making small oozing wounds that would not close but slowly and steadily bleed her to death. Mondarius smiled as he worked. Death was an art and he was an artist. He considered the lungs and the aortic arch. Tiny tears. Not too much, but enough. He spoke the words and wielded his tools, weaving the destruction of the abominant king into the death of her servant. Binding his prophecy to its completion. Maranya's death by his arts would doom the king she was pledged to protect with her life. It was such a wondrous and satisfying irony. Lord Hoon would reward him well.

* * *

Aejys could tell by the look on Bryngaryn's face that something was wrong. The four ha'taren that had come with them followed at her back. "Aejys, they're not here. Someone saw them leave. Their mounts are still here, but they're not."

"Come on. Let's get back to Thorn Hall," Aejys said. They crossed the grounds to the stables and halted to stare at the sky.

"It's snowing!" Bryngaryn exclaimed.

* * *

Pieface crept along the alley. Getting into the warehouse posed a problem in and of itself, much less finding his way into the hell temple beneath it. Every entrance was guarded. He ducked between some rain barrels and stared up at the guttering. He did not like fighting indoors. No Badree Nym did. If they got too frightened or upset, the unconscious poltergeist effect could kick in and cause the whole building to collapse on their heads which could bring an end to their existence as Badree Nym and the whole idea of becoming Jesmyrran was disgusting – after all who wanted to grow up? And it would hurt like hell besides. And then there was the possibility of killing any allies who came charging in behind them. They didn't have the option of transitioning. Complications. Complications. Complications. It made his head ache. *And what if Maranya was still alive? Oh please let her be alive.*

Pieface pulled a bang ball out of his pocket and tossed it so it struck a little ways

down the street. Instantly the two guards ran to see what it was. He darted around the rain barrels and into the building, unhooking his piepan from his belt in time to come face to face with two more toughs. The pan lashed out, opening them to the spine and they toppled onto him. Pieface grimaced, wiggled out from beneath them coated in gore and climbed up the huge crates to lie for a moment, wretching and breathing hard. "I'm a paladin. I'm a paladin. I'm tough. I think I'm gonna die."

Then he started crawling along the crates, peeping over the edges.

* * *

Aejys arrived at Thorn Hall to find her people already arming and mounting to ride, as well as a large number of what she was calling her Charisian infantry. Britlyn was up behind one of the Rowanhart auxiliaries with her satchel of medicines, Felice stalking beside them.

"What's going on?" Aejys demanded.

Tagalong strode forward. "Kanz is wounded, dying is how I hear it. Maranya's been taken. We've found the Hellgod's temple. It's under that cloth merchant's warehouse a block from Dynanna's temple."

"Tag, you hold Thorn Hall. I'm taking command," Aejys said. Then she rode back to Britlyn. "Sure you want to come?"

Britlyn nodded resolutely. "I'll only ride as far as the temple."

"Good girl."

Aejys schooled the worry from her glance and forced aside the fear from her heart as she whispered too softly for anyone to hear, "Maranya, please, my sister, be alive when we reach you." And she remembered the night of the sword dance and the words of the oracle at the Willowhorn. Maranya had offered her life to their god to be taken in Aejys' place. Aejys felt certain that they would not be in time. Even to say goodbye.

* * *

Pieface slid into the ambulatory aisle leading around the high altar, creeping along the edge of the pews until he could hide behind the wooden altar screen near the skin-covered table, which held the tools of their rites – he had a nauseating suspicion in the pit of stomach that the skins had come from sapients – watching them alertly, ready to fight or flee, his mind racing desperately as he tried to decide how he could possibly desecrate an altar. He had never done it before. He wished Dynanna had told him how. Then he felt the pressure of tears building behind his eyes as he considered that, from the sound of their words, they had killed his new friend. He held his emotions as tightly to his hands as the reins of a fractious pony, knowing –

as few Badree Nym did – that giving way to them would unleash the poltergeist effect and bring the building down around his ears and he had no desire to wear wings.

"Pissing shit-eaters," he cursed, which was about the worst thing he knew to say and, as he said it, realized he had a good idea for desecrating that altar. He would piss on it. Of course, that meant pissing on Maranya, also, but that could not be helped and it was not as if she could complain – being dead. First, he had to kill some bad guys.

* * *

Hoon and Mephistis received Mondarius' warning as they indulged in an elegant late dinner in his private solarium, a wondrous hanging garden built atop his mansion near the Hall of Words. Nibari gathered around him, fawning and simpering, presenting their half-clad bodies to him and his royal guest for their sating. Two were intended for full-meals. The nibari knew this, but they would not know which of them would die, since the choosing would be spontaneous. Their fear and nervousness made them that much more delicious and enticing. Their minds had been deeply bound and they could not speak of their status to anyone not even each other.

Hoon crumpled the paper angrily. "Tell Mondarius to come immediately." The messenger bowed and departed. "The abominant king is an Abelard. Mephistis, many things make sense now. Such as how Margren could call the vargeis. If Aejs is an Abelard, then your sons are also. I must kill the ones you have."

Mephistis' eyes blazed. "I will not allow that!" He knocked aside the nibari, sending them cowering among the flowers.

Hoon snarled. "You have not studied the prophecies. One of them might even be the Twisted Child. The one with both sides of the gift!" The anger drained from his face and he smiled. "You promised one of them to Anksha. She has smelled all around the house where they live and says one smells strangely and it makes me wonder."

The defiance faded from Mephistis' face at her name. She had left him alone for several days, having so many sa'necari to feed upon had allowed her a surfeit of blood, and his energy had risen. "How can you think that?" he asked more calmly.

"Several things just became clear in my mind. Only a single temple remains, besides our own, in Charas. Of late it radiates with greater and greater power. Dynanna is not only alive, she is in Charas. For months she must have been sneaking her people into the city. When the abominant king dies, the Cussèd One will destroy Charas. She will have vengeance for what we did to her. The Badree Nym will rage through the streets, knocking everything down."

Mephistis looked stunned. "Then we must leave here."

"No. First we must kill the king."

Mephistis nodded.

"Prophecy is an inexact science. You have much power, but little lore. All the gods have their prophets and all the prophets have made prophecies concerning the same matters. But they are skewed. Not consciously. Skewed by their affinities, perceptions and training. They must be assembled and compared, pull out the threads, the commonalities. That will produce the best interpretations. I think Mondarius is gifted enough to do that. And being of a long-lived race he has the time to do it well."

"My lord?" Mondarius bowed to Hoon as he entered, his eyes making a hungry sweep of the crouching nibari.

"Feed if you hunger, then gather your things and leave immediately for Minnoras. Anksha will ride with you, for she wishes to leave. She will have a guard of royals and a single blood slave with her. Isranon. I will brief you while you dine. I want a comparative analysis of the prophecies of the entire pantheon. I want assassins dispatched to Rowanhart to kill the little princes and the fireborn as well. See that the fireborn can't be raised; you know the blades to use. The dark-haired little boy with the catkin eyes is the Twisted Child with both sides of the gift. Kill him as well. And his brother. You can make more sons, Mephistis."

Mephistis felt incredibly sad. He thought about Margren, about how happy they had been. He thought of Isranon, his friend, whom he had failed. It would be more merciful to die tomorrow in battle with the sacred king, than to live and see his friend die.

Hoon sealed the door with a gesture. "Feed, Mephistis, and forget these sons you have never known. Full meals. Every one of them." They began to kill them all.

* * *

Maranya heard a thunk of metal striking bone, hot fluids gushed over her; heavy weights like bodies falling thudded to the floor. Her head jerked and she realized she could move again. She wished desperately that she could see. A stench of ammonia and a rush of water that could only be someone relieving themselves startled her. It splattered her side and chest. The altar cracked and canted to one side, tearing her wounds further as it pulled at her bonds and pressed sharp edges into her back; spilling her insides further with the worsening angle. She groaned.

Pieface, who was busily adding insult to injury by doodling on the walls with his pastels, drawing mustaches and beards on the statues, and determinedly vandalizing everything in an outrageous act of descretion that would allow Dynarien and

Dynanna to enter, paused when he heard her and shoved his art materials in his pockets.

"Maranya?" Pieface came around to the side, peering into her face. He saw her ruined eyes and realized she could not see him.

"Pie..." she whispered hoarsely, "Is that you?"

"Pieface," he corrected. "I'm actually Pieface. Paladin of Dynanna." He saw the way her insides lay bared and his stomach heaved. Pieface divested the dead sa'necari of their clothing and used it to cover her after flicking the skin back in place. It was all he could do not to vomit on her.

"Leave me."

"No. The others will get here eventually."

Pieface stroked her head, half in comfort, half in helpless confusion and grief.

"Go. Let me..." a groan twisted up from her gut. "let me ... die alone."

"No." Pieface shook his head. "They'll be here."

"Not ... in time. I don't ... want you ... watching it ... please."

Tears ran down his face. "No. I'm not going." He hugged her head.

* * *

Aejys swept up to the temple, dismounting like a storm, her eyes flashing, her wings snapping and folding repeatedly, feathers ruffled. Dynanna stood at the gate waiting with a veritable horde of little people at her back. "Kanz?"

"He died soon after I sent word," Dynanna said. "The council meeting is a trap."

"So your message said. I'll see them caught in their own snare. What has gone down so far, if any thing?"

"Pieface has gone in to desecrate the altar. That's the only way Dynarien and I can get into the temple itself. Other than that I felt it best to wait for you."

Aejys nodded. "Lets take them out." She raised her arm, signing her warriors to follow as she strode down the street. The guards saw them coming, threw the doors open and called inside for help. Aejys ran forward, shield on one arm, Spiritdancer in the other. She spitted the first man before he could even draw, caught the next man's blow on her shield, opened him from breastbone to groin, and then lunged into the warehouse. An icy rage held her and she saw them in a cold clarity in which

they seemed to move at half speed. She called out her gods' names and Maranya's. The brands on her palms glowed and the light leaked around her fingers. A double aura surrounded her, the inner white and the outer the dancing, shifting colors of flame: the Sacred King had come.

Nothing stopped her. Nothing slowed her. Aejs found the stairs and went down them. She sensed the direction that led to the next level, stalking determinedly toward it. Dynarien, Dynanna and Bryngaryn ran to overtake her and then to get ahead of her, fearing what she would find. Dynanna sensed the magnitude of Pieface's distress and knew it could only mean that Maranya was dead or dying. She wanted to get there ahead of Aejs, and told her brother and Bryngaryn this.

Dynanna caught sight of someone different beside her as Aejs turned to kill another sa'necari. Odanner froze, his hands outstretched. "I – I had to come."

"Your funeral," Dynanna said and shrugged,

* * *

Maranya heard screaming and running feet. Then familiar voices.

There came a pull on her body as someone started to cut her bonds.

"Don't!" Dynarien said. "Just unhook them." He slid his arms under her arms and legs. "They'll have broken her arms and legs in at least two places, dislocated both her hips and her shoulders."

Dynarien moved her to the floor. He removed the soiled clothing Pieface had covered her with. Sick horror filled every face present. Dynarien took her wrist, Reading the full extent of the damage and shook his head. Odanner knelt beside her, pressing her insides back in and laying the slit skin over it.

"Kanz?" Maranya gasped out.

"Dead. The warning got out," Dynarien told her.

"Good. Forget me ... I lived to die," Maranya whispered, beginning the oath. Then Bryngaryn was at her side, repeating it with her, saying it for her when the pain made her falter, this time they added the words of leave taking.

"No one of your worth should die here," Odanner said quietly.

Dynarien snapped his fingers, summoning his pack.

Odanner goggled for a moment.

"What's mine, comes to me," Dynarien explained. "There's no way to move her

without hurting her." He took out a bottle of Pollendine and poured a large quantity down Maranya's throat. The lines of pain softened. "They sealed a prophecy within her body. Probably Aejs' death. She's too badly hurt to save, even if we had a master life-mage and all we have is Britlyn. We need to disrupt the prophecy ... we..." Dynarien's voice caught and he heard Talons' voice in his memory:*it's a better death than I was dying*. The he slit the bindings on her arms and laid them at her sides.

"You need to help me die," Maranya said softly, the deepening effects of the Pollendine making it easier to speak. "It's all right. Months ago I pledged my life as a sacrifice to my god to be taken in Aejs' place. This day Aroana has chosen to accept it. My heart is glad. I live to die. My body is the king's shield."

Odanner, the life-mage who had fled with the apprentices, rather than stay and defend his masters, felt very ashamed on hearing her words and his eyes filled with tears.

"Did you find her?" Aejs shouted, walking down the middle of the aisles.

Dynarien glanced up, then at Odanner and Bryngaryn. "Stop her, don't let her see this." He started pulling his tunic off to cover her with it.

Bryngaryn ran down the aisle, grabbing at Aejs who shoved her aside, running now. She stopped and stared. "Oh, my gods. Maranya! What have they done?"

"My liege," Maranya's sightless eyes turned towards her and the formal words put distance between them, forcing Aejs to control her reactions, to act like a king first and a sister second.

Aejs closed her eyes, her lips pressed tightly closed, drawing air deeply into her lungs through her nose in calculated breathing, stilling the tension in her body. When she opened her eyes she was in command of herself again. "I've never seen anything like this before."

Dynarien covered Maranya as best he could.

Dynanna caught her. "It's divinator work. He and I have both seen it before, sis."

"Can your Badree Nym bring this place down from the outside?"

"Yes."

"Then get everyone out and make it so. After it's done, you can explain this atrocity to me. Then I'm going after Hoon. I am done with games, even if it means leveling the city. You have the power to do that. I know it."

"Yes, I do," Dynanna agreed, her tone grim. "For decades, as the other temples

were destroyed, survivors from those temples have sought refuge in the only temple the nasties could not muck with – I'm not at liberty to say which ones they come from. I've been sneaking Badree Nym into Charas to protect those survivors. I also have fox magi and grymulkynds, three cadres of pixies, a unit of pookas, sixteen sneeze-willies, some dwarf ogres and stump-bynters."

"You brought an army to Charas?" Dynarien gasped.

"Well you told me not to come alone!" Dynanna snapped. "Temple's bigger on the inside than the outside."

"Let's get out of here!" Aejs gestured for them to leave. Dynarien gathered Maranya into his arms and they headed for the stairs.

"You. Brought. A. Fucking. Army. To. Charas." Dynarien hissed through gritted teeth at his sister as they walked. "That's not sneaky. That's insane."

She shrugged. "I'm the God of Cussedness."

"The reason your people have never seen this is because the corpses are sealed in the masonry of the temples," Dynarien explained. "Mostly in the foundations."

* * *

A fatal dose of Pollendine sat in a small glass on the nightstand, waiting to pass Maranya's lips. Aejs had so far refused to allow them to give it to her. They wanted her death to be done by something other than a blade, since the divinator had used blades on her – lest they seal the prophecy themselves. Aejs sat by the bed, stroking Maranya's dark hair, staring, heartsick at her ruined eyes.

"Please, my liege. You dishonor me."

"Honor is ugly and cruel."

"Honor is my life."

"Honor is your death."

"Honor is most precious. Help me." Her face twisted up in agony, betraying the fact that the last smaller dose of Pollendine had worn off. "Help me."

Aejs stared at the glass. There was enough there to kill three humans. Aejs had not listened to all of Dynarien's reasons for giving her so much. It would take several tries for Maranya to get it all down. Aejs had insisted that if it were to be done, she would do it. She lifted Maranya up, settling the dying woman against her chest, then helped her drink, pressing her face into the short black hair to mask her tears.

"Don't ... watch me ... die."

"I won't... I'll just hold you and close my eyes."

"That's ... what ... they did," she whispered, slipping first into sleep and then into final stillness. Aejys felt numb, hollowed out as she lowered Maranya to the bed, drawing the sheet over her face. And then she knew. "Nariya!"

A strangled sob emerged from behind Aejys. She glanced and saw Britlyn, five mages, and Odanner standing behind her. They all had tears in their eyes. Odanner's face was a study in rage and anguish. He held the empty glass in his shaking fist.

Odanner snarled, "Get out of here!"

Aejys fled into the outer room.

Bryngaryn rose from a bench. "It's done?"

"By my own hand. She was my shield-sister. I owed her that much. You are now captain. I want vengeance. We're hitting Hoon's estate, and then we're going to wheel and hit the Hall of Words across the street. By then I'll have missed my appointment." Aejys smiled, bitterly. "But I'm certain they'll understand. Anyone tries to stop us dies. Are you with us, Dynarien?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you know any of the Abelard spells?"

"Shared life, Revelation ... a few others."

"Excellent. Anyone who attacks us, grab him and cast Revelation. Keep casting it until it stops working. I don't mean repeatedly on the same victim. Understand what I mean?"

"Cover all the possibilities."

"I'm staying here," Dynanna told her, emerging from the temple with Dolorous. "Hold down the fort, protect the life-mages. But you can take all the Badree Nym that want to go. They'll have a good time."

* * *

Before Britlyn could say anything to shame him further, Odanner threw back the sheet covering Maranya, threw his power into her heart and started it, shoved his fingers down her throat and forced the Pollendine out of her. "Circle. Rapport. Britlyn, monitor, coordinate. Drew, Tom, get the spells and components out of her. Noreth, get that shared life variation going. I, and only I, will handle the mending."

Across a tiny slip of private rapport Britlyn sent to Odanner *<You'll kill yourself . >*

<I owe my god a life . >

<I was wrong, Odanner. You are a good, man . >

<No, Britlyn. You were right . >

Then Odanner was flying on instinct, desperate and half out of his mind. The room faded around him and he found himself standing again in the white columned halls where he had spent so many many years. It ached with silence. It seemed to be both a memory and a dream; reality and something else entirely. He could see the staff inches from his fingertips, calling to him, demanding that he grasp it and heal. The actual staff had had nothing to do with healing. The Sunfire Staff had been forged to defend the life mages against the powers of darkness and stand off the armies of the undead. Perhaps it existed only in his mind or possibly on some other plane. He reminded himself that the real staff had been destroyed when the temple collapsed. It had called to him that day, demanding that he grasp it and destroy the unnatural creatures invading the temple, protect the masters, but he had refused and fled instead. He felt ashamed. Odanner turned his thoughts more firmly inward. This time, instead of fleeing, he closed his hands upon the staff, lifted it up. It seared his hands painfully, yet he refused to let go. Tears filled his eyes.

The masters and teachers had always told him he was a life-mage, not the simple mender he had always been. That his potential had been greater. The staff burned. He had been afraid of it. Afraid of failure. *I was a coward .I could have helped the masters. I was as much afraid of failure as I was of death.* He could feel the internal bleeding in dozens of places, the damaged and failing organs. How could he ever hope to repair that much damage? How could they have hurt her so bad?

The sunlight burned his arms and face. Why did they put her in a room that got the morning sun? He paused. That was a west window. He knew it because he had washed it nearly every day for ten years – ever since he came here to hide with the apprentices when the great ones were slain. West windows did not get that kind of sunlight in the morning. Then he knew. He had taken up the staff and been answered.

<Lord? >

The burning heat turned to pleasant warmth.

< I cannot bear to fail again. I offer my life for hers, Lord. Only give me the strength to heal her. >

<Your life, for hers, Odanner? Are you certain? >

<Yes, Lord. > Peace and acceptance swept through the failed life-mage. *<This*

once, let me truly heal and it will be enough. The apprentices ? >

<Will be cared for. >

Odanner extended himself further into Maranya's body. Instead of trying to heal it all at once, as he had always done before, he focused on the torn arteries and veins, closing them. Pain flared in his head. His temples throbbed violently. He turned his attention to the lacerated organs laying in barely attached pieces. He forced them together. His chest hurt and sharp pains shot through his left arm. Odanner shoved past it. He felt the peripheral link as Naneth began shared life, replacing the blood Maranya had lost. Odanner smiled faintly. The apprentices knew their jobs far better than he had expected. They must have been studying and practicing in secret. What brave souls they were! Peace stole over him and then stillness.

Britlyn looked up, almost breaking the link when she sensed him die. He slipped away with such peace and contentment that it astonished Britlyn. He had never known that in life.

<Spells and components are out of her, Britlyn. She's clean. > Tom sent.

<Internals are finished. Odanner's done. > Naneth said.

<Odanner's dead. > Britlyn sent to the others. Then she broke the rapport.

Silence reigned for a moment, and then Britlyn took charge. "Tom, Drew, take Odanner to his room and ask the Abbot to see that he's prepared for burial. We're mages, not priests. Then come back. Bring some of the strong ones. We'll need help getting her hips and shoulders back in place. Splints for her arms and legs. Naneth, you've a deft hand. Stitch her wounds. We'll need a cream for her eyes and silk. I'll sit with her until we can let the healers know that the life mages are back. They'll need to move her to the infirmary."

A golden glow filled the room to overflowing as she spoke and Tom gasped aloud. "Britlyn! The staff!"

All eyes turned. There standing in the corner, leaning against the wall was a glorious golden staff. A chorus of murmurs rose from the others. Tom started toward it and Britlyn, tears streaming down her face, stopped him. "Don't touch it. It is not for us. It is entrusted to us. Get something to wrap it in. It goes to Rowanhart for the child with both sides of the gift."

"You did this, Britlyn," Tom said. "Your courage."

"No," Britlyn replied, her voice almost too soft to hear. "Odanner did it. His sacrifice brought back the Sunfire Staff. Now get on all of you we've work to do. Prove yourselves worthy of it."

Britlyn eventually found herself sitting alone with Maranya. A low moan told of returning consciousness and pain.

"I'm alive?"

"Yes, ha'taren."

"How?"

"A life-mage has traded his life for yours. You have been cleansed and healed as much as we are able. The dark magics are gone from your body."

"My liege?"

"Lord Darmungaard's estate has fallen. The Hall of Words is under siege. That's all we know."

* * *

Josiah walked slowly from the keep into the bailey, leaning heavily on the arm of a Charisian healer, watching Aejs changing the marching order, shifting and ordering units. He had to concentrate and focus tightly just to move, to take each step without falling. The moment neared to use the dark arcana he had brewed. Aejs intended to strike Hoon's Mansion. Then she would wheel and go after the Hall of Words. Josiah had his own theories about where Hoon and Mephistis would most likely be, but chose not to share them. Pyne stayed close beside him, almost hovering. Dynarien had taken his own form as had Pieface and Sugar Maple. This was it then.

"Kanz?" Josiah asked Aejs when he finally reached her. "Maranya?"

"Dead."

"Both of them..."

"Maranya..." Aejs' breath caught in her chest. "Divinator. I had to help her ... I had to help her."

"I've seen it. The mercy. That's what you did?" Josiah held her briefly, and then let her go.

"Yes." Then she turned away from him, shouting, "Mount up! We're taking this city down!"

Aejs led her forces through the streets with Dynarien and Bryngaryn at her side, Ha'taren Guard at her back, along with a host of strange creatures and Badree Nym trailing along behind with their hats off and cowls down so that everyone could see exactly what they were. Some ran, others stared; most remembered the prophecy of

the snow and asked questions of the trailing Badree Nym, especially of Sugar Maple who was lovely as always.

"We're storming Lord Darmungaard's Mansion," she said in a dreamy fashion. "Your leaders are mostly sa'necari in disguise. Lord Darmungaard is actually Lord Hoon. We found a temple to the Hellgod beneath the cloth merchant's warehouse and destroyed it. They had just sacrificed Maranya Deontaramei to him. Some of you danced with her, didn't you? She was such a lovely dancer. We're going to smack them for it." She hugged her broom and sighed wistfully.

Sugar Maple continued chattering in that wise, drawing more and more people to listen to her as she walked. Gradually people formed up behind into an angry mob. Clearly the omen of the snow, the fulfillment of the prophecy had been brought down on them by the corruption of their rulers. In a sense, Hoon was right, it would not be Aejs who destroyed the city: it would be Dynanna, just as it had been Dynanna – indirectly – who had beaten Margren in Armaten.

"I'll destroy them," Aejs said. "If not here, then elsewhere. I will not rest until I have. All I ever wanted was to be left alone. They've made it a war. They have kept coming after me and mine. I've just had to help my shield sister die. I'm going to dig Hoon out from all of his holes and destroy him. Then I'll destroy every vampire of his blood. Then I'll hit Waejontor. No stone unbroken. I'll salt the earth where the palace stands. There will be no descendants of ... oh gods ... oh gods ... oh gods ... thank god I did not say it." She folded up in the saddle as if wounded. "Do you know who those little boys are? My nephews? Those two little innocent children? I've known it, like a fact on paper ... but the implications ... I almost cursed my own nephews."

"Your sister and Mephistis' children?" Dynarien asked, riding beside her.

"And he is?"

"A Waejontori prince?" Then it dawned on Dynarien. "Waejonan ... they're descendants of Waejonan ... and you were vowing to destroy his descendants."

"But I caught myself ... sometimes my anger gets ahead of me. If I destroy Mephistis will the taint pass to them?"

"No. In fact that should protect them. However, you should now understand why the Nine do not deal in curses. Too often the innocent get hurt along with the guilty. Curses are often too random."

One of the Badree Nym warbled as they arrived at the gates.

Hoon's shifters had been alerted to their march and the heavy wrought-iron monstrosities of gates were dropped into place and sealed. Aejs' ranks opened and six squat figures, four feet tall and as broad across rolled forward, seized the gates in

their huge hands, ripped them from the hinges, sailed them over the walls and skidded them along the roofs.

"What were those?" Aejs asked Dynarien. "The dwarf ogres?"

"No. Stump-bynters. When my sister hires troops, she really hires troops," he said, grudgingly. "She must have been preparing for a war for a long time."

"She gave seven life-mages sanctuary, Dynarien," Aejs reminded him.

"Yeah, she did," he said and that grudgingness turned to serious respect. "I'm proud of her."

Aejs rode forward into the grounds, her people spreading out around her. Someone screamed and died. Lances of death magic struck from all sides, killing. Then little figures in blue robes rushed forward, letting their cowed hoods fall back to reveal tulip ears and long snouts as they waved their paws and spoke in sharp barks to dispel the attacks. Aejs spied the sa'necari standing beneath the trees, couched her lance and charged. Her ha'taren chose their targets and bore down upon the attacking death-mages while the fox-magi continued to counter the rest. Dynarien dismounted, stalking up to the doors and kicked them in. Shifters poured out of other doors and windows throughout the estate and the battle soon disintegrated into chaos.

* * *

Josiah sank heavily onto a bench, Pyne catching his arm. He had recently been let into the secret of Josiah's identity, because of their need to have another healer helping with him. Josiah closed his eyes, leaning against the wall, his head listing on his shoulder, his color faded to nothing with the effort to see Aejs off.

"Did you tell her?" Pyne asked, anxiously.

"No. She would never have gone," Josiah replied heavily.

"You should lie down."

"No," he said, his voice hoarsening to a whisper. "I want to die with the sun on my face. There is a bench ... on the other side. We used to sit there. Help me walk."

Pyne shouldered his arm and got him to the bench. He laid Josiah there.

"I'm cold. Get me a blanket."

"I'll be right back."

Josiah smiled and took his bottles from his pockets as soon as Pyne disappeared. It

was a warm day and Josiah was, indeed, very cold. But the day had come to make his move and he was down to minutes and hours. He could lie here and die quietly before Aeijys got back, or he could potion himself to the limit and go to the ambush and take out Hoon and Mephistis – die fighting to keep her safe; to preserve his love and liege-lord. There was only one death worth dying. Josiah took a long swig from a bottle, the liquid was as black as midnight. It contained amphereon and Pollendine, which he had spiked with arcane substances. Then forced himself to his feet. Even with the drugs, he was holding on by the strength of his will alone. Just as he reached the gate, Tagalong saw him and came running up.

"Where are you going?"

"The council meeting."

"It's a trap."

"I know. I'm taking them all out."

Tagalong's first instinct was to try to stop him and then she simply caught his arm and held him for a moment. This was, after all why they had fought so hard to get him here. "Get as many of them as you can. Is it okay if I arrange for some mop up? In case you don't get them all? These are the big guys."

Josiah thought about that and nodded. "Give me a good head start." He grabbed the reins from one of the soldiers standing near the gates who glanced at Tagalong. Tagalong nodded and the woman gave Josiah the horse. Before he could mount, a ha'taren came up with her wynderjyn.

"My friend will carry you," she said.

The big animal knelt, allowing the mage to mount and he rode out.

"Aroana defend you."

* * *

The fighting was intense until she reached the inner chambers. Then Aeijys began finding bodies in plenty, but in rooms that her forces had not yet entered. These people had simply lain down and allowed themselves to be drained. She found room, after room like this. It was almost as if Hoon had decided to leave and would not be returning – rather like a fleeing king's scorched earth tactic. These people might have been those who would know where to find Hoon. The forces she fought might have been left here to delay her. Suppose she had kept her appointment and fallen. Then her people might have come here seeking Hoon and his fighters have delayed them while he escaped. She did not like this at all. Aeijys turned and stalked out, calling people to her. She had a gut instinct that she had to get to the Hall of Words at once.

Dynarien, Bryngaryn, the fox magi, Pieface and Sugar Maple all fell into step behind her as she walked. As Aejs reached the courtyard, she spotted Tagalong dismounting.

"Aejs! Tori's gone to the council meeting."

"Didn't you tell him it was a trap."

"I did. He said it suited him just fine. He'd get them all at one go."

Aejs broke into a run and the others went with her.

* * *

Josiah staggered, almost falling. He leaned against a wall in the Hall of Words. Someone paused to see if he was all right and he snarled wordlessly. Everyone went on about their business as if nothing happened across the street. No one really believed the king would dare to attack the Hall. They seemed to think it was personal between her and Hoon. But they would soon learn different. He pulled the bottle of dark arcane blend from one pocket, taking a large swallow. Then a pull from the whiskey in the other pocket. Finally, he took out another black bottle and drained it. He had now stained his soul past salvaging. But he straightened and moved on.

He could cast the spell again – the spell whose residual effects were killing him – but he doubted it would work or even help, he had nothing left to draw on. How much time did he have left? Minutes? Hours? Would he even make it as far as the council chambers?

Aejs ... oh gods ... Aejs. Don't come after me ... but if he did not get there before she found out he had gone anyway ... and he felt certain Tagalong had gone to fetch her ... then she would come and they would kill her... Tagalong, you promised me a head start. You better have made it a big one.

Josiah reached the ornate doors to the council chambers, which stood open. His knees started to give and he caught the wall, reeling against it, pressing his palms, face and shoulders to the cool marble. No matter how large a lead Tagalong had given him, he had a feeling it would not be enough. His body had started to fail too quickly, slowing him to a crawl. He was almost as frightened of taking any more of the drugs as he was of not taking more of them. Josiah fumbled with the vials, coded by shape as well as color. One was pure amphereon in a liquid base. He got it open and took all of it, ordinarily a stupid thing to do. His heart raced and his head cleared in a dizzying rush as it created an illusion of health by making the body think it had just taken a heavy load of adrenaline among other things. The contents of another bottle of the black liquid went down his throat.

He straightened in time to see Aejs running through the halls toward him with

others farther back. She caught and held him. "Don't go in," she begged. "It's a trap."

Josiah kissed her. "I know it is." Then he knocked her backwards, away from him, lashing out with his power to send her tumbling farther and entered the council chambers, sealing the door behind him.

She pounded on the doors with the pommel of Spiritdancer, screaming his name.

"Get it open! Get it open. He's going to die." *He's sacrificing himself to take them down – to protect me. .*

"This is what he came to do," Dynarien told her.

"Only Spiritdancer can free those souls from the Legacy!"

"I'll try," Dynarien answered. He extended his awareness into the soil of Charas, drew on its life force. A deep green light formed around him, reaching around and through the doors in leaves and vines of power. The doors creaked and then folded inward, shattering. Aejs rushed in ahead of him. Dozens of undead and sa'necari filled the chamber. The air hummed with heat and power. Dynarien realized that Josiah had been about to cast conflagration and incinerate them all, taking himself with them.

Josiah saw Aejs, screaming at her to get out. He drew the power back into himself and staggered at the recoil.

"Time to die, Abelard," Hoon snarled, shoving his sword through Josiah's chest. Mephistis seized the opportunity to shove a blade into his back. For an instant the blades suspended him. Then Hoon and Mephistis jerked them out; and he crumpled, his arms pressing in across his wounds as he fell to lie unmoving on the ground.

Shock delivered to him a state of grace in which he no longer felt his wounds. He remembered the last two years with an odd clarity, as if it were all limned in sharp colors like the twilight land before a storm. He remembered how jealous and distressed he had felt when Brendorn turned up out of the blue, even though he had carefully never told or ever intended to tell Aejs that he was in love with her; he found himself, reluctantly liking Brendorn, understanding how Aejs could love him; his own shame at not being able to save him from Farendarc; his grief when Margren murdered Aejs and then his joy when the nine ghosts helped him call her back from death; the sweetness of knowing she had come to love him as much as he loved her; the terror of almost losing her twice more, once to Dinger's viper and then to Hoon's spell that nearly shoved her directly from life into undeath; and the foulness of his fall from her love through his betrayal with Zyne – that hurt most of all – and death seemed the only true atonement. He would have that now.

Dynarien saw Josiah fall and screamed in rage and grief at the loss of his friend. He

saw Aejs charge into the ranks of the undead, scything through them like a storm out of Haven. But the chamber was so full, that Dynarien feared she would be pulled down before she could reach Josiah. He drew his golden sword even as he lashed out with power as he had done in the Creeyan chapel nearly a year ago. The green leaves and vines of energy whipped through the chamber, destroying the undead with a touch, cutting a path for Aejs to reach Josiah, preventing the pressing hordes from around her. Only the living went untouched. Bryngaryn leaped into the room, engaging the nearest sa'necari, screaming "Aroana!" and "For Maranya!"

The fox-magi, speaking in yips and barks, matched the sa'necari spell for spell.

Pieface's deadly pan sailed out, while Sugar Maple's broom brought trees reaching in through the windows to strangle the necromancers.

Mephistis, seeing Aejs clearly for what she was and knowing himself overmatched, turned to flee. Hoon stared at him, a flash of memory came and was gone in an instant. His eyes saw Mephistis, but his mind saw Waejonan. He saw Amalthea's face; Amalthea begging for her children's lives; Amalthea's face as Waejonan took her mind; Amalthea's face as Hoon and Timon murdered her; Amalthea who had been innocent. Only the Spiritdancer could free his children's souls from their prison in the Legacy of Waejonan. Hoon shoved Mephistis into the path of Aejs' blade.

With one lunging swing, Spiritdancer severed Mephistis' head. It rolled to Hoon's feet. Hoon fled through a window with Dynarien's power reaching for him.

White mist with sparkling silver motes of power flowed forth from the bloody gushing stump of Mephistis' neck. The chamber filled with ghosts, crowding it, flowing out into the corridors. A wail went up from the sa'necari and they fled, levitating through the windows. A shock hit Dynarien's system and he wavered in his attack – realizing that the piece of his soul, which had been missing for four millennia, had returned to him. Dynanna, battling in an alley, looked up and laughed as she became whole.

In Waejontor, the royal palace shook and a chunk of the roof fell. Baaltrystan, King of Waejontor, cried out as the magic deserted the realm. A retainer tried to drag the stunned monarch from the chamber as more pieces came raining down. A wall collapsed atop him in a rush of gray geysering dust, chunks, and fragments of stone and masonry amid the shrieks and screams of his retainers and court.

And still the ghosts of the victims of a million unholy rites continued to pour from the prince's corpse. They streamed around Aejs as she knelt, gathering Josiah in her arms.

"Did ... did you ... get them?" Josiah asked, his voice a hoarse, struggling whisper.

"Mephistis. Hoon got away."

Josiah's breathing shallowed out and then strengthened for a moment with an odd rattling sound. He touched the spot of wetness gathering in the corner of her eye. "Don't cry for me." Then his hand fell away and he was gone.

She clutched him tightly and, for the first time, sensed the taint that Hoon had left in his body with her steadily sharpening awareness, cleansing it from him with a single word of blessing and felt his soul go free.

* * *

Kalirion emerged from his palace, wearing only a short kilt, and approached the scrying pool. He had not intended for matters to work out as they had. Sometimes the decisions the mortals made were harder to gauge than even he expected. He had been certain that Odanner would save Josiah; but he had saved Maranya instead. Kalirion had never intended for Aejs to lose Josiah once she came to him with her request. Events had gone beyond his ability to alter them.

He reached through the pool into the council chambers in Charas, wrapping Aejs and, with her Josiah's body, which she clutched tightly in her arms, in the folds of his power and brought them into his garden. Aejs crouched on the grass, keening softly. He went to his knees beside her. He sucked in his breath as, once again, he was forced to admit that prophecy was not an exact science. He had not seen this turn in his scrying pool.

"I am sorry," Kalirion told her, "I did not intend for you to lose him. I believed he would be saved."

"I will not question deity. I should never have fallen in love again." Her voice was hollow, empty. "I brought this on myself. On him. He died for me. As Brendorn did. It will not happen again. And Maranya is dead"

"Maranya is the reason Odanner could not save Josiah. He traded his life for hers. She is blind and crippled, but she lives. I will have Josiah buried in my temple which will soon be built in Rowanhart. My priests will work to restore his reputation, to restore his honor in your kingdom."

Aejs could not think for a moment. The weight of her grief for Josiah pressed upon her, but her heart had eased a bit knowing that she had not lost Maranya as well. "Thank you, Holy One."

"Curses are two-edged swords. For that reason, the Nine rarely deal them out. We choose to work in other, subtler ways. When you have gotten these people to safety from Charas, you must return to Norendel, as you have promised, and free Carloff. You are my sacred king. Go home and rule wisely."

"Hoon..."

"Hoon will never again seek to cross you. You have broken him. Forget him."

"As you will, Holy One."

* * *

Dynarien sat on a hilltop overlooking the Hillora. He had not found a life-mage to restore Talons. Odanner was dead. The others were no more than apprentices. Aejs planned to start back soon. They figured that if they took a leisurely enough pace they could take along all the people who wished to go with them. Where it had taken weeks to get here, it would probably take months, based on the size of the group going, to get back. Aejs had purchased a large wagon with canvas sides that could be rolled up and fastened so that Maranya could be traveled flat and as comfortably as possible while her wounds healed – the apprentice life-mages were still working on her eyes, but held little hope for them. The Dancer had begun to teach Britlyn who, of all of them, held the most promise. Tagalong and Hanni had announced their intentions to marry and she was now living with him in that boat of a wagon of his, still treating him like an invalid and he was soaking it up.

He summoned his pack, opened it and took out a skin of nectar, drinking thirstily.

"Could I have some of that?" a cracked, aged voice inquired.

An old man stood there, leaning on an ebony staff, highly polished and inlaid with golden solar disks. Dynarien guessed him to be some kind of sun-mage, Charas had many of them, and handed him the skin. The old man drank and returned it. "I suppose you're still mourning for that young Hajeeshyn? You came all this way and did not find a life-mage strong enough to restore her."

Dynarien's head jerked back and he blinked. He was certain he had told no one why he went looking for life-mages, other than his sister. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I know many, many things. I'm an oracle, you see."

Dynarien's eyes lit up, but before he could ask anything the old man interrupted him.

"I don't give my answers for free. You'll owe me two favors. Favors I expect that only a young scoundrel of a yuwenghau can grant." He pulled a well-wrapped sword from his back, handing it to Dynarien.

How did something so large get into something so small? Even he could not do that.

"Don't open it. Just give it to Lizard. We're got a godwar brewing and I'm opening my armories again."

"And?" Dynarien settled the sword beside his pack, eyeing the man closely; he

definitely did not look like someone who had armories. This was growing stranger and stranger. The brand in his palm itched and he scratched at it.

"And that mage had some very fine ideas while he lived. I want you to go to Rowanhart and help get that school going. Regardless of what the surviving council members say, Charas is dying. It has been for years. They're going to seal themselves up in their citadels and wither. Until something comes along and eats them all, of course. And it will. It will."

"I promise."

"For your answer: ask Skree about the child who was born with both sides of the gift. That child and his brother were born with my mark upon them. He's not old enough yet, but he will be in plenty of time to give her back to you."

"I can have Talons back?"

The old man chuckled. "I said that, didn't I?" He turned and walked off. "Tell your sister, she and her paladins are invited to lunch tomorrow."

"My sister? Your mark?"

But the old man had vanished. Golden flowers swept across the hillside. Dynarien's palm began to burn as well as itch and he opened his fingers to stare at it. The mark faded away to nothing. He had been released from service to the Sun Lord.

"Kalirion!"

* * *

Britlyn opened the slender black suede pouch and stared at three artists brushes, her sensitive life-mage fingers registered that the hair was human. She frowned.

"Maranya? Are you certain this is what you wanted?"

"Yes," the blind woman said. "They were made out of love. Can't you feel it?"

Britlyn was startled both to hear the warrior who up until her crippling had lived only for a glorious death talking of love and to hear that three brushes of human hair had been made out of love. She extended her awareness a little deeper into the hair.

"Two of them were made after the people died and one while the mon was still living."

"Yes," Maranya said. "The mage wanted to be able to find his na'halaefs again in the next life and he wanted them to be able to find him. But only one painting was ever finished. I promised him I would paint the other two."

"Maranya..."

"I know ... I'm blind. Tovari is going to help. He can hold the brushes in his teeth."

For answer the wynderjyn poked his blunt nose over the side of the wagon and snorted, *"I'm going to be an artist in my old age."*

* * *

On a far off peak in the mountains around Vallimrah, a woman came walking. She wore simple brown robes, borrowed from a priest, yet everyone who saw her, fell weeping to their knees and giving thanks. The heritage of Eldarion Havenrain flared about her like a flaming aureole. Runners were sent ahead to Magdarien and the Queen met her beneath the Oak of Sorrows. Kalestari Havenrain, the greatest warrior of that fireborn lineage, had returned to them, whole at last.

A huge equine emerged from beneath the trees, regarding Kalestari; steel dust grey; black mane and tail with a long horn of purest ivory. A smile spread across her face, "Tala'ajaan?" The unicorn tossed his head and reared with an imperious cry, then dropped to spring forward and dash around her. "Tala'ajaan!" She caught his mane, digging her fingers into it.

"By all the gods, you've come back to me." She hugged his great neck, crying.

"No," he corrected, "You've come back to me."

Kalestari turned to Magdarien. "Waejontor is destroyed. The Legacy of Waejonan has been dispersed into the earth itself. Word must be carried to Shaurone. I intend to carry it."

* * *

Here ends the tale of Aeijstrys Rowan and Josiah Abelard. But life is a complex tapestry and there are always tales left untold of others whose lives and deeds impinged upon their own, which might someday become known when all the threads of fate are woven.

THE END

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