

LORD OF FIRE

The Silver Mage Series: Book 1

By

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Lord of Fire

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One

He had been called the Silver Mage, the Fire Emperor, Lord of the Dark Brethren and a bevy of less flattering names from those that had felt the sting of his power.

He had died saving the world.

And Sera Rab-ker went to his grave every year in tribute to a man she had known better, she thought, than the rest of humanity.

She brought flowers and a bottle of the finest wine she could buy, borrow or filch from the cathedral wine cellars. *He* would have appreciated the wine. Only the second anniversary of his death and yet already it seemed like an eternity. She missed him. A man she had known in both spirit and flesh. She missed him in any guise he might have taken - - and she mourned. But she did that quietly, a private young woman and never one for wearing an easily bruised heart upon a sleeve.

She was a practical girl and life went on. Even when the greatest wizard the world had ever known lay cold and dead beneath her feet.

What choice regardless, what time to mourn with the rebuilding and the expansion of the city and the joining of kingdoms into one greater force that might not ever again be splintered and so devastated.

Alsansir was the new capital of the Southern Kingdoms, now that the great city of Gud'nar lay in ruins. Alsansir's king the elected regent of all the provinces that had been devastated by the armies of The Dark Brethren in their quest to break the seals that bound Galgaga, the Death God. And even when the three dark warlords themselves had been turned from their path of destruction the world had had to deal with the Death God itself.

Two years since that final, fateful moment when power met power and good men died and the most powerful wizard the world had ever known destroyed himself to save humanity from being devoured by pure evil.

And Sera left flowers and wine. Her tribute offered under the tall obelisk grave marker that perched on a hill in the cemetery that had once been outside the limits of Alsansir, but now sat nestled within the sprawling outreaches of a city that had almost doubled in size. She was the only one who came. No one else wished to remember the anniversary of that brutal victory that rid the world of Galgaga. Not even the surviving members of his Brethren -- his warlords -- even though they had all claimed to love him.

Sera came and she would always come for as long as she lived. She would never abandon him to vague memory and legend. A portion of her heart - - her very soul - - would always rest with Dante.

Dante. Dante Epherian the wizard who had almost destroyed the world himself in his 400-year campaign to gain power unto himself. But he had changed after his defeat at the hands of King Rufurd and the circle of High Priests some twenty odd years past.

On the day of her birth, when his misplaced soul had somehow latched onto her new born one. He had been a wraith that had followed and protected her for the first seventeen years of her life, until by her hand and her will, she had broken the seal that had kept his earthly body separate from his ethereal soul.

And now he was dead again - - truly dead - - and the world went on. A new temple had been built within the boundary of the new city. A great sprawling cathedral to equal the one that sat atop the cliffs of the palace proper. A new Temple for a new religion.

Not a new religion entirely, perhaps, but one that had spread but recently - - over the

last handful of years to the southern kingdoms. The worship of the High God - - the god that sat over the other gods that Alsansir worshipped and called on for support and guidance. It came from across the sea and for many years had been practiced in small gatherings within the kingdoms.

It was not until the advent of the Prophet that the devastated people of the southern empires began to embrace it. After all, their own gods had done nothing to protect them, despite all their desperate prayers. The teachings of the Prophet promised comfort and salvation and a realm of everlasting peace and tranquility on the other side of life. A tired and frightened had people flocked to the temples of the high god that sprouted up in every city, as well as the smaller shrines that graced almost every town and hamlet. The Prophet himself was followed as if he were a god walking the earth, though he discouraged the adoration. He was only the mouthpiece of the high god, he declared to an adoring following. Only the tool the God used to spread his word.

Angelo was his name. It was the only one he went by. He had come to the south not long after Galgaga's defeat and began his teachings. Two years was all it had taken for the worship of the high god to spread to almost every living soul in the south. Two years for them to place the symbol of the high god above those of the lesser gods they had worshipped all their lives. Even the priests -- even her father the High Priest of Alsansir found solace in the new faith. They had welcomed Angelo with open arms and invited him into their most privileged circles. The old king loved him. The crown prince was enthralled by his words. Sera found him intriguing. A man of many layers. Intense and devoted and powerful. Not unlike the man she honored today, sitting in grass before his grave. Only the devotion was different.

She would have liked to linger longer, but today was a busy day. The city was bustling with visitors come to witness the upcoming royal wedding. Even the expanded boundaries of Alsansir were hard pressed to house all the well wishers. Princess Rejalla was to marry the Prince of Ludas. He was prince by default, a distant relation to the royal family of that once great trading city. But he was the only surviving member of the royal blood, all the other having died when the city had been taken by the Dark Brethren some seven years past. It was a political coup on both kingdoms parts. It would align Alsansir irrevocably with its northern neighbor, the strategically located Ludas, and it buffered a

weak Prince's power among a court full of nobles wishing to take it from him.

Sera poured the wine onto the ground below the marker and watched the hungry earth soak it up. Then rose, brushing off her knees and made her way back into the maze of narrow streets.

She passed the Temple of the High God, because all streets of the new city lead towards it and found it bustling with activity. Workmen hung on scaffolds upon its high walls, finishing stonework that had been in progress for almost a year. People rushed in and out bringing decorations for the wedding ceremony that the old King had decided would be performed by Angelo himself. The temple guard and the king's Lion Guard stood at posts about the square, watchful of all the traffic, keeping the curious who did not have business here out of the way of those who were frantically trying to prepare the not fully completed temple for a royal wedding. She saw a Lion Guard Lieutenant she knew well, conferring with a group of his comrades and changed her path his way.

Charul glanced up at her approach, dark eyes under a fall of dark hair. He had been there at the final battle. One of those who had fought bravely and selflessly and almost died because of it. He had survived unlike so many others and was revered among the Lion Guard because of it. And as people tended, who shared terrible experiences, he and Sera had formed a close bond.

He finished his conversation with the guard and moved to meet her. She looked up at him, eyes sparkling with expectation.

"Have any of them arrived yet? Any word?"

"Not yet." He smiled down at her, a boyish, charming smile set in a fine face. He shifted and the leather of his armor squeaked. "But I do believe our scouts to the north have reported a large party on the road towards Alsansir. That might possibly be one of them."

"Due when?" she demanded.

"Tonight perhaps, if the weather holds."

"Ha, if it is one of them, then the weather will be very polite." She grinned at him, clasping her hands before her. "I've got to go make sure all their suites are ready. I'll see you soon, Charul." She bounded off leaving him grinning fondly at her enthusiastic retreat.

Up through the old city, climbing the winding streets that led up the hill towards the palace, Sera was in fine spirits. A royal wedding was just the thing to revive the gaiety of a city that had been sadly lacking in it for years. She passed the guards at the drawbridge who nodded at her passage, well familiar with the daughter of the Great Priest Rob-Ker and proceeded into the palace proper. Finding the major domo of the king's household was not an easy task in the confusion of the wedding preparations. But, she eventually tracked the middle-aged and stern faced woman down and demanded to know if the three suites of rooms set aside for the wizardly guests they were expecting, were ready. The hectic woman waved a maid to take Sera to see for herself and told her explicitly that if anything were not her liking she would be expected to see it taken care of herself. The major-domo was busy seeing to the royal guests already in residence.

Of course the rooms were immaculate. The major-domo was not so inept at her job that she would let such a thing slide. There was little for Sera to do, so she found herself back in the halls of the palace momentarily at a loss. Her own dress was ready and she only had to make certain her father's dress robes were pressed and waiting for him. Her own wedding gift to the couple was almost ready to be picked up from the glass smith.

She might have been welcome in the fluttering court of ladies that revolved around the princess, save that for the most part she couldn't abide their gossip and useless chatter. Besides, there had been a distance between Sera and Princess Rejalla since Dante's arrival into their lives that did not quite delve into hostility -- far from it -- but did not invite closeness. Women who coveted the same man were not necessarily the best of friends. And Dante had attracted anything remotely female and naturally there were conflicts. It had not restricted the princess from asking Sera to serve as one of her twelve honor maids. But that was as much a political move as one indicating friendship. Sera had a fair bit of status, not only as the Great Priest's daughter, but as one of the those responsible for Galgaga's final defeat. She was held in high regard by the people of Alsansir as well as the nobility.

With no other task to distract her, she decided to return to her rooms to make certain all her wedding finery was in order. Her rooms were in the cathedral dormitory in the wing belonging to her father. She had left the palace walkways and entered the courtyard between palace and cathedral when she noted a trio of men strolling about the gardens.

With fall in full swing, the leaves of the ornamental trees were a tapestry of reds and oranges and yellows. The autumn flowers were in bloom. It was a lovely place to walk in this season before winter would strip all the beauty from the garden.

She walked down the path and the men walked up it, their course destined to cross. They were a trio of great status. The Lion Prince Teo walking side by side with his soon to be brother in law, Prince Leron of Ludas. And beside him, twirling a stem of autumn doise flower between his fingers was the Prophet himself, Angelo.

“Sera.” Prince Teo hailed her with an inclination of his head. She bowed respectfully, conscious of the dirt on the knees of her trousers from kneeling in the dirt of Dante’s grave, and the tangled, wind-blown state of her long reddish gold hair.

“Your majesties. Your holiness.”

Prince Leron looked down his nose at her, seeing only the dirty clothing and the lack of ornament that told him she was not of royal lineage. Angelo smiled at her warmly, pausing to take her small, smudged hand in his large, immaculate one. There was a holy signet ring of his faith on the middle finger of that hand. She had not declared herself to be a devout follower of the High God yet and was not required to kiss the ring, as the Faithful gladly did. She merely lowered her eyes modestly and blushed at the attention. The Prophet had always gone out of his way to show her kindness. To speak with her when they chanced to cross paths.

“Lady Sera, you grace this garden with your beauty. Nature as always smiles upon you.”

“Your Holiness, you’re too kind.” The blush spread. He was a magnetic man, the Prophet Angelo. A tall man, but slender, his angled face handsome, his brown hair receding and pulled back into a well-trimmed tail at his neck. There were strands of gray at his temples that lent him a distinguished and trustworthy look. As if his brown eyes, so deep and thoughtful, were not enough to drag a body into his influence.

“Majesties, I will catch up with you later to discuss matters further. “ The Prophet smiled at the two princes, indicating they might go on without him. “I think I might walk with the lady for a bit in the garden, if that is acceptable to her?”

Goddess, she could not rid herself of the blush. She nodded minutely, eyes downcast, hands folded demurely. The princes walked on, she could hear their footsteps

receding down the stone pathway. Angelo lightly touched her back with one hand, moving her forward again.

“I look forward to seeing you in the garb of honor maid. You will be beautiful, I’m sure.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, watching her feet move across the paving. He intimidated her with his charisma and his benevolent gaze. Meeting his eyes was like looking into the mirror of her own soul. It was small wonder people called him the Emissary of the High God.

“Did you go today, to Dante Epherian’s grave?”

She blinked and looked up at him in surprise, shocked that he might know of her pilgrimage. When she didn’t answer immediately, he picked up her hand and gently patted it.

“I’ve heard rumors that you went at the last anniversary of his death and thought you might have ventured there again on this day -- it is the second year since he died, is it not?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And you loved him?”

She drew a shaky breath, not wishing to delve into those feelings with the Prophet or anyone else. She whispered. “He meant a great deal to me.”

“You have a kind heart, Lady. A tender and forgiving heart to honor a man so devoid of sanctity towards the god -- the gods we all worship.”

She had defended him for so long, his name, his memory that reflex made her lift her chin and retort. “I honor a man who saved this world, your Holiness. He was a friend to me.” Then she realized how tart that rejoinder had sounded and lowered her eyes again. “Forgive me.”

“Oh, forgiven, Lady. I know a passionate heart when I see one. You will never be one to meekly follow the flow of general opinion. Not if your heart sees otherwise. But it is a pure heart and a pious one, I think. You are most assuredly forgiven.”

They came to the place where the path split off to the cathedral dormitory and she stopped uncertainly. “Your holiness ---”

“Angelo, my dear. When we are not at prayer, please call me by my name.”

She opened her mouth and shut it nervously, not quite brave enough to utter his name without an honorific attached. "This is my path. I've -- I've tasks to do before -- before the dinner bell."

He inclined his head generously. "Of course, Sera. I will see you tomorrow at the Temple for rehearsal, shall I not?"

She nodded and he gave her leave to depart with a lift of his hand. She hurried down the path to the dormitory. She entered the shadow of the doorway with relief, past his line of vision. Somehow she was lighter of spirit once out of his potent presence.

She was at the gates flanking the main road leading into the city from the north with Charul when the company arrived. Twenty men and women in armor, riding fine high stepping war horses with a pack train trailing behind. It was a small force to accompany a former Warlord of the Dark Brethren, but an impressive one. Sera recognized some of the faces. Most prominent among them was the lady that rode at the fore of the company. A dark and beautiful face framed by long, midnight hair and large golden eyes that declared her Nelai're blood. The Lady Kheron. The Stormbringer. And of the surviving Warlords of the Dark Brethren the one Sera had the least affinity with.

It all went back to the Dante dilemma. If he had had a passing interest in Rejalla, it was nothing to what he had shared with this woman. Kheron he had truly loved. Loved for almost a hundred years. A century long love affair was a hard thing to compete with. Sera hadn't at the end, even tried, not overtly. She could not fault Kheron for loving him.

The party stopped at the gates and the Lion Guards, Charul among them, stood at attention.

Sera stepped forward. "Lady Kheron. Welcome back. I hope your journey went well."

"As well as any journey." The lady's eyes drifted about the new boundaries of the city. There was something distant and preoccupied in her gaze -- and Sera thought, there was still a certain sadness.

"You're the first to arrive. Lords Gerad and Kastel are expected soon."

A half smile touched Kheron lips, then drifted away like leaves on the autumn wind. "I look forward to seeing them."

There was so little to say in the face of Kheron's distance, that Sera floundered for words and ended up simply saying. "We'll escort you to the palace. I've arranged quarters for you and your party."

They all rode back, a spectacle of formidable warriors that drew the attention of pedestrians. Children ran after them, excited and curious at this latest grand visitor to pass through the city towards the palace. Kheron did not speak, but when they passed the hill where the cemetery stood, her eyes strayed that way and stayed there until they were well past it.

"I can take you there -- if you'd like," Sera suggested hesitantly. Brown eyes turned her way and the Nelai're shook her head.

"No. I've no need."

There seemed nothing else to talk of. Idle chatter about the wedding seemed so far below the Stormbringer as to be insulting. Sera rode silently, occasionally exchanging glances with Charul. The dinner hour was past and Sera arranged for trays to be sent to all of Kheron's party. The lady herself went to her suite, declaring that she was weary from the journey and wished to retire. She would play the formal part of the Stormbringer on the morrow.

Sera, to be quite honest, was glad to leave her to her dark mood. She was more than happy to join Charul and those of the Lion Guard who were acquainted with some of Kheron's lieutenants in the earthier barracks dining hall. They drank and socialized well into the night until she was so dizzy from strong guardroom ale that she could barely walk straight on her way back to her rooms.

She was on the path back to the dormitory, with Charul's uncertain support as escort through the night when out of the darkness a large shadow appeared at her other side.

She yelped. Charul swore and pulled her out of harm's way, fumbling drunkenly for his sword. Out of the darkness a man's laughter sounded and Charul's wrist was caught and the sword forced back down into the scabbard before he had fully managed to draw it.

"Never draw steel if you can't even stand up without staggering, boy."

Sera gasped, recognizing that voice and squinting through the darkness at a broad and shadowed face.

“You blackguard,” she cried, not at all angry. “You always come upon me from the shadows. Have you no manners?”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed, Sera.”

“Lord Gerad?” Charul gasped even as Sera threw herself into the big man’s arms. He picked her off the ground effortlessly, swinging her about, so that she was dizzy when he finally set her feet back on the ground. She caught at his thick arm for support.

“When did you get here?” Charul asked, sounding annoyed at being so disarmed.

“Just now. I don’t care much for fan fare and the front gate had a gaggle of nobles about it that I couldn’t stand the thought of having to talk with.”

“So you sneak in like the assassin you are,” Charul said, with slightly improved humor.

“Ah, exactly.”

“Are you alone?” Sera demanded. “Why didn’t you come in the spring? You promised to return in the spring.”

“Trouble on the border. Damn darklings are crawling all over the mountains. I’ve had a lot to keep me busy. But I wouldn’t miss this. Seeing the princess marry -- seeing you all dressed up as a honor maid.”

She giggled. Somehow when Lord Gerad of the Divhar, the deadly nightwalkers, said the same thing Angelo had, it delighted her.

Compulsively she hugged him again, her head barely reaching mid-chest. “I’ve missed you so much. There are old friends in the guardroom. Lady Kheron is here, but she’s in her rooms. I think she’s still terribly sad.”

Gerad’s brows drew. His face grew solemn. “Still? Where are her rooms, Sera?”

“She’s probably asleep. She said she was tired.”

“She’s not asleep. I’ll find them myself, just give me a clue, girl.”

She took a breath, trying to recall the exact location through the fog of drink. She told him. And he patted her on the head like a favored dog.

“It’s a good thing I’m a friend,” he remarked. “This place is as open as a whore’s booth during carnival. Take care of her, Charul.”

* * *

Master of the nightwalkers, Lord of the order of Divhar assassins, Gerad moved through the shadows as if he were a part of them, a fluid extension to their velvety darkness. No one knew he passed that he did not wish to know. He slipped by the castle guards at their posts and into the hallways of the palace proper with none the wiser. Down halls dimly light at so late an hour and up colonnaded stairs to the guest wing.

There were rooms, no doubt that had been set aside for his own usage, but he sought another. He sought an old friend whom he thought had strayed from a course of ever enjoying life again. Gerad was not a man given to deep emotional ponderings. It was not the way of the warrior and warrior he was down to his very bones. Perhaps, the finest swordsman alive, some might say. If you asked him, he might say it was as much the sword, the double-edged blade he carried, which had more magical power than any inanimate object had a right to.

He paused at a door, leaning in to sense for a presence. Not the one. The next and he felt her within. There were certain people that had an aura that could not be disguised or hidden. He was a master of scenting auras. The door wasn't locked. He slipped inside. The room was darkened, no single candle burning, but the windows were open and a cold breeze blew in. He stayed to the shadows even in this room, searching her out. Found her by the window, slouching in a padded window seat, her knees drawn up, her face turned towards the night. For a moment, all he could do was watch her, drink in the sight of her after so long an absence.

They had all planned to meet in Alsansir each spring. The first spring she had not shown and this spring he had been busy keeping the wilder remnants of their former army across the border to the east.

As always his heart hammered at the first sight of her and as always he forced it to calmness and locked away the stirring in his heart that she brought. She would never return it. Her own heart had been given away long ago, and it was too broken and injured a thing ever to belong to another man.

“What are you doing, sitting here in the dark?”

She gasped, turning, the scant moonlight silhouetting her sleek dark hair and the gleam of her oblique eyes. She did not move from her seat otherwise and he knew her

Nelai're eyesight was adjusting to the shadows to search him out, so he stepped forward into the moonlight to make it easier on her.

"Don't you ever knock?" she asked quietly.

"Only when I'm invited. Answer the question Kheron."

"Don't presume to order me, Gerad."

"Then tell me what you're doing, still mourning over him?"

Her breath drew in through clenched teeth. She swung her legs over the side of the window seat and stood to face him. "That's not your business. Leave me be, Gerad!"

"Sorry, Kheron, but I can't do that."

She stood there, fists clenched, long lovely legs spread, pale ivory trails of nightgown waving in the breeze. In the darkness they stared at one another. Then she said softly. "Don't make me regret coming here. Don't make me regret seeing you again."

"What kind of friend would I be if I didn't try and help you? It's been two years, woman. You got over it quicker than this the last time he died on us."

"Shut up! You know nothing of what it is to love."

Didn't he? He looked away from her then, pressing his lips. "I loved him too. Not the way you did, but I loved him just the same. You loose people and you go on, Kheron. You don't waste your life away mourning. What have you been doing these past years? Helping the abandoned, the orphans, like you said you wanted too? Or brooding and sulking and crying away the days? Have you built anything?"

"Gerad, leave me alone." There was something quiet and final in her voice that told him he was on the verge of pushing it too far, that she was about to tune him out and keep him tuned out until she could get as far away from him as possible. He didn't want that. He wanted the Kheron back that had been spirited and impulsive and full of righteous indignation over the plight of all the helpless in the world. Like she had been helpless so long ago, abandoned by her people because of her half blood, left to fend for herself - a tiny Nelai're girl. Then Dante had found her and she had become a woman of power and of strength. And Gerad damn well knew that it hadn't all been due to the wizard's influence.

He held up his big hands in surrender. "All right, all right. Just do me the favor of

smiling once or twice while we're here. I miss your smile."

She sniffed at him, not quite mollified. "I don't recall ever smiling that much. What memories do you have that I do not?"

"Maybe it was all in my mind." He grinned. She didn't. Gerad sighed, lowering his hands. "I haven't made my formal arrival. I'll show up in the morning for breakfast. I left my men in the hills outside the city. I think I'll sleep there tonight rather than here. Too many stuffed shirts."

He started to leave, reached the door and her whisper paused him. "Don't waste your concern on me, Gerad. I hardly think I'm worth it."

It hurt not to turn back and respond to that. He forced himself out the door and into the shadowed hall. Yes, he would find far more comfort in the hills with his nightwalker's than he would in the palace tonight.

Two

Sera woke to cathedral bells an hour before their usual morning chiming. She blinked hazily, head aching with the very strong remnants of hangover and stared out her window at the dark gray of pre-sunrise sky. Why were the bells chiming? Had those rascal boys that plagued the priests with their practical jokes gotten into the bell tower to plague the whole of Alsansir? If so she hoped they got the beatings they deserved. She lay listening, searching for the discordant sound of untrained bell-toilers. There was a pattern to it. Not the haphazard play of boys. There was a name and a meaning for this bell pattern but she could not for the life of her recall it.

Outside her doorway she heard the patter of running feet in the hall. Then more and the chatter of frantic voices. Her heart began to pound a frenzied beat in her chest. Woken too soon and too quickly with too much ale consumed the night before her head swam and flashes of vision interspersed with the bright lights.

Death. Crying. A people crowding the streets in mourning. A gilded coffin being lowered into the earth. A crown in hand -- in the Prophet's hands -- being lowered to the smooth brow of the Lion Prince.

She sat up, gasping and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She fumbled for her robe and hastily donned it, even as she pelted for the door, turned the lock and ran out into the hallway into what seemed a sporadic migration out of the dormitory. The courtyard was filled with people in various stages of dress. Most, like herself had risen quickly and wore no more than their nightgowns and robes. She caught at the arm of a passing priest and cried.

“What’s happened? What’s wrong?”

He turned wild, red-rimmed eyes to her. Tears streamed down his face. She stared aghast, afraid to hear what he might say.

“The king --- the king is dead.”

He pulled away from her and hurried with the others towards the castle. She stood, her hands clutched before her, shocked -- speechless and numb. The king was dead? The king was dead.

“No.” She whispered softly, remembering the stern faced, old man who had ruled Alsansir for all her lifetime - - twice her lifetime. Her vision came back to her. The death, the mourning, the crying, the crowning. She buried her face in her hands and cried as so many others in the courtyard were doing.

* * *

People crowded the road into Alsansir. Peasants carrying their belongings on their backs, their crying children tugged along by the hands. Farmers in carts, merchants in their wagons, the lower nobility on horseback, all flocking in towards the sprawling city that took up most of the valley.

The riders might have stood out against them, had the people had attention for anything but getting into the city proper. They were well outfitted and armored. The armor alone of any one of the knights costs more than any one farmer or ten farmers on this road might earn in his lifetime. The horses were destriers, thick legged and thick furred, tossing their mighty heads in agitation at the closeness of the people. These were horses used to killing men on the battlefield and their riders were hard pressed to keep them in check.

The captain of the company, at the direction of his lord, stopped a young aristocrat on horseback and demanded to know the meaning of the hectic traffic.

What he was told made his face go white and he returned to his lord grimly with dire news. The company reined their horses to the muddy slope at the side of the road and urged the great animals over terrain that the other travelers avoided, plunging ahead of the sluggishly moving line. At the gates where the crowd was stymied and backed up, the massive warhorses bullied their way through past outraged cries. The gate guard, plainly doubled and tripled moved to halt the passage of armed knights into the city.

“Halt! Halt!” Frantic guards cried, waving their arms recklessly before the noses of the destriers. The horses tossed their heads in the air and stomped enormous metal shod hooves in the dust. “You can’t enter the city armed without permit.”

The caption moved his horse about so that he looked down on the guard blocking their path. “Lord Kastel of Sta-Veron has permit. Do not block his passage.”

The guardsman blanched, looked beyond the caption to his lord, who sat cloaked and silent on a white warhorse. The man waved frantically to his fellows, indicating they move out of the way. “Forgive me, my lord. I didn’t know. The confusion ---”

Lord Kastel inclined his pale head marginally, a token that the slight was forgiven and forgotten. His men moved their horses forward, clearing a path in the crowd for him to pass unmolested. Into the city they rode, down streets that had not been there the last time Kastel had been in Alsansir. Almost two years and then the city had been a shell of its former self, so damaged by war was it. Now it was a sprawling monstrosity that seemed to have little design or logic to the way its streets turned. There was a temple whose spires rose above the houses and shops that clustered around it. It was almost impossible to pass that square, it was so crowded with people. They made their way by force of heavy horse body alone along the edges at the back, squeezing past the bodies of people already pressed together.

There seemed to be a man at the steps of the temple who spoke to the crowd. Lord Kastel lifted one hand to bring his men to halt, while he stared at the temple steps and strained to hear the words of the priest upon them. The crowd certainly seemed to be hanging on his speech. The words barely drifted to the back of the square.

“- A time of mourning. But fear not for the High God has planned even this, as he

plans all things. Darkness has not come upon us -- but a new beginning. If your faith is strong and your devotion to the High God unshakable you too shall find glory in the place where our beloved King has journeyed. Only those who revel in the darkness of forbidden worship and forbidden magics shall suffer the fate that awaits in hell.”

It went on. The call to the faithful and the subtle warnings to those that dared practice other beliefs. The warnings to those that had the gift of magic not church condoned. If only that priest on the steps knew what sat at the back of his congregation.

The lord Kastel had heard such sermons before. A hundred times or more, before he had gained the title and the prestige he held this day. Been condemned as a witchchild and a demon's get before he had truly known what magic was and most certainly before he had learned to use it. Those rustic priests and their pious followers would never have dared to denounce a sorcerer to his face. Behind his back perhaps.

Clear blue eyes scanned the crowd, passed over the rooftops and traveled to the cliffs upon which Alsansir castle perched. He blinked slowly, a fall of long brown lashes over high, pale cheeks. The man on the steps of the temple annoyed him and he wanted out of this crowd of fervent followers of the High God. He signaled his captain and the horses began moving again.

Doorjambs were draped with black ribbons to signify the mourning of a city. The castle itself was surrounded by grieverers. The Lion Guard at the main drawbridge saw them coming and cleared as best a path as possible, their commander saluting smartly as they passed and ushering them into the outer bialy where confusion somewhat less claustrophobic than that outside ruled. They reigned in their horses, hooves clattering on cobblestones while the captain called loudly and imperiously for someone to come and see to them.

A frantic stable boy ran from the direction of the royal stables, catching the bridal of Kastel's mount.

He dismounted with fluid grace, swinging his cloak over one shoulder, surveying the courtyard as he pulled off his gloves. He wiped a hand through wheat pale hair, freeing it of road dust. The steps leading to the main hall of the palace were crowded with people coming and going, loitering in groups, conducting business. A trio of servants overburdened with flowers brushed past him on their way up the stairs. Petals

fell at his boots.

His captain, Kiro, complained at the discourtesy, complained at the lack of formal welcome. Kastel ignored it, stepped over the petals and onto the stairs. In the aftermath of the death of the king of Alsansir and the Regent of the Southern alliance he was not offended or surprised at the lack of proper greeting. Captain Kiro was accosting passing servants with requests to find someone of authority to see to his lord.

The guard towers at either side of the main gates had been rebuilt, Kastel noted absently. The last time he had seen them they had been in ruins. Everything had been rebuilt in so short a time. The industriousness of the faithful, he supposed.

“Kastel!” A female voice called his name without benefit of title or honorific.
“Kastel!”

His caption beetled his brows in disapproval looking for the perpetrator. A slim, red haired figure slipped down the stairs and past Kiro and attached herself to Kastel. He took a step back at the assault.

"You're late. You were supposed to be here two days ago," the girl accused, taking a step back with her hands still on him.

Kiro, who had been frowning, grinned and he took in the soft features. No stranger this young woman. Far from it. "It twas not his fault, Lady Sera," the captain assured her. "One of our young men became enamored of a village girl and when her father discovered them - - well, there were restitution's to be made."

Sera craned her neck to smile up at the captain, a becoming blush spreading across her cheeks. "Oh. Well - - then, there were extenuating circumstances."

"As there were here," Kastel observed and she turned back to him with a crestfallen look. "Oh, Kastel, he died in his sleep two nights ago. He'll never see his daughter married. She won't have her papa to give her away." A tear welled up in her eye and she wiped at it reflexively.

"So the wedding will still take place as planned?"

"It will be pushed back a few days, but yes. It's politically prudent to get it over with as soon as possible, I'm told. They'll crown Teo king in two days."

"And does the regency of the south pass to him as well?"

"They haven't decided yet. Everybody who has a say is here - - so they've been

clustered together for the last few days discussing it. The Prophet is pushing for Teo to get it. A lot of them listen to his words.”

“The Prophet?”

“Goddess, Kastel, you have been hibernating in the deep north, haven’t you? You have heard of the religion of the High God up there in the cold, wintry north, haven’t you?”

He lifted a pale brow at her. “We’ve received a rumor or two, yes. You mean the Emissary of the High God? That Prophet?”

“That’s the one.”

She took his arm in hers and led him up the stairs. “Captain Kiro, you’ve a room inside Kastel’s suites, the rest of your men have billets in the Lion Barracks. Kheron’s men are there, but Gerad’s prefer to camp outside the city.”

“I’m surprised Gerad’s not with them.” Kastel observed.

“As am I.” Sera rolled her eyes.

Sera led them into the grand hall, where people in black moved like worker ants busily about their business. Sera wore a black tunic over her trousers and a black ribbon in her hair. She showed him to his rooms, chattering all the while about the confusion that had taken over the city. He looked over the very fine exterior, feeling uncomfortable in the midst of that very same confusion. The cold north was a much more hospitable place than the lair of vipers that lived in a royal court.

He was still acquainting himself with the layout of his rooms when a familiar face appeared in the still open doorway. Gerad laughed and strode into the room with purpose in his stride, ignoring the hand Kastel extended in greeting in favor of wrapping his arms about the younger man and hauling him off his feet. Sera smothered a laugh of delight. Kastel smothered a curse of indignity before he was sat back on his feet. He glared up into Gerad’s beaming face.

“Still ugly as ever,” he drawled, straightening his cloak and armor.

Gerad laughed. “Still have the face of a girl. Where the hell were you the last two springs?”

Kastel brushed imaginary dirt from his sleeve. “Busy. Is there a problem?”

“What is it with you two?” Gerad sniffed disgustedly. “Sulky and brooding. Gods,

I hope it's not catching."

"Well," Sera saw fit to interrupt. "I'll have some lunch sent up to you. There's a formal dinner at the evening chime. Shall I tell them to expect you?" she looked at them both hopefully, then added. "Kheron promised to be there."

"I'll be there," Gerad said.

Kastel sighed. "I suppose I should, having gone to the trouble to make the trip."

Sera's smile lit her face, making it worth the agreement to attend what would undoubtedly be an arduous supper. She leaned forward and confided. "I'll make certain to seat you at the interesting table."

"Lovely."

Gerad laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Damnit, boy, I've missed you. So, tell me what you've been up to. . "

* * *

The dinner was a state affair. Solemn and full of formal comportment. There were perhaps ten tables crisply laid in white, with gold and silver utensils beside the finest of porcelain plates. The hall was filled with some of the most influential and powerful people in all the kingdoms. Sera had made certain the Warlords of the Dark Brethren were seated at the same table and that that table was a good ways from the royal one where Teo, Rejalla and Prince Leron sat amidst the company of other kings and royalty.

Having been responsible for the death of Prince Leron's immediate family, it was wise to put distance between them. Not that Prince Leron had not benefited in the end from the fateful events and not that the Dark Brethren cared one whit what he thought or what power he might have come to wield. They had power aplenty between them.

Sera sat next to Kastel, with Lady Kheron on his other side and Gerad beside her. None of them seemed inclined for dinner talk. Although Kastel did incline his head towards Sera once and inquire about Angelo.

"Who's the man between Teo and Rejalla?"

"Angelo. The Prophet. He's become Teo's closest advisor. Teo has asked him to perform the coronation ceremony."

And that was as much conversation as Kastel seemed inclined to indulge in for the evening. But they all listened. Every one of them had their ears open to the speculation that ran rampant about the hall. The minor nobles were frantic to know what the ruling kings of the south had decided about the Regency. Would it stay in Alsansir? Was Teo, only twenty and five, ready for the mantle of such responsibility?

They went through soup and salad and appetizers while people whispered opinions and forecasts among themselves. The main course arrived via a caravan of uniformed servants. Roast boar. Marinated fowl. Fish in butter sauce. Clams bubbling in wine and their own juices. Steamed vegetables and soufflé creations. It was a fine fare. And when the main courses had been taken away, a plethora of desserts were brought out.

While folk sat back to digest and savor after dinner spirits, a harper traveled about the tables strumming melodically on his instrument.

Sera was happily stuffed. She was content to sit back and listen to the music and enjoy the silent company of old comrades.

The Prophet interrupted it. He stood and every eye in the hall immediately riveted to him. He lifted his arms and smiled at the gathered lords. “My friends. My faithful followers. It is a sad time for us all. To lose a king and a father and a friend is a blow that we shall mourn for many weeks and months to come. His loss to the south is a great a blow, for he was the man to whom we all entrusted our safety after a span of great darkness and devastation. It was no small feat to rally the entirety of a land. To unite kingdoms. No small honor that kings and princes bowed to this one man as regent. And now we find ourselves faced with the decision to choose another man. All the powerful and wise men who rule the lands of the south have come to another agreement, one that I am proud to announce first to you, noble guests and mourners. The Regency of the South shall remain in Alsansir under the guidance of our crown prince, Teo, who has proven himself to be a worthy protector against the darkness that threatens all men’s souls.”

His eyes flickered to the table where the Dark Brethren sat, a subtle reminder of just what darkness he spoke of and who had served it. Sera took a breath and glanced askew at Kastel to see his reaction.

If he had one, he showed nothing of it on his face. He simply sat sipping his wine, a bland look of vague interest in his pale eyes. Further down the table Gerad was frowning

and Kheron showed no more interest in the speech than she had in anything since she had arrived.

There was more to the speech, but it was mostly rhetoric praising the High God and predictions of greatness for Teo's rule. The silence could not be maintained for long and Angelo graciously sat down and let the room burst into applause and cheering.

"Very interesting speech," Gerad said afterwards, when they had all slipped out and walked through the moonlit gardens.

"Yes. I saw him on the steps of the temple in the city," Kastel remarked. "He seems vigorously opposed to - - the darkness - - as he puts it."

"He's very dedicated," Sera explained. "I think he feels the souls of all his followers are his responsibility."

"Humm," Kastel mused.

Gerad snorted. "I'm for seeking some real company with the Lion Guard, who's with me?"

"Not me," Sera said. "I had such a hangover the last time."

Kheron, who trailed behind them, shook her head negatively.

Gerad looked at Kastel, then sniffed. "And I can assume you'll pass mingling with the common, working men, Kastel."

Kastel lifted a brow but refrained from response. Gerad shrugged and waved to them as he moved off.

"I shall retire," Kheron said. She wore long, embroidered formal robes, the design exotic, hinting at Nelai're origin. She began moving away from Sera and Kastel.

"Kheron," Kastel called after her softly. "Are you well?"

She hesitated, her back to them. Her profile as she half turned her head, was shadowed. "Why shouldn't I be? Are you?"

He did not answer, and she retreated in silence. Kastel lifted a hand to the bridge of his nose, as if massaging away a pain. In the moonlight his pale hair fairly glowed.

"She is not all right," Sera said quietly. "She's so wounded and - - and I think she tears at the wound so constantly that it can't heal."

"Your second sight?" he asked. "This is what you see with it?"

Sera swallowed and nodded.

"You could always read people better than they could read themselves."

"It's why I never believed you and Gerad and Kheron were evil - - and *Him* - - when the rest of the world insisted you were."

"You're a strong girl -- woman -- Sera 'Rab-ker. Never let your heart be so ravaged- - by *anyone* - - that you become like she is now."

She laughed. "I don't know if that's the most cynical or the most beneficial advice I've ever gotten, Kastel. Sometimes I think I should have mourned more, but, after a while, I just couldn't. I couldn't live like that."

Kastel took her hand, raised it to his lips, breath warming her skin. "You are wise beyond your years, lady. Rest well."

He left her in the garden, a swirl of indigo cloak that melted into the darkness. Sera scuffed her feet a bit on the cobblestone, thinking that he still mourned as well, but perhaps not for all the same reasons as Kheron.

What she'd always seen of him, when her elusive powers gave her inner visions, was a shy young man forced into the controversial position of sorcerer and lord, who had never, despite all his power forgiven himself for being what the pious priests of his childhood accused him of being.

* * *

He hated the company of so many noble lords. He hated walking among them as if scant years ago he had not been on the verge of conquering their lands. He hated imagining what they whispered behind his back, though he would never, ever lose composure enough to let them know it. He wished Gerad had not opted to join the men-at-arms in their drinking games, for despite their differences, he had missed the Master of the Divhar and would have enjoyed a private talk. He wished Kheron were not so self absorbed in her own pain. But none of that seemed destined to happen this night, so Kastel sat before the grand marble fireplace in his suite and sipped at the fine wine the servants had provided him.

The Lion Prince would now become the Lion King as well as the Regent of the South, the cradle of civilization. He supposed Teo would be as good a Regent as any,

considering the choices left after the years of war. Teo had the power to hold the throne - the title - better than most. He had the adoration of the people, being a hero of the Darkling wars and being instrumental in the defeat of Galgaga, as had they all. He was a fine commander, possessed of a keen military mind as well as a honed sense of honor. He would do well.

Kastel drained the glass and poured another, wishing the oblivion of a wine induced sleep. He dreamed less that way. He could never quite shake the nightmares of Galgaga, of its sinewy fingers crawling through his mind, of its presence inside him. It was gone forever and still it plagued him, made him ashamed and morose when he sat alone with time to think on his hands. He finished the last of the wine and sat back, listening to the crackle of the fire and the quiet sounds of Kiro slipping back into the suite after a night of carousing with the guard.

He lay his head back against the chair and shut his eyes, dozing in the warmth of the fire. The dreams of Galgaga did not come. But something else did. Something that had seemed to wait for his slip into unconsciousness before it sprang upon him, took him in its jaws and rent him violently. Visions sprang to mind and images that were foreign and incomprehensible, bringing with them almost a physical sensation of pain and - violation.

Things he loved were hurt. He was hurt, terribly. How long he slept under the grip of it he knew not, but he came back to himself with a start, to find himself sprawled on the rug before the fire, with sweat dampening his hair and tears streaming down his cheeks.

He rolled to his side, shaking, trying to banish and understand the fleeting images at once. They ran from him, fickle and taunting in their humors, slipping through his fingers when he tried to hold onto them and understand what had happened. What the nightmare was that had racked him so. He could not stop the shaking. He drew his knees up, squeezing his eyes shut in efforts to chase away the last tendrils of the night horror. Never had any of his dreams of Galgaga affected him so and they were the worst he'd ever had. The only thing remaining of it was the flashing image of a face. A smiling face with eyes so intense they shook him to the core. He had seen that face - he knew he had, but the flickering residue of dream icon would not stay put long enough for him to

put a name or a memory to it.

He felt sick and claustrophobic in the warmth of the room, so scrambled to his feet ungracefully and made to the balcony doors. He flung them open to the paling sky of pre-dawn, murmuring a flight spell even as he stepped out onto the cold stone of the balcony with bare feet.

He felt gravity release its will upon him and wished himself up, quickly, into the thin cold air of morning where he could breathe and the sweat and tears could dry from his skin. The castle was a miniature collection of towers and building blocks below him, as was the sprawling city that lay surrounding it. All was dark, no lights shining in windows. All save the new temple that sat within the boundaries of the city. Its towers shone with the light of burning lights and its windows were alive with illumination. He hovered, hundreds of feet above the rooftops, the thin silk of his tunic plastered against his back in the wind and stared down at the one bright spot in a field of dark shadows. He remembered the man on the steps preaching to his gathered flock. The Prophet who had sat in a place of honor next to the new King and Regent.

It was the same face that had punctuated his nightmare.

Three

A funeral and a coronation all in the space of a week that was supposed to be filled with the preparations for a wedding. The streets were filled with the cries of mourners over a man who had ruled their land for longer than most of them had been alive and the laughter and cheering of a people who had been given a young and vital new king. It was a peculiar week, full of contradictions and emotional upheaval. Sera bore it all with a sort of dazed efficiency. She did the things she had to do, attended the functions she was expected to attend and marveled at the effectiveness of a bureaucracy that chugged along with undeterred stubbornness despite all the upheaval.

Prince Teo was crowned king the day after his father was laid to rest. The coronation took place in the great throne room of Alsansir palace under the eyes of every noble lord that could be squeezed into the hall. The Prophet, Angelo performed the

ceremony.

She thought absently, standing crowded in among the well-dressed, well-bred aristocracy, that not more than two years ago her father would have been asked to do the honors. Angelo had risen that far, in that short a time.

Gerad was there for the ceremony. Kheron and Kastel were not. No one but Sera and Gerad noted their absence. Kheron she understood, but Kastel had been unusually scarce these last few days. There was no help for it, her slim shoulders heaped with too many other concerns. The wedding was three days hence. She had heard rumors that Rejalla had wished it postponed longer, but her advisors had convinced her to go through with it as planned. She had also heard that Rejalla had been crying a great deal since her father's death, locked in her rooms so that no one might intrude. But maids tended to know everything and they talked.

Sera crowded out with the rest when it was finally over, stiff neck and sore feet from several hours of speeches and formality. There was an open buffet that spread through two halls, the numbers of guests being too large for a formal dinner. There was to be a coronation ball later in the night. She picked at the food and watched the faces of the men and women around her. So many of the wealthy and the powerful gathered in one place. So very many of them had taken to wearing symbols of the High God at their throats; the new fashion to announce one's piety.

"That was a torture I'd not willingly endure again." Gerad came up beside her, hands full with plate and glass. "What a bunch of windbags."

"Shush." She smiled past her own glass at him. "Not so loud, some of those windbags are lurking in the vicinity."

"Humph. Looks like Kheron and Kastel had the right notion."

"They both need to show their faces," she said. "Every other lord of the realm is here. They both hold lands and they both need to be recognized by all the other powers that be."

"You doubt they are? None of us are welcomed into the cozy little circles of the rich and powerful, but believe me, they never forget us."

"No, but they can't be allowed to overlook you either. They both have says in the decisions the regency makes."

“Oh, little Sera, you’ve grown so political in your dotage.”

“Well, I live in a palace, you big ape. I can’t help it. Why don’t you go find Kheron and drag her to the coronation ball this evening? She needs to dance -- to have some fun, even if it kills her.”

“Or me most likely, for making her do it,” Gerad snorted. He stuffed a sweetmeat into his mouth. “You going to go after Lord Winter?”

“I think I can convince him to make an appearance. Or I can beg and plead and pretend to cry. That always works with men.”

“Humm, maybe I should try it with Kheron.”

Sera giggled at the thought. “Well, even if she won’t dance with you, I’ll put you down in my book.”

Gerad nodded solemnly. “I’ll hold you to that, little girl.”

* * *

Kheron wasn’t dancing. Gerad stood not far from her, glumly milking his umpteenth glass of the very expensive wine brought out for this special occasion. If Sera thought she could have gotten away with it, she would have gone over to the Lady Stormbringer and attempted to cajole her into attempting to enjoy herself. She had been on the receiving end of Kheron’s cold looks too often to wish to provoke one now in the midst of such festivities. At least Gerad had gotten her here. It was a start.

Sera had not yet danced. Kastel kept potential partners away with his usual distant, imperious look. His eyes were colder than the northern tundra’s. One might have thought these people were still his enemies from the way he held his body and the tightness of his lips. After cajoling and pleading for him to attend, she could not bring herself to leave him. If she had, she felt certain he would, in short order, have drifted silently away, leaving all the ordinary mortals to while away the night.

The dance floor was filled with gracefully revolving couples. The lilting music of a waltz flowed through the halls. She saw the new king dancing with the sister of a neighboring king. Prince Leron and Princess Rejalla shared a slow dance before the princess begged off and retreated to the sidelines to be surrounded by her own

sympathetic court of ladies.

“So, how are things in your lands?” She asked Kastel for lack of anything better to say or do. He half glanced at her, before his eyes flickered back out to drift among the guests. “Did this year bring good harvests?”

“As well as any.”

“Oh. So no one will starve this winter in the north?”

He looked back at her as if she had asked some monumentally stupid question. “People always starve in the North. It is a harsh land with little fertile ground for planting and a short warm season to do it in.”

“Oh. Oh. What do you do then, if your villages don’t have stores for winter?”

“The ones that recognize their province lords - - the ones that aren’t nomadic, can buy grain or trade for it from their lords.”

“You have villages in the north that don’t owe fealty to you?”

“The cold North is not so civilized as the warm lands of the South, Sera. There are people and things that live in the Winter Mountains and the Tundra that know no master. And honestly it isn’t worth the effort to force allegiance of them. They trade with those that are under province rule - - so there is benefit to both.”

“It sounds brutal. I have to admit, I’m happy to live in Alsansir, where winter is not so terrible a thing. Its full winter there already, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“You must be glad to take a foray to warmer climates to get away from it.”

He lifted an elegantly crafted brow at her. “Lady, you forget my reputation. The bleakest winter holds no secrets nor terror for me.”

“Ah -- well, yes, I suppose so. But still -- don’t you get cold?”

He almost laughed then. A quick flash of a smile that one so rarely saw from him. “You are determined to reach the heart of the matter, are you not? Yes, it’s cold. One just learns to tolerate it.”

“Do you want to dance? I really want to dance.”

“I don’t --”

“Please, Kastel. This is such a wonderful tune. Just one. Maybe if Kheron sees you doing it, Gerad can talk her onto the floor.”

“I would prefer not.”

“But you’ll humor me anyway -- please?” She blinked up at him yearningly with her most potent helpless female stare.

“If you insist.” Grudgingly he took her arm.

It was a lovely mid-range waltz, simple and graceful in the flow of couples about the dance floor. For all his reluctance to engage in the practice, Kastel was a competent partner. As if he would blunder about at anything. He guided her about the floor, true to the pattern the other dancers wove and she let herself be lost in the rhythm and the enchantment of the motion. Eyes followed them. Watching the man that was in the running for being the most powerful wizard alive and the young woman who had been the beloved of *the most* powerful. At that moment she reveled in the stares. They were not fearful or condescending now, they were merely inquisitive.

The waltz ended. He stepped back from her, inclining his head with the perfect grace of a gentleman thanking a lady for the honor a dance. He extended his arm to lead her from the floor.

“Lady Sera.” Someone hailed her through the crowd. A man in the white and gray tunic uniform of the Basilica Guard slipped through the dispersing dancers towards her. He wore the silver symbol of the High God on a chain about his neck. He was tall and thick about the shoulders and legs. A man of rugged features and short, spiky hair. The captain of Angelo’s Basilica guards, the holy guardians of the temple and the Prophet himself. The most unusual thing about Captain Sinakah was his eyes. Pale green orbs with tiny black iris that never seemed to dilate. Angelo said it was because the Captain had been present once when the High God had spoken to the Prophet and his eyes were forever more fixed as they had been when he had seen the true light of the All Mighty. Nevertheless, it made Sera nervous to look him in the eye.

Sera and Kastel turned, waiting for the man to reach them. He bowed his head slightly at one or both of them, his expression fixed into neutrality.

“My lady, my lord. His Holiness, the Prophet has requested that you introduce the Lord Kastel to him.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Even as she reflexively agreed, she felt Kastel’s fingers tighten on her arm. She glanced up at him, but his face was unreadable, his eyes

shuttered by a thick veil of lashes. “Kastel?”

But Captain Sinakah was ushering them through the reforming dancers. The strains of a new tune melted into the air. There was a platform where the highest of the nobility might sit in comfort and overlook the ball. Teo sat there, talking with Rejalla and Prince Leron. At the edge of the platform a cluster of holy men and nobles played court to the Prophet, who was speaking animatedly, moving his arms and hand expressively as he usually did during sermon. Angelo saw them coming and broke off from his rhetoric. He stepped towards them in welcome, holding out his hands to them.

“Ah, lady Sera, how beautiful you look this night.”

“Thank you, your holiness.”

“And this must be Lord Kastel, whom I’ve heard so very much about.”

Kastel did not incline his head or indeed do more than stare at Angelo as if the prophet were a blank wall and held as much interest for him.

“Umm, yes. Lord of Sta-Veron and all the icy north.” Sera introduced nervously, her arm going quite numb from the grip Kastel had on it.

“Ah, is not the correct title, Winter King? That by which you were known while you followed the dark rule of Dante Epherian?”

Kastel inclined his pale head marginally, eyes cold as the winter sprites that danced at his whim.

“How do the barbaric people of the north call you, Lord Kastel? What honorific do you bear there?”

For a moment Kastel didn’t answer, then his fingers loosened on her arm and he disengaged. Unobtrusively she folded the member to her, rubbing the place his fingers had gripped.

“It would depend on whether they are enemies of mine or not.”

“Ah, your enemies feeling the might of your sorcerous powers.” Angelo smiled charmingly at him.

“If it is so warranted.”

“How fairs the fellowship of God, in the cold north, Lord Kastel? Are the pious welcome in your lands?”

“They are as welcome as they are in any land. They come as they please -- if

they've the stamina to survive the winters."

"Ah -- the truly righteous man can endure all manner of afflictions to spread the workings of God. Is there a temple to the gods within your own city, my lord? What faith do you practice?"

The gathered clergy and nobles behind Angelo stared expectantly, waiting for the answer. Sera blanched and tried to hide it, wondering what had caused such interest in Kastel from Angelo. The Prophet was on the hunt for something, even though she sensed no particular harmful intent from his probing. She never sensed anything but benevolent causes from the Prophet.

"I practice no faith and worship no god," Kastel said bluntly. "But any who serve me may worship as they will."

Angelo nodded as if that answered some question he'd had in mind. "I understand. Being cursed with the dark magics - - no faith would have you. How unfortunate for you never to have been allowed the patronage of a god."

Kastel's lashes flickered. He drew half a breath in offense or surprise, she could not tell. Angelo's face melted into lines of sympathy and he reached out as if to bless one of his faithful with his touch. Kastel drew back, a step so sharp that he surprised himself from the quick flash of dismay in his eyes. Angelo's own brown eyes widened, then he sighed as if saddened. "The High God will always welcome those who are truly repentant. He even has forgiveness for those cursed from birth with the stench of the Demon."

"I shall keep that in mind." Kastel inclined his head. "But, if you will excuse me." He left no room for argument, turning on his heel and marching away, not bothering with the circumspect route around the dance floor, but plowing through the dancers as if they were not there. Sera stared after him in anxiety.

"Poor boy," Angelo said, placing a hand on her shoulder. The familiarity startled her. But good manners did not allow her to shrug out from under his touch. "Are the rumors true that he is common born? Cast from his birthplace when the nature of his dark magics began to make themselves known?"

She wanted to go after Kastel. She wanted to berate the Prophet for his condemnation. Of course she dared not.

“I’ve heard such, your grace,” she murmured. “You would have to ask him for the truth of the matter.”

“I think I can guess, he being what he is.”

“He’s a good man, even if he doesn’t worship the gods.”

“And you my dear, are a naive, sweet girl. With age, you will come to more fully understand the nature of men.”

Perhaps he was right. She could not comprehend what the Prophet had been about. The whole conversation had tasted of accusation and censure. It had bordered on attack almost.

“Please excuse me, your grace.” She pleaded softly.

The fingers brushed her shoulder, shifted her hair, then retreated. “Of course, my child.”

She did not look back at him. Kastel was nowhere in sight. She skirted the edges of the crowd, looking frantically for him.

“What happened?” Kheron appeared beside her.

“I don’t know,” Sera complained. “I really wish I did. The Prophet just finished insulting Kastel - - I don’t think I can call it by any other name. And it was like - - like Kastel knew it was coming, before Angelo even opened his mouth.”

Kheron frowned, scanning the crowd from her slightly taller vantage. “He’s not here.”

“I know.”

“I’ll go find him. It’s a boring party anyway.”

She stalked off. Sera sniffed, thinking that it wouldn’t have been if the Nelai’re had danced at all.

* * *

“I’m leaving.”

Kheron moved to block Kastel’s path from window to door, hands on hips, golden eyes narrowed in speculation.

“Why?”

“I find it unbearably contrived here. I yearn for the more honest face of the north.”

“You’re lying.”

Kastel glared at her, offended. If she had not been dressed in a clinging gown of cream that fell off her shoulders and dipped to reveal the lovely curve of her golden back, he might have issued a challenge. He could not quite bring himself to do it to a woman in a ball dress. He narrowed his eyes instead and stalked around her.

“What do you care, Kheron? You’ve not shown a spark of interest in anything else here. I’m surprised you bothered to come at all.”

“Don’t try to divert me, Kastel. I’m not at question here, you are. You’re angry, I can see it in your eyes and you’re never so careless as to let your anger show. And there’s something else that I can’t quite place. What did that damned holy man say to you to upset you so?”

“Nothing. Ask Sera if you’re so curious. It was her that set you on me, was it not? Why cannot women help from meddling in other’s affairs? Have I meddled in yours? No, I leave that to Gerad, who moons over you and who you ignore as you might the lowliest cur in the street. He always had more respect for you than Dante did - -”

Her hand shot out and connected with his cheek. He expected it. He knew what to say to raise her ire. How to make her forget her concern for him.

“Don’t you dare, Kastel. You and I will have more than words if you continue so.”

“More than words about what?” Gerad stood in the doorway, Sera hovering behind him.

Kheron blushed, turning her eyes towards the fire.

“So you marshal them both, do you, Sera?” Kastel accused of her.

“You run off like the hounds of hell are on your heels and you wonder at concern?” Gerad strode in, looking at the half packed chests. The servants gathering his things had been run off by Kheron when she’d stormed into his rooms. “Damn, Kastel, since when do you retreat at the gibbering of some stiff necked priest?”

“I’m not in retreat. I just -- I tire of this place. Of these people. I long for the unbroken white of home.”

He turned his back to the lot of them, facing the open balcony doors. The Prophet -- the face in his nightmare. He could not shake the terrible disquiet. None of that dream

but the face and the flavor remained and still it terrified him. He thought about the word and decided that yes - terrify - was as apt a description as any for the uncontrollable emotions that ran just under the surface of conscious thought when he recalled the Prophet. He couldn't understand it. He couldn't stop it and he wanted out. There was no way he could stand another meeting, chance or not, with that man and not blast him from the face of the earth. And wouldn't that sit well with the newly constructed Regency of kingdoms.

And the three of them - - comrades - - friends - - didn't have a clue. And how demeaning to tell them that a simple nightmare had so unraveled him. He couldn't and he *wouldn't* explain.

"I have yet," he said coldly. "Ever needed any of your consent for my actions."

"Kastel, I'm sorry," Sera cried. "If I had known he would be so awful -- he's never like that."

"It matters naught."

"Kastel --"

Gerad held out an arm to quiet her. "Fine. If you've got the urge to leave so badly, there's nothing any of us can do to stop you. If you don't want to tell us why -- that's fine too."

Kastel glanced back at Gerad, who was being unusually accommodating. When the Master of Nightwalkers did not add any further remark. Kastel nodded once, grateful for the acquiescence.

"But," Gerad finally added. "If you do, what with the little scene during the ball and all the eager little clergy and nobles who overheard - - it will make you seem the coward."

Kastel stiffened, expelling a gust of breath through flared nostrils. First Kheron pushes him to the point of wishing violence on her, then Gerad follows fashion. Two who were supposed to be his friends were most certainly provoking him this night. But, not nearly so much as the Prophet. No one in easy memory, save perhaps Dante himself, had dared to utter such sibilantly debasing innuendo to Kastel's face. They whispered behind his back -- that he knew - - but none dared to so blatantly attack him in the open. The Prophet must surely believe that some hand from heaven guarded him.

“Everyone will think you’re too ashamed to face him again and if that’s the case it must be because he’s right. That’s what people will say.”

“I care not a whit what people say.”

“You damn sure seemed to care what he said.”

“He offended me. I see no reason to stand blithely by when my honor is offended.”

“No, I can’t recall you ever doing such a thing.” Gerad nodded.

“What do you want of me?” Kastel finally flung an arm out and waved it at the lot of them. Sera’s eyes were as big as moons. Kheron’s were narrowed thoughtfully. Gerad’s scarred face managed to look innocent, even though Kastel knew very well he was far from that.

“Just don’t let them think they can ostracize us. Those of us with power not church ordained. Think about it, Kastel -- these past years, what has the church of the High God been preaching to the people? Trust in the church. Trust in the power of the High god and forsake all other dark powers for they are the workings of demons or hell or whatever. Notice the hedge witches that used to sell poultices and wards and love spells are gone. They used to hawk their wares on the street corners. Now, if they do still practice its behind closed doors because the people are buying into the Prophet’s garbage. You think he didn’t plan that little meeting? You think he didn’t plan on singling out the most powerful practitioner of the ‘dark power’ and making a public scene? *Think* about it. Sera, where have all the hedge witches gone?”

She stared at Gerad, wide-eyed, frightened over talk that had obviously never occurred to her. Over things that had happened under her nose without ever her notice. Yet Gerad saw it after a year’s absence. Kastel hadn’t noticed it at all. He hadn’t noticed anything but the temple and the crowded throngs of worshippers. Gerad was right, that’s what they were doing. Trying to drive one more stake into any power not church ordained. It explained that nonsense the Prophet had been asking him. It did not explain the dream. That he couldn’t shake. Yet the practical part of him, the strategist in him could not rationally back down when a volley had been fired at him and his. If he just disappeared into the night word would get out - - would most assuredly get out - - that the Prophet had chased yet one more demon spawn from the midst of the faithful.

He was not willing yet, to let them have that victory. “All right. Till the wedding

then.”

* * *

The Princess Rejalla looked beautiful, all done up in white silk and filmy gauze that trailed over her hip length black hair. Sera walked behind her, along with five other maidens to take their places before the alter in the temple of the High God. The whole of the ceremony went without a visible hitch. The vows were exchanged, the blessing of the Prophet given. The newly wedded royal couple hailed as man and wife.

Sera slipped away during the aftermath, when people were mulling about in preparation of retreating to the reception up the hill in the palace, when she saw Angelo homing in on her. Gerad, Kheron and Kastel were impossible to find in the commingling of people. She honestly didn't know whether Kastel had lingered at all after the ceremony ended. For all she knew he might now be on his way out of Alsansir.

Later, during the reception, hard-ridden and tired messengers came to the king with news from the mountainous border to the east that a ragged army of darklings had broken past defenses and even now razed settlements at the edge of the southern kingdoms.

Teo made his first official appointment when he asked Gerad, who had been patrolling the eastern mountains with his nightwalkers anyway, to take the mountainous lands formally as Lord Defender of the Eastern Range.

Gerad, who had never held title other than Master of the Divhar and never actually held lands of his own, having come to the conclusion that being responsible for a hungry people was not nearly as entertaining as fighting the battles for those that were; found himself at a loss. He told the king he would give the offer serious thought. Walked ten steps away and turned and accepted. Teo congratulated him. Gerad shook his head wondering what he had gotten himself into.

The mountains of the east were sparsely populated, but there were villages and settlements deep in the woods. Foresters and hunters and gathers of woodland herbs and mushrooms found nowhere else.

He asked Kheron if she would accompany him, to set matters straight. At first she declined, but Gerad persuaded her with tales of the destitute and homeless mountain

people - - children left orphaned after the darklings ravaged the villages -- that would need the help of someone strong. She agreed finally, with some small bit of determination back in her golden eyes. With a purpose she had lacked for some years now.

And Sera - - Sera settled back down after the excitement and prepared to face another year in Alsansir. Another year of growth. Another year of watching the faithful congregate in a city three times it's original size. Another year of peace.

Four

One year later

The city was full of the sounds and smells of autumn market. The last of the crops were brought to sale; what wasn't sold to the royal storehouses bought by merchants and to smaller extent by private individuals. Pigs and cows were herded to market for slaughtering and salting in preparation of the winter months. Fur traders from the mountains of the east and some even from the distant north brought their wares. Wine sellers from the west displayed their finest summer vintages. All in all autumn market was a festival. Everyone went to the market.

Sera had an array of ribbons she had purchased from a silk weaver, a new winter cloak lined with ermine on the inside, and a jug of very fine Therusian wine under her arm for her yearly visit to the Grave. She walked along cheerfully, her hair in a braid down her back, in the tunic and leggings that were much more practical in the cooling weather than the festive skirts and flimsy blouses that the other young women wore to the market festival.

She stood out anyway. A young woman bursting with health and vitality and a careless beauty that drew the male eye effortlessly. Men followed her passage with their gazes, turned to watch her walk by, sometimes getting slapped for it by the ladies they happened to be with. Sera grinned happily and strolled on, content with the world. It was not until she passed the booth of a rug salesman that she happened to find herself

mingling with the gray robed forms of priests, who were gathered in turn around the Prophet and of all people her own father, the Great Priest of Alsansir. Although he seemed to be taking a second seat nowadays to Angelo.

Angelo saw her first, before she could slip away unnoticed. She had over the last year, since the incident at the coronation between him and Kastel, opted to avoid the Prophet when she could. It did not deter him at all from seeking her out upon occasion.

“Sera. Has the market been good to you today?”

Given no choice, she stood before her father and the Prophet, her arms full of purchases. “It has.”

“What have you there, Therusian wine? You’ve not taken to the sin of partaking of spirits, have you?” It was said with a tone of humor, but there was censure under it. Before Gerad’s observations, she had never noticed how Angelo used words so much to his advantage.

“No,” she murmured.

“My daughter takes it in tribute each year to the grave of Dante Epherian.” Rab-Ker explained, as though he feared Angelo think her a drunkard.

“Ah, is it that time again?”

She did not answer. She wanted away from the cloying presence of so many of Angelo’s followers. His captain of the Basilica Guard, Sinakha, stood beyond the Prophet’s shoulders, staring at her with his strange eyes. She shuffled her feet and said.

“There’s one more thing I need to purchase. I should hurry before they sell out.”

“By all means, hurry then.” Angelo gave her leave. Her father frowned at her from beneath his graying beard, as though he thought her manners deplorable. She lowered her eyes and slipped though the priests, finding escape.

When she was gone, the Prophet shook his head sadly at Rab-Ker, who had become a regular attendee at his sermons, who urged his own parishioners to listen to the words of the Prophet.

“I fear the girl spends too much time honoring that dark spawn of hell. The rumors fly that she sits at his grave like she might at a worship.”

“She had a -- strange relationship with him.” Rab-Ker said. “She does not take her honoring of him past this one day a year. I would put a stop to it otherwise.”

“There is only so much the hand of a father can do to curb the willfulness of a young woman grown. She needs the guidance of a husband to set her on the path of righteousness. Why have you never betrothed her, my friend?”

“I have tried.” Rab-Ker sighed, the tortured sigh of a neglected father. “She will have nothing of it. She is a strong girl. Her time in the Lion Guard during the war gave her a will of her own.”

“Such a young woman requires a strong man. A Godly man.” Angelo observed. “It is unseemly that she should run wild so.”

“Perhaps.”

The Prophet, having spoken his piece on the matter of Sera’s marital status turned his attention to other things. A carpet for his study in the temple.

* * *

Afternoon brought rain to skies that had been clear. A cold front accompanied the storm, the frigid fingers of its breezes creeping in through cracks in windows and under doors. It was a sign of a cold winter to come. Sera looked out the window of her room into an evening gone dark and unpleasant and wished she had gone to the Grave earlier. She was in for a soaking now and a cold one at that. Fortuitous that she had bought a new, well-oiled winter cloak. She pulled a heavy woolen tunic over her head and donned her work boots, lacing them tightly to keep out the water, gathered her bottle of wine and her bouquet of autumn flowers and ventured into the rainy dusk.

There were covered walkways circling the cathedral courtyard, leading from the dormitories to the cathedral to the outbuildings that served it and finally to the east wing of the palace. Well-bundled people kept strictly to these thin havens to escape the rain.

She passed a group of women, coming from the cathedral. Fine ladies by their expensive cloaks, by the polished state of their hair and faces. Sera hardly paused to look at them, so used to ignoring and being ignored by the glamorous birds of paradise that peopled the king’s court. There were so many more lovely young ladies now that there was an unmarried king sitting the throne than there had been.

“Sera?”

She started at her name, turning to look into the painted midst of silk and fur. Princess Rejalla or Queen Rejalla if one granted her the title of her husband's throne, was bundled in the center of the ladies in waiting. Her face was half hidden by the edge of her hood, her soft, black hair, framing eyes equally dark. Tentatively she smiled at Sera. Sera blinked at her, surprised to see her out on such a miserable afternoon. Surprised she wasn't attending a royal dinner with her husband or some equally prestigious function. She had only returned to the city a week ago, to honor the death of her father. She would stay perhaps for another month to visit with her friends and family before returning to her husband's kingdom of Ludas. Sera hadn't spoken to her since her arrival.

"Your majesty." Sera bowed her head respectfully, eyes straying to Rejalla's hidden figure, wondering if the rumors of the princess's pregnancy were true.

"It has been a long time. How do you fair?" Rejalla said.

"Oh, I'm well. How do you find Ludas, Princess?"

"Ah, a fine city. Not quite as seasonable as Alsansir -- but it is home now."

"It's not seasonable tonight." Sera smiled. "What a miserable time for you to be talking a walk. Were you at worship?"

Rejalla nodded her head. Her ladies looked bored.

"I'm surprised you didn't go to the temple of the Prophet. Everyone else does nowadays. Even your brother has made it his official place of worship."

"I know. I just wished for something more comfortable. There is too much change in my life nowadays -- I yearn for old, familiar things."

Sera could sympathize. Very much so. There were times when all the new practices and byways of the engorged Alsansir made her want to close herself in her rooms and hide. She missed the old days before all the upset and destruction that had changed her world. She missed the years of her youth, when she had had her own personal spirit benefactor, before the war had taken the innocence of youth away from her. She missed just being Sera, the unremarkable daughter of the high priest. But wishes never came true. That was a hard, cold fact that had been drilled into her over the years.

"Well," Sera said, impatient to be about her business. "It's too cold and wet an evening for me to keep you standing here ---"

"Are you going to his grave?" It was blunt and Rejalla stared at her with expectant,

sad eyes.

“I - - yes.”

The princess nodded once, pulled her cloak tighter about her throat.

“Say a prayer for me.” She murmured and hurried past, her women trailing behind her, some casting doubtful stares back at Sera.

She was left standing there with the wind tearing at her cloak, tearing at the petals of the flowers in her hand, with nothing to do but recall just how many women Dante Epherian had been adored by.

She slipped past the gate guard, who waved her on from their shelter of the small gatehouse and she braved the slick cobblestones of the town below. Even with her hood up her hair was soaked and cold water dribbled down the inside of her tunic. Lightning flared at the edge of town, followed almost immediately by the boom of thunder. She shuddered, ears ringing from the clap. She doubted her own reason to braving this storm merely to pour wine into already soaked earth and leave flowers that would be destroyed by morning. Her sojourn could just as well be accomplished tomorrow if the weather permitted. She was cold and shivering and soaked to the bone. The lights of a nearby tavern beckoned. Warmth and song and mulled cider were powerful sirens.

She plunged past, half way there and determined to reach her goal, wet or not. Again lightning struck within the boundaries of the city and thunder shook the ground. She ran up the muddy trail to the cemetery, shaking from fear of the storm as much as from cold.

Monuments to the dead loomed in the darkness ahead of her. Light blinded her and the earth shook. She cried out, deafened, body tingling with the nearness of the strike. The wine jug hit the earth and landed with a sloshy thud. She stood, grasping the flowers in nerveless hands.

* * *

The exterior of the Temple had been completed, with much skilled labor from artisans and stonemasons. A great statue of one of the holy messengers of god perched just outside the great glass windows of the Prophet’s study. He sat with his back to the

outside world, his hands paused in their movements, quill frozen above a sheet of fine parchment, ink wet on its tip. Behind him the flash of lightning illuminated the face of the angel. The roar of thunder rattled the windowpanes. The Prophet stared blindly into the fire across the room, his eyes wide, his mouth pressed tight as if in concentration or communication with some higher deity than mortal man might usually hold converse with. He was the Prophet, after all.

After a moment, he sat the quill down, careful to wipe the excess ink from its tip. He walked to the door of his study and quietly asked the young priest on duty in his outer office to summon Captain Sinakha. Then, he went to the windows and stared out into the storm. On his mouth lingered a slight smile.

* * *

Sera stumbled in the mud and went down on one knee. Mud slid down her boot tops. So much for dry feet. She might as well take off her cloak and revel in the rain for all the good it had done keeping her dry. She trudged up the hill, past the mausoleum of some wealthy family and towards the obelisk that marked Dante's grave.

And found it wasn't there. Not in one whole piece at least. The ground was rent as though some great hammer from heaven had struck it. The jagged, lower half of the monument lay tilted at an odd angle, the upper half in a hundred pieces on the ground around it. The air smelled of ozone and smoke. She stood in shock, staring, knees loosing all strength, buckling. She slid to the mud, feeling shards of stone under her palms. Of all places, lightning had struck here. Obliterating his monument.

There had never been peace in his life, as much his doing as from the dictation of outside fates. That his rest should be so disturbed - - it made her stomach clench and her heartache. A sob escaped her, tears mixing with cold rain. Recklessly she crawled over the chunks of stone, over mounds of disrupted earth, clawing uselessly at grass and dirt. There was a great hollow where the strike had centered, where earth had been blasted away. Splintered pieces of wood jabbed skyward. The remains of a funeral box.

She wanted to back away, having no desire to behold the grisly remains within -- and she could not. She peered into the darkness and found only wood and the hollow

bottom portion, mud filling it rapidly, of the coffin. If a body had ever been there, none was now.

Five

He wove through the darkness with the stink of decay about him, the feel of mold on the crusted fragments of fabric that stuck to his flesh. The rain beat down with enough force to hurt. Blinding, freezing, debilitating. Pebbles and dirt inside his boots drove him to distraction -- so much so that he pulled them off in a frenzy. He pulled at the offending scrapes of fabric, scratching at skin underneath with long sharp nails in the animalistic intent to remove that which aggrieved him.

Like an animal, all he knew was the here and now of lightning slashed skies and driving rain and a black maze of stone that was confounding to his sense of direction. He saw a hundred things in the flashes of lights - a hundred ordinary things that his mind could not put words to, could not connect to things a man might know. So he fled, seeking haven and knowing nothing of what form that haven might take.

Long streamers of hair plastered to his face, blinding him almost as much as the constant flashes of lightning. The storm had washed away the stink and the film of dirt from his skin. He pelted down a narrow way, crouching close to a rough stone wall. Two shapes came out of the darkness from the other way, protecting themselves from the rain with a shared cloak held over bowed heads.

He cried out. They did, a woman's voice and a man's in fear and surprise. His was the rage of an animal caught off guard. He stuck out, pushing them backwards, running away from their sprawled forms, desperately wanting out of this maze. There were lights through the haze of dark and storm and he veered away from them, pelting through a thin and dirty alley, past a makeshift shelter where ragged figures huddled. He scattered the outer fringes of their belongings in his rush, and they cried out, emerging out of the darkness to defend what was theirs.

There was a wooden fence that blocked his path. He beat a fist against it in pure blind panic of all the walls closing in about him. From behind the alley-folk skulked

towards him, the glint of dull steel in their hands. Gibberish came out of their mouths. It grated on his hearing, as the rain did and the thunder and the harsh sound of his own breathing.

Somewhere in his madness a tiny awareness that he should have understood glimmered at the back of his mind. It made him afraid and being afraid made him angry. He snarled at them and lunged, bearing one backwards under his weight, hands about a thin throat. A blade sliced him from the side, cutting under his armpit and scouring his ribs. Pain of a different nature from what he had known in this cold, dark place laced through him.

He screamed, flinging back his head, wet strands of hair whipping about his shoulders, his face. He cried something and did not himself know where the words came from -- or even understand what they meant. He extended one hand and a streak of lightning every bit as blinding as that released by the sky rushed out to envelope the knife bearer. The creature did not even have the chance to scream and his sizzling remains caused the others to scatter in disarray, abandoning their make shift shelter for favor of the rain slicked streets outside the alley.

The one under him was cringing, face hidden under crossed hands, body a tight knot of fear. There was no threat there now. He sensed that as any animal might and rose, favoring his injured side. He touched it with his fingers gingerly, felt the gaping edges of flesh leaking warm liquid. He brought fingertips to his lips, tasting the salty stuff. A chill passed over him. He hugged one arm to the wound and loped back out to the street. There were figures coming down the way towards the alley -- towards him, drawn by the screams and the magic. He veered away from them and heard their calls following him.

Out. Out. Out. That was the extent of his thoughts. Escape was the whole of his world and this maze seemed lacking of any convenient exits.

* * *

The young priest came in with a tray bearing tea and sweetbread. The Prophet stood at his window, ignoring the service, staring into the storm-darkened night. He looked over the shadowed rooftops of the city that had built up around his temple and in the

distance, perhaps some fifteen, twenty blocks away there was faint flare of light that was not descended from heaven. The Prophet's eyes widened. His hands rose to touch the cold glass of the windowpanes. For a moment his lips moved, silently reciting some prayer. Then he turned to fix his aide with hard brown eyes. In careful precise wording, the Prophet gave the young priest a message to carry, bidding the man repeat it before letting him leave to find Sinakha.

When the priest was gone, the Prophet left the study and strode to his private rooms, where he shut and locked the door. Beyond his bedchamber was a small room he always kept locked, where certain holy relics were kept. He wore the key on a chain around his throat just below the symbol of the High God.

Inside there were chests and boxes. He rummaged about, looking for a particular chest and found it finally under a stack of wooden crates. It was not quite of the nature of the others. Metal and oddly smooth with an odd locking mechanism that was triggered not by a lock, but by softly clicking dial with numbers about its edges. He turned it this way and that and back again. Then lifted the top to reveal a deep well filled with things that must surely have been relics of some past god, for no one of them held place in the world today. He found what he desired, wrapped in a sheet of felt, closed the chest and spun the dial. He took his treasure back into the softly flickering light of his bedchamber. On the bed he unwrapped it. A pair of plain, steel colored bracelets. Smooth and featureless on the outside, scarred with lines and ridges on the inner cuff. He picked one up, running his fingers along the inner rim, found an indent and pressed it. A tiny red light, no larger than a pin head began to flash, signaling life within cold metal. The Prophet smiled to himself.

After all these many, many years, the spark of life remained.

* * *

Sera ran all the way back up the hill to Alsansir castle. Her side ached from the exertion, her cloak was a sodden weight that hindered more than helped her. The gate guards barely recognized her in her headlong rush, and moved reluctantly out into the rain to halt her progress. She wiped hair from her face and with uncertain glances at each

other for the wild look in her eyes, they let her pass. Past the main bailey, around the side gardens of the palace where walkways shielded her from the driving rain; through the kitchen courtyard and into the cathedral gardens. She was limping by the time she entered the cool, dry corridors of the dormitory. She left a trail of water behind her, hem of the new cloak dragging the floor.

At her father's door she pounded mercilessly until the sound of footsteps approached from the other side. He opened the door, a look of censure on his face for whoever came so diligently calling at this evening hour. The look shattered into one of concern when he saw her and her state.

"By the goddess."

"Father. Father, you've got to come. I didn't know what to do. The lightning - - the lightning destroyed everything. There's nothing there. Oh, goddess there's nothing in the grave!"

"Sera calm yourself. You're shivering. You'll catch your death." He reached to draw her into the warmth of his rooms and she shied back, afraid that once she entered the comfort she might not be inclined to leave, and she needed her father, who knew so much more than she about wizardly matters to come and see the grave himself.

"You've got to come!" She cried. She was verging on hysteria, she knew she was and could not stop it. "Please, please come."

Rab-Ker stared at her, aghast. Then he rummaged in the nook by the door for his own cloak. Came out with a second one and demanded she give up the soaked one she wore. She did so frantically, dropping the wet thing on the floor outside his door and donning the dry warmth of one of his winter cloaks.

They started back out into the rain.

* * *

He stopped to catch his breath, vision spinning from the pain in his side and the last nearby flash of lightning. The thunder crack that followed shook him to the bones. He pressed his back against a rough stone of a wall and howled in retribution for the scare it had given him. The night sky gave him no heed, rumbling without note of his presence.

There was a wide street with many lighted doorways and windows. He abhorred to travel down it, vulnerable to the light and whatever dwelled within it. He had no choice save to go back, so he clung to the shadows as best he could, hurrying with what strength he had left after running so long, with the blood draining out between his fingers.

A doorway opened and someone stepped out under an awning with a bucket to dump in the rain. He brushed past ruthlessly, a scream of surprise drifting in his wake. There was an intersection that was smaller and darker and he took it instinctively. Someone shouted behind him and he flung his head about, wild eyed, to look.

Shadowed figures had followed him. They began down the little dark street behind him. Panic. Escape were the only things his mind could process. The only things that it had processed since his memory began. A wagon blocked his passage and he veered around it, driven into an alley much like the one he had been attacked in before. Nothing but stone wall at the end of it. He hissed his frustration and spun to escape the trap. But dark, robed figures blocked the mouth of the alley. Others pelted through the rain behind him.

He was ready to go through them, not caring that there were more of them, but a low, rhythmic chanting began to issue from their lips. It paused him. It made a dread pass through him that he had no notion the origins of. He staggered against a discarded barrel. Righted himself with a hand on the wall. In his moment of disorientation others had entered the alley. There were faces close to him. He screamed in outrage and struck out, raking a man in the face with his nails. A hand slapped around his upper arm, and something stung the underside of the flesh. His head snapped around, a snarl on his lips. There was a man with drenched black hair, a few inches taller than he, with oddly luminescent green eyes. He lost the snarl in a haze of senses beginning to swim. Tried to pull away but the man swung out with a club in hand. The business end of which connected to his skull.

The chanting was the loudest thing in his head, louder even than the pumping of blood and the pounding in his skull. His knees gave way and the man let him go and others came upon him with their clubs. He ceased to know anything, which was a relief.

Rab-Ker stood looking down over the ravaged pit where the grave had been. Water dripped off the cowl of his cloak, off the ends of his mustache. Sera stood behind him, arms wrapped about herself under her father's oversized cloak.

"He's not there," she said. "Is it magic?"

"I don't know," Rab-Ker replied quietly. "Do not jump to conclusions, girl."

"Conclusions? Father - - his body is gone!! What happened to it?"

He swung his gaze to regard her, then jerked his head towards the city. Light flared in the midst of the maze of houses and shops. A growing ball of energy that momentarily illuminated the night and the tower of the Temple before it subsided and let the storm regain its dominance. Sera felt it too. Something that was not nature originated. Something drawn from that plane where magic dwelt. A powerful dark spell that only the most powerful, the most skilled might use and survive the summoning.

"Goddess." Rab-Ker whispered. "That was - - an Hellfire spell. Yes, yes, I'm sure of it. And at the Temple of the High God!"

Sera mouthed a curse - - a prayer. Terror and hope ran through her. She grabbed her father's arm and pulled him away from the shattered grave.

"We've got to go to the temple, father."

Gathering wind neither knew they still had, they ran through the city streets towards the temple of the High God. They passed commotion and panic on the way. People were in the streets despite the rain, holding glass-covered lanterns, upset in their faces and voices. The closer they got to the temple, the more crowded the streets, some running away from the temple, most going towards it.

The street they followed, along with half a dozen others bled into the temple square. A crowd of perhaps a hundred folk braved the rain before the steps. Cries rent the air. Screams of anguish and mourning. The face of the temple to the right and above the main steps had been gouged as if by lightning strike. Chunks of stone littered the steps and ground. There were bodies on the ground that priests and townsfolk labored to take within the shelter of the temple. The Basilica guard stood wary and watchful, helping when they could, attempting to keep the majority of the stunned crowd out of the way of those helping the wounded -- or the dead. It was hard to tell.

Rab-Ker caught the arm of a priest, demanding to know what had happened. The priest looked at them both with frightened, spooked eyes.

"I don't know. I don't know," he cried. "I was at prayer within the temple shrine. I saw nothing but priests and Basilica guard going out and then a great explosion and cries of men in agony. The Prophet himself came, and - - and everything was confused. A demon, he said. A demon attempted to destroy the temple of the High God."

Sera couldn't wait. She slipped past her father and up the steps. A temple guard tried to prevent her, but she evaded his reach and entered the great hall of worship. The ceiling towered above, supported by a hundred arches. Faintly the wind whipped echo of bells could be heard from the towers. Row upon row of benches receded in the distance, ending before the grand dais where stained glass windows looked down upon the place where the Prophet preached. On the floor and upon benches men were laid. Blood stained the carpet. There were more cries of women and children clustering about the bodies than there were from the injured. There were few signs of life as was surely to be expected by mortal men caught in the brunt of a hellfire spell. If that was truly what it had been.

She passed the charred remains of a man, his face unrecognizable under the crust of blackened flesh. The bright glint of the holy symbol at his throat was the only sign that he might have been in the employ of the temple. She cringed and passed on, looking from face to face of those frantic people in the temple. She heard a prayer being said over a dead man, and saw the Prophet himself kneeling over the corpse, holding the hands of the man's widow while the woman sobbed out her grief. He rose, pressing her into the care of one of his priests and his eye caught Sera.

"My child, this is no place for you."

"What happened?" she demanded, forgetting all honorifics in her desperation.

The lines in his face deepened, his eyes took on that almost glow they had when he preached from his pulpit. "A spawn of hell has walked among us and wrecked havoc on the good and faithful children of the High God. Look around you --" his voice rose so that people around them could hear. Eyes were drawn to him, cries quieted as the people in the temple strained to hear the words of their Prophet. "--Look at the grievous injury done to the earthly bodies of God's servants. Look outside at the damage done to the

house of the High God in hell's attempt to usurp our faith."

People crowded the doors of the temple, the guards not able to keep them back as they struggled to see and hear Angelo.

"Careful, careful my friends for the victims of hell's jealous wrath lay here. Victims of the dark that threatens our very souls. Be strong. Be faithful and ward your hearts and minds against the dark forces that bring such destruction and pray for those it has struck down."

Sera felt sick. She saw the faces of the women bent over their husbands and brothers and sons and the nausea rose. A hellfire spell had done this. Could it have been -- had it been cast by - - *him*?

"Who did this?" she whispered, tearing her eyes away from the mourners, looking intently up at Angelo. He was damp, she noticed. And his face and hands were dirty, as if he had helped to bring the dead inside to sanctuary. He put his hands on her shoulders and she stared up, bedraggled and shivering from cold.

"A spawn of hell, my dear. One of the soulless demons sent to destroy us."

"Where is he?"

He lifted both brows at the question. "It is not a thing to concern yourself with. It is a matter for God's minions."

"Is he here?" she cried, her voice rising enough to attract attention.

"Whom do you speak of?" Angelo asked in bafflement.

"Dante!"

He blinked at her. Whispers began to circulate around her. Rab-Ker came up behind her, a solid presence at her back.

"Dante Epherian? Dante Epherian is dead my dear. This has upset her terribly, Rab-Ker, perhaps you should take her home."

"His grave is empty," she cried. "I saw it. I did. And that spell ---"

Angelo looked past her to Rab-Ker, who solemnly nodded assent to all she said. Angelo frowned.

"Risen from the grave? It is not possible or godly." He looked around at the expectant listeners. They hung on his every whisper. He lifted his voice so that all could hear. "I do not know this man Sera daughter of Rab-Ker speaks of. So I cannot say

whether the demon that murdered your husbands and sons wears his form -- but if what she says is true, then he is surely the minion of the dark master of hell. Only a creature of hell could walk the earth after rotting so long in the grave. God save us all.”

The cry went up. Outrage and calls for justice. Angelo turned his pious eyes to Sera. “Spurn your thoughts of this devil, Sera. Have faith in the High God.”

“Where is he? He’s here, isn’t he? What have you done with him?”

“It is not your concern, girl.”

“Sera.” Rab-Ker restrained her when she might have surged forward and laid hands on the Prophet.

“I want to see him.” She cried.

“You can’t,” Angelo said calmly. “Whether he is what you say or not, he is mad. And dangerously wild. It is not safe.”

“I’ll take her home,” her father said, bodily pulling her with him, through the crowd, some of which cast her dour, angry looks. Past the bodies and down steps back into the rain.

“He’s there,” she said, held close to Rab-Ker. “Angelo has him in the temple. I know it. I sense it.”

“I believe you, daughter,” Rab-Ker said. “But there’s no helping for it now. Not with the dead in his wake and the town up in arms. Wait until the storm stops and emotions cool. Then we’ll see what might be done.”

“How could they take him, father? How? Unless he’s injured -- or not himself.”

“Calm yourself, Sera.” Her father’s arm tightened about her shoulders. “We’ll deal with it later.”

* * *

Later was much later. Someone, likely her father, slipped a sleeping draught into her tea and she slept like the dead late into the afternoon. She woke up in the little chamber off her father’s rooms where his servants sometimes slept. She was in a long white sleeping gown and her hair had dried in a mess of tangles. She lay, blinking grit from her eyes, no accustomed sunlight streaming in to let her know what time it was.

For a moment she was more concerned with the strangeness of the room she found herself in than the events of the prior night.

Then memory came back. She swung legs over the side of the bed, searched for clothing and found nothing of hers. She ran from the room and into father's rooms. Empty. Then out the door and down the dormitory hall, regardless of her state of dress and to her own rooms. She donned whatever clothing was easiest at hand. Ran her fingers through the mess of her hair and finally twisted the whole lot of it up in a bun and jammed hairpins through to hold it.

The sun was out. Aside from puddles in the courtyard there was no sign of the storm last night. She stopped a priest in the cathedral courtyard and asked where the Great Priest was. The man did not know. She accosted two more with similar results. Ran up the stairs into the cathedral and asked the Holy Sword on duty if Rab-Ker had appeared today. No. Not today. Not even for Morning Prayer, which by the by, Sera had missed herself.

Back out into the courtyard. Where would he be? The Temple? Should she go back to the temple and confront the Prophet herself? He never took her seriously, unless he was complementing how she looked, and he would surely not take her requests to heart unless Father was there to back her up. She needed to find father. One of the Great Priest's aides walked across the gardens, arms full of scrolls, about some important task. She yelled across the courtyard to get his attention, then pelted full out towards him. Oh, his look of disapproval was priceless. She ignored it.

"Where is my father? Have you seen him today?"

"I believe he is taking audience with the king." The priest sniffed.

The king? The king! He had gone to Teo about it without waiting for her. She hissed, turning on her heel and running down the covered walk towards the palace. She had to slow to a more dignified pace once inside the royal walls. People stared at her nonetheless as she passed. There were a great many whispers behind shielding hands. There seemed a cloud of speculation over the whole of the palace. The guard contingent had doubled. She saw Charul conferring with a trio of Lion Guard. They all looked at her when she hurried up, frowns on their faces, worry in their eyes.

"Where's the King?" she demanded. "I've got to see the king."

Charul nodded to his comrades and took her by the arm, leading her away. "He's in conference."

"I know that. With my father. I have a right to be there, Charul. Where? In his study? His office?"

"Is it true?"

She took a shaky breath. "I don't know. I - - maybe. Angelo wouldn't let me see him. The King has to make him let me see him."

"They say he killed a beggar outside The Polished Owl Tavern. They say it was a man with no more than rags on, with long pale hair. Eleven men were killed outside the Temple. Three survived. Priests, the Prophet's guard, volunteers at the temple who came outside to see what the commotion was."

"If it was him. Then they threatened him somehow. He reacted to that."

"He didn't blink at killing a man even when he was at his best." Charul reminded her. "What if -- what if he's back - - again - - and he's evil. Like the Prophet says."

"He's not evil. He was never evil. His soul was incomplete. And just what is the Prophet saying?"

"That if the wild man they have in the temple cellars is Dante Epherian then we'd all best hope that the King decides for swift justice before he strikes us all down."

"Oh, Goddess, and you support that?"

"I didn't say that. You asked me what the Prophet was saying."

"You know all this might be mute if it's not him. And the only way to find out is if somebody who knows him goes to see him. And I've got to get the King to agree so Angelo will let me do it. Now take me to Teo, Charul."

He did, but not happily. The guards at the door to the royal study were not thrilled to have her intrude upon their master's meeting. Rab-Ker looked up from a cup of tea and frowned darkly at her. Teo, sitting across from him, merely lifted a dark brow with a look that said he had expected her intrusion earlier.

"Lady Sera."

"Your majesty." She didn't pause between the respectful bowing of the head and her plunge into the room. "This is ridiculous. Why can't I see him? If it's not him, great - - good, then everyone's mind will be set to rest. If it is, then who else is going to be

able to talk to him?"

"Sera," her father reprimanded her for daring to demand anything of the king.

"It's all right. I understand you were a bit distraught last night, Sera. You seem a bit distraught now. Your father is advising patience on my part concerning what they have at the temple. Which is most certainly wise advice if it is - - him. He is never to be taken lightly - - regardless of state of mind."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Sera said, trying to sound reasonable. "But don't you think it would be better for all concerned if I were to go - - and if it were him -- maybe talk a little sense into him."

"My daughter does seem to have that ability with him." Rab-Ker added.

"I'm aware. But Angelo reports that he is beyond reason. That he rakes at the walls like a rabid animal and screams gibberish into the air. Angelo suggests that this time, when he came back to life - - he came back without human reason."

"Then - - then all the more reason why I should be allowed to see him."

"The city is up in arms. They demand retribution for the dead - - for the desecration of the holy temple. Good men are dead. What should I do about that?"

"How can you try a man without reason? Isn't that a point of law in Alsansir? That a man who cannot reason cannot be tried for crimes he commits."

Teo opened his mouth, then shut it. He chuckled and inclined his head in respect of her rational. "Very good. Perhaps you ought to be a litigator, Sera. All right. The three of us know him. So why not make the trip to the temple and have the Prophet show us the mad man in his cellar?"

* * *

The black iron door with its small square of grill just above her easy eye level stood like an omen at the end of the narrow dark hall deep under the temple. Two levels underground, and it was cold and moist and smelled of mildew. Straw littered the floor to seep up some of the moisture, but it couldn't keep it out of the air. Sera had on a light cloak and still she shivered. Six guards walked among them. Two king's men and four Basilica guard, one of them being the Prophet's captain, Sinakha. Sera felt tiny and

powerless crowded in the walk surrounded by armed men. Her father was behind her, as was the king and the Prophet who was a frowning presence. Captain Sinakha looked through the grate, then motioned one of his men to put key to lock. The door swung open and Sinakha and his guards moved into the cell, lanterns held aloft, casting shadows about the stark corners of the little room.

Sera stood in the door, searching the shadows. There was certainly nowhere to hide. Nothing but a drain at the center of a stone floor that sloped inward towards it, so that refuge, human or otherwise might flow towards it.

There, in the far corner, a huddled form. Legs were curled up against the body, arms wrapped around them. Head ducked to knees. Rags barely covered flesh. There were few enough of them and they indeed looked as if they had been rotting for years. It was the hair that made her close her eyes a moment and breath a sigh of relief -- of sudden panic. A dirty tangled mass of it, silvery white under dried mud, it draped about his shoulders and arms in disarray.

“Dante,” she whispered and stepped towards him.

“Lady. No Closer.” Captain Sinakha warned even as the curled figure shifted, lifted his head to look up at them. Clear silver eyes rimmed by blackest black narrowed, arched black brows drew down and between one breath and the next he was upon her, the closest to him. Her head snapped back from the blow he dealt her and she crumpled, dazed. He paid her no more heed, intent on attacking those behind her.

Sinakha had out his club, as did his men. All she could see from her position on the cold floor was a jumbled movement of limbs. The thump and thud of clubs on bare flesh made her wince. A guard staggered back into the arms of king and Prophet. Dante went down next to her, one arm out flung, almost touching her. Blood under his nails and wrists encased in plain iron bracelets some three inches in width.

Then they were upon him, the guards that remained standing. Sinakha took a pair of cuffs with a short length of chain from his belt and snapped them over the plain bands Dante already wore. He grabbed Sera by the arm after and yanked her to her feet, pushing her into the arms of her father. They took her from the room against her will.

She cried out in protest. That he was only disoriented. That they needed to give her time to talk with him. But they heeded none of that. They exchanged looks over her

head that said plainly they would talk later without her hysterical presence among them. That they would discuss his fate without her, when of all of them she had the most right to be there.

He was alive. Dante - - Dante was alive. A grief she had pretended wasn't there in the years since his 'death' lifted. Her cheek throbbed, her elbow hurt where she had hit the ground, but a weight had lifted from her heart. He had not left her after all. He was not his most charming, certainly, but what did one expect newly risen from the grave.

She sat in the Prophet's outer office with an ice pack to her cheek, the nervous aide serving her tea and cakes while the king, the prophet and her father conferred within. She curled her legs up in the chair, grinning madly and not able to stop it. A single tear made a slow path down her cheek. And once he was back in his right mind, he would make it all right again. He could do that. She had faith in him.

Six

It was cold and he hurt. The rage had passed along with the intruders whose voices he heard as unintelligible chatter and whose faces he saw through a tunneling vision. They had left the chains on his wrists, the cuffs just loose enough to fit over the metal bracelets beneath, but not enough to fit over the joints of his thumbs. His hands were sore and bloody from his trying.

He sat exhausted, the foot of chain resting over his knee, his hands on either side of his leg. The darkness was palatable. He hated it. He recalled a place of great darkness in flashes of memory. A place of great pain and of himself sometimes the victim, more often the victimizer. He could not quite recall why or where or who. The who bothered him the most - - the realization that there were things about himself that he could not remember - - the first rational thought that had crossed his mind since he'd discovered himself in this dark, cold world. And that came only after hours alone with nothing to do but think in the eight by eight by eight cell. He had paced it a thousand times, shoulder against the wall to feel his way, eyes straining in the darkness.

It seemed to him that he ought to have been able to banish the dark and the cold.

All it took was a word. But that word was illusive. He sat in his corner and pondered, pulling at his hair in consternation when his memory would not cooperate with the immediate wants of his mind. It was only when he stopped thinking and dozed fitfully that the invocation came to him. He murmured it, wanting the power, needing the confirmation that he had some control over this situation. Eyes half closed, he finished the last word and waited for light and heat to flare and the latter did occur, but not as expected.

A burning began at his wrists. A bone deep heat that turned rapidly painful, like liquid glass being forced through his veins. It traveled up his arms with the pumping blood and he cried out, sprawling backwards, shaking out his wrists in efforts to stop it. Through his heart it surged, a white hot searing pain that liked to rip that frantic muscle apart, then up the massive veins of his neck and into his skull.

He screamed, slammed his head against the floor in a blind effort to shut off the agony. He ripped at the bracelets on his wrists, nails gouging into the flesh of his palms and the inside of his arms. They wouldn't move. They would not even turn on his wrists, almost as if they had been grafted into place.

Then the pain subsided and gradually faded to be replaced by cold made more chilling by the recent burning of his blood. Inside his mind, after-images flashed. Faces, places, exhalations of power. An androgynous, beautiful face grafted into the hulking body of a monster, mouth opened in rage. At him? Angry at him? Because he had betrayed it when he had been made to complement it? He curled in a ball and tried to shut those confusing images away, because they did not help him discover self, only made self more obscure and bewildering.

* * *

Sera marched right past the Basilica guards at the doors to the temple. Doors that were usually open to one and all, but this day were closed, keeping the general public from the house of the High God. The bodies of the faithful were laid out in final rest, their families and friends looking over them in respected privacy. The Prophet himself would say words of eulogy before the burial tomorrow.

The guards tried to halt her, but she was not alone in her mission. Three Lion guard walked at her back. Charul and two of his cronies. The confrontation of separate guard factions might have turned belligerent if Sera had waited for them to sort it out themselves. She bypassed the problem by breezing past them while they raised hackles at each other, her arms full of blankets and a warm pot of food swinging from her hand.

“We’re going to the cellar to see him. Get captain Sinakha if you want.” She announced firmly and the guards had no choice but to scurry off in search of their captain. Her own escort crowded about her protectively when mourners turned their eyes to her in growing antagonism. Whispering that she was in liege with the devil in the temple dungeon.

She was down the stairs and to the first sub-basement level when the stomp of boots alerted her that someone in authority had been alerted. She was almost relieved to see it wasn’t Sinakha himself, he spooked her, but one of his lieutenants, who was red faced and offended at her intrusion with armed guard into temple domain.

“My lady, you have no authority to go down there. His holiness has not given permission. You will have to petition his holiness or captain Sinakha if you wish to see the - - prisoner.”

“I will not. He will not stay in that cell with no blanket or even proper clothing. And have you bothered to feed him?” At the man’s blank look she lifted her chin disgustedly. “And you call yourselves men of the church? Animals are treated better. If you wish to come with whatever men you choose, then fine. Come. Make certain we don’t spirit him away, if that’s what you’re afraid of. But I am going down there and I will see him warm and with food.”

“But - - the Prophet is not here now. He left instructions that no one was to - -”

“Did he leave you instructions to starve him? Or see him freeze?”

The guard blinked at her. She jerked her head to indicate the passage ahead of them. “Escort me to him, then. I am under your protection.”

That confused him enough to get him moving in the desired direction even before he could properly think about what he was doing, but by then, with her Lion Guard crowding behind him, he had little choice but to see it through. She knew very well Angelo was not at the temple. It was why she had chosen this time to gather her allies and

make her assault. She had seen him ride into the palace to confer with Teo. She could only imagine what they were talking about. The same thing everyone was talking about. Dante Epherian's unusual ability to cheat lasting death. They most certainly were not willing to have her input on the subject any more. Charul had confided to her that the Lion guard was under strict order to keep her away from the king's future meetings concerning the unholy wizard in the Prophet's keeping. And she could fume about it all she liked, Charul had bluntly told her, but he wasn't breaking the king's direct orders. So she settled on something that had not yet been banned. She would have never gotten this far by herself, but with the authority of the Lion guard behind her, she could bluff her way in to see Dante.

The Basilica lieutenant looked through the grate on the cell door first, holding up his lantern to make certain no ambush awaited before unlocking it. He and his man went in first, clubs at ready. Charul slipped in front of her to assure himself it was safe before ushering her forward. The look on his face was surprise and dismay when he saw Dante in his corner. This was most definitely not the grand, arrogant wizard they had known. This was a wary, feral creature that crouched in a dark corner, hair tangled and matted, lips pulled back in a warning snarl at their intrusion. In his crouch, his fingertips touched the floor, and she noted that he was still chained.

"Why haven't the chains been removed?" she demanded quietly.

"Who wants to get close enough to take 'em off?" the Basilica guard replied. She narrowed her eyes in anger and stepped forward. The guard stepped with her as a whole unit. Dante growled and tensed.

"Stop. All of you. Just stay back and don't move. Let me."

They most certainly did not wish to heed her words, her own escort being chiefly upset with her request. She turned and fixed Charul with a steely gaze and he reluctantly nodded. She took a deep breath for courage and slowly moved forward. He did not leap at her. His muscles remained tensed and his eyes were narrow slits of black-rimmed silver, fixed unerringly upon her. Four feet from him, and she felt she had gone as close as she dared. She knelt, carefully sitting the pot beside her and unfolding the thick blanket, taken from her own bed, and laying it between them. There was a simple tunic and trousers. She laid all of these atop the blanket, pressing the folds out of the top layer

with her hand, full of nerves. He stared at her unceasingly the whole time.

Goddess, he is like an animal, she thought. Like a scared, dangerous animal that doesn't know whether it should attack or not. Please let him not, for Dante Epherian's attacks were seldom not lethal.

She reached for the pot of food. Rice balls mixed with chunks of meat. Finger food. Charul had advised against anything that required utensils, rightly figuring that the Basilica guard would have fits if she tried to bring a knife into the cell. She lifted the clay top and the aroma drifted into the cold little cubical. She saw his eyes shift minutely, to what she held and back to her. She smiled and offered it. He didn't move. So she sat it on the floor next to the clothing and blanket and leaned forward to push it towards him. He lifted his hands, reached out towards her. She heard her guards start to move and whispered.

"Stay."

Amazingly enough they heeded her. Dante's eyes flicked past her, gauged whether they would come at him or not, and dismissed them. His fingers grazed her hair and behind the tangled, too long bangs of his own, she saw a wonderment in his eyes.

"Oh, Dante," she whispered and lifted a hand to touch him. It was too forward. He jerked back, eyes reverting to hard suspicion. She looked down from them, to his wrists, where she had noted the crimson of blood. Under the cuffs were the metal bracelets she had noted earlier and around them he had mauled himself as though trying to remove them. Those bracelets had not been with him when they had put him in the ground. She was certain of that.

"Sera." Charul had had enough. His voice was tense with impatience to have her away from a potential threat. "It's time to leave."

She nodded, pushing to her feet, careful to make no sudden movements that might set Dante off. She moved back into the company of guards, and with visible relief, they left the cell and locked the door behind them, the lieutenant muttering all the while that the Prophet would most certainly hear of this infraction.

* * *

Sera and Charul had lunch in a little restaurant on the wharf that overlooked the river curving through Alsansir's western side. Three years ago the city had stopped at the river's edge, the water a natural defense against attackers. With the growth in population it had expanded to the other shore and bridges had been built to span the distance. They had fresh fish baked in flavorful thym leaves and onion rolls with rice. She was paying, the least she could do to assuage her guilt over more than likely getting Charul into trouble over the incident at the temple.

"So what's the worst they can do?" she inquired timidly, picking at the remaining flesh clinging to the bones of fish.

"Oh, some unsavory duty more than likely." He seemed less disturbed over the prospect than she, which cheered her somewhat, but did not remove the sinking feeling that she was fast reaching the limits of what she could do. There was a certain point where people would stop doing her favors - - or she would become too conscious bound to ask. She needed Charul not in trouble. He was her best source in the Lion Guard and him demoted or placed somewhere that he might not be able to help her if she truly needed it would serve neither of them.

"I'll go talk to the Prophet and tell him it was solely my responsibility."

"You have no authority over the Lion Guard, Sera. There's no way we're going to escape censure just because you decide to be noble. Let it fall where it may."

"No. Angelo listens to me, sometimes. He might be persuaded."

Charul sniffed. "When he looks at you, he's thinking about more than the salvation of your soul. Be wary of him, Sera."

She blushed, embarrassed to discover that someone other than herself had noted the uncomfortably intense way the Prophet had of looking at her.

"He's the Prophet." she said, attempting to make light of it. "What will he do, ravish me behind the shrine in the temple?"

Charul shook his head darkly. "Just be careful."

* * *

"Sera."

The voice was stern and brimming with disapproval. Sera froze, with her hand on the handle of her door. Father stood at the outer doors of the dormitory, looking displeased. She forced a smile and lifted her head inquiringly.

“Yes?”

“What did you do?”

“Do? When?” She had not meant to be evasive, but the words slipped out anyway. She winced at the tightening of his mouth and the beetling of his thick brows.

“You will be required to account for yourself, young lady. The Prophet is quite perturbed. The king is hearing his complaint this moment.”

She drew a breath, a swell of righteous anger making her brazen. “Well, he can hear my complaint while he’s at it. The Prophet was certainly making no efforts to see Dante fed or clothed.”

“I suggest you hold that argument, but swath it in a layer of respect and tell it to the both of them. They’ve requested your presence.”

“Oh.” The courage faltered. “I thought the King didn’t want my input.”

“You seem determined to change his mind. Come along.”

Three powerful, stern faces stared her down when the finely carved door to King Teo’s study closed behind her and Rab-Ker. Teo and Angelo sat by the fire, wine in the king’s hand, the Prophet sipping tea. Father urged her to a place before them and moved to stand near the Prophet’s chair. She shifted uncomfortably, hiding her hands behind her back like a guilty child.

“You appropriated my Lion Guard for the express purpose of forcing your way past his Holiness’ security.” Teo did not waste time with pleasantries. “You ignored his strict orders and endangered yourself, his guard, my Lion’s, all on a whim.”

“A whim?” she blurted. “You saw that box they put him in. It’s freezing and he’d not even a blanket. And they hadn’t fed him. Since when do we treat people so?”

“Sera!” Rab-Ker reprimanded her for speaking so impertinently to their king. Angelo lifted a hand.

“I am willing to forgive a compassionate heart, your majesty, and truly I feel young Sera was moved by compassion. I fear more for her own safety when her compassion moves her to endanger herself.”

“I am not in danger from him! He would never hurt me. Father you know that.”

“Did he not strike out at you? Do you not bear the hint of a bruise on your cheek?”

Reflexively she lifted a hand to her cheek, where indeed the faint purple splotching of a bruise where Dante had hit her remained.

“The circumstances were different. He was startled. He’s not himself.”

“No. He’s not.” Angelo agreed. “He was a thing of darkness before this - - but now, after a sojourn in hell - - I fear he is a harbinger of evil. It is a bad omen, his return to this world. A terrible prophecy of dark times to come if we are not vigilant in our faith.”

“The world was ever more peaceful without Dante Epherian in it,” Teo commented. “I would imagine even his disciples would agree to that.”

His disciples? It occurred to her suddenly that she had been searching Alsansir for support, while the greatest allies she might have were the Dante’s former Warlords.

“Well,” she said calmly. “That might be. Why not send and ask them? They certainly should have some opinion of the matter.”

Teo smiled at her with a look that clearly revealed he knew what she was thinking.

“Not just yet. I’d prefer to have the matter resolved without having the three of them attempting to strike down the city walls and decide the matter for us.”

She took a frustrated breath. “Then that brings to mind the question; what’s to prevent Dante from doing it himself once he comes to his senses and takes offense at his treatment at the hands of his Holiness? Has anyone thought of that, yet?”

“My dear, the High God has the power to quell even the most demonic of powers. Believe me when I tell you the evil is bound by the faith of the holy.”

“How?” She pictured the cell and the door outside it in her mind’s eye, trying to recall if there had been runes of binding engraved in the stone. She remembered nothing. She could not recollect sensing any great magic and she was particularly receptive at picking up on that sort of thing. The one thing that had seemed out of place and unfamiliar were the bands on his wrists and the gouges in his flesh around them, as if he had been mad to get them off.

“The bracelets?” she said.

Angelo lifted a brow at her, impressed at her alacrity. “Holy wards. Very old relics

from the following of the High God across the sea. Very powerful. No demonic power will pass beyond their wards. His magic is bound. It is only the temptation of his presence that will endanger us. As long as he is here, in this mortal plane, to work his mischief, then all the pious are in danger.”

“He is not without supporters,” Teo mused. “As Sera has pointed out, if word reaches Master Gerad, Lady Kheron or Lord Kastel, then all of that might be a mute point.”

“You can’t hide it from them,” Sera cried.

“Men are dead because of him,” Teo reminded her.

“And the world is still in one piece because of him as well,” She snapped back. The king lifted a dark brow at her tone, but she was too frustrated to back down.

“And what do you propose?” Teo asked her.

She could come up with no easy answer.

“Shall I assign you the task of going to the families of those dead men and explaining that there will be no justice?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “He was wild. Mad. You said it yourself. He did not do it on purpose.”

“No, if he had done it on purpose half the city would be smoking ruins,” Teo remarked. “So we ask ourselves, is it better to have a mad Dante Epherian on the loose or a sane one with evil intent creating chaos in a world that has just recovered some of its sanity?”

“That’s only if you believe what the Prophet says about him. He’s not some evil fetch from hell. I know it.”

“If only we all had your faith,” Angelo said gently. She wanted to smack the benevolent smile off his face. How could he look so angelically pure and sit there casting accusations of demonic conspiracy at Dante? And the King was listening. The King was so attuned to the Prophet’s words she might as well have been talking gibberish. Even Father seemed swayed. And the only people that could help her were so far away as to be unattainable.

“But you don’t,” she said quietly, thinking. Desperately thinking of what she might do gain time and access to Dante. She had to appear to bend to their way of thinking

most of all. Had to quell their fears of her doing something foolhardy and stupid.

“Perhaps I have too much faith. But he was better, when I brought him the food and the blankets. Perhaps we’ll know more if his rational returns. If I could talk to him - - if you could talk to him, then we could discover if the Prophet is right. I think perhaps, if I could see him again, if I could make him remember me - - then it might benefit us all.”

“No,” Father said firmly, but the Prophet held up a hand.

“Perhaps it might not be a terrible notion. Perhaps it would serve us better if he were sane enough to declare his allegiance.”

He owes allegiance to no one. Sera thought, but did not say. *Be it hell or heaven.*

But, if Angelo thought he might gain such a vow from Dante, she might find her way back into that cell.

Seven

I hate this. This featureless dark. This boredom.

He sat in his corner, with the blankets she had given him wrapped about him, and pondered his existence. He contemplated the word *I*, as if it were some wondrous and foreign term that had suddenly unfolded to him a world of new possibilities. *I* denoted an awareness of self that he had not, up to a few hours past, possessed.

An animal did not think of nor refer to itself as *I* in any manner of its instinctual existence. It merely was. *I* signified something of a higher nature. He was intrigued by the gradual perception of something more to his patterns of thought. Something behind a chasm of - - darkness - - of void without a name, that if he picked at enough would surely come to him. It was just a matter of finding the proper thread to unravel the whole thing.

He put the clothes on the girl had brought him. She floated in his memory a face in a sea of faces that held meaning that was just out of his reach. But closer. He wished she might come back again, with her sweet scent and her luminescent eyes. If he saw her again, he might recall a reason for the tracks she left in his mind.

When the door opened and light cast its invasive fingers into the cell, blinding him, it was not her. A man stepped into the room, one other man behind him, holding a

lantern. White robes brushed the floor and a red silk scarf hung about his neck. On a chain was a gold emblem. This was not a face that brought memory with it. It was lined about the mouth and eyes, with hair thinning on the top. The eyes were deep and brown and at first glance not as diverting as the odd green ones of the large man behind him. That man did hold a place in memory. Recent memory concerning mindless flight and final confrontation in a storm drenched alley. He fixed the face of that man in his mind for future reference. There was debt to be paid there and in his new awareness of self, he found a taste for vengeance.

But, there was little in the lantern bearer's face save a vigilance to protect the other, so he turned his eyes back to the white robed man. Those brown eyes had not wavered from their gaze at him. The expression did not alter. He stared back, lifting his chin defiantly. His own eyes flashed, transparent in his emotions, hiding nothing of his thoughts. The brown eyes reflected nothing but quiet fortitude and as moments passed, the animal part of him began to sense a subtle, terrible power behind those eyes. An old, old power that in some minuscule part of him, did strike a cord of familiarity. His hackles rose. Carefully, with a rustling of chain, he placed his fingers on the floor, to balance himself should he have to spring up.

The man took note of the slight movement. One side of his lips twitched, as if satisfied. Then he turned without ever making a sound and glided out of the cell. The green-eyed guard pulled the door shut behind them, taking the light with him. All but a faint glow that seeped through the small grate on the door and receded as their quiet footsteps echoed down the outside hall.

He shivered. It was a long while before the tenseness left his body.

* * *

She knelt before the great shrine in the temple, head bowed, hands clasped in pious adoration of the High God, mouthing the ritual words that asked for guidance and protection against evil. The Prophet had suggested she do so, to ward her soul against temptation by the dark powers. It had seemed a prerequisite to his cooperation and to his good will, so she meekly agreed. Her mind wondered while she knelt and her gaze took

in nothing of the marble floor or the ornamentation of the shrine. The words that came from her lips were habit and nothing more. She could have uttered them in her sleep, having grown up the daughter of a priest.

She finished her prayers and rose, knees stiff from so long kneeling on the hard floor. She had brought more food. It sat on the wooden bench behind her and she retrieved it before signaling to the Basilica guard who was to accompany her downstairs. There were more of them waiting below, to protect her - - or see that she did nothing to violate the security of their impromptu prison.

She walked amidst them meekly, counting on their good report of her demeanor to insure that future visits were allowed. That had also been a condition of Angelo's. She gave in to them all, willing to say and do anything to achieve her goal. The capitulation seemed to please him. He had a weakness for the humble.

They opened the cell and let light into the cold darkness. Dante seemed not surprised by the intrusion. He sat, legs crossed, back against the wall, watching the door. He did not even blink at the onset of light. She hesitated in the doorway, guards behind her, waiting to follow her in. She wished they might stay just outside the door, but that too had been a requirement. She would not be alone with him. Ever.

Steps forward, that echoed on the stone floor. A smile that wavered on her lips. An offered bribe of food. And his eyes never wavered from her, except once to watch the migration of her guard into the room behind her. They clustered at the open door, clubs in hand.

When she was close to him, she knelt, and placed the pot on the floor between them as she had before. She looked for the old pot and found pieces of it against the far wall, shattered. She would have to clean that up before she left, so there would be no censure from Angelo.

"Hello," she said very quietly, wishing her voice to travel no further than Dante, but knowing that the guards would catch parts of it, the cell being too small for privacy.

"Are you better, today?"

He stared at her, unwavering silver eyes under tangled locks.

"It's so terribly cold in here. Do you need another blanket? Warmer clothing? I can bring either next I come." She gazed at him hopefully, searching for that spark of

recognition.

“I brought dinner. Pork and vegetables with sesame. I know you like that. You shouldn’t have broken the pot I brought before. They’ll get angry.”

She picked at her cuticles nervously, and talked. Just talked. She spoke of the summer before and the spring blossom festival that had taken place on the plains between Alsansir and Ludas and been attended by people from every province in the south. She talked about the wedding of Princess Rejala and Prince Leron, and the tragic events preceding it. She told of Gerad’s appointment of Lord Protector of the eastern mountains and of Kheron’s terrible lassitude.

“If she knew you were alive, she would be so very happy. So would Kastel. He hides it better, but he misses you too. He won’t come back here because - - because of things that were said during the wedding week. That’s what Gerad says, anyway. I wish he would. He cloisters himself away in the north and won’t let anyone close to him - - again gossip from Gerad. Gerad says even his commanders are wary of him, he’s grown so moody.”

She sighed, disheartened by the lack of response, glanced behind her to see how impatient the guards were becoming, to gauge how much longer they would let her stay.

“Father is starting to pester me about marriage. He wants grandchildren. He’s afraid he’ll die and leave me with no one to protect me. I keep telling him I can protect myself. I could join the Sword Maidens and none of them ever marry. Gods know I trained enough when I was younger.”

“Lady.” Her time was up. The guards had had enough of the cold and the boredom of watching over her. She sighed, pushed the dinner pot, which he had not touched closer to him and prepared to rise.

Something flickered in his eyes. One hand lifted, the other following by rote of the chain connecting them and reached towards her.

“Don’t.” It was strained, as if he were not familiar enough with words to utter it with confidence.

She froze, eyes wide, both hands on the floor in preparation of pushing herself up.

“Dante?” She whispered. Finally, emotion crossed his face. Confusion, frustration. He shut his eyes and pressed a hand to his face. As sometimes happened with Sera,

emotions and images and feelings of others came to her. She felt the confusion. The dawning of memories. He was remembering her as she had been at fifteen and himself as a wraith, bodiless, devoid of purpose other than his connection with her.

Tears formed in her eyes.

“Do you remember?” she whispered. “Please remember.”

“Sera?”

She cried out and hurled herself at him, startled him so badly that he slapped his head against the wall in shock, before he put his hands on her back, at first hesitantly, then with sudden fervent intensity.

The guards closed in, she felt their presence; felt his reaction to their approach in a stiffening of muscles.

“Please,” she cried. “Back off. I’m okay.” She lifted her head from his chest and looked back at them. “Please.”

They hesitated, but came no closer, laid no hands upon either of them. It was enough for the moment.

* * *

It came back in jumbled bits and pieces, the life before the death. Faces and places. Arguments and great battles. Lovers . . . oh there had been a great many of them. 200 hundred years of things; some clear as paintings in his mind, others so distorted as to be unreal.

Perhaps they had been. Perhaps he had not been a whole being during the majority of those 200 years. Perhaps Galgaga had been too much in his mind, its purposes his purposes. He recalled the God Annihilation very well. It flared in his memory like a stabbing finger of accusation.

He pushed that away with effort, trying to focus on other things. He recalled his name, which was in itself a great triumph, and recalled other names he had been called over the years. But, Dante was the one he called himself. The most informal. And she called him that.

From her lips anything would have sounded good. He remembered the smell of her

hair. It was the same. As was the feel of her small, slender body pressed against his. A thousand images of Sera flashed behind his eyes. The girl. The woman. Laughing, furious, determined, jealous -- devastated.

“Sera,” he said the name again, into her hair, as if to reaffirm it.

She sobbed against his neck, tears cool and miraculous. Tears for him.

“Lady Sera?” One of her guards moved forward, frowning, backed by two of his fellows. “Your time is up.”

She shuddered. Dante drew his brows, indignity that they dared to interrupt at so crucial and inexplicable a moment rising within him.

“Leave us, or a curse upon you all.” He hissed the warning and their eyes widened uncertainly. They knew him, it seemed, better than he knew himself. They backed away, clustering at the door, whispering among themselves. One of them ran down the hall outside, steps receding into faint echoes. It was enough.

“Where have you been? You were dead. We all thought you were dead.”

He barely heard that; a muttered plea against his chest. He thought it was not so good a place, where he had dwelled. A year. Ten years. A hundred years. Time had no meaning where he had been. Pain, and terror and all the sins man might ever conceive did. And he had been cast there, into hell -- not a victim and not a conqueror. The powers that be in that realm were ever so jealous of their dominion and ever so spiteful of those that would not bow down to worship it. They had quite hated him.

“It doesn’t matter. Not here.”

He ran his hands down the length of her hair, down the curve of her hip and back again, marveling at the feel of her. Half thinking this was some hellish delusion that would be ripped away from him. If it was, there were certain demons who would pay. There were spells of his that worked quite nicely in the pits of hell.

Spells. He lifted his wrist and looked at the band beneath the manacles. He vaguely recalled attempting a spell and the unexpected results. He knew the feel of a ward, but this was different. Oddly all encompassing and muffling in its range. Binding wards shackled magic from being summoned, but they did not generally hinder awareness of the patterns and the current of magic. He felt deaf and insulated. The world was usually bursting with the invisible scents and flux of magic, but now he felt nothing more than

the duller of mortal men. It was no small bit disconcerting, to find oneself back in the world of the living, cast in a dank little cell by sniveling churchmen - - and he was certain they were that by the righteous superiority in their eyes - - and without a shred of magic to set things right.

“Who put these abominations on me?” He asked.

Sera shifted her head to see what he spoke of. Her eyes widened in dismay. She tried to sit back but the chain connecting his wrists prevented her, so she pressed hands against his chest and leaned back to the limits of his circled arms.

“The Prophet. I didn’t know - - I couldn’t have stopped it, if I had. I’m sorry.”

“You know what they are?”

“Binding wards. Against magic.”

“Hummmph. I could burn any normal ward to a cinder with hardly an effort. These are decidedly not normal.”

“He said - - the Prophet said that they’re holy relics. That the power of the High God is imbued within them.”

“The High God my ass. Who in hell is this Prophet?”

“This is not the place for blasphemy,” she chided. “At least not so loud. We’ll both get in trouble.”

“Trouble? Trouble?” He lifted his hands over her head so he could jab a finger at her. “Whoever put me here is going to see more trouble than he could possibly imagine. I’m going to reduce this whole place to a pile of smoking stone. I’m going to turn this Prophet into ash.”

“And how are you going to do that? With those on?” She lifted a brow at him, pursing her lips smartly. “Are you finished raving?”

He glared at her. No one but Sera had ever habitually fussed and snapped at him without finding their heads separated from their bodies. “I do not rave.”

“You most certainly do. Do you want to hear what happened or not?”

He stared at her. She stared back unflinchingly. There were dried tear streaks on her cheeks. She looked entirely kissable and he hadn’t kissed a woman in what seemed a very long time.

“In a minute.” He snatched her by the tunic and pulled her against him. Forced a

serious and hungry kiss past her parted lips, until desperate for breath she pushed away. He smiled at her lazily, satisfied at the rosy blush on her cheeks and the flustered look in her eyes. He put his arms back around her back and pulled her against him. She settled to a more comfortable position between his legs and asked.

“Do you want to hear what happened?”

“I can think of better things to do?”

She rolled her eyes. “With the guards standing just outside the door?”

“It’s been a long time.”

“Behave.” She wiggled to dislodge his fingers from straying down her behind and between her legs. She had no idea what effect that had on certain parts of his anatomy, but then Sera had always been ignorant of her own desirability.

“Teo is king now,” she started.

“So the old man finally died and his pompous son took his place. Bound to happen sooner or later.”

“And he strongly supports the Prophet.”

“He always was a prude.”

“The Prophet is the man whose power you’re in.”

He didn’t say anything to that, so she continued. “Four nights ago I went to your - - grave. It was the third anniversary of - - your death. There was this terrible storm. It looked as if lightning had stuck your gravestone and you were gone. Do you know what happened? Did you make it happen?”

He shook his head, totally blank on the whys and wherefores of that phenomenon. He had no memory of attempting to break back into this world, at least not recently. In fact memory of everything he had been doing of late was gone.

“I don’t know all the facts, but - - but they say you were mad. That you killed a man in the streets and that when the temple guard tried to bring you in, you used an Hellfire spell. Many people died.”

“They put hands on me,” he said slowly, dredging up twisted, narrow memory. “I don’t recall the spell - - but if they dared to touch me, then they deserved it.”

“Dante,” she cried. “That’s not true. Some of those men weren’t even guards. Some of them had nothing to do with it. The whole city is up in arms.”

“And what might you suggest I do about this cry for justice?”

“I don’t know. You weren’t yourself - - I keep telling them that. Maybe if you apologized and let them know you’re back in control.”

“Apologize? I’m sorry, have you mistaken me for someone else?”

“Ooohhh, don’t you have a shred of sense? You are in trouble here and unless you can get past those wards on your wrists, you’re not in a position of power. Sometime a little humbleness goes a long way.”

“For you maybe. I don’t do humble.”

“You do asinine quite well,” she snapped.

He grinned down at her, loving the angry spark in her eyes. “You are so beautiful, Sera.”

The anger faded. Her lips trembled, an invitation he could not resist. She kissed him back this time, wrapping her arms about his neck. She tasted of honey and spices, and the soft flicker of her little tongue was ecstasy. Her moan of pleasure the music of enchantment that had not a thing to do with magic.

“Sera!!”

God. That voice. That damned stern, righteously shocked voice that had her jerking backwards so sharply against the chains that she bruised his wrists. Rab-Ker filled the doorway, his broad face filled with a few more lines, the brown in his hair fighting a losing battle against invading gray.

“Father.” Sera scrambled to extricate herself from Dante’s arms. Dante glared sullenly at the Priest.

“You have lousy timing, old man,” he muttered and got an offended stare from Rab-Ker.

“Sera, what were you doing?” The father demanded.

“I wasn’t doing anything.” The daughter cried guiltily.

“She was doing quite well before you got here.” The defiler of innocent young woman assured them both. Sera cast him a glare.

Then the guards behind Rab-Ker moved to let another man into the cell and all Dante’s lazy insolence evaporated into tense, deadly concentration. He recognized the man who had come to his cell earlier this very day. The intense eyed priest who had

stared at him silently, and left him without a word. That man set his hackles up and triggered alarms that very few men or monsters triggered.

Sera's Prophet. It could be no one else. The Prophet stepped just past Rab-Ker and the Great Priest half way inclined his head, as if in respect. Oh, that was a telling stroke. That the high priest of Alsansir bowed to this new religious zealot, told a great deal about the way things were now. Three years, Sera had said. Quite a lot of change for a mere three years.

"So the madman has regained his senses." The Prophet said, the traces of a smile touching his lips. Dante hated him immediately. "Dear Sera, you were so correct in assuming your presence would bring him about. Well done, my child."

Sera trembled, bowing her head as if ashamed, which ignited Dante's ire.

"She's not your child."

The Prophet arched a brow at him. Rab-Ker lowered his. "Sera, come here."

"But, father . . ."

"Girl, you agreed to certain things and you ignore them, first chance you get."

"What things?" Dante demanded. "What sin has she committed? Could be anything with your lot of pious asses."

"She was not to come into contact with you." The Prophet supplied. "For her own safety."

"Oh, its not her safety that's in question, priest." Dante tilted his head, a feral smile crossing his lips.

"With you, all godly men are in danger. Your presence in this world has always been an anathema to the holy."

"Get over yourself."

"Your rise from the dead only proves how the dark powers of hell favor you."

Dante laughed in genuine amusement. "If you only knew how untrue that statement is. Enough of this drivel. I'm tired of this cell and I want these wards *OFF*."

"The desires of the unholy mean nothing to honest men."

He almost rose in fury at that, but Sera turned on him and kept him back with a touch of her fingers on his arms and a pleading, frightened look in her eyes. She mouthed the word *PLEASE*. With a frustrated growl he subsided, fists clenched, wishing to call a

spell to strike the lot of those smug faced priests and priestly minions down in their tracks. A tingle of pain went up his arms and he winced, blocking the desire for magic, having no wish to be emasculated before these holy assess.

“Sera.” Rab-Ker said sternly. She looked to Dante a moment more, a promise that she would not desert him in her eyes, then rose and marched over to her father. The Prophet smiled down at her and there was in his eyes a proprietary glint. Dante narrowed his own eyes.

“Perhaps you should take lady Sera home, High Priest.” The Prophet suggested. “We shall all talk of this later.”

Rab-Ker nodded his agreement and herded Sera through the guards out of the door. She looked back once before she was swallowed by the shadow outside. Which left Dante alone with the Prophet and his guard. The big, green eyed one who had been with him before leaned against the doorframe.

Dante rose to his feet, not wanting to kneel in this man’s presence. “Do you have any notion of the pain and agony you’re inviting by keeping me here?”

“Pain and agony are the torments of the wretched sinners. The pious man endures suffering knowing that it will end with the glory of heaven.”

“Oh, God.”

The Prophet stepped forward, quick as a cat and backhanded Dante. If he had not been so surprised by the act, he might have avoided it. “Do not utter the name of our lord, you foul spawn of hell.”

Dante lifted his hands, gingerly touching his face. “My suggestion to you,” he said slowly, carefully controlling the tremble of anger in his voice. “Is that you just kill me now. Otherwise, you are going to beg to the devil for mercy because your *GOD* will be in no position to grant it to you.”

The guards shifted, willing to move forward and silence the blasphemy, but the Prophet lifted a hand. He leaned in towards Dante fearlessly. “And what would you know of god, you motherless abomination?”

There was something in the eyes, something in the inflection of the voice that made Dante start and blink in sudden recognition. But it faded as quickly as it had come and he stared at the Prophet warily, wondering if there were more to this man than some dusty

religious Zion.

The Prophet smiled and pressed his hands together as if in prayer. “But, the High God is benevolent and wishes to forgive when forgiveness is truly desired. Think on your sins, my son and perhaps one day you might find absolution.”

Dante sniffed and lifted his hands. “Whatever. Do the chains have to stay. As you say, I’m not quite mad anymore. Isn’t the cell enough?”

“Oh, quite. Sinakha, please remove the manacles. I trust there will be no further outbursts of violence.”

Dante shrugged, then as the Prophet turned to leave him, he whispered. “By the way, she’s mine. So whatever little plans you had in mind, you can forget.”

The Prophet paused a step, not looking back, then he continued towards the door.

Eight

“Is it true?”

Sera had barely escaped from her room and the stern lecture her father had delivered, when the cloaked, furtive figure of Princess Rejalla apprehended her on the garden walk outside the cathedral dormitory. The Princess stood half behind a trellis of roses gone stalky and bloomless in the beginnings of winter. A fur lined, green cloak half hid the contours of her face. Tendrils of long, black hair escaped the cowl and the eyes in the shadow were huge and desperate. Sera stopped four feet from the sister of her king, the muscles in her jaw working spasmodically. Too many days of tension had her nerves and her tolerance at a breaking point.

What she saw in Rejalla’s eyes, what she had always seen in Rejalla’s eyes when it concerned Dante set her teeth on edge. She could not forget that this woman had known him in a way that she -- despite all his declarations of love for her -- never had. This woman who had always had everything had pursued Dante when she had known Sera loved him. It had never been malicious and he had certainly been an instigator -- as he instigated quite a few liaisons with women who caught his eye, but with Rejalla who had

once been Sera's childhood friend, it grated more. She would never wish the Princess harm - - it was not in her nature to let jealousy turn her spiteful, but she would also never be friends with Rejalla again. Not with *him* between them.

Sera pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, taking a breath to collect her poise.

"Yes." She said simply.

A soft release of breath and the princess lowered her lashes, murmuring a silent prayer. "I heard so many rumors. So many terrible tales. I was afraid to ask - -"

"Yes, I imagine your husband would be irked if you showed too much interest in a former - - lover." Sera hated herself for saying it as soon as the words left her lips. Goddess, this whole situation had made her snappish and short.

Rejalla stared at her, large dark eyes brimming with liquid. Goddess, don't let her start crying. Sera was most certainly not up to comforting her.

"Yes." Rejalla whispered. "You're right. He's a good man, but protective of me. I -- don't wish him to be hurt."

Sera nodded, swallowing. "I'm sorry. I'm tired. Sleep hasn't come easily of late."

"How -- how is he? They say he's mad."

"He was. He's better now. Still mad, but more of the angry sort."

"How did it happen? How did he come back? We were assured there were no spells of resurrection or rebirth cast."

"I don't know, Princess. He doesn't remember. It doesn't matter."

"No."

Rejalla looked down, as if she didn't know what else to say. Sera chewed at a nail, having the sudden thought that though Rejalla might not be her crony, she might very well be an ally of Dante's. An ally with the ear of the king.

"The Prophet keeps saying that he was sent from hell to destroy us. I'm afraid he's going to persuade the king to do something horrible to him."

"All those men that died -- I've heard."

"It wasn't his fault. He reacted blindly to them attacking him. He wasn't in his right mind. Do you think Teo might listen to you, if we tried to convince him of it?"

The princess twisted the edge of her cloak nervously, looking across the garden square to the lights of the cathedral. Her silence made Sera desperate.

“I know you don’t want your husband to think you’re interested in another man, but
- -”

“I’ll do it. I’ll talk to Teo. Tomorrow, I’ll take lunch with him. Come as my guest. We’ll make him understand.”

Sera let out a sigh of relief, closed the distance that separated them and took the princess’s cold hands in hers. There were some things that even rivals could agree on.

“Thank you.”

* * *

She dressed formally for the luncheon in a skirt and over tunic, an ornate belt cinched about her waist. She met the princess outside the royal wing and the two of them descended together, on the east garden solarium, where the King liked to take his mid-day meals.

Teo looked up from the table and the pile of parchment he was leafing through, saw Sera in his sister’s company and lifted one dark brow.

“Well, strange bed fellows. Let me guess what brought the two of you together.”

Rejalla blushed. Sera was past embarrassment and merely curtsied as any proper subject of the king would in his presence. Be humble, she told herself. Humble will get you further than brazen and demanding.

“I don’t suppose lunch will be a peaceful affair, then.” The king predicted, waving them over.

“I see no reason why it shouldn’t.” Rejalla said, settling into a gracefully curved rod iron chair. Sera followed suit, folding her hands demurely in her lap. Teo waved at a servant who went off after their lunch.

“How has your morning been so far?” Rejalla asked sweetly.

“Terrible. There are bandits along the west coast that are harassing merchant ships and its damn slow work rebuilding war ships to fend them off. I believe the demolition of the seaboard kingdom’s navy can be directly attributed to Lord Kastel when he was rummaging about the south a few years past.”

“He was under the influence of Galgaga,” Sera murmured in defense. “It was not his

fault.”

“Ah, yes. And you would be a great defender of those not responsible for their actions this week, wouldn’t you lady Sera?”

“Oh, Teo, be nice,” Rejalla reprimanded. “Just because you’re in a bad mood this morning, don’t take it out on Sera.”

He lifted a brow at his sister. “Oh my and here I had heard rumors that the two of you were at odds since Dante Epherian’s first reawakening. What is one to think when you join forces?” he leaned forward conspiratorially. “Don’t be too obvious, Rejalla, or your husband -- dull as he is, will become suspicious.”

“Teo!” The Princess glared at him.

The servants entrance with a cart loaded with food hindered any further castigation Rejalla might have delivered. There were sautéed shrimp over a bed of greens drenched in a citrus vinaigrette, thin slices of pork with a sweet gravy, seasoned rice with bits of vegetable and a mushroom mix rolled and fried in a thin, salty pastry. Light and elegant fare and Sera had no taste for it.

There was about Teo a certain hostility that had nothing to do with the state of the southern alliance, and more to do with his assumption of what case they were here to plead. Certainly one expected no love between the king and Dante, the two of them being enemies of a deadly sort. On the occasion of their last traumatic encounter, legions had been lost and a city state demolished. That had been before reluctant alliances were made to battle an evil that threatened the very world.

“All we want,” Rejalla said, when they had all pushed plates away and the servants sedately cleared the table. “Is a little bit of fairness.”

“Fairness? And what, prey tell, would you have me do for *him*, that I would do differently for any other man responsible for the deaths of -- I believe the tally is up to fifteen good men? This week, at any rate.”

“But no one speaks for him.” Rejalla said.

“On the contrary, he has the two of you.”

“Neither of who is a litigator and besides which, it seems that it is the church who is the accuser and the church who wishes to hand out the punishment. Since when are murders tried by the church?”

“Since the murderers are spawns of hell, your highness.”

The Prophet strolled down the solarium walk, hands hidden in the folds of his sleeves, a serene smile on his face.

“You have no proof of that,” Rejalla cried.

“He’s back from hell. Is that not proof enough, Princess?”

“He’s a great wizard. The things he does can not be judged by the standards of common men.”

“Ah, and of what is he a great wizard of? Holy magic. The white power granted us by the benevolent gods we worship? No. He is and has always been a child of the dark hegemony. You say he cannot be judged by the standards of common men. You are right, my child. He can only be judged by the holy standards that he and his kind abhor.”

“He was wild when he first came back,” Sera said quietly. “You know that. You saw that. We all did.” She cast a look to Teo for confirmation. “So you can not deny that what he did might have been done with no more thought than an animal gives to defending itself. If he killed those men, it was not intentional.”

“Even unintentional murder demands penance,” Teo reminded her. Angelo smiled and took the remaining chair that the king offered.

“The people demand justice be done,” Angelo said. “They pray for it daily. I pray hourly for some solution to this dilemma, my dear.” He reached out and patted Sera’s hand.

“I strive to seek some manner in which forgiveness might be offered. Some sign that he has a soul that might be salvaged.”

“He has a soul,” Sera whispered.

“Ah, you speak of the part of him that you grew up with. The portion of his being that survived the cleaving of spirit and self delivered by King Teo’s own honored father. How do you know that part of him survived hell, my child? That evil place is anathema to good.”

“You don’t know that it didn’t.”

“Only Dante can answer than question.”

Sera blinked and looked up at him, grasping for a slim chance. “And if he did. If he did prove that he’s not evil. What then?”

“Forgiveness for his magnitude of sins could only be achieved by complete denouncement of his hedonistic ways. Of a declaration of faith in our god and an unanimous agreement by an ecclesiastic tribunal that it was uttered in good confidence.”

“You’re not serious?” Teo stared incredulously.

Angelo smiled. “Oh, but if what the lady Sera says is correct, that he meant no real harm with his actions, that he does indeed have a moral soul hidden within him -- then it would be remiss of the church not to give him the chance to amend his ways. It would be remiss of me, as Prophet of the High God, not to personally attempt to salvage a soul. But it must start with him.”

He turned his eyes to Sera, who was staring at him wide eyed, speechless. His hand squeezed hers.

“Do you understand, my dear? He has to will forgiveness. He has to declare his willingness to change his ways and submit himself to the mercy of the High God. It’s the only way mercy might be granted.”

* * *

Dante couldn’t stop laughing at her. She stood, with the uncomfortable presence of her father behind her and the Basilica guards outside the door and blushed furiously while he sat against the wall and laughed until tears leaked out of his eyes.

“It’s not that funny,” she complained, glancing back to make certain her father had an adequately supportive look of seriousness on his face.

“It’s hilarious,” Dante contradicted her, wiping at the corner of his eyes with a knuckle. “I haven’t heard anything so amusing in -- in I don’t know how long. Ages. Decades at the very least. They want me to bow before their ridiculous god and pledge my troth? They want me to plead for forgiveness from the likes of that ass Teo and his pet Prophet. I’d as soon beg it of you, High Priest, and we all know how likely that is.”

“Then you will likely revisit hell sooner than you think.” Rab-Ker said. “For between the Prophet’s declaration that you are a minion of hell out to destroy all good men and the outcry for justice over the murdered men - - I’ve the feeling they’ll see you burn.”

“Oh, will the witchfires grace Alsansir again? I thought that persecution had ended fifty or more years ago.”

“You are so stubborn,” Sera cried, stomping her foot in agitation. “This is serious. The teachings of the Prophet have the people scared silly of any magic not ordained by the church. Mother’s frighten their children into obedience with tales of dark magic. Stories about you.”

“Oh, they’ve done that for years.”

“Well, it goes further now. They’ve chased the hedge witches out of town. The shops that used to sell charms and wards have been banned by public outcry. People are so wary of magic now, that the whole town is terrified of the rumors that you’ve come back.”

“As well they should be, considering my warm welcome.” He glowered at her, at her father behind her. “Believe me when I say if it weren’t for these damned bracelets - - there *would* be hell to pay.”

“Then perhaps the Prophet is right,” Rab-Ker said. “Perhaps we are all safer with you gone.”

“Most assuredly, he is.”

“Dante!” Sera dropped to her knees before him. “They want to burn you or drown you or whatever they do to witches and hell beasts. You can’t stop them. He’s taken your power. Can’t you get that through your thick skull?”

“I understand that they want me humbled. They want *ME* to beg forgiveness for something I don’t even recall doing. I don’t beg, Sera. You should remember that.”

“Ooohhh. I remember how stubborn and asinine you are.”

“What are a few moments of retribution when your life is at stake?” Rab-Ker asked.

“I’d rather die.”

“Then you probably shall. Sera, we’ve done what we can. Let us go.”

“No! Damnit, no. You will listen to reason if I have to cram it down your throat.” She leaned forward and screeched at him, slamming the heel of her hand into his chest to accent each word. “I don’t care if you would rather die. I won’t have it. Do you understand? I can’t go through that again.”

Dante caught her wrists to stop the pummeling and held them between them. “It is not as easy as you make it out to be, Sera.”

“What? You’re saying the great Dante Epherian is incapable of doing something? That it’s beyond you?”

He looked past her to Rab-Ker. “You’d just as well that I did die, wouldn’t you, old man?”

“If I did, I would not be here with my daughter. I do not believe what you sacrificed for us should be repaid in this manner.”

“You don’t have to mean it.” Sera said desperately. “What’s a little lie and little contriteness if it will get you out of here?”

“They won’t believe it.” He let her wrists go, reached out to catch a lock of her hair and rub it between his fingers. “Would you believe it, old man, if I came to you and professed a sudden love for your hypocritical religion? If I told you how sorry I was for -- say, wiping out your army at Denar? Why should this Prophet be any different? Why would Teo, who even if he is an ass, is at least a smart one, buy a word of it?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.” Rab-Ker agreed. “But, then I’m not the Prophet. I don’t have the ear of the High God . . . “

“As if he does.”

“ . . . And most importantly, I don’t have wards on your person preventing you from using your vaunted powers. Whether you like it or not, you are at a disadvantage here. A very great disadvantage, and I might suggest you learn to deal with the situation from that perspective. He will believe you, because he has the power to force the issue. And for once, you my friend, do not.”

Dante’s sullen glare was not so much for Rab-Ker as for the bitter truth of the words he spoke. Oh, it galled him, Sera knew very well it galled him to the core not to be able to magic his way out of this cell and the power of the Prophet. He leaned his head against the wall, mouth a tight, angry line. There were faint bruises on his face. A scratch running down one finely crafted cheek. The scrapes he had made on his own wrists were crusted with dried blood. He could have healed it all with a whisper had he access to his power. In frustration he slammed his skull against the wall. Once, twice and Sera reached out to touch his face, leaning in to press her cheek against his.

“What’s one little lie? If you fool them, then you’ll still be the winner. Please, Dante.”

He shuddered, she could feel it under her fingertips. So much pride. So much power tangled up within, straining for release and finding no way out. Every one believed the worst of him, himself included, but she knew, that given the chance, given a shred of belief *in* him, he would do the right thing.

Against her hair, she heard his low agreement. “All right. For you, I’ll do it.”

Nine

He did not expect it to happen so soon. He expected, as with most things bureaucratic or ceremonial, that it would take days, if not longer for them to arrange it. He had expected to have a little time to prepare himself emotionally for the trauma of pretending to be humbled. It was not a thing familiar to him. He could not quite ever recall a time when he had ever bowed down to any man, god or demon. It was not in his nature to be that flexible.

Men bowed to him. They begged him for forgiveness. He was frankly amazed that he had let Sera talk him into it, but she had powers of persuasion over him that no one else did. That part of his soul that had twined with hers at rebirth, that had ridden shackled to her through the years of her young life would forever be vulnerable to her. No terrible thing, he had found. No weakness to detest, but one that he found he rather cherished. As he did the girl.

So he found himself agreeing to act the penitent and bow to men that he truly held a distaste for. He found himself not quite in the right frame of mind for meek behavior when the door to his cell slammed open and guards filed in. He expected to see Sera in their midst, bringing his supper, but the only one who stepped forward was the guard captain with the odd green eyes.

“On your feet.” Was the rude request. The man stood over him with the obvious and quite deluded assumption that his size and his impressive armament were intimidating. Dante looked up at him lazily, his arms folded across his bent knees. “Why? Shall we dance?”

The thin lips tightened. The men behind him waited, ready to lay hands on him should their captain so will it.

“You are summoned by the Prophet and the King.”

“The Prophet *and* the King? Well, I should be impressed, shouldn’t I? Hummm, maybe it will come to me later.”

“Get up.” The captain made a grab for him.

Dante bared his teeth and hissed. “You’ve laid hands on me once. How many times do you want to die, monkey-man?”

He pushed to his feet on his own, one graceful movement that had him staring eye to eye with the guard captain -- was his name Sinakha? He had to remember that for future missions of vengeance. The man stood just an inch or so taller than he did, but he still managed to stare down his nose at him.

“So what now?”

Sinakha’s lips twitched, as if some hint of a smile were trying to burst past the perpetual frown. It was just enough of a warning saying that this was not a man who brooked insolence or disobedience. That this was a man who took great gratification in instilling discipline when the chance occurred to him.

He was also damned quick for a big, brawny man. Gerad would have been hard pressed to match that speed. Dante who had always been more inclined to rely on his vast magical prowess, although he was an excellent swordsman, just saw the fist coming, and could not quite connect the awareness and the reflex of stepping out of the way fast enough.

Sinakha struck him on the side of the temple. A glancing blow that did little more than spin his head about and momentarily cause bright lights to dance behind his eyes. Sinakha did not give him time to recover. Sinakha was good at what he did. A hand caught Dante’s shoulder, spun him around and slammed him against the wall. While he was gathering breath to curse, the man clamped a manacle about one wrist, captured the other and fastened his hands behind his back. A very talented man. An expert at dealing with unwilling people.

Dante did not bother to reiterate on the promise of a long and painful death. He glared from under his lashes, concentrating on calming his furious breath. Sinakha

caught him under the arm and started him walking. Past the eyes of the guards, some of whom looked properly wary, others who smirked at the manhandling. Through the door and into a dark hallway that he had no memory of transgressing the first time. Up a narrow stair, where he stubbed his toe, a reminder that he had no shoes, which was a damned embarrassing way to meet his enemies. Shoeless and in the plain, homespun garb Sera had brought him; dirty, with his hair a tangled, pale mess across his shoulders. Street venders dressed better. It was an affront to him, who had a taste for fashion.

Up a second level, a place for storage by the looks of it, and out a door into a hall where windows looked down from above. Nighttime shown through the panes. Torches guttered along the walls. He heard the muffled murmuring of a crowd through stone walls. More guards joined them, and Sinakha thrust him into the keeping of others while he went to confer with the newcomers. The guard captain's frown deepened. He motioned for several of his men to go ahead, then came back and took charge of Dante again.

"Problem?" Dante asked maliciously, hoping something terrible plagued the temple.

"You." Was the curt answer. Sinakha began walking again. A brisk stride that had them at the doors at the end of the hall in short order. They were opened for them and beyond were the tall ceiling and cavern like space of the main shrine. The sound of voices suddenly amplified with the open doors. A sea of angry faces turned towards them. The guards pushed forward, moving the closest folk out of the way. Cries went up, spreading throughout the temple. Cries of *Murderer* and *Demon Spawn* and *Epherian*, as if that name were a curse in and of itself.

Sinakha's fingers tightened on his arm, he yelled for his men to make a path for them, but people pressed against the guards, screaming for his death. Calling for the witchfires. Peasants, rabble, the poorest of the poor among the plain-garbed folk that made up Alsansir's middle class.

They all clustered together in their common cause. His destruction. He was somewhat shocked by the fervor and the boldness of the crowd. He was feared and hated, he knew that, it could hardly be avoided after his years of conquest while he served the purposes of Galgaga, but the common folk had never dared to scream their hatred to

his face. Had never ventured to attack him physically. What, by all the demons of hell that they accused him of serving, was the Prophet preaching to them?

A woman pressed against the living barrier of guards, red faced from crying, waving a black scarf at him furiously. "Murderer. You killed my husband."

He stared at her blankly, as Sinakha hauled him through the press, thinking that he very well could have. Out the great central doors of the temple and there was a crowd barely restrained from becoming a mob on the street. There were priests on the steps, calling for people to be calm. To let them pass and those priestly forms were the only thing that kept violence from erupting. It certainly was not the guards who barely held the line towards the heavy coach that sat at the bottom of the steps.

Into it and he was sandwiched between Sinakha and another guard, two more taking the opposite seat. The door slammed shut, cutting out the torch lit faces, but only barely managing to dim the shouts and accusations. It rocked into motion, slowly forcing its way through the crowd. The high-pitched scream of a horse from outside and the progress faltered. The coach swayed, as the crowd pressed against it from all sides.

The Prophet and the king did not scare him. Hell had not particularly frightened him. The god of Destruction, Galgaga had not been a thing to quite inspire fear, but he found himself unnerved by this crowd of common folk, who against all their good sense, were attacking a wizard that, had he possessed his powers could have destroyed them all and their city along with them.

But he didn't have the magic. And for the first time it occurred to him that being torn apart by an angry mob was not the heroic demise he might have hoped for on his third time down. And what -- terrible thought that it was -- if he did die and went to hell again and somehow those damned wards on his wrists went with him? Being at the mercy of the things that lurked in the depths of hell was not a pretty notion. He shut his eyes and wished for the coachman to get his equine charges under hand and get the coach out of this hate filled square.

With great difficulty it did, rattling over cobblestones and picking up speed once it had cleared the mob outside the temple. The guards breathed sighs of relief, but did not speak among themselves in Dante's presence. His sense of direction was sorely skewered. He had nothing more than vague memories of his initial flight through the

town, and no earthly notion of what building he had been imprisoned within. It was a great church, he had seen that on his harrowing trip through the shrine, but he was aware on no great church save the Cathedral within Alsansir and yet it took no long coach trip to reach the palace, if that was indeed where he was headed. He had no intention of inquiring of his guards. But, soon enough the coach slowed and was hailed from without, and then passed over what sounded like a wooden bridge. One of the bridges that led to Alsansir castle. The door was opened and Sinakha nudged him to get out.

The weathered facade of Alsansir castle faced him. The courtyard was orderly and free of the mulling folk that had littered the temple steps. Only royal guards at their posts, who looked on the temple guards with the fine air of superiority of men upon whose territory other men tread. Lion guard met with Basilica and captain's exchanged words. Sinakha would not give up custody of his prisoner, so the Lion's joined with the temple security and together marched him into the palace proper.

They stared at him, the Lions. He might have recognized a face or two had he not been dwelling so intently on the indignities he had been subjected to on the one hand and on the other seriously doubting his ability to act the humble supplicant. He could not for the life of him imagine what good it would do him. No matter how much faith Sera had in the benevolence of her religion, he had little doubt that this was no more than some devious ploy on the part of the church. Or more likely this Prophet, who's very presence made him wary. What was it about the man --?

Down halls he vaguely recalled, past clustered servants and a stray courtier or two. The great doors of the throne room stood closed, but watched over by two guards in full dress regalia. They opened them on cue as the procession approached.

There were people in the great chamber beyond. A great many people lining the walls, peering around each other in efforts to see the entrance. Nobles and priests -- god, there were an over abundance of priests -- ladies in all their finery. Military men in their finest uniforms, sparkling with medals and honors. All turned out to see him. Wryly he thought he ought to feel flattered.

He lifted his head, shook his hair back from his face and paced down the carpeted aisle leading straight to the throne, before Sinakha could lay hands on him and force the issue. They whispered about him. In awe, in fear, in reminiscence, in speculation. Once

again, Dante Epherian was the center of their dull little worlds.

He reveled in the attention. A lazy smile touched his lips, a predatory gleam burned in his storm silver eyes. He ignored all the petty faces of the people lining the way to the dais. They were nothing. Except for Sera, who stood not too far from the dais, before her father. She he noted from the corner of his eye. Saw in that haphazard glimpse, frightened eyes and pale skin.

But he hardly had the time to focus on her, not with Teo sitting on the high backed, stone throne and the Prophet standing one step down to his side. Teo he had a problem with. Teo, he would always have a problem with, the pretentious ass having been a thorn in his side after his return to physical flesh the last time around.

Dante had a tremendous problem with being tested, which came from not having it happen very often. Teo's power for a mortal man, not born a wizard had been no small thing. The loyalty he inspired by the men fighting under him a greater asset. He'd fallen early though, after the rising of Galgaga, his power no match for that writhing malevolence, and Dante Epherian had stepped in and saved his sorry carcass from that final death. That at least Dante had over the pompous ass.

He stopped ten feet away from the dais, proper court etiquette. Sinakha stopped a few steps behind him, and the other guards melted to the sidelines. A thin, imperious smile touched his lips as he met his old enemy's eyes. Teo wasn't smiling. Teo looked rather disgusted, but he sat his father's throne with his back straight and his face composed. Off to one side, his heir and sister, Rejalla stood beside a mousy haired man, who wore the circlet of some petty kingdom about his brow. Leisurely, while they all waited for someone to break the tension, he let his eyes rake over her familiarly, just to annoy Teo and the man next to her, whoever he was. She blushed.

Teo finally lifted a hand for silence and the flutters of whispering ceased with an expectant intake of breath. Dante lifted a brow.

"There are charges brought against you, Dante Epherian." Teo never had been one for beating around the bush, which considering how annoying the blooded nobility was, had always been a trait Dante had found appealing in him. One of the few. "Charges of murder and collusion with the dark forces of hell. Fifteen men of Alsansir lie dead from actions of yours. The Holy Prophet of the High God, Angelo, claims that you are an

agent of Satan and should be treated as such. What say you?"

Oh, that was to the point and completely righteous and full of the justice Teo always had thought he ought to be the one and only to deliver. Dante had to take a moment to force the bile of swallowed pride down his throat before he could speak. From the side of his vision he could see Sera mouthing the words she wished him to speak.

"Fifteen?" he asked, his voice echoing in the complete silence of the hall. "I seem to recall one -- who attacked me in the storm. He deserved it. The other's I don't quite remember --- but, of course I regret any innocent life that was taken from action of mine." Which was a totally crock of absurdity, considering the multitudes of deaths he had been responsible for and remembered quite clearly, that the lot of them did not seem to be upset over.

"But," he added, before Teo could respond to that vaguely patronizing rendition of an apology. "Shouldn't any atonement be made to the poor widowed wives of the dead, instead to a hall full of nobles who could care less if a town full of peasants lived or died - - unless it meant profit to them?"

An agitated whisper swept the room. He heard Sera moan from the side. Teo drew his brows in displeasure and the Prophet - - if he was not mistaken, the Prophet almost smiled before he wiped the expression from his face and dutifully frowned

"This is not a court - - yet, to decide your innocence or guilt, or what price you might pay for the crime."

"Guilt? Isn't that a rather broad term, considering?" Dante flared back, interrupting the King to the dismay of his court. He felt Sinakha's presence close in on his back, and stiffened, waiting for that man to lay hands on him, which here, under all these eyes would be intolerable.

"Of the guilt we have no doubt." The Prophet's smooth, orator's voice broke into the friction flaring between Teo and Dante. His face was the picture of calm serenity. His smile took in all the court, drawing their trust like sand soaks water. God, there was something about the man.

"What is in doubt is your right to stand among us as a mortal, human man. If indeed you are a spawn of hell, then any lawful standards a true man might be entitled to -- are bereft you."

The court listened to the Prophet as if the man had them hypnotized. Behind him, Teo focused on his every word. The priests in the crowd looked positively orgasmic. The Prophet moved down the steps of the dais, his staff of office clicking on the stone. Dante stared as rapt as the rest, only his fascination came from some inner rasp of recognition. The face and the body were unfamiliar, but there was something else - - something in the words he spoke, in the look in his eyes - - that itched and scratched at Dante's memory. And no recent memory. No clear one at all. Something long, long ago that just needed the right hint to come back to him.

"We hope and we pray that it is not so," The Prophet lamented. "If you have a soul, then We will strive for its salvation. If you do not -- then you will be sent back to the hell you came from."

"And how would you know?" Dante asked softly. The Prophet came closer. Sinakha laid hands on his shoulders, as if afraid he might go for the man, chained as he was. He might have, if he had not been so enticed by the fluttering hint of recognition.

"No spawn of hell could willingly pledge itself to the High God. A spawn of hell would burn if it kissed the holy ring of the God."

Another step closer. He extended his hand, upon which was a gold signet ring with the symbol of the High God carved into a blue stone.

"Kneel," Sinakha hissed in his ear, a moment before he deftly kicked at the back of Dante's knees, collapsing his legs. He went down with a snarl, the guard captain's fingers hovering over his shoulders to keep him down should he start upwards. In his memory, Dante had never knelt before another man in supplication. No matter Sera's pleas that this was the only path to eventual freedom, he could not tolerate it. He clenched his fists so hard his nails bore into the flesh of his palms. His vision tunneled dangerously and he felt a tingle of pain from the wards about his wrists as the magic reflexively stirred to his very great desire.

The hand with the ring was before his face. The Prophet looked down upon him, his eyes glinting with an inner light that suggested -- excitement. Thrill at the adoration of the crowd, of the submission of a man who he knew very well was being forced into the act. And he used his god as leverage for all of it. He used his god for an excuse to lord over the faithful and crush the unfaithful. At the word of his god he might destroy the

world. It was a familiar tune. Dante had played it himself in the past, when Galgaga had held control over some part of him. Then it occurred to him that before the destruction of the old world, he had known a man like the Prophet. He had seen that look and that fervent wish to be god's prophet on earth on a man of religion. On a man that had welcomed Galgaga and the entities that had summoned it, because he wished to remake the world in the name of god. A twisted man that had used religion as his justification for terrible things.

"I know you," Dante whispered.

"Declare your acceptance to the High God's will."

"I know you! You fucking sick bastard. I know you!"

Sinakha grabbed his shoulder, his hair when he tried to surge to his feet, yanked his head back and put a knee in his back. The court was murmuring in agitation. Sera was crying for him to stop.

"Do you refuse to accept the salvation the high god offers? Or can you not because you are truly a creature of hell."

"You would know, you hypocrite. You've no more traffic with the gods, than the pig you ate for dinner. I guarantee there's a place waiting for you in hell and you can converse with your *god* there, for you surly have no contact with it on this plane."

Priests cried out in horror at the blasphemy. Sinakha hit him hard, with a fist or an elbow on the back of the head and drew back to do it again, but the Prophet lifted his ring hand to stop it. Dante hissed and swung about, slammed a shoulder into Sinakha, taking the captain's moment of unbalance to gain his feet. He got no further than that before Sinakha and others of his guard were one him, grasping his arms, his hair -- to hold him immobile.

The Prophet leaned close, reaching out and lifting a stray strand of silver hair, rubbing it between thumb and forefinger, smiling slightly into Dante's fury.

"Do you? Know me? Or do you merely think you do, heathen creature. Your time in hell has not served you well if you stand shackled before the church today. Your demon master will not have one more servant to wreck havoc upon the world of good men."

"No man or demon is my master. Who are you?" He ground out the words, hating

the man's hands on him, not able to shake it because of the guards holding him fast.

"I am the prophet of the high god. And he tells me that it is my duty to try and save your black soul by breaking the vessel that holds such evil. You will be cleansed and saved."

Dante laughed. "You can't save me. The gods don't listen to you anymore."

"Oh, but I can." The Prophet touched his cheek, a grazing of knuckles against flesh that made him flinch. Then, the fingers moved to his forehead and rested there. The Prophet's eyes rolled up in their sockets and he threw back his head, crying out for divine support in his crusade. It was almost laughable, until a lance of white pain shot through Dante's head. Pain that quickly turned to numb disorientation. His strength fled. Awareness dulled to a tiny pinprick of light and fuzzy vision. His legs gave out and he collapsed back into the arms of his guards.

Vaguely he saw the Prophet standing over him, arms thrown out as if in supplication to the heavens. A miraculous thing happened. Through the dark, heavy stone of the throne room ceiling, a ray of white light shone down, haloing the Prophet in its pure glow. The crowd cried out in awe, people fell to their knees in reverence. And Angelo, the Holy Prophet of the High God, stood with a secret smile on his lips and satisfaction in his eyes.

* * *

Images drifted through his mind, unbidden and unwelcome of the time before. As with most of his memories of that time, they were blurred and disoriented, more like the imaginings of a fever dream than the recollections of a sane mind. He recalled the world when it had been different. When the cities that now lay as nothing more than eerie ruins in the badlands had been shiny and new.

A world that had thrived before it brought destruction upon itself in the quest of its most powerful for the unattainable. A world full of wondrous technology, full of wealth and luxury that none in this new world might imagine. A world full of greed. That never changed, only the goals did.

Then it had been the pursuit of the old powers, the ones that lived in the twilight

places of myth and reality, that had retreated so far into obscurity as to be almost non-existence. Save that man, in his never ending quest for power and knowledge could never leave well enough along. And with science conquered, men turned their curiosity to other things.

He had no memory of his childhood. Of his conception. Whether he was birthed or discovered or created was an infinite void in his memory. His first recollections were of himself, very much as he was now. More naive, less powerful. Someone's tool. A conduit to the world of the arcane.

He might have known what he was created for then, but the knowledge had fled him not long after the Destruction. He knew it had to do with Galgaga and the powers that had brought the Death God forth, but more than that eluded him.

He remembered men in that old world that had worked secretly to herald the coming of Galgaga. Men of great power. A mortal man, who held sway over the beliefs of the multitudes, who believed that his god had chosen him to lead the righteous to the path of salvation. A man who believed that the coming of Galgaga would destroy the wicked and elevate those of his belief. A man who believed he was favored by the angels of god and at their word, worked at the downfall of his civilization.

A man that had thought they were opening a gateway to heaven, when all they were doing, in all their zeal for power, was to give hell a portal into their world.

That man's name had been Devin Angelino and he had been a priest, risen in the ranks of his denomination to the highest office possible. A pious man who hid his own dark passions under the cloak of religion. Dante remembered hating him then, too.

He woke with a start, muscles flinching spasmodically from the shock of having a spell of some import being rammed through his skull. His head pounded, feeling swollen and huge. He saw bright, flashing lights in the darkness he opened his eyes upon. He shut them and the vision was exactly the same.

Nasty, nasty little subtle spell, the Prophet had used upon him. No particle of power had escaped outside the touch of skin to skin to alert any magic sensitive observer that power had been called at all. It was not a spell he was familiar with, but then again, he had never been particularly interested in secretive demonstrations of power.

Gingerly, he shifted, and heard the rattle of chain. Felt the restraint of manacles still

on his wrists, but this time fastened to the front and attached to a length of chain attached to the wall. Black, cold cell. He had no notion whether it was the same one he had occupied or not.

There were none of the comforts Sera had brought him, at least within easy range. He tried to sit up, and regretted it as his head swam and nausea rose in the back of his throat. He rested his cheek against his knees miserably until the queasiness passed and his head cleared enough to reason.

Angelo. Devin Angelino. The latter had been an old man. An old catholic theologian, who thought the world needed a cleansing of all who did not practice his own beliefs. A man who had too much mortal power, and just a touch of the supernatural. A man who had been given magic to impress upon him the favor of god's angels, when they, after all was said and done, were only using him. As they had tried to use Dante.

Devin Angelino had begged for the honor to be their tool and he had, in the end, hated Their chosen vessel, never mind that Dante had rebelled against their plans for him. Not that it mattered in the end. Nothing could stop Galgaga from devouring the old world and all the monuments it had built. Devin Angelino had supposedly shared the fate of most of the world. For half a millennia Dante had forgotten he ever existed. He almost doubted it now. It was not the face or the figure of the man he had known. The power he sensed in this man had not belonged to the Devin Angelino of old. Not even close.

And yet.

The essence was the same. Only more twisted on the inside and smoother on the out, as if five centuries of working to control the path of man's faith had given him ultimate powers of persuasion. If the Prophet was indeed Devin Angelino, then Dante had no doubts that every detail of events since his reawakening had been orchestrated and planned to reach this point. For if he recalled correctly, Angelo had always been a man to carry a grudge. Always been a man who planned meticulously. And he had just managed to put on a show that convinced the court that Dante was a minion of hell, thus preventing any jurisdiction of the crown from the matter. And he had played right into the Prophet's hands. He cursed himself and his temper, but most of all, he cursed the name of Devin Angelino. The Prophet of the High God.

Ten

Sera was in a frenzy. The whole of the castle, it seemed was a bee hive of gossip and speculation and righteous indignation over the contempt the Prophet had received when he had striven his best to offer a hand of friendship and benediction. It was abominable. It was of course to be expected from one such as Dante Epherian.

Sera felt herself go stiff with anger every time she heard an uninformed, snide opinion on what ought to be done with the demon spawn the church had taken under its guard. Oh, and he was under the temple's power now. Fully and irrevocably after his little performance in front of king and court. The fool. The great, prideful fool.

Father wasn't talking to her. He was playing the part of the betrayed, as if he had personally been injured by Dante's outbursts. As if his reputation was bruised because he had encouraged leniency.

Maybe it was. Sera hardly knew anymore what to put her faith in. All she knew was, they had dragged Dante's limp body away under very tight guard, and the nobles and the priests had called for the witchfires to cleanse Alsansir of his foulness. And shock of shocks, it had been Angelo who had calmed the cries for reprisal and convinced them all, king included to let the church try and save the soul, if not the man.

She found she did not believe his words anymore. She found suspicion in what her own eyes had told her when that light from heaven had pierced the throne room ceiling. She found herself thinking dark and blasphemous thoughts concerning the Prophet and his High God.

Of course they wouldn't let her see him. She was not entirely certain where they had taken him. When she marched up the steps of the Temple, the guard calmly took hold of her arm and led her to a small side chamber where captain Sinakha held his offices, where she was informed that she was not allowed anywhere in the temple but the shrine and if she did not obey those rules then she would not be allowed in the temple at all.

She went back to her rooms and pressed her face into her pillow, trying not to cry in

her frustration. Her options were becoming more and more limited. Rejalla was not taking visitors. Her husband, if one were to believe the whispering of maids, had not been pleased with the familiar look Dante Epherian had gifted his wife. There had been arguments, the maids said.

Sera was in fear of hearing that witchfires had been lit and herself too ineffectual to prevent them. She had spells at her call, but hers were mostly healing and defensive magics, those condoned and taught by the church. She could not by her self, overcome a mob, or the determined guard of the Prophet. Which led her to ponder that she dearly needed the assistance of those who could. Of those that did have a voice that could not be ignored by king and court.

She went in search of Charul. Found him in the Lion barracks, playing dice with a comrade and pulled him away from the game. He went with her, off duty and out of uniform, long dark hair pulled back in a tail at his neck.

“Were you there?” she asked, when they walked the streets below the castle, out of the range of prying ears.

“No. I heard.”

“I’m afraid, Charul. It’s like they’ve been building up this hate for so long and all it took was Angelo to set it on fire. They’ll kill him if they can.”

“He brought it on himself, from what I heard of it.”

“Goddess, Charul, he brings everything on himself, but this time he can’t fight it and they’re cutting off every source of support he has.”

He said nothing, stuffing his hands in his pockets, watching his boots take step after step. Sera stared at his profile, desperate for some sign of support.

“You followed him once.”

“I followed the Free Resistance. We just happened to strive for the same goal.”

“He achieved that goal.”

“Yes. Without him we would all probably be dead now.”

“He needs our help.”

“What more can we do?”

“Get Gerad.”

Charul turned dark eyes her way, face stretched with surprise.

“Gerad’s in the East,” he said slowly.

“I know. I don’t think the Prophet or the king would let me send a messenger. Why invite trouble, they say? I need someone to go to him that they don’t know about.”

“Oh, Goddess, Sera. Do you know what you’re asking? I would lose my place in the Lion guard. I would be tried for desertion.”

“Gerad would protect you. Dante would, if we free him. I would take the blame.”

“You couldn’t. We’ve been over this.”

“Charul, I don’t have anyone else. I know I’m asking a terrible thing of you - - but I don’t know what else to do. They’re going to kill him.”

“Sera - - -”

“Please, Charul. Gerad has to know. He’s my only hope.”

He stopped in the street to stare at her, his face stricken, but she thought, touched with the hints of grudging acceptance.

* * *

Time passed. He was not quite certain if it had been a day and a night or two. It might have been more. The darkness gave up no clues as the passing of time. He had his hunger and his thirst to tell him that more than a reasonable amount had gone by without benefit of water. Then ears sensitive to the slightest sound, since they were all he had to rely on in this black pit, picked up the clap of footsteps and the grating of a key in the lock of his cell door. Not the same cell, he thought, for the light from the lantern did not spill through a grate in the door. Only when the heavy portal creaked open did the yellow illumination grace the harsh lines of the cell.

His eyes rebelled at the light, pupils shrinking in sudden discomfort. He turned his head away marginally, lowering lashes, in no particular mind to show interest in his visitor. He knew it wasn’t Sera. The sound of the steps had not been hers. Therefore it was an enemy of his.

When his sight adjusted he saw that the guard captain Sinakha had hung a lantern from a bracket by the wall and moved to stand by the door, waiting for his master who stood in the portal to enter the cell, before he himself stepped outside, closing the door

behind him.

That left Dante alone with the Prophet. Angelo. Who stood staring down at him with his hands hidden in the folds of his sleeves, his face, as always touched by the serene hand of the truly faithful.

“So is it you?” Dante asked, sitting comfortably against the wall, holding the chains near the ring where they were attached.

Angelo lifted a brow. “Do not presume to know me.”

Dante laughed. He seemed to recall Devin Angelino saying something similar so very long ago. “It is you. Where have you been all these years? Why don’t you wear the same body?”

“Oh, you seem to know everything else, why not the answer to that? The Prophet comes from across the sea, from the west to spread the word of the High God, haven’t you heard?”

“Humm. No, I was busy conquering the world -- or being dead. The little things tend to escape attention. Like what you’ve been up to Devin.”

“Don’t call me that.” Angelo stepped forward threateningly. Dante tilted his head, interested in the weak spot he’d found.

“Why not? It’s your name.”

“It is the name of a man who was betrayed.”

“You were betrayed? That’s laughable. I thought it was the other way around -- you handing the world to Galgaga in return for your own personal power.”

Angelo hit him. A stinging slap at the first, then a backhanded blow on the return. He crouched over Dante, knotting his hair in one hand, pulling his head back and grasping his jaw with the other. A tingle of power went through his fingers into the core of Dante’s skull. Dante ground his teeth against the pain, refusing to cry out, even when it seemed his brain was about to explode.

“Don’t ever mention that again in my hearing, you thief. You murderer,” Angelo whispered, close to his ear, when he had let the pain drift away. “You took the glory that should have been mine. They gave it to you, when they had promised it to me.”

“They used you, you moron,” Dante ground out. “They gave you petty power to placate you and you danced to their bidding.”

“Liar.” Again with the pain and this time Dante’s body rebelled, trying to jerk out of the Prophet’s grasp. The chains prevented him, the debilitating nature of the spell stole his strength. He called Angelo the foulest string of names in his vocabulary and the Prophet’s fingers strayed over his eyes and the agony turned into a lucid and living thing. All he saw was red with the white hot center of pain.

He came back to himself sprawled on the floor with Angelo’s perched over him, knee in his gut, leering down in satisfaction. “Do you know,” the Prophet said. “How easy it is to take a body once the soul is broken?”

Dante stared up at him, shaking from residual pain, at a loss to understand what Angelo was babbling about now.

“I was only gifted by god with telepathy back then, before the angels came to me. I could read men’s inner sins, their desires, their truths and lies. It made me a better priest. It allowed me to reach levels of power where I could do more good. I was never born with the curse of black magic. I am not a creature created by it, like you. I am a mortal man, and unlike creatures born with the gift of magic, my lifespan is a mortal one. Only when They gifted me with the power was I able to prolong it. You asked why I wear a different body? There is a way, if the soul is broken and the spirit destroyed, to leave an old body and take a new one.”

“You’re a body snatcher,” Dante hissed. “You profess morality and you do that? That’s an evil even I wouldn’t contemplate.”

Angelo ran a knuckle up the side of Dante’s jaw. “You don’t have to. You wear the same face you did 500 years past. To accomplish the things I had to accomplish, to bring faith back to the world, I had no choice. But, you are right. It is not a fate that a moral man should be subjected to. I only took the bodies of those cursed with dark magic from birth. Those born with hell’s gift. And do you know that with each body taken, I gained the magic that was theirs? And kept it, even after I had moved to a new form. I’ve had twenty-four forms while you’ve held this one. Can you imagine how great my power has become with the combined might of so many wizards at my command?”

“I didn’t use the Hellfire spell that night. You did.”

Angelo smiled at him. “Sometimes sacrifices must be made in the name of the god, to further His dominion.”

His dominion. Angelo's dominion. Angelo stole the bodies of those born with the gift of power to further his own power. Angelo had contrived this whole thing to get Dante within his control. Angelo wanted him. His power, his body.

"How many years have you dreamed about this?" he asked. "Getting me? The ultimate power. A body that won't age?"

Angelo leaned close. "Since the first day I discovered I could take the body of another and make it my own."

"You're going to be disappointed. I don't break."

"Oh, you will. I've become very good at what I do."

* * *

There was a period of time that he could not organize his thoughts. They scattered like puffs of pollen on a strong breeze, ripped asunder by Angelo's persistent hammering at the walls of his soul. It grew worse the more he refused to shatter. He had after all, survived admirably in hell. What earthly torture could be worse than that? Although in hell, he had not been stripped of his power. That in itself was as much of a torment as the things the Prophet inflicted upon him. Knowing that had those wards had not been fastened on his wrists, he could have blasted Angelo to hell where he belonged, no matter the Prophet's claims of having the power of twenty odd magic users.

They could not have been so very powerful, if they'd let Angelo conquer them. Twenty odd hedge wizards were nothing when it came down to true power. He told himself this, when the pain receded enough for lucid thought and Angelo left him in peace. And he held onto the satisfaction that the Prophet would never break him. He might kill him, but never destroy his spirit. That would gall the man more than anything else.

How many days? Five, ten, since the little fiasco in the throne room? He didn't know why time was suddenly so important to him. It had never mattered before. He wished Sera were here. She soothed him, when she wasn't yelling at him, or trying to tell him what to do. He thought of her face when the pain became too much, thought of her laughter and the sweet smell of her hair. He used her mercilessly as a lifeline to sanity,

when he thought he might be slipping over the edge, she the truest and most pure thing in his life.

The door creaked open. He did not bother to turn and look. Just lay on his side, his head cradled on one arm, with his back to the portal. Angelo hated it when he ignored him. Angelo hated to be dismissed as trivial.

Only it was not Angelo. He heard a feminine gasp and for a fleeting moment his spirit soared, thinking it was Sera, somehow gotten past the Prophet to see him. He rolled to his back, the effort costing pain and stealing his breath. He thought he had bruised if not broken ribs, courtesy of one of Angelo's fits in response to some blasphemy or another of his. He couldn't recall exactly what he had said to inspire the kicking frenzy.

"Dante!" It wasn't Sera. Very surprisingly it was a robed and jewel adorned Princess Rejalla. More surprising still was the fact that her brother, Teo stood in the shadow of the doorway behind her, members of his Lion Guard shifting behind him. His expression did not look happy at all.

Rejalla dropped to her knees beside him, her face trembling with dismay at the way he must have looked.

"Oh, what have they done to you?" she whispered. She reached out to touch his hair, which was miserably lank and dirty. He hated the feel of it on his own skin. He hated being filthy and bloody and bruised. He shut his eyes and sighed, wondering how she had managed to talk her brother into allowing this sojourn. Teo, as far as he could tell was a convert to the Prophet's way of thinking.

He said nothing, not trusting his voice and unwilling to show that weakness with Teo looking on. Rejalla's dark eyes welled with tears. He remembered Sera saying she was married now. Queen of Ludas. He recalled her husband on the dais beside Teo. The man had not seemed to suit her. Not in regality, not in power of presence.

"Why won't you give in?" she said. "Just give up your stubborn pride and bend knee to the church? Don't let them believe you're what the Prophet says you are. What can it hurt?"

Foolish girl. As if it would matter to Angelo. He could do a thousand penances and it would not be good enough for the Prophet, because the Prophet damn well knew what

he was and what he wasn't.

She sobbed in frustration when he wouldn't respond to her plea. She leaned over him, her hair falling across his shoulders and pressed her cheek to his. "I'm so sorry."

"Rejalla! Enough!" Teo gripped her shoulder, pulling her up and away from Dante. "You're a married woman. Remember it. You've had your chance and failed. As I said you would. Now come."

Dante fixed Teo with a level, cold glare. "You're his puppet and you don't even know it."

The king didn't dignify that with an answer, only a quick, furious glance. He walked his sister from the cell without a look backwards and the door was shut behind them, plunging Dante back into darkness.

* * *

"Sera, it makes no sense. Why won't he just do what they want?"

They were in a small, private shrine in the Cathedral. Rejalla and Sera knelt before a statue of the Goddess, knees protected by velvet pillows, heads bowed as if in the act of prayer. It was the only way they felt they might meet without censure. Without prying eyes and ears observing them. That it had come to this in her own home.

"Because he's a fool," Sera whispered bitterly.

"You should have seen him. He looked so battered and weak. We've got to do something. He'll die under the church's care."

Sera clenched her hands before her, eyes under her fall of hair burning with anger.

"He'll never give in. Not now."

"I don't understand?" Rejalla's voice rose loud enough to attract attention and Sera glanced over her shoulder to make certain no priest paused by the door to see what prayers were being recited with such vehemence. No one came.

"How bad was he?"

Rejalla took a shaky breath, lashes fluttering down to cover pain in her eyes. "He wouldn't talk to me. Dried blood and bruises. Perhaps the marks of a lashing -- I couldn't see well in the cell. But -- but I've heard tell that church inquisitors don't

always leave marks.”

Sera cursed under her breath, imagining those things done to him. *Him. Her* Dante. And hating the people responsible. The man responsible. That Angelo dared lay a finger on him, she would never forgive.

“Gerad will come,” she whispered, saying a true prayer that her message would fly fast and true to the Master of Divhar. “Perhaps with Kheron, if she’s still with him. Matters will be set right.”

“If Dante’s even alive by then.”

“Don’t say that. He’s lived through worse.”

“With his magic.”

She had no answer to that. She kneeled before the goddess and wished she had the faith she had at fifteen and mourned that she probably never would again.

* * *

Rab-Ker had, in his lifetime done things for the greater good that he was not proud of. Sometimes things were required to uphold the laws of man and god, that men of conscience found abhorrent. He knew very well that with power and responsibility came hard decisions, but even holding that knowledge close to heart, he found himself bothered by the prophet’s single-minded persecution of Dante Epherian.

He understood the reasoning. He understood the people’s growing distrust of things magic after the devastation that Galgaga and its minions had left in their wake. He understood the need to give the people reassurances that the church was indeed guarding the sanctity of their souls against the blackness of perdition. But his own sect had never been one to preach the fire and brimstone messages that those that followed the High God did.

He had a problem with the burning of witches. He had a problem with the torturous efforts of inquisitors to evict admissions of guilt or innocence from those suspected of trafficking with the darker powers.

He did not know quite whether to believe what the Princess Rejalla had told Sera of Dante’s condition. Sera seemed to believe. Sera was miserable and distraught. Sera,

who hardly ever cried, sat in her room, stone faced, with silent tears running down her cheeks. It broke his heart on the one hand and hardened it on the other. He had used her connection with the wizard, to concrete a control of sorts over the uncontrollable, yet he never had planned that she loose her heart to him. He had hoped she might share his own practicality, but he should have known. She was too much like her mother. Too volatile of emotion, too quick to judge and to give her heart. Too easily hurt. As she had been, over and over by the damned dark wizard. And still she championed him.

A week passed and she stopped talking to him at all. She hardly ate. He began to worry for her health as well as her mental well being. She sat in his study, high in the Cathedral tower and looked out the window over the new city, staring at the spires of the Temple of the High God. And he could not stand it any longer. He went to Angelo, one holy man to another, to voice his concerns.

The Prophet received him in his office, prim and proper in his crisp robes and his holy symbol of office glinting at his breast. His smile, as always was a thing of warmth and welcome, inviting any to share in his aura of faith. It never faltered, even when Rab-Ker explained his reservations, questioning the wisdom of the Prophet's decision.

"I understand," Angelo said sagely. "The worship of the Goddess and her sibling gods, has ever been a more inclined to forgive and over look the things lurking in the shadow of hell, than that of the High God. Perhaps in years gone by, that inclination was not as much a danger to us. But now, with the world disrupted by the passing of the Death God and the things brought over the boundary between this world and the darker one when it -- - died - - my friend, we can not afford to relax our vigilance."

"Perhaps. But in this one case - - it is possible that what you see as a devotion to the powers of hell, is more pride and arrogance on the part of Dante."

"Ah, I hear your daughter's words from your own lips, Rab-Ker. You let the girl's misplaced devotion influence you. She needs to be taken in hand. I mean no disrespect to you, Great Priest, but why did you never arrange marriage for her? It would have brought stability into her life. She runs wild now, without the humbleness or decorum of a proper young woman her age. She moons after a demon spawn."

"She is a pious girl," Rab-Ker defended.

"She is reckless and headstrong and need's a husband's guidance. She has power

and could be such a force of good for the God if only tutored properly. You have done what you can with her, Rab-Ker. But how much can a father truly achieve with a wayward daughter?"

"It is true. She has rejected my few proposals of marriage. I thought to give her time to get over her attachment to Dante, but that seems an improbable thing now."

Angelo leaned forward, a light of passion coming into his eyes. "I have made no secret of the fact that I admire the girl. I find her strength of will commendable, her beauty soothing to look upon. I have taken no wife in all my years of crusade for the High God's doctrines. I would take her in hand. I would show her the path of true redemption and of true faith, if you would consent to give me her hand, Rab-Ker."

Rab-Ker took a breath of surprise, quite thoroughly shocked by this turn of the conversation. Never would he have imagined the Prophet had eyes for his daughter.

"You would marry?"

"In the eyes of the God, marriage is sacred. Let our lines be joined. It would be a marriage blessed by the goddess and the High God."

"I --I hardly know what to say, your holiness? You've taken me by surprise in this. It is a most generous offer. I will consider it. I will speak with Sera of it. I cannot promise she will be well disposed to it, considering her preoccupation with Dante."

"Perhaps it is time that she be treated like any other young woman of high breeding and given in the marriage her father wishes, regardless of the fancy she refuses to let go of. I will speak with the King. Perhaps with his blessing on the union, she might better see her path to duty."

* * *

"Sera? Are you here?" Rab-Ker lifted his hand to rap on her door, listening for the sounds of movement within.

She opened it after a moment, her face thin and strained, her hair a tumbled mess about her shoulders as if she had not taken a comb to it in days. She might not have for all he knew. Perhaps the Prophet was right. Perhaps she did need a powerful hand to guide her out of this misery she inflicted upon herself.

“Child, have you eaten today?” He stepped past her into her room. She stood at the open door, as if she did not quite know what to do with him in her rooms.

“I had an apple for breakfast,” she admitted. He frowned, the hour being well past dinner.

“That is all?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Sera, I want you to snap out of this self-destructive mood. You’ll make yourself sick, if you don’t eat properly.”

“Father, I’m all right. Leave me alone.”

He drew his brows at the rejoinder. She glared right back, one hand on the door knob the other on her hip. “Is there something you wished, Father?”

“I wished to talk reason to you, girl.”

“I’m perfectly reasonable. What need?”

“I’ve had a proposal of marriage for you.”

She stared at him blankly.

“One that I am seriously considering.”

“How can you consider marriage for me?” she finally declared archly.

“By the law of the land, Sera. You are my daughter and unmarried and therefore my wishes on the matter are law.”

She blinked, then laughed. “Oh, goddess, are you serious? You’ve never before ‘considered’ such a thing. Is it because I won’t pretend to ignore what’s being done to Dante? Who asked for my hand?”

“The Prophet.”

At which pronouncement she caught her breath, eyes widening in amazement. Her face went white, drained of blood and the hand on the door knob began to shake. She brought it to her breast, clenched in a fist.

“And -- and what did you tell him?” Her voice was a barely audible whisper.

“I told him it was a generous offer and that I would consider it.”

“You did not!” she cried at him, lunging towards him, fingers grasping the lapels of his robes. “I will not!! How dare you? How dare he? Do you think I’m some piece of meat to be sold at market?”

“He’s gone to talk with the king on the matter,” Rab-Ker managed to get in over her screeching.

“I don’t give a pig’s ass! The king can join the both of you in ---”

“Sera!!” he took hold of her before she could utter that curse and shook her, hoping to bring her back to her senses. She twisted out of his grip, wild eyed and wary, then ran for the door, despite his calls for her to stop. Then she was out of it, pelting down the hall like a hunted doe, scattering a pair of priests on their way to prayer.

Rab-Ker stood outside her doorway, declining to call after her before witnesses, frowning darkly at the curious looks of the priests when they turned their eyes to him. They quickly continued on their way to the Cathedral. No matter what the Prophet thought about the proper submissiveness of women, this was not going to be an easy matter.

Eleven

Out of desperation and panic, Sera did something she would never have done with a clear head. It was quite one thing to march into Temple with Lion Guards at her back and bully her way past unsuspecting temple guards; and a different thing entirely to use magic to break the sanctity of a holy house for her own ends. Those were the actions of a criminal, plain and simple, and the consequences would be dire if she were caught at it. Consequences were the least of her worries.

Forced marriage to a man she had come to resent and even hate held a far more prominent place. And she had no one to talk to, to spill out her fears. No one to protect her if father were on the Prophet’s side. And the only man who would have was in the cellars beneath the temple, in dire predicament himself. She needed to see him. To talk with him. It was a driving desire that had her at the steps of the temple in blind recklessness, before she knew quite what she was about.

It was then that some reason began to seep back into her brain. Basilica guards stood outside the doors, watching the passage of the worshippers into the temple. They were a new fixture on the steps of the temple, since the advent of the Prophet’s demonic

prisoner. There was no safe entrance that way. She veered back onto the street, walking with head down and arms crossed over her breast around to the side of the great building. The main doors would all be watched. But there were unobtrusive, little used portals that might provide entrance. To the very back of the temple, where the traffic was little or none, in an alley with refuse was stacked for the street cleaners to take away. There was a plain door in the midst of the garbage. There was no handle on the outside. It didn't matter, she knew a spell of unlocking. It was not exactly a spell designed with illegal entry in mind, and the priest who taught it to her would be aghast to know to what use she put it, but beggars certainly couldn't be choosers. She laid fingers on the door and silently mouthed the words of opening. Felt the small amount of power it took to perform such a simple spell flow into her, through her fingers and into the door. Something quietly clicked. She took a breath and gently pushed at the door. It swung inwards with hardly a creak.

A narrow dark hall, lined with crates and boxes. She shut the door behind her and slipped down the passage. She was not familiar with the temple as she was with the cathedral she had grown up in. She hesitated at doors, listening for the sounds of people behind them. She heard the clamor of the kitchen, kitchen sounds could not be mistaken for anything else, and hurried past that door. She found finally, after a great deal of frustration, an opening that led to the great nave of the temple. She stood in the shadowed doorway and got her bearings. Across the way was the passage that would lead her to the stairs to the basement levels. Across a temple scattered with people praying, with priests passing among them, giving blessing. With guards at the entryway and no doubt more watching the door to the cellars. She wished for a spell of invisibility, but knew none.

What she did recall was an incantation for inconsequence. A spell that might allow the caster to blend in with the background. She had heard Gerad use it once. It was most certainly not a holy spell -- not if it was fashioned by nightwalkers, but it might be the thing she needed to achieve her goal.

She leaned into the shadows behind the nave and mouthed the words of the spell, praying that she remembered them correctly. It wouldn't work, Gerad had said, if anyone was actually looking for you. It would only allow the caster to escape their notice if

their minds were on something else.

She said the words twice over and felt a shiver pass her body. She did not know if it were her own apprehension or the spell taking effect. She had no notion if it had worked or not. As quietly as she could, she slipped behind the altar, clinging close to the wall, and began to circle the room. No one looked up from their devotions. No priest chanced to glance towards the naive and call out to ask her what she did there. She reached the door and opened it only wide enough to slip through, then crept down the hall. There were guards by the door to the cellars. They sat at a small table, talking quietly among themselves. She froze, back pressed against the wall, breath caught in her throat. They did not look up. One suggested a game of cards. The other worried that the captain might catch them at it and report it to His Holiness. They muttered at the injustice of the duty.

She silently slid along the wall. The goddess and all her kindred must have been smiling down on her, for the door to the cellar was slightly ajar, all she needed do was turn her body sideways and slip through the opening, the door moving hardly an inch in her passage. Then she was down the cold stairs, mindless of the dark, hands feeling at the stone of the walls to find her way. Dare she call a light? She heard no voices down here. No guards lurked in the pitch darkness. Maybe just a little one. A tiny speck of illumination that she could squash if need arose.

“Illumina,” she whispered the summons. A glow no larger than a plum flared to life before her eyes. She waved a hand downwards to direct it towards the floor, where it might be less noticed. It hovered just before her as she wove through the boxes of the storage level. Then she found the steps leading down to the lower, more dreadful sub-basement. That door was locked. She opened it with a spell, feeling a bit of strain at the use of three spells simultaneously.

With a swell of satisfaction she pelted down the stairs, down the hall to the cell where Dante had been, only to find the door open and the cell devoid of occupant. She stepped inside, saw the pile of blankets she had brought to him, rumpled and unused in a corner. She let out a little whimper of frustration, for the moment devoid of purpose. What if he was being held in the castle dungeon? She could never get past there. What if he were dead? No. Not dead. She would know it. She knew she would. And Rejalla had said he was in the Temple. Another cell then. There were many doors along this

passage. Closer to the stairs? No, further. As far as they could get him from escape and warmth and light.

She went down the hall until it narrowed and sloped downward. The walls were rougher, hewn from stone and not yet smoothly finished. The doors were further apart, thick and metal. She went to the furthest one and pressed her hand against it. Murmured the opening spell and pushed it open. Nothing. Water puddled in a dip against the far wall. The smell of mold was overpowering. She shut the door with a shudder. Moved to the next. Pressed hand and ear against it and thought -- no. It's not this one. The next and she felt a stirring. She caught her breath and magiced it open.

The little ball of light proceeded her inside. He lay against the wall, as if it were his only solace, wrists fastened by thick chain to a ring four feet from the floor. He uncurled at the intrusion of light, made to push himself to his knees and she cried out inarticulately and rushed forward, skidding to her own knees on the stone before him, throwing her arms about him before he had the chance to fully gain his balance. He went over, caught the chains to prevent the topple to the floor and could not quite hold his weight and hers. She ended up on top of him, tangled in the chains, sobbing his name against his neck.

His fingers grasped after her hair, pulling her back enough so that he could see her face. His own was haggard and bruised. But his eyes were sharp.

"How did you get here? Did they let you come?"

She shook her head, sniffing back tears. "No, I snuck past."

"You used magic," he accused harshly and she blinked at him, bewildered to have him censure her, of all people.

"Yes but ..."

"I could feel it. If I could feel it then *HE* could."

"He?" she shook her head at him, not understanding. "I had to come. Oh, Goddess, everything is going so badly. I don't know what to do."

"Get out of here is what you do." He pushed her away, wildness in his face. She fell backwards, and he struggled up, holding to the chain for support.

"But -- I don't understand."

"Sera, get out before he finds you!"

"I'm afraid it's too late for that."

The gentle, smooth voice of the Prophet echoed in the tiny confines of the cell. Dante snarled. She cried out in dismay, staring up at the tall figure of the Prophet from her sprawled position on the floor. The large figure of captain Sinakha stood behind him, green eyes aglow in the illumination of her witchlight.

“Sera, I am very, very disappointed in you.” The Prophet stared mournfully down at her. “I had such high hopes for you, my dear.”

Under his gaze, she rose guiltily to her feet, held her chin high and met his stare. “I demand that you cease this, at once. It’s not moral or holy.”

He reached out, gripped her shoulders and his fingers bit down into her flesh so hard she winced. “You may demand nothing, girl. You’ve given up that right.” He shook her once, hard enough that her head snapped back painfully.

“Don’t touch her!” Dante hissed, lunging forward, only to be brought up short by the chain that fastened him to the wall.

Angelo looked past her at Dante, lifted a brow caustically and said. “It is time Sera had discipline in her life. It is time she learned to pay for her mistakes.”

A dozen foul names spewed from Dante’s lips. Sera blanched, suddenly afraid of the hate in this room. Dante’s, The Prophet’s -- goddess save her -- her own. The Prophet thrust her into the hands of Sinakha.

“Take the young lady to my chambers. I will deal with this trespass there shortly.” He smiled. He smiled when he should have been frowning darkly at her transgression and that scared her more than anything else.

* * *

He was on his feet, pulling at the chains in a rage to get at the object of his rancor. The hate welled so strong inside him, he felt disjointed and out of control. Angelo merely watched him, just out of reach, that infuriating smile on his narrow lips. And Dante raged and threatened and promised horrible, horrible vengeance if the man laid so much as a finger upon Sera.

“A finger?” The Prophet said, lifting a brow. “Didn’t you know, her father and the king have consented that I take her as bride. A finger will be the least of the things I lay on her.”

He roared his rage, yanking against the chains until he felt the flesh bruise and tear at his wrists. "I'll kill you. I'll turn every ounce of your stinking flesh into ash. Goddamn you!!"

"I've told you not to take the name of god in vain." Angelo's lashes fluttered down. He whispered a word and force slammed into Dante's body, racked him with a pain too brief for it to be one of Angelo's tortures, then snapped back into the Prophet, taking every bit of strength Dante possessed with it. His legs gave way, rubbery useless things, and he collapsed to the floor in a jumble of limbs he had no energy to straighten. He hardly had the will to breath, to blink his eyes to clear them of reflexive tears.

Something changed in Angelo then, the intrinsic benevolence that he always wore in his guise of Prophet evaporated, to be replaced by a cold and calculating maliciousness. The door the cell slammed shut behind him, as if by a strong gust of wind. The light from the lantern outside in the hall that they had brought with them was obliterated, and a new, harsh light grew about the Prophet. He crouched over Dante, twining silver hair in his fist, eyes gleaming in a madness that was usually so very deeply hidden. It roared like a blast furnace now.

"Why do you continue to deny *ME?!?*" he screamed down, spittle flying from his lips. "It's for the greater good of all men. How can you not break?"

Dante's lips wouldn't move to utter all the things he wanted to fling back into Angelo's face. All he could do was lay there under the weight that shifted over him and endure.

"You will regret it, I tell you. You will pay for this insolence. I have marked the things you love in this world. I have. Before you ever even came back from hell, I marked that which you held dear. That girl. The Nightwalker. The Nelai're. The Winter King. You were nothing before *They* called you out of the eather. Nothing!! And yet you thought you were so much better than the rest of us mortal creatures. You took what was rightfully mine!! Galgaga chose you, when I had been promised that honor. They promised me, damn you!! Then you murdered it. You killed it, when for so long I had waited for it to be reborn and to choose me for its purposes."

Tears streamed down the Prophet's cheeks, fell onto Dante's face. He wanted to cringe away from them. Wanted to scream back at the madman that what he had wanted

so badly, what had been thrust upon Dante all those centuries ago had cost him 500 hundred years of free will. Had cost him any goal but the destruction that Galgaga thirsted for. He would have gladly given that *honor* to Angelo.

“Liar!!” Angelo screamed and slapped him. Dante stared in helpless shock. The man had pulled the thoughts right from his mind. Of course he had. No matter what powers he held now, first and foremost he had been a telepath, able to read men’s souls. Dante was just surprised that he had been able to get past his own, not unimpressive, mental barriers. Had he become that weak?

Fine. Let him pull the scorn from his thoughts. Let him know how unchanged he was from the Devin Angelino of the old world, who got off on cowing people, on holding power over the weak and subtly causing them misery. Only now it wasn’t so subtle.

The Prophet laughed, framing Dante’s face with his hands, bending close to whisper. “Maybe you’re right. Perhaps I do. We all have our weaknesses. You gained power by force of magic and war, while I chose a more subtle path. I was more successful at it. People beg to worship me. They speak your name to frighten their children into good behavior. I will shatter you. Into a thousand little pieces that all beg to please me. It’s only a matter of time. I already own your body ---”

One hand drifted down to caress the length of Dante’s body, then back up to tap a hard nail against his temple. “--It’s only your mind I need to break. And if I can’t do it by pain alone, then perhaps I will find those things you love and destroy them. Sera will be mine in short order. I’ll let you imagine the wedding night. Do you know she sent a messenger to bring the Nightwalker. Your salvation, she thought. Pretty young man, that messenger. I believe you knew him. He won’t reach Gerad. I’m afraid he’s passed to another realm. Gerad would have, if he’d come. And that pretty, pretty little Nelai’re. I’ll find them both sooner or later. And the Winter King. I had thought to take him for my next host before you were so kind as to return and offer me a better choice. I had already begun to work my way into his mind. He’s prone to nightmares, you know. People prone to nightmares are easy to shatter when you get under the layer of conscious thought. If I do have to kill you, I’ll have him. But I’ll hurt him first, I promise you that.”

“Don’t -- touch -- him.” He got the words out, a trembling, furious whisper that could not hide the panic that grew inside him. “Leave -- them -- alone -- you -- bastard.”

Angelo smiled at the dread he saw in Dante's eyes, that he pulled out of his mind. The first sign of true fear he had been able to invoke. Dante hated himself for the weakness, for giving the man the lever he needed to hurt him more than any physical torture ever would. Tears of helpless fury trailed down his temples. Angelo wiped them away with his thumb, leaned down and kissed the corner of Dante's lips.

"One way or another," he whispered, then worked a magic that cast Dante into utter, senseless black.

* * *

She sat curled in a chair within the confines of the Prophet's own private chambers. She could see his bedroom just through the doors to the left and shuddered, wrapping her arms tighter about her drawn up knees. Sinakha was outside, blocking her escape. She wished, oh she wished so very much, that they would send someone to get her father, so that both he and the Prophet might berate her. She dreaded being alone with Angelo. He was a fanatic, she told herself, a man obsessed with religious stricture, but he was not a monster. She was being a fool to imagine herself in peril from him. The man wanted to marry her for the Goddess' sake. He wouldn't hurt her. But he could wound her with his censure, with the power of his words. His words could sway thousands.

What was taking him so long? Goddess, please don't let Dante fall deeper in trouble because of her misdeed. Oh, what had she been thinking to do this? To so blatantly disregard their strict orders. She had not helped herself or Dante. All she had done was make things worse.

Finally, after what seemed forever, Angelo came. He walked in, pulling off his outer, formal robe. There were dirt stains on the knees of it. She made to rise and he waved a hand at her to stay.

"Sit."

Sera sank back into the chair, back straight, hands clutching the smooth wooden arms. She watched him go to a panel on a bookshelf where a tray of liquor sat. He poured himself a glass, offering her none. With his back to her, he took a sip, stood that way for a moment before turning to face her. His face was lined with stern disapproval.

She swallowed and turned her gaze elsewhere.

“Do you have an explanation for your actions, Sera? For breaking the sanctity of the temple with the usage of dark magics?”

How did he know? Dante had said he would know, but how? The Prophet, other than the miraculous displays of covenant with the High God, had never admitted to the practice of magic. She had no answer for him. If he wanted apology she couldn't give that either. She was not sorry she had come. She was sorry she had been caught at it.

“The king will hear of this. Your father will. Neither will grant you clemency this time. Your punishment will be given over to me. As will, as I'm sure your father has informed you, your hand in marriage.”

Her eyes snapped to him. She shook her head to deny it, but he held up a sharp finger to silence her. “Rab-Ker will be relieved that I still desire to take you in matrimony even after this debacle. I shall strive to overlook it. I shall strive to teach you the error of your ways. You will come in penance for the next score of days. You will begin this very night, on your knees you will pray before me, begging the High God for forgiveness.”

“But, I have not declared my faith to the High God.” She argued. He stalked towards her, grabbed her by the arms and pulled her up out of the chair. Again, in one night he laid hands to her. She glared this time, defiant of his attempts to make her cringe. “I am not one of your faithful, your holiness. I'll take my penance in the Cathedral, if I must.”

“You have not offended the goddess or her brethren, girl. You have offended *ME*.” He glared down at her, eyes boring into her own. The defiance trembled, curled up and ran with its tail between its legs. All from that stare. He let her go and stabbed an imperious finger at the small alter against the wall of the room. “Kneel and pray.”

She trembled, afraid of this man, almost took a step to do his bidding, when the door opened and Sinakha stepped into the room. The Prophet's face twisted in irritation.

“Your Holiness. Forgive me. But a messenger has come from the King begging immediate audience.”

“Now? What does he want?”

Sinakha shrugged blandly. “The messenger did not say. He only implied the

urgency.”

Angelo waved a hand. “Fine. I’ll come immediately. And you --” he fixed Sera with his gaze. “--Have not gotten off so easily. The king will hear of this tonight, I assure you. Come tomorrow to the temple for penance, if you value your soul.”

* * *

She ran through the darkened streets toward the palace for as long as her breath and her legs would allow, then she stumbled on, holding her side against the pain. She did not go to her rooms, but to the kitchen where she knew many of the maids. She found the girl who was assigned Princess Rejalla’s suite, and implored her to carry a message to the princess. She sat in the kitchen by the fire, shivering until the maid came back, with the news that the princess had agreed.

She bolted from the kitchen then, and through the dusk shadowed gardens towards the Cathedral. Into its welcoming, soothing sanctuary, with its great stained glass windows behind the naive. With its aura of peace and comfort. How could anyone forsake it for the Temple of the High God? How could anyone choose the harsh doctrines of the High God over the gentle teaches of the Goddess? She entered the small, private shrine and knelt before the alter, waited there with tense expectation for perhaps half of an hour, before the soft rustle of silk announced the arrival of another worshipper. Silently, Rejalla moved into the room. Lowered herself to the cushion on the floor, and bowed her head in prayer. When they’d knelt there for a while undisturbed, the Princess finally whispered.

“What happened?”

“I was stupid. I snuck in to see him and I got caught.”

“Is he all right?”

Sera took a breath. “I don’t know. I was hardly there a moment before the Prophet dragged me away.”

“The Prophet himself!”

“That’s not the worst of it. He’s asked my father for my hand. Can you believe it?” Her voice rose in her dismay. Rejalla turned dark eyes her way, astounded.

“He didn’t.”

“He did. And the worst part is -- I think that half of it is to hurt Dante.”

“Why would you think that? Why would the Prophet go to such lengths?”

“I don’t know. I just -- it’s just a feeling I have. He hates Dante.”

“He hates what he thinks he is.”

“No it’s more than that. I’m certain of it now. And -- and I think he may have magic too.”

“That’s ridiculous. I hate what he’s doing to Dante too, but I can’t make the Prophet out as evil because of it.”

“I don’t know what to think of him anymore. I know I won’t marry him. I know we’ve got to get Dante out of there.”

“Us?”

“Who else? I can’t wait for Gerad to come. I want to get him out of Alsansir.”

“Even if we could -- Teo, the Prophet’s men, would be after him.”

“Then we run fast and far. We get to Gerad, if we can.”

The Princess turned back to the altar, eyes frightened, hands clasped before her breast.

“You’ve made risks for him before,” Sera said.

“Yes. But, I’ve more to think about than myself now.”

Sera stared and comprehension dawned. “Your baby?”

“My baby. The heir to Ludas and Alsansir.”

Sera bowed her head, frustrated in the knowledge that she could not argue with the Princess’ need to protect an unborn child. “You’re right. You can’t risk it.”

Silence. They both sat under the watchful eye of the Goddess. Rejalla lifted her eyes. “But, with the heir to two kingdoms in my womb, they would not dare to censure me. They will take the greatest care no matter what insanity I discharge. And I am allowed into the Temple freely, even if you are not.”

Sera bit her lip, thinking she ought to discourage a pregnant woman from such risks, yet unable to utter the words. Instead her mind whirled with strategy. “And you are always accompanied by ladies in waiting.”

“Always. And I have very faithful guards.”

“There will have to be a distraction,” Sera said.

Rejalla bent her head towards her, eyes alight with conspiracy. “What shall it be?”

“Well, we can’t use magic. The Prophet is sensitive to that. It’s how he discovered me in the first place. We’ll have to get a key somehow, to the door and the manacles.”

“Guards mingle. They dice, even in the temple. An adept enough hand and a ring of keys might be lifted long enough to make an impression for copy.”

“You have the mind of a brigand, Princess.” Sera grinned. “I never noticed before.”

“I never had anything denied me.”

The two of them stayed at prayer for a very long time.

Twelve

Sera went the temple the next day, early in the morning to take her penance. Rather she do it willingly than have father drag her there. He had not spoken to her and she had done her best to avoid his presence. She kneeled in the temple with the other penitents and pretended to pray for forgiveness. Angelo came out and watched her. Not obvious. Most of the folk in the temple were unaware of his presence in the shadow of the naive. But she knew he was there, staring at her. She stayed for an hour, a decent length of time to beg for absolution, then rose stiffly to her feet and hurried down the gleaming central aisle towards the doors. No one stopped her. She had held terror with each step she took that Sinakha would appear out of the shadows with plans to escort her to the Prophet. She was out of the doors and down the steps with a sense of victory in her heart.

She had no desire to go back to the dormitory where Father might corner her and give her one more lecture on good behavior, or tell her that he had decided to try and force the marriage upon her. So she went to the river and spent the day along the docks, browsing the dozens of import shops that boasted distant and exotic goods. When Rejalla had what they needed for their plan to work, she would send someone to contact Sera.

With nightfall, she had no choice but to return home. There was no note waiting under her door. Disappointed, she curled up with a pillow before her small hearth and

stared into the flames. Father did not come to berate her, which clearly told the extent of his upset. If he was not talking to her, then he was deeply disappointed. She was sorry to hurt him. She would be sorry for the hurt to come, the disgrace of a daughter who committed sacrilege against the church and treason against the state.

She slept on the floor before the fire, and woke with a stiff neck and a growing sense of expectation. She bathed and washed her hair, twined it in a braid down her back and dutifully marched to the temple for her second day of penance. There was a coach outside the steps of the temple and pair of guards who clustered together in the cool morning to smoke outside it. They wore neither the livery of the temple or the Lion Guard. It took her a moment to recognize the colors of Ludas. She frowned, and was half way up the steps before one of the guards called to her from below.

“Lady. You dropped something.”

She looked down, startled and the man trotted up the steps, bent several steps below her and made to pick up a silken handkerchief. It was not hers. He handed it to her anyway, whispering as she leaned in to take it. “Her majesty prays within. Wait for a sign.” Then he was bowing to her and returning to his comrade. She took a breath, balled the handkerchief in her hand and continued up the steps. Why had not the princess contacted her before this? Had something happened? She was not prepared.

Thoughts spinning, she walked down the aisle, past the faithful followers of the High God, eyes scanning the temple for sight of Rejala. There, at the front row of benches, a cluster of richly dressed women sitting with clasped hands and heads bowed in supplication. The princess and her ladies in waiting. Being a penitent, Sera was not allowed the dubious comfort of the wooden benches and moved to the space just in front of the first row where sinners might kneel and beg mercy of the god. She settled before the group of women, taking her accustomed position. Behind her, she heard one lady in waiting whisper to another in tones loud enough to reach her ears but no further.

“How unfortunate that his majesty, king Leron has chosen to leave for Ludas on the morrow. Our lady will surely miss Alsansir.”

“Yes. How unfortunate.”

Sera’s eyes snapped open. So that was it. Had King Leron heard of his wife’s visit to Dante’s cell? Was that what prompted this early departure? Goddess, please let

Rejalla's men have gotten the keys.

"I suppose," the same lady who had spoken said. "That her majesty will have to accomplish all the tasks she hoped today, for there will be no further chance."

Sera took a breath. It was now then. There would be a sign. What sign? She lifted her eyes to scan the shadows beyond the naive, looking for Angelo. Would he come and watch her penance today? Goddess hope he had more important things to do.

She waited, so tense her jaw hurt from clenching. Time passed with painful slowness. There was a rustle of silk behind her. The ladies prepared to rise, reaching for cloaks. One brushed against Sera's back. A hand touched her shoulder, a voice whispered. "Don't you think you've prayed enough?" Then was gone.

Was she to leave with them? She rose to her feet, trailing out behind them, mixing with the lot of them as they paused at the end of the aisle to talk among themselves. A man cried out in rage in the last row, leaping at another who sat beside him. Blows were exchanged. The women squealed, clustering like a herd of frightened sheep against one another in their efforts to get away from the violence. Priests ran towards the combatants, Guards from the doors and from the interior of the temple did. A cloak was thrown over Sera's shoulders. Fingers grasped her hand and pulled her desperately out of the huddled women and along the back of the temple. She ran, caught sight of Rejalla's profile under a raised hood and made haste to lift her own. The Princess halted not far from the door they sought, lifting a hand to warn silence. The screams of the women at the front of the temple were loud enough to wake the dead. The door in front of them opened, and guards ran out, looking for the disturbance. They passed the two hooded women without a second glance. Rejalla and Sera slipped behind them and into the door.

Down the hall and to the door leading down the cellar. "They'll break up the fight and come back. We won't have time." Sera hissed.

"Trust me. There will be another diversion." She produced a key from under her cloak and inserted it into the lock. Sera grabbed a lantern from a hook on the wall and proceeded the princess down the stairs, through the basement and down the second flight. Almost to his cell. Rejalla inserted the key, turned it in the lock and pushed the door open. The two of them burst into the cell, alight with fear induced adrenaline.

And there Dante was, curled on his side against the wall, not moving. Not even

apparently conscious.

“Oh, goddess,” Rejalla cried.

Sera moaned. It had never occurred to her, that they might get this far and fail, merely because they couldn’t carry him out of the dungeon.

“Unlock the manacles.” She snapped at Rejalla, who looked as if she were about to start lamenting about his condition. She crouched beside him, as the Princess fumbled to insert the key in the locks about his wrists.

“Dante!” she cried. “Wake up.” She shook him. His lashes fluttered, but did not open. “Get up, Damnit.” A hard slap to his cheek and he groaned, turning his head. Rejalla had one hand free. He brought that to his face, half aware. How long had it been since they’d passed the guards? Three minutes? Five? When they went back up those stairs, would the guards be back at their station?

The other wrist was free, the chains hanging loose against the wall. She caught hold of his hand and hauled him upright. His eyes tried to focus on her, but there was a great deal of disorientation in their clouded depths. He half smiled at her, tried to reach out and touch her face. She would have nothing of it. She captured his face with her hands and hissed at him.

"Snap out of it! Goddamn you, snap out of it!"

“Sera.” The princess pleaded with her, eyes wide at the viscous tone in Sera’s voice.

“Get under his other arm.” Sera said, wedging a shoulder under his armpit and attempting to get him to his feet. Rejalla pulled from the other side. They all swayed. Goddess, he was going to be more than they could handle on the stairs unless he regained some semblance of lucidity. They staggered to the door, out into the hall and into blackness. Sera cursed.

“The lantern.” She pressed him against the wall, with Rejalla making sure he didn’t just slide to the floor and ran back for the light. She came back, ready to take his weight again, and he waved a hand weakly at her.

“Give me a second,” he murmured. “I’m okay -- just a little dizzy.”

“We don’t have a second.” She glared desperately. The princess, still under his arm, met her gaze with huge worried eyes. Sera pulled at him to get him to take the

support she offered.

“Is this -- an official escape?” he asked and she hated the weakness in his voice. Damn Angelo for doing this to him.

“Shut up.” She was out of breath already and imagining all the dire things that would happen if they were caught.

“Yes,” Rejalla said from his other side. “We have to hurry up the stairs before the guards come back. Oh, Goddess, I’m so glad you’re alive.”

“I don’t feel alive,” he muttered, then cursed when they reached the stairs and he saw the steep climb before them.

They began the ascent. He got stronger even as she seemed to lose stamina. They passed the first level and began to climb the last set of steps. Sera pressed her ear to the door at the top, listening for the sounds of guards talking. There was nothing. She urged Rejalla and Dante onward. Nothing in the hall but a faint acrid smell.

“Something’s burning.” She turned to look back at the Princess, who shrugged from her position under Dante’s arm, with an innocent look on her face. At the final door leading to the temple, Rejalla paused, extracting herself from Dante with what Sera was certain was a look of regret. She unfastened her cloak and underneath it there was another of similar color. The outer had seemed unusually long for her and was plain in color and ornamentation.

“Here.” She put it about his shoulders, her hands lingering at his throat as she fastened it. She stared up at him, lips trembling and cried. “Please be safe.”

“I saw your husband. He’s not good enough for you.”

Rejalla’s eyes welled with tears. Sera rolled her own eyes and expelled a gust of air. “We don’t have time for this.” She hissed, grabbed at his arm and hauled him towards the door and away from Rejalla. He followed her meekly enough, only stumbling a little. With the door open the smell of smoke was stronger. Everyone in the temple was crowded at the doors, looking outside. They crept along the edge of the wall until they reached the fringes of the crowd.

“What’s burning?” Sera whispered.

“My coach,” the Princess answered. “Oh.” She gasped, cringing back against Dante, her eyes fixed across the crowd of people. Sera followed her gaze and drew

breath herself. Captain Sinakha, with several guards in his wake stalked towards the disturbance. She glanced up at Dante, who was staring at the Basilica captain with hard, angry eyes, not bothering to hide his face at all. She jabbed an elbow in his side and he gasped, doubling in more pain than she had intended to give him. One remembered the bruises on his ribs and thought of cracked and broken bones. It was hard to recall that he did not at the moment have the power to heal the ills of his body.

“Through the crowd,” Rejalla whispered. “When you reach the steps, I’ll make certain Sinakha has other things on his mind. Just go quickly.”

Sera nodded. Dante was still holding his side. Impulsively Rejalla leaned over and kissed his mouth while his face was on a level with hers. “Good luck.”

Two hooded and cloaked figures slipped into the crowd, past guards with their attention fixed on a merrily burning coach at the bottom of the temple steps. Rejalla’s guard, along with temple guard were attempting to put it out. They parted from the anonymity of the crowd. Behind them, she heard Rejalla’s voice raised in consternation over the destruction of her carriage. Sera cast a quick glance over her shoulder and saw the Princess shaking a finger in the face of captain Sinakha.

Her arm in his, they reached the street, heading away from the temple at as fast a pace as he could manage and not draw attention. Her heart was beating so fast it felt liken to burst.

Free. He was free. She could hardly believe the feat had been accomplished. Laughter wanted to bubble up in her throat, but the rational fear that very soon his presence would be missed and the whole of the city set in arms because of it, kept her excitement to a low simmer. She pressed against his side, as much to lend her support as to revel in the feel of him.

Neither said a word until the temple was a block behind them, only its spires showing above the roofs of more common buildings.

“I don’t recall this part of the city.” The cowl put his face in shadow. A few strands of pale hair trailed out where it fastened at his throat.

“It wasn’t here last time you were. Thousands and thousands have come to live here since the Prophet came. The city grew to accommodate them.”

“When did he come?”

“Not long after -- after Galgaga was destroyed.”

“After I died, you mean?”

“Yes. He brought an army of followers. He said he had been told by the High God that Alsansir was to be the new home of the faithful.”

“He lied.”

She peered up at his profile, a glimpse of straight nose and sensuous lips. He took in the whole of the new city; the quaint shops, the cobbled streets, the industrious folk who lived and worked here.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” she admitted quietly. “I used to think he was a good man.”

“So did he. Maybe he still does. It doesn’t make it so.” There was rancor in his tone. A loathing that made his voice tremble and his fingers tighten on her arm. “Where are we going, Sera?”

An excellent question. Her mind had been so intent on getting away from the vicinity of the temple that she just walked blindly. Rejalla and she had talked about ways out of the city last night, but had not come up with an exact plan. They had both leaned towards the notion of using the river as a means of escape. Go by boat up to Ludas where the hunt would not be as strong. Where Rejalla had connections and might be able to help them eastward where Gerad’s forces were.

“To the docks. We’ll find a boat to take us up river.”

“Find one quick,” he said. “He’ll figure it out soon and be after me.”

“Boats leave all the time for Ludas. Every hour.”

He stared ahead of them, down the road where a troop of royal guard marched down the center of the street. Even while she gaped, mind momentarily blanking, he veered her into the shadow of an awning, turning his head to look into the window of the shop that sported it.

“I hate this,” he muttered, staring at a display of butchered meats.

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“Having to hide from mere foot soldiers. God, I want these things OFF.” He wrenched at the bracelets in frustration.”

“We’ll find a wizard in Ludas who can break the spell,” she promised.

He sniffed, glancing down at her as if she were the greatest of fools. "If I can't break it, do you think some warlock for hire can?"

"You're on the inside." She said. "You're not supposed to be able to break it."

"You don't understand these wards." He told her sullenly. "I don't understand them."

"C'mon." She pulled at his arm when the guard had passed down the street.

"Maybe Gerad or Kheron can do it, when we find them."

"She's with him?" he asked.

Sera pressed her lips, a tingle of -- something -- making her back go stiff. It was not, she told herself, jealousy. It was more a regret that any chance Gerad might have had to win Kheron affection would be banished once the Lady knew Dante was alive. It was concern for Gerad that made her brows beetle and her teeth clench.

"Last I heard. She was going to help him hold the eastern boarder. She could be anywhere now." She let go of his arm and crossed her own under the folds of her cloak.

"You said she was still sad. Over me."

"Did I?" Sera asked airily.

He lifted a brow at her, ghost of a smile touching his lips. He did not ask her more.

The smell of the docks announced the river long before they came within sight of its sluggish, brown waves. Vessels of every size rocked gently at dock. A few tall-masted ocean going vessels among a crowd of squatter river boats and fishing tubs. They needed to find out what vessel was soon to leave port for up river. She asked several wondering sailors, who seemed of the opinion that the river boat *Bilge Rat*, was very soon to head out of dock and make for northern ports.

"How appropriate," Dante muttered, when they stood on the pier below the squat, dingy boat, watching her sparse crew scurry about the decks in preparation to depart. It stank. The stench was palatable and nauseating. There were crates of live animals on the decks. Chickens, pigs, sheep, all crowded into intolerably small spaces. One hated to imagine what was crammed below decks. If the situation had not been so desperate, time not so much against them, she might have suggested they find another ship to attempt passage on.

The captain of the *Bilge Rat* came out to meet them, when they walked up the much

patched plank, when what might have been his first mate scurried to tell him that they had intruders on the deck.

“What by the fewking, puss filled sores of a dock whore, are you doing on my boat? I paid my freight tax, by the wilting tits of me mum. What more do you want?”

Sera blinked. Dante lifted both brows at the colorful imagery the man’s words brought to mind.

“We’re not tax collectors, sir,” Sera began.

“Then get the fewking hell off my boat. We’ve got fewking work to do.”

“We -- we were hoping that we might buy passage down the river.”

The captain gawked at her, his tiny, miss-matched eyes squinting to see under the shadow of her hood. He was as tall as she, and carried the weight of a man Dante’s height. It rested mostly in the great round stomach that protruded from the short, incredibly dirty vest he wore. It was hard to differentiate the smell of his boat, from that emanating from his pores. Sera tried hard not to gag.

“This ain’t no fewking passenger vessel. Have you got yer eyes in yer arse? This is a cargo boat, missy.”

“We’re in a dreadful hurry, and we were told you’re about to leave port now.”

“Fewking gossip mongers.”

“Listen, you repulsive little toad.” Dante leaned forward, a good foot taller than the captain. “It is quite clear that this boat is not fit for human presence, but let us assume for the sake of argument that the both of us are gluttons for punishment and wish to indulge ourselves in the worst, most deplorable stench we can find -- that being your filthy tub -- what do you care if we’ve gold to pay and no particular problem with vermin and disease?”

The captain stared at him. Sera tried to smile, but his smell turned the expression sour. It occurred to her that she might not have enough money on her person to tempt the smarmy little man. She had not left home anticipating this. She had not left home saying a word to Father. She had not even seen him. A twinge of guilt fluttered in her stomach over that.

“How much gold?” The captain finally asked, greed overcoming his aversion to their presence. She reached for the pouch at her belt. It felt distressingly light. She

emptied the contents into her palm. The captain laughed scornfully. “There’s not enough there for me to ship yer fewking pigs, much less yer lofty selves.”

Dante glowered, throwing back his cloak to free his arms, as if he had plans of taking the grimy little man by the neck and forcing a passage from him. Something clinked faintly in the cloak. The captain’s eyes lit and he leered at Dante.

“I knows the sound of gold tumbling, when I hears it. What do you have there?”

Dante looked down at himself. Felt inside the cloak and found within an inner pocket a pouch that was by far more impressive than the one Sera had produced. It was quite full of gold. Enough gold to tide even a princess over. Bless Rejalla, even if she had kissed Dante.

“Oohh, that’s enough,” the Bilge Rat’s captain assured them.

“In your dreams,” Sera snapped, snatching the bag out of Dante’s hands. He had a decided lack of respect for the value of money, very seldom having to pay for anything in his role as conqueror and wizard. He either took what he wanted, or people gave it to him in hopes of gaining his favor. She counted out five coins and gingerly placed them in the dirty palm of the captain. “This is what we’ll pay. It’s too much, but we are in a hurry.”

Thick fingers closed over the gold. Beady eyes shifted, to watch her secret the pouch on her person. He waved a hand towards the rear of the boat. “You can sleep below deck with the crew, if you don’t mind close company.” His eyes passed up and down Sera lewdly.

“We’ll sleep on the deck,” Dante told him.

The captain shrugged. “Suit yerselves. One bowl of gruel a day is all the fare we have on the Bilge Rat.”

“And wonderful stuff it is, I’m sure,” Dante muttered, when the captain abandoned them to yell at his crewmen to toss off lines and push the boat out from dock. They stood on the shifting deck, while the five or so men that manned the boat, hurried to do their jobs. There was a pile of canvas and coiled rope aft. Extra sail. It seemed by far a more inviting place than the horrors that no doubt existed below decks. They made their way to that simple haven and Dante sat down with a sigh, favoring his right side. There was some slight privacy here, with the stacks of rope on one side and the side of the boat on

the other.

Sera sat down next to him, watching the shore begin to recede.

“Are you all right?” She asked, when he lay back and grunted in the process.

“Wonderful.” He shut his eyes, folding his hands behind his head. The sunlight on his face revealed bruises under the dirt. There was a nasty cut above one dark brow. She brushed his bangs back to see it, and he slitted his eyes to look up at her. She frowned at him.

“Do you have broken ribs?”

“Probably.”

“I’m sorry I jabbed you in the temple.”

“You should be.” He shut his eyes again. She sniffed, shifting the cloak to get a look at his side. He let her do it without protest. A great dark bruise marred the skin over his ribs. She ran her fingers lightly over muscle and bone and felt him shiver reflexively. Under the dirt and bruising, his smooth skin was tanned an overall light gold. There was a beautiful, lean symmetry to his body, battered or not, that drew her eye like a magnet. It had been so long since she had seen him in the sunlight, in anything but the dark of a dungeon cell, that she had to stare, while she had the chance and his eyes were closed. The sheer intensity of his presence, his beauty, was made more bearable by the blood.

She took her hands off him, flushing, shivering and crossed her arms under her cloak. Three breaths, four and she got her erratic pulse under control. He always did that to her. Always made her have to jealously guard her self-control. She tried to take her mind off him for the moment and worry about the future. Three, four days travel by river to Ludas. Thanks to Rejalla they had the gold to purchase horses and supplies. It would be easy to reach the eastern mountains. The only problem she could foresee was missing Gerad on his way to Alsansir. He was probably already on route. He would find out soon enough what been happening and hopefully figure out that they would try and reach him.

The boat settled down to a steady rocking on the waves, caught a wind in its sails and fought against the seaward current that wished to drag it southwest. The wind blew the stench towards the bow, and left the aft blessedly free of the foul odor.

“Father’s going to be worried,” she said quietly. He didn’t respond. She looked down at him and gauged by his deep, even breaths that he slept. Good, she thought. He

needed a peaceful, safe rest. She might have sought one herself, if the occasional speculative glances of the river men had not set her nerves on edge. She braced her back against a coil of rope and watched the river pass by.

* * *

It was full dark when Dante opened his eyes. For a moment, he thought he was still in the cell and that the figure creeping towards him in the darkness was Angelo come to deliver more of his tortures. But there was a strong breeze and it carried the smell of fresh water with it and a hint of animal dung and the figure, when he opened his eyes and looked up at it, froze, like a thief caught in the act. Most likely it was. He remembered the boat and the swarthy crew and smiled up at the ragged, skinny man who crouched a few feet from the bed of canvas and rope they had made.

“Just -- just fetching a bit of rope.” The river man whispered, looked frantically about for a bundle of rope to grab and scurried off into the shadows of the deck. Dante relaxed, as comfortable as he could recall being in -- a very long time. There was softness and warmth against his side. There was, now that he was awake enough to think about it, a hand resting across his chest and a knee tucked up over his thigh. Sera snuggled close, her face hidden by her hood, the folds of her cloak draped over the both of them. The air was cool, tinged by winter’s fast approach. That didn’t bother him. At least it was open air. At least there was a sky over his head and stars that gleamed faintly in the darkness. There had been no stars in hell.

He did not know why he was here, alive and in the mortal world again. He did not know which power of hell, if it had been a power of hell at all and not some other indefinable source, had thrust him out of the Pit. He’d tried often enough himself, to no avail. The boundaries of hell were difficult to pierce. It worried him, the not knowing. It hinted of some plan that was not his own. It hinted at himself being a pawn in some other power’s game. He did not enjoy being a pawn. He frowned up at the stars, wishing for answers that would not come.

All he got was a small sigh from Sera and her shifting against him, restless in her dreams. He rested his cheek against the top of her head, valuing her peace and her rest

more than the physical urge to discover the secrets of her body. Though she sorely tempted him with the warmth of her thigh across his and the slight curling of her nails on the skin of his chest, like that of a cat kneading in its contentment. As if at the moment he would be able, with his ribs complaining at every breath and his stamina surely far below its normal range. And all the other little reminders he had in body and mind of the Prophet's regard. Oh there was surely an account there that would be hell to pay when he got his power back. He dared Teo and all of the forces of Alsansir and its southern alliances to stand in his way.

But, for the moment, that had to wait. For the moment, he was at the disadvantage. All he had was Sera and her optimistic hope of reaching Gerad. He would not endanger her with his notions of revenge. He hardly had the heart to tell her that her messenger had never reached the Nightwalker. That Angelo, the schemer, the master planner, would guess their goal and set forces in motion to intercept them. East was not the wisest course to follow, despite the help that resided there. But he would wait and see what Ludas brought before he suggested another route.

Thirteen

The *Bilge Rat* drifted into the port of Ludas four days after leaving Alsansir. Her crew was not sorry to see their passengers gone. Dante could be intimidating. He could be arrogant and he was feeling close enough to his old self to excel at both. They walked onto the docks of Ludas, which at one time had been greater by far than those of Alsansir, but now were a shadow of their former glory. The city had never recovered from its siege, some seven years past, by the Dark Brethren. Its walls were pitted and gouged. Some of its buildings still the crumbled wrecks they had been left after the siege. It was a city that had lost its heart and only recently, since the marriage of its prince by default to Alsansir's princess, had moneys started flowing in abundance towards restorations. A fair deal of that money came from Alsansir and Teo's wish to see his sister city a strong ally should the need arise. The merchant ships still sailed up the river to Ludas, but nowadays they left the best of their goods at the ports of Alsansir.

Sera and Dante walked about the docks, listening to rumors, buying a bit of supplies here and bit there. Something was most definitely astir. The guard that walked the docks was plentiful and the merchants wary. When they asked one sword smith, from whom Dante purchased a blade and scabbard, what was afoot, the man professed to have no clear knowledge. He only knew that as of the day before, the guard had been swarming over all the city. Not good news. A messenger on horseback, with fresh mounts waiting at all the road houses between here and Alsansir could have reached Ludas a day or more before them.

“We need horses,” Sera said when they walked from the shop, hugging herself nervously while Dante examined the sword he had bought.

“I need decent clothing.”

One could hardly argue with that. Under the fine cloak he was clad in the filthiest of blood stained rags. She gestured to a common clothier that catered to sailors and the working men of the docks. It did not suit him. He found a richer shop a street past the docks. The proprietor sniffed disdainfully at him when he walked in, shoeless, dirty and with tangled unwashed hair.

“Perhaps you’ve wondered into the wrong shop. The Good Samaritan’s Second Hand is a street over.”

Dante fixed an icy gaze on the man and purred. “Perhaps you’d like to spend the very brief remainder of your days licking the dung from the soles of my boots?”

The clothier blanched, wisely not remarking that Dante had no boots to speak of.

“We’ve money to pay,” Sera offered, embarrassed. Dante cast her a withering glance at her attempts to soothe an awkward situation. Ignoring the shopkeeper, he began shuffling through the racks of clothing. Found a pleated black linen tunic and tossed it into Sera’s keeping while he continued to browse. He had always had a taste for fashion. He was generally quite spectacularly garbed. He had gone to great troubles to learn and perfect a spell of Sartor. Or for lack of a better word, tailoring out of thin air. Kheron and Kastel thought it was the most ridiculous and egotistical waste of power ever to grace a summoning. A refined Sartor spell took as much power, when one got right down to it, as a highly powerful destructive spell in any other self respecting wizard’s arsenal. One was calling forth the power to creating clothing out of thin air, after all. It took a fair

amount of concentration and fair portion of energy. It had taken him two decades to master it. He enjoyed it more than any spell to his name. It was quite better than the trivial task of shopping for one's outfits.

He found a leather vest with silver inlay along the inside edges that he rather liked and Sera got that too. A pair of soft leather trousers, dyed black, followed, then a thick black belt with an ornate silver buckle and a long black cloak, (obviously the color of the one Rejalla had given him did not go with the dark choice of his new clothing). Sera piled his choices on the counter while he sat down on the wooden bench by the shoe and boot selection to size boots to his feet. He found a pair of high black boots with knee guards and pulled them on, stood up and stomped about in them before whirling on the morose shopkeeper and stabbing an imperious finger at the man.

"A bathhouse. Preferably one where they change the water on occasion."

"Two doors down," the man said grudgingly. "They've even girls to wash your back."

Dante lifted a brow in interest. "Perfect. Pay the man, Sera."

Sera sniffed, asked the shopkeeper what was owed and reluctantly counted out what she thought was an outrageously high price for the purchase. Dante was already half out the door and she hurriedly grabbed the bundle the somewhat mollified clothier had packaged for her.

"Girls to wash his back," she muttered to herself. She followed him into the bathhouse where he was already demanding a clean, hot bath of the old woman who ran it. He cast her a look when she leaned on the counter beside him.

"Care to join me?"

"No, I'm quite clean enough, thank you. Besides, I don't like girls washing my back."

"Your loss." He grinned at her, amused by her pique. The old woman returned to guide him to one of the bathing rooms, claiming that a girl would be in shortly. Sera tossed him his bundle of new clothing and proclaimed that she would wait for him outside.

When the old woman came back, claiming that Dante had told her Sera would pay, Sera grumbled and dug in the pouch for some of the lesser coins she had gotten in change

from the clothier. Her fingers trembled on an extra piece of silver.

“Do you have any fat, ugly wash girls?” She asked hopefully. The old woman lifted a brow with interest. “Newly married, huh?”

Sera blushed. “No!”

“Ah, then you have even more reason to be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“For an extra coin or two, I could find a plain faced girl to attend your man.”

“He’s not my man,” Sera muttered, digging the coins out anyway and placing them in the wrinkled palm. Cackling with glee, the old woman went off to fetch the proper girl. Sera sniffed, crossed her arms under her breast, then half smiled.

* * *

It was a thoroughly unenjoyable bath. Oh, the water was clean and stingingly hot and the wooden tub was a good enough size to accommodate even his long legs, but the wash girl who lumbered in was pig faced and almost his own weight. Her giggle sounded like a rat in a trap and her hands had the tendency to wonder to parts of him that had no desire to have her hands upon them. He came away from it clean of the stench of the Prophet’s dungeon, though the repulsive scent of the man’s presence in his head still lingered.

He shooed the cow away when she attempted to help him dry off and dress, accomplishing that task himself. He felt incredibly better in relatively decent clothing and clean, if not damp and tangled hair about his shoulders. He wished for a mirror to gauge the fit of the clothing, but found Sera’s and the old woman out front’s reactions to his reappearance assurance enough that he was at least somewhat back to his old self. The old woman lifted both brows in surprise at the difference of the man who came out of her baths from the man who had gone in. Sera just stared at him, then blinked and caught herself and promptly looked away.

It helped his bruised ego. He caught Sera about the shoulders and ushered her to the door without a word to the gawking washhouse mistress. They walked down the wooden sidewalk in the midst of mid-day pedestrian traffic. The smells of foods from venders

and taverns preparing for lunchtime clientele drifted tantalizingly among the passerby, luring folk to their origins. After four days of the *Bilge Rat's* gruel, the aromas were overcoming. Even Sera could not complain overly much about putting off yet a while longer the search for horses and supplies.

There was a tavern not far down the sidewalk the placard of which boasted a fine and varied menu. It apparently lived up to its bragging for the main room was filled with patrons. A sweet voiced female minstrel played for coin near the hearth. Dante jostled another set of customers who had been waiting for a spot near the warmth of the fire out of the way and appropriated the but recently empty bench for himself and Sera. There was grumbling, but the fat little merchant and his fancy boy were not willing to argue overly with the dangerous look Dante fixed them with. He ordered a great selection of food from the waitress that passed by the table, while Sera rested her elbow on the tabletop, shutting her eyes as if exhausted. He had a moment of concern, then noticed that she was humming along with the popular song the minstrel was singing and it was no sudden faint. He glanced at the minstrel himself. A shapely enough form, with a fall of straight dark hair obscuring the face. She had the voice of an angel -- or a devil, depending on who's view you took. She also, he noted, had the tattoo of a slave on the back of the hand that held the neck of her lute. Not a terribly common practice this far south, slavery. It was more a northern and northeastern custom. There was a man sitting behind her, nursing a mug of ale, who kept a close eye on the coins tossed at the feet of the singer. Her master then. He almost turned his eye away, no longer interested in either master or slave, when he noted the rune signs sown into the lapel of the man's vest. And upon closer inspection the ornate and gaudy rings of warding about his fingers. A hedge wizard or a warlock for hire. No proper wizard would parade about with such evident signs of the trade on his person. And obviously this one was not that good, since he had to rely on the income of his slave.

Dante sniffed in disdain and turned his attention to the mug of ale and the basket of hot bread that the harried waitress sat before them.

"What?" Sera asked him, sharp enough to have caught his contempt.

"Nothing. Just a hedge wizard pretending jewels and rune signs make him more of a power than he is."

“Where?” Her eyes grew curious. He indicated the general direction of the man with his chin, hands full of ale and bread.

“Oh. I wonder if he might help us with the wards?”

“Not likely.” He snorted, but she was up from the bench and scurrying around the table in complete disregard of his opinion. The platter of food came about the same time she came back with the hedge wizard in tow. The man was greasy and imperious, with eyes that plainly told of how high a regard he held himself over the rest of the world. Dante ignored him, more interested in the roast chicken.

“I’m told you need the services of a wizard.” The man finally said, after enduring Dante’s lack of notice for several long breaths.

“Dante.” Sera leaned over his shoulder pleadingly. “He can at least try.”

He glanced askew at her, holding a greasy bird leg between his fingers. Large brown eyes begged for compliance, but the twist of her mouth suggested she was about to become petulant if he refused her.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Let him look at the damned things, for what little good it will do.”

“Not here,” the hedge wizard said, leaning down to whisper the warning. “The common folk aren’t as tolerant of works of magic as they used to be. Outside.”

Dante waved the drumstick under the hedge wizard’s nose. “When I finish eating. I’ll not abandon a good meal just to listen to your drivel.”

The man sniffed, offended. “I can see you have little respect for the powers of the arcane.”

Dante half laughed, turning his attention back to his lunch. Sera said soft words the man, after which he went back to his minstrel, then she sat down next to him and reached for a slice of bread.

“You could stand to practice a little more civility, you know,” she complained. “Being nice to people will get you further than rudeness.”

“I don’t have to be nice to people and they either get over it or they complain about it and end their miserable lives then and there.”

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. “You are so full of yourself.”

When the last of the food was gone, she pulled him out onto the street, where the

hedge mage waited. His minstrel stood against the shadows of the wall, lute strapped across her back, head down. She never looked up at them when her master beckoned them into the privacy of the alley next to the tavern.

“She says you have wards to be broken,” the man said, when they were alone in the dim alley. “Let me see them.”

Dante didn’t like the tone of command. He sneered down his nose at the man, then held out his wrists. The hedge wizard pretended concentration as he reached out and touched the bands. With a simple ward, it would be a matter of entering the layers of magic with one’s mind, finding the weak spots, if there were any and fraying the knot that held the whole of the ward together. It was not an uncomplicated task, but easy enough if one had the patience for it. This hedge mage might well have been adept at unworking simple wards. Dante already knew the things fastened to his wrists were no simple workings.

The man’s eyes snapped open and he snatched his hands back as though burnt. He mouthed a curse or a prayer and looked at Dante in shock.

“By the goddess, what are those?”

Dante lifted a lazy brow. “Why, I thought you were the expert on matters arcane?”

The slave girl appeared in the mouth of the alley and the hedge mage’s eyes narrowed in indignation. “Lily, I told you never to interrupt.”

“Master, Holy Swords come.”

The mage’s eyes widened in dismay. “They’ve become a damned inconvenience since the Prophet’s teachings have spread.”

Dante wasn’t listening. He was grabbing Sera’s wrist and hauling her down the alley towards the open, back door of the building next to the Tavern. Women at laundry looked up in surprise at their entrance, complaining at their passage. Past tables where children and more women folded and pressed clothes, and into the front of the laundry shop, where he pulled her out the door onto the sidewalk, one arm about her shoulders as if they were any other couple out for a stroll. Once glance over his shoulder and he saw a troop of perhaps ten Holy Swords, the knights of the Goddess, stop by the entrance to the tavern they had taken lunch at. They had stopped the hedge mage and his minstrel, and the man was talking animatedly.

They turned a corner and put the holy knights behind them. Sera's face was pale with fright and her fingers clutched at his arm.

"How did they find us?" she hissed. "We've been in Ludas two -- three hours at most."

"I don't know." He wondered if the wards on his wrists might allow the man who had put them there to track him. Dismal, dismal thought, that.

"We need to get out of here and on the road." She took a breath to collect herself, disengaging her fingers from his arm and pacing ahead with the look that said Sera was in the midst of plotting.

"We need horses and supplies, but I don't know whether we've the time to risk buying the latter." She glanced back at him for opinion and he shrugged noncommittally. The little details had never been his strong suit.

"Horses first." She finalized her decision and stopped a passerby to ask where horses might be purchased. The bazaar four blocks down from the pier, they were told.

They made haste to that open air animal auction area, where every manner of beast was penned and sold for slaughter, reproduction, work or leisure. She let him choose the animals, while she nervously fingered their dwindling supply of gold. A fair portion of what they had left purchased two horses and tack. At the appearance, whether normal or not of city guard in the crowd that strolled through the bazaar, they decided to make straightway for the bridge that led over the river to the eastern side of Ludas. From there on there was nothing but unwall'd town separating them from their road eastward towards the mountains and Gerad.

One bridge was all that was left after the Dark Brethren had ripped through Ludas. There were the remains of three others protruding from the waters of the river. One left standing to accommodate all the easterly passage from the city. One that was crowded with carts and people and herds of animals. And one which stood heavily guarded by men in armor at station houses on either shore. Guards milled about the western shore, city guard and few Holy Swords.

They pulled their horses up across the unkempt garden square that separated town from river and bridge and watched. Sera moaned miserably.

"What do we do? We'll never pass them unnoticed."

“Did you think he’d let me go east to Gerad? Did you believe he wouldn’t figure out that was the first place we’d go?”

She cast desperate eyes his way. “It’s insane that he would go to all this trouble.”

He didn’t tell her why. He didn’t think she needed to hear it then, when her pulse beat so fast in her panic that her breathing was short and ragged.

“Not east then,” he said, and reined his mount about.

“There’s nothing for us on the west side of the River. Nothing but the Great Forests and the western mountains.”

“He’ll have every force he can muster out to stop us reaching the moutons and Gerad. It’ll take him time to shift them westward.”

Hooves clattered on cobblestone, people moved out of the path of large equine bodies.

“Stop!” Someone cried out behind them. Sera turned her head. He half did before a bolt of impact energy passed over his shoulder and shattered the corner of the building directly in front of him. He cursed the wards for shutting out awareness of the spell-casting before it was too late. Only the ineptness of the mage who had thrown it had saved him from a nasty mishap. The horses seemed to have a better sense of it than he did, for they screamed and reared in their fright. Sera cried out, her eyes wide and he thought she sensed the gathering of a new spell, she must have, for *he* felt a tiny trickle of power being summoned.

Sera’s mouth worked and she lifted one hand and the impact spell met and rebounded off a shield of her forming.

“Send it back at them,” he cried. And her frantic eyes only darted to him, before she kicked her horse into motion, not casting the Rebound spell at the attackers. His own horse followed hers, frantic not to be left in the eye of danger.

“Damnit, you could have taken them out with their own spell,” he cried, angry at having to be defended by her and wishing hurt on someone for the indignity.

“I don’t know that spell,” she cried back.

“What do they teach you in the church?”

She didn’t answer. The horses pounded down the narrow streets. People cried out and scattered from their path. There were the sounds of distant pursuit behind them.

Damn, damn, damn, someone had fixed a location spell on them -- or him, and passed the magical scent on to the powers that be in Ludas. There was no other way coincidence worked so thoroughly against them. No other way they could have been found both at the tavern and at the bridge to the east.

They fled through the city streets, only getting turned about once or twice before they saw the western wall. There was a gate that guards were in the process of closing, to the consternation of the travelers waiting to get in and out of the city. The horn that blared a hollow cadence in the background noise of living, breathing city and the exertion of the horses under them, must have been a notice to seal Ludas.

Dante pulled out his sword, plowed through the people crowded about the half closed gates and made a swipe at the guard attempting to pull the gates shut. The man rolled, more intent on saving his life than closing the gates. Other's came running, weapons out. Sera was through the narrow opening before they could fight their way through the panicking crowd. He followed her out, and blade still in hand galloped down the dirt road that sloped from the city. A hundred shanty huts lined the pock marked way, its hollow eyed inhabitants coming out from their shabby dwellings to see what the furor at the gates was about. Staring in dull curiosity at the riders thundering away from Ludas.

The animals could not hold the all out gallop for long and were leathered and breathing hard by the time Ludas had receded in the distance. There was the thin line of a forest to the northwest. They had to veer off from the main road to get there, but he wanted anonymity.

"Sera there's a trace spell on us. Maybe me. We need to find it and cancel it. Do you know how?"

She stared at him in dismay, her breath as ragged as her mount's. She did not have to tell him she did not know the ways of that spell. He saw it in her face.

"I'll teach it to you," he promised. "In the wood."

"We haven't the time. They'll be after us."

"They've no need to hurry if they've a trace on me, girl. They can find us any time."

He spurred his horse towards the edge of forest and the animal put on a valiant burst

of speed. Into the shadows and the buffered silence of the wood. Past the fledgling undergrowth of the fringe and under the canopy of older trees. He swung down and when she stared down in hesitation, wanting very badly to ride on, he reached up and pulled her out of the saddle. A twinge of stubbornness passed her face at the treatment and he shook by the shoulders to impress the seriousness of his intent.

“A spell of tracing is imbued in a person or a thing. It clings to the essence and is a beacon the caster, letting him know where ever the object of that spell is at. You’ve got to find the spell and then banish it.”

“How?”

It was simple enough. It did not require tremendous power or lengthy study. He mouthed the words with her, again and again, until she had them verbatim. Coached her on the wanting of the spell of the need to find the essence of magic that clung to a body. She ran her hands in the air down the length of his body. Up again and paused, fingers trembling at his hands -- at the cursed bracelets on his wrists.

“I think -- it’s there, on the wards.”

Damn. He had feared it might be on that which he could not shed and that which she could not tamper with. He whirled and paced a few lengths, thinking furiously. What could they do to hamper the spell? The wards were designed to keep his magic power directed inwards. Painfully inwards as he had discovered. Perhaps she might be able to cloud the issue. Not banish the spell, but fog it so the trace was unclear. An outside power might be able to do that, at least temporarily.

He needed to concoct a variation of a spell that she could use. It would take time. They might as well be putting distance between themselves and Ludas while he pondered. He motioned her back into the saddle and they rode deeper into the forest.

Fourteen

They lived across the mountains in the wastelands, the darklings. They had always dwelled there, for as long as living memory could recall, living nomadically, sparring amongst each other as well as the civilized folk who lived on the western side of the

ridges. They were fodder for those powerful enough to command them into armies and had served those with little conscience for the destructive path they cut through the tame lands of the west and the south. Dante had used them off and on for several centuries of subjugation. The Dark Brethren had appropriated their dubious loyalty in the years after Dante's first death.

Gerad had never liked the stench of them. Or the bestial way they fought. There was no skill to the darklings, no grace of battle. Merely brutal, animal force that was fine for a front line charge where one expected the forerunners to be shredded, but held little more appeal to a man who had spent his life trying to attain the perfect skill, the perfect swordsmanship, the perfect posture in battle. He had never commanded the darklings in battle, that had been Kastel and Kheron, and he felt no particular remorse in slaughtering them when they attempted to cross the mountains back into the civilized lands of the western continent.

He had slaughtered a fair amount of them in the past year. He and his Nightwalkers and the forces that Kheron had lent him when she journeyed with him to the mountains. They were still stretched thin, with five hundred miles of passable mountains to patrol and so very many small hamlets and villages left unprotected in all that rugged terrain. More often than not, they found the darklings who had slipped across the border by the trail of dead they left in their wake.

There was an orphanage in the lee of the central palisade where he held his command post. Kheron had built it not long after her arrival in the steep wooded lands of the eastern mountains. She had ridden with him and seen the faces of those children and women bereft of village and families to protect them and she had gained purpose to her life. She strove with single-minded determination to bring those helpless wounded ones under her wing and teach them that they were not without hope. That they could, with the proper help, care for themselves in the outside world.

With those children, orphans of an army she had once led, she was happy. She smiled when they had healed enough mentally and physically to laugh, and Gerad smiled with her. She whirled into a mad rage when she came upon the murderers and none withstood her wrath. And Gerad took vengeance with her. He was content, because she, to a certain degree was. When she laughed with him, or smiled at one of his wry

witticisms, his heart soared. He did not expect more of her, because he did not know if she were capable of more, so he took what she offered. He took her friendship, which she had always given and cherished it.

Life was good. There were enemies to banish, that well deserved it and a woman near at hand which he held in highest regard.

It was only one day, deep into fall, when snow had already begun to sprinkle down upon the evergreen forests of the Eastern Mountains, that he had a sense of premonition. He was not generally one to foresee the future. It was not a magic he possessed. His magics were more guttural and earthy and not at all the spectacular things that Kheron commanded. But he felt something all the same. He sat at camp with ten of his nightwalkers, four days south of his main compound and quite suddenly thought of Sera. She drifted into his mind and he shivered, for dread omen accompanied her ghostly presence.

All day he rode with the thoughts that something was wrong with Sera nagging at his mind. By the evening, after he and his men had found the band of darklings they had been tracking, the sense of wrongness was overwhelming.

He sent two of his men back to the main fort to tell Kheron where he had gone and with the rest he sat out southward, towards the green meadows of Alsansir.

Four days journey and he reached the main eastern trade road and stopped at one of the various road stations to resupply. The guards manning the post were unprepared for his visit. They were nervous and wary at the presence of the Lord Protector of the East and his nightwalkers in their barracks. They were quick enough to fulfill his requests for fresh mounts and enough supplies to tide them over for a journey to Alsansir.

It was only after another day's travel that a band of men met them on the road. Armed holy guard and several men in priestly robes.

"My lord Gerad." A priest held up his hand in greeting, and Gerad lifted thick brows at the obvious foreknowledge of his passage. From the look of men and horses they had ridden hard to intercept them on this road.

"You head down the road to Alsansir?" The priest asked. It was an obvious destination, since nothing else of import existed beside this road but Alsansir, seventy odd miles to the south.

“I do. Have priests taken to surveying travelers nowadays? What business is it of yours?”

“Business of the regency of the southern alliance, my lord.” The priest replied smoothly, though the armed guard at his back showed signs of quiet unease. Rightly so, confronting Gerad. Even though their numbers were greater than his, there could be no doubt in any of their minds where the greater force lay, and that within the well oiled hilt of the great sword protruding from a scabbard at his back.

“What business, prey tell?”

“A delicate foray into truce with the bandit kingdoms of the west coast. His majesty, King Teo has invited the seven bandit kings into Alsansir with assurances of no hostility. Your presence in Alsansir, my lord, would surely be perceived as a threat and might shatter all hope of alliance.”

“Alliance with a bunch of thieves and pirates? Why is he bothering?” Gerad snorted in disbelief. “Better to rally forces and send them all to join their ancestors. They’ll only stab him in the back when the chance arises.”

“Be that as it may, my most gracious lord Gerad.” The priest made a sign of blessing in the air before him. “The King asks that you, nor any other force that might be perceived as a gathering of might, heed his wishes and stay away from Alsansir until the parlay is over.”

“And when might that be?”

“Send a messenger in a week or so to see. One never knows with political bargaining.”

Gerad scanned the faces of the men before him. Grim faced guards and the passive faced priests, both of whom wore about their persons the symbols of the High God. The new religion. Since when did the king use priests as his messengers?

“All right. My business can wait.”

There was a visible exhalation of relief among the men at arms. The priest smiled sweetly. “If there was business you had to attend, you might conduct it through me. I return to the city in a few days time.”

“No. Nothing of import.” With a sharp motion he directed his men to turn about. They rode away from the holy guard without a backward glance.

“If they’ve sense, they’ll follow a ways to make sure I kept to my word,” he told his commander when they’d gone a goodly distance. Go back to the compound and tell Lady Kheron that something is up in Alsansir. Tell her, if her curiosity is aroused, to use discretion.”

“And where will you be, lord Gerad?” The commander asked with the air of a man who knew very well the answer to his question.

“Alsansir.”

“Alone?”

“Of course. I would hate to bring a force of arms that might chase the bandits from the walls of that fair city. They’ll never know I was there, my friend. Now go and deliver my message to the lady.”

He veered sharply from the road towards a copse of trees that would hide his divergence from any following them. If he had felt a wrongness before it was ten fold now. There was most certainly something afoot in the deep south.

* * *

The last time Lily had seen her family was when she was four. They had stood on the thin, muddy road beside the thatch hut that had been her home, watching as the slaver they had sold her to for rice and flour to last them another hard winter, carried her away. She was never certain if she cherished the memory or hated it. But she kept it close to her heart, for it was all she had of who she had been.

She was no one now, because slaves had no identity. None but at the whim of their masters. Fifteen years a slave and she had forgotten what it was like to be free. It hardly mattered anymore. One became used to the submission. She had a skill and a passion that made her valuable. She had the gift of song and the power to sway men’s moods with her voice. It was, she had been told on occasion more than a natural talent. It had the taste of magic, her song and her ability to latch onto the mood of her audience. Her first master had sold her when she was eight to a traveling company of performers, where she had learned instruments and dance and the secrets of goading coin from an audience. Then she had been bought by a lord, who had seen her perform and coveted her for his

own. She had been a lovely, dark young girl then, thirteen winters old. She had sung for him and warmed his bed and never once cried for it. It was the lot of a slave. Her final master, the mage Vernon, had sensed the magic her voice carried and bartered for her, trading his magical services - - the lord's son at the time had been cursed with impotence and the lord feared ever having grandchildren to which he might hand down his lands. She had serious doubts whether Vernon had actually cured the impotence or only made it seem so, for the morning after the lord's son had successfully bedded his wife, Vernon had made haste from his lands with Lily in tow.

For two years she had been the slave of a hedge mage, earning more often than not more coin from her song than he did plying his arcane trade. It had gotten worse for him the last few years, what with the public opinion of magic souring with the advent of the Prophet's teachings. There were cities and towns in the far south that he dared not show his face. He lamented about how rich the pickings had been a mere ten years past. She never commented one way or another, not being one for useless talk. She had learned that a slave spoke when spoken to. Her expression was her song. She was content enough in that single outlet of emotion.

Lily was nineteen years old. She thought she might pass twenty in the possession of Vernon the hedge mage, but it was not to be so. Ludas had not yet come to the point of its southern sister, Alsansir in banning the practice of witchery, and yet with one simple and harmless incantation by Vernon the both of them found themselves in the custody of the holy guard, waiting miserably for the censure of Ludas's high priest. Only Ludas high priest did not come. The man that came to see them wore the symbol of the High God at his breast and wore the dust of the road on his robes. Guards of a different nature crowded the room, mingling with the holy guard who had apprehended them.

Vernon winced squeamishly, looking from face to face with the air of man who lived his worst nightmare. He could not quite meet the eyes of the priest in charge. Lily could not and stared mutely at the floor, forgotten behind her master.

"You saw him?" The priest demanded of Vernon.

"Saw who, your grace?" Vernon's usually haughty voice broke.

"Dante Epherian, you foul warlock."

Vernon blinked, shocked. He opened his mouth and shut it, speechless. "Epherian -

-? But he's dead. Everyone knows that. How would I see ---"

"Shut up. A man and a woman. He would be hard to miss. Striking of feature, silver hair. She would have reddish hair and brown eyes. Beautiful. You bargained with her at a tavern."

Vernon couldn't stop blinking. "I saw them-- yes. But he wasn't -- he had no magic -- I would have felt it -- he could not have been."

"What did they wish of you?"

"He wore wards on his wrists. She wanted me to break them. I couldn't."

"No doubt. What else did they say?"

"Nothing. Nothing, my lord. I swear by the name of god."

"Never utter the name of god, you foul practitioner of the black arts." The holy priest cried out and touched Vernon on the forehead. Vernon squeaked, his eyes bulged then almost seemed to shrink in their sockets, steam escaping them. He fell to his knees, then toppled over onto his face, quite, quite dead.

The only ones who seemed shocked were the holy guards of Ludas. The men who had come with this dire and frightening priest moved not at all. The priest's eyes turned to Lily. He strode across to her and she huddled against the wall, head down, straight dark hair obscuring her face.

"And what are you?"

"A minstrel, your holiness," One of the Ludas priests murmured.

He reached out and touched her jaw, lifting it so that he might see her face. "A minstrel. And something more, I think. I have a weakness for song." He let her go, turned and spoke sharp orders to his men, who scrambled in orderly fashion to do his bidding. Someone came and took her arm, one of *his* men. She thought she had a new master, a powerful and terrifying one. They pulled her past the body of Vernon and would not even let her pause to shut his wide, open eyes. For the first time since she had been sold to her first master, she felt like crying. But she did not. She had learned long ago, that tears only worked for pampered, free women, not for the likes of her.

* * *

Sera shuddered with effort, sweat beading her forehead, hands shaking as she sought to master a spell that should have taken weeks of study and preparation even to attempt. Spell casting was not an easy labor, even the simple ones, which Dante assured her this was. If it were effortless then everyone would be doing it. The only thing that saved the world from being filled with magic happy wizards was the fact that it was damned hard. Even if one was born with the gift of power. It took concentration and faith and a stamina of spirit that would wreck a weaker person. Not to mention meticulous analyzation and groundwork.

“I -- I think I got it that time,” she breathed as she lowered her hands and stared at the dull metal bracelets on his wrists, which rested on a moss covered log between them. The two of them knelt on either side of the log. His eyes gauged her, considering. He had to take her at her word, himself having no ability to discover for himself if the Trace spell had been clouded.

They were deep in the forest, almost a half day’s travel from Ludas. There had been no sound of pursuit yet. Which did not mean none was on their trail. Which in turn meant more riding. Sera was sore and tired and wished she had done more riding during the past three years instead of sedately existing within the confines of Alsansir. Her legs ached abominably. She rose with a groan and a miserable glare at the horse which had caused her pain. The animal placidly returned the stare, mouth full of leaves it had stripped from a nearby tree.

Dante put his hands on her shoulders, fingers kneading sore flesh. “Are you all right?”

“No,” she moaned. “I want a hot bath.”

“You missed your chance,” he murmured next to her ear. She shivered all over, from the touch, from his breath on her skin. With a little grimace she slipped out of his grasp and started towards the horse.

“We might as well get going again. I don’t know how we’re going to get east from here. Gerad’s probably already in Alsansir, wondering where we are.”

“No - - he’s not.”

There was something in his voice that made her catch her breath. She turned, looked up at his face. He diverted his glance from hers, tightening his lips.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a small voice.

“Your messenger never got through, Sera.”

“How -- how do you know?”

“Angelo told me. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand. I sent Charul east secretly. The Prophet wouldn’t have known.”

“He knew because he can pull thoughts out of people’s minds, Sera. He intercepted him. He killed him probably, because he was your ally and mine. Gerad doesn’t know.”

It was like he had hit her in the stomach. She staggered back against the horse, pain in her gut rushing up to her chest like a heart attack. No. No. She could not have sent Charul to his death. She could not have been responsible for that.

“You don’t know he’s dead,” she whispered.

“Angelo told me he was. I believed him. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” she cried. “He trusted me. He did it for me and was killed for it. He was my friend.” The tears came, spilling down her cheeks, invading her mouth with their salty taste. Her throat felt raw. She had killed Charul. It was her hand that had sent him out and her fault he was dead. Dante reached out for her and she slapped his hand away.

“Don’t. Just don’t,” she hissed. “You don’t care. What’s one more death to you?”

She snatched the reins and started walking, not having the strength to mount, what with her legs shaking and her vision blurred from tears. He followed, but she hardly heard. At the moment she hated him, because whenever he came into her life death and destruction followed. She wiped a sleeve across her eyes, sniffing back her sorrow. The horse nuzzled at her shoulder. It left a great wet spot of saliva on her cloak. She drew a shaky breath and asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“The time didn’t seem right.”

“The time---?”

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

She whirled, a sudden hysterical rage upon her. “Upset me? How dare you make that judgment for me. What gives you the right to decide what I can deal with and what I

can't. I've lived long enough without your protection to survive just fine without it now. How dare you?" The more she talked, the angrier she got.

She slammed the heels of her hands into his chest hard enough to make him stagger a step backwards. "Don't ever presume not to upset me again." She cried. "Go be valiant to someone who wants it like Kheron or Rejalla. Damn you!!"

She tried to hit him again and he caught her this time before she could land a blow, pulling her into the circle of his arms. She struggled, furiously fighting the embrace, crying and cursing, until he braced himself against a tree to gain better leverage to control her in her frenzy.

It got through to her finally that he was whispering over and over. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." And she didn't know what for. Charul's death, her guilt, her rage. His own lack of remorse where mortal men's lives were at stake. She sobbed and collapsed against him, fists tangled in the material of his cloak. He slid down the tree, holding her cradled against him, solid strength where her own was all shuddery and fleeting. Another time and he might have taken advantage of the closeness, of her desperate presence in his arms, but now, she had unnerved him. She could sense it in his body, in the cadence of his breathing.

He held her and did nothing more than hold her until the tears dried up and the trembling ceased. After that, she pulled away, exhausted and stripped of emotion and stared at him. His eyes were wary, uncertain how to deal with the depths of her grief. Not sure where he stood in the hierarchy of blame she placed for Charul's death. He was there, to be certain, but held not so high a place as she did herself.

"We've got to go," she whispered hoarsely. "We've wasted enough time."

She struggled out of his arms, climbed to her feet and went to her horse. He followed, slowly. She did not look back. She stared into the darkening shadows of the forest ahead, displaced and disheartened. Before, she had felt hope. Now she felt as if the world were closing in on her. She had known Angelo hated Dante, but she had not known the lengths he would go to prevent succor. She had not known fully, what monster whispered in the ear of her king and sat at the head of the new religion all of the south had embraced. She wanted to know. Dante knew more than he was telling, of that she was sure.

Quietly she asked. "Tell me about the Prophet."

Fifteen

"What is it?" Sera stared at the ground under her horse's hooves. There was a deep gouge in the earth, perhaps fourteen feet wide that wound through the trees, scarring the bark from trunks some three feet high.

Dante frowned down at it, peered into the sunlight dappled shadows of the forest into which the trail disappeared. He had never seen the like and he had been witness to a good many incredible things. This looked like nothing less than some great snake had slithered its way through the wood, leaving bruised trees and scratched earth in its path. He was aware of the existence of no such snakes. Not in this world, at any rate.

He pushed hair behind his ears and shook his head. "I don't know."

Sera shuddered, spurring her horse up the opposite side of the indentation to join him. "There are things that have appeared since - - since Galgaga was defeated. Strange things that no one has ever seen before."

"Things like what?"

She shrugged, wrapped in her cloak, her hood half obscuring her face against the chill. "Creatures that never existed before. Father thinks that a rent was formed when you were fighting Galgaga. A tear into another world that never has quite healed. He thinks the strange things that people are seeing more and more in the lands are coming across that rent. We haven't seen so many in the south, but the rumors of odd creatures in the less civilized lands are growing."

He rode for a while in silence, thinking that Rab-Ker could very likely be right. There had been a great altering of things during that final battle. A rent could very well have been made. If he'd had his power, he might have tracked it down and sealed it. God forbid that anyone else had the presence of mind to do it.

At least Sera was talking again. For a while she had rode in silence, a dour, depressing companion. Two days into the forest and the trees grew older and larger, the underbrush more strangled from lack of proper light reaching the forest floor. They were

into the Great Forest now, the oldest woodland on the continent. It had been here during the age of old. Probably long, long before that. Forests had the habit of outliving generations of men.

They had roots and mushrooms for dinner, with berries for desert. Sera refused to use any of her magics to hunt a livelier dinner. She would not kill with her gift. He thought she was being overly prudish, but one could hardly tell her that in the face of her recent trauma. So he ate the things she gathered without much enthusiasm.

He stared at her across the small fire they had made, trying to fathom her moods and her disposition towards him. With anyone else he would hardly have bothered. No one else, no other lover or friend had quite the ability to affect him with the mere swing of their mood. Sera, he catered to, for some unknown reason -- it was often beyond his understanding why it mattered so much what she thought of him.

He hated her censure. He despised her sad sighs and her refusal to meet his eyes, when she was usually so bold in her opinions. Other than physically comforting her, which she would not allow - - and that was no small frustration - - he was at a loss at how to make things better. He had never bothered to learn the subtle ways of soothing the hurt feelings of others. It had never been a concern of his.

So they were silent companions, Sera lost in her own moody soul searching and he despairing of ever getting his magic back. With it things had always worked out so much better. He could fix the wrongs that bothered her if he had his power. He was certain of it.

They rode out the next morning with a fine mist in the air that added bit to the usual chill. Bird song twittered through the leaves. A pair of squirrels played tag over their heads, dislodging leaves that fluttered down gracefully in their path. Sera smiled at the antics and Dante felt ridiculously beholden to a pair of furry rodents for causing the reaction. He nudged his mount closer to hers, thinking to initiate some inane conversation. Anything to draw out her good humor.

And rather suddenly the squirrels disappeared and the birdsong ceased. Sera hardly noticed it. Dante frowned, staring at the leafy canopy overhead.

With no more warning than a rustle of leaves, from out of the foliage at the side of the game trail they followed a tree swung out at them. It hit his horse, square in the chest,

sending the animal staggering into Sera's mount. It sprawled off its feet when her horse shied backwards, screaming in equine fear. The animal slammed against the bole of a tree and only blind luck saved Dante from being crushed between it and unforgiving wood. The fates were damned kind to see that his leg, instead of being trapped under the weight of the horse body was merely pinned under the limp neck. Breath was hard in coming, from the impact of the fall, and he hadn't the presence of mind to do more at first than stare dumbly at the foliage where the blow at originated.

Foliage which parted to reveal the towering form of a giant, who held a club longer than Dante's body in its meaty fist. It had to stoop to get under the intercrossed branches of the lower pine limbs, standing some eighteen feet in height and some eight feet in width at the shoulders. Its face, in the brief glimpse he got of it, was much like any giant's face, broad and thick boned, with overhanging brow and small, dull eyes. Its mouth was filled with rotting, yellowed teeth, which were revealed when it opened it to scream out a battle cry. One step out of the brush and it was almost on them. The club, which was no less than the trunk of a good sized tree came down towards Dante, ready to finish the job the first strike had started. He pulled at his leg desperately, heard Sera scream from near by and the club smashed down.

And rebounded off the invisible shell of a shield of her making. She was off her frightened horse, mindless as it bolted from the protection of her shield and on her knees beside the bloody head of his own downed and very dead mount.

"Are you all right?" Her fingers grasped the mane and helped shift the dead weight of the head and neck off his leg. He didn't answer -- the club coming down again, backed by all the rage of a giant's frustration. She shuddered, flinching back. The power of the impact that rocked her shield, rocked her body as well. He scrambled over the horse to crouch behind her, grasping her shoulders to shore her up.

"Tell me you've got something offensive you can throw at him?"

Another blow, this one two handed, as the giant realized it was up against something not of a natural character. The thing was dressed in scrapes of fur and cloth that had been haphazardly sewn together with thick ropes. Sera cried out. She had never studied offensive spells. She did not have attack spells in her arsenal and with a few more blows the giant would shatter her shield and the both of them would be paste.

“Illumina,” he cried. “Throw Illumina in its face as strong as you can, then run after your damned horse and don’t look back. I’ll draw it off from you.”

“No,” she moaned.

“Do it, Sera.” His fingers tightened on her shoulders as the club came down again, bouncing off the shield a mere feet over their heads. Damned disconcerting to sit here helpless, under the weakening shields of another, with no recourse but flight.

She took a breath as it raised the club over its head for another strike, then cried out the single summoning word. A blare of intense white light appeared outside the shield and with a sharp gesture of her hand it flared into the giant’s face. The creature cried out, loosing its grip on the makeshift club, clutching at its eyes in sudden pain.

Dante pushed her to her feet, shoving her roughly in the general direction her horse had fled. She followed his directions for once, running madly through the trees, never once turning her head to look back. He hesitated a moment in his own flight, drawing his sword, even though he didn’t know what good it would do against a giant, but certain that the creature would pursue the prey that had thorns before it would hunt down the more seemingly helpless. It blinked away the blindness and Dante struck out at its legs, cutting a thin slash across its thighs before bolting away into the forest with its cries of rage behind him.

It had longer legs. It could cover considerably more ground than he in fewer strides. The only thing he had going for him was the close confines of the forest, which he could slip through without slowing, while his pursuer had to either ram his way past or go around.

The trees were a blur in his vision. His breath came painful and hard. There were a hundred little scrapes and scratches from the bramble he tore through and he cursed the fates that had ever stripped his power from him. Oh, how miserable to be a normal, mortal man with no more connection to the arcane realm than to the elusive gods they all worshipped. There were a dozen minor spells that could have wiped this annoying giant from the face of the earth. They trembled on his lips and he could not utter them for fear of the wards on his wrists throwing the power right back at him, either killing him outright or incapacitating him long enough for the giant to do it.

He heard it closing the gap and thought how humiliating it would be to be killed by

a mere, slow-witted giant. No matter what realm he ended up in, he would forever carry that shame with him.

There was a gully ahead. A wide, deep gully with steep, muddy slopes that dropped down to a forest stream. There was no jumping it. All he could do was slide down one muddy slope, losing his footing on the slick dirt and ending up on his knees at the edge of the stream, then scrambling up and splashing across thigh high water to the other side and a higher slope leading to escape. One look over his shoulder and the Giant was almost to the gully. He could not climb that muddy slope in time. He grasped a root and pulled himself up, used it as leverage for his boot and grasped after dirt and rock for more support, threw his sword up and over the edge and made a concerted lunge for the small roots protruding there. Pulled himself up and almost over the lip as the giant screamed in victory and made to jump the gully and land on top of him.

Almost made it, but its great foot slipped in the mud and it miscalculated the leap, falling just short of the other side, slipping more when it landed and crashing down, its chin slamming with a distinctive crack against the opposite lip where Dante scrambled for footing. He found himself staring the giant in the eyes, the giant's somewhat dazed from the fall, blood seeping out from between its slack lips where it had bitten its tongue.

Dante looked about frantically for the sword, found it even as the giant was blinking awareness back into its eyes, and thrust it into its face, piercing the left eye almost up to the hilt. The tip lodging the back of the giant's skull would not let the blade slide deeper. A cry almost issued from the torn lips, but died quickly, even as the giant did, its brain destroyed.

Dante sat back, legs sprawled, hands supporting his weight on the pine littered forest floor. There was blood seeping over the hilt of his sword. And the giant was slowly beginning to slide backwards into the gully. He reached out, grabbing the sword hilt to save it from going with down with the giant. Almost had it yanked out of his hands as the tip lodged in bone refused to let go. It did, with a pop and he was left with the gore covered thing on the ground between his legs. His hands were shaking from reaction. He had destroyed greater things than this without a blink of the eye, and yet this one victory, which he had achieved without a drop of magic had him trembling. He laughed. Dropped the sword and laughed, a surge of adrenaline that had been all but

gone welling up in him at the purely mundane victory.

For a long while he sat there, laughing, then cleaned the blood off the sword with leaves and pine tags. There was the sound of crinkled leaves and twigs snapping from the other side of the gully. Slight sounds. A small creature passing, not a large one.

Sera appeared through the trees, eyes wild, bramble tangled in her hair. Her eyes took in the scene, passed over the slumped form of the giant damming the path of the stream, lifted to him still sitting on the far lip. She swallowed and scrambled down the slope, wisely avoided the form of the giant as she sloshed across the stream and started to struggle up the other side. Dante stirred to activity, going to the edge and reaching down a hand for her to grasp and pulling her up by main force alone, since her feet slipped madly in the slick mud.

“I couldn’t find the stupid horse,” she cried, flinging herself against him, wrapping her arms about his neck and clinging tight. “Oh, goddess, goddess, I thought you were dead.”

He sighed, resting his chin on the top of her head. “Not so easy as that, to kill me. At least to keep me dead,” he added with a tired, humorless baring of teeth.

She pulled back, looking up at him critically, reached up to finger a thin briar scratch on his cheek. “Well stop trying so damned hard, would you. You like to drive me crazy.”

She smiled at him. At him and not at the antics of some damned squirrel, and it made the whole hectic thing worth it. Now if he could just get her to rub the ache out of his shoulders - - -

* * *

Sta-Veron sat at the crux of two mountain ranges, where the Eastern Mountains turned into the Great Northern Range and the God’s Tooth mountains, which bordered the tundra to the extreme north, collided with those more milder ridges. It formed a great valley of cold, snow bound lands that were protected on either side by the formidable barrier of mountains. It was not a pleasant land to live. It was frigid nine out of twelve months of the year and only tolerably warm those other elusive weeks.

The people of the north were a hard folk, tempered by a climate the people of the warm south shivered just to think of. A fair number of the people were nomadic and predatory, hunters that moved with the game and owed no man allegiance. The others carved villages and towns out of the snow, drawn to the north by its lure of riches. The diamond mines of the God's Tooth range were legendary. Gold littered the high cold streams of the Great Northern mountains. Though few in the south much entertained the thought of living the cold north, they did relish the trade friendship with it brought. Exotic furs, gems and gold were an enticement to any man.

Contrary to the opinion of the south, Sta-Veron was not a barbaric, desolate city, riddled by the winds down from the Tundra. Though it did not in any way boast the size of the jewels of the south, its walls were thick and high and its streets wide and clean. Its houses were orderly and well constructed to keep the cold out, and its people well protected and content under the rule of their enigmatic lord. They spoke of Him with hushed tones, full of respect, for he had made Sta-Veron into a city that was proud and strong. He brought magic and riches from years of conquest in the south and west back to cold Sta-Veron and he hoarded it not, like many an ambitious lord might, but used it to enhance the city.

They did not know if they loved their lord, for he was sullen and moody and often they never saw him for months at a time, but they respected him and would defend his name to any who dared slander it. He was not like them in any respect, not hardened and weather lined, no gruffness at all to him, more a refined, quiet elegance. He did not even show the years that they knew he possessed, instead showing the face of fresh youth, but that was only the wizardly core of him showing though. The people of the North were not frightened by the arcane.

He sat in his castle above the sprawled houses and businesses of his folk and drifted in solitude. His servants were wary to disturb him. Sometimes for days at a time, he spoke no word to any living being. He had books from all over the world, scrolls of ancient and arcane things. Books older than that and rarer, which he found fascinating and poured over with fanatic zeal. The library was the warmest place in the castle, from the mere number of things that crowded in it. The other rooms were stark and cold in their decoration.

He spent most of his time in the library. The walls were lined with books. A treasure trove more valuable than all the gems in the mountains, when it came right down to it. He sat behind a great, carved desk, a thick book open before him. A witch light hovered over his shoulder, brighter and easier on the eyes than reading by candlelight. In the comfort of his own home, he dressed casually, in a thick, soft robe, over loose pants and tunic. There was a cup of mulled wine by his hand, brought by a silent servant, who crept in on cat's feet and disappeared as silently.

It was a book of spells. Most of them were unintelligible to his understanding, even after weeks of scrutiny. Spells were like that. If a body and a mind were not oriented towards a certain type of spell casting, then they would forever be unattainable. He, for all his vaunted power, was useless at casting fire oriented spells. They simply escaped him. He was too intertwined with the aura of the ice magic he did excel at. It didn't matter how long a body studied, it just didn't work. Even his mentor, Dante, who had lived half a millennia or more and who was primarily a fire mage, could not manage a decent Cold spell.

Kastel sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger to drive away the ache of reading all through the night and into the early morning. It was a habit he had taken up over the last year or so, staying up the long night, putting sleep off until exhaustion drove him to it. He dreamed less that way.

Outside the frosted window he could see drifting flakes of snow. The stuff was already piled up in the streets. It was going to be a cold winter. There was a soft knock at the door. The captain of his guard slipped in, bundled for the weather, his face still holding the chaffing recently being in the cold.

"My lord." Kiro inclined his head respectfully, but wasted no more time than that on honorifics, instead striding to the desk and standing before it in a business like manner.

"Yes?" Kastel asked.

"There are reports of another one in the mountains. Nomads saw it this time. From what they saw, and I believe them, it was bigger than the last."

Kastel sighed closing the book, putting a marker in his place. Not even full winter and already the creatures that lived in the high colds were coming down to warmer climes

and plaguing his folk. Only they were not the normal beasts these past few years. They were things that had no name in the tongue of men, hideous, gruesome things that belonged in another place. Things that had come with the passing of Galgaga.

He could feel the faint presence of the rent that had swallowed Galgaga. He knew without a doubt that small, sibilant things slipped through on occasion. He would not get near it, that place where Galgaga had gone. He had been enthralled by it once, and would not risk the magnetic pull of its presence again. It was gone from this plane and would stay gone, and the little things that passed through could be dealt with.

“Where was it seen?”

“On the north side of the Great Northern Mountains, not far from Hesranha town. If it’s like the last, it will be drawn to the people in the town.”

It needed to be destroyed. The last one, the smaller one, if reports were true, had killed a dozen of his men before they had taken it down. He had no wish to deplete Kiro’s forces more.

“Prepare a party. We’ll leave tomorrow morning.”

Kiro lifted a brow, pleased. “You’ll lead us, my lord?”

Kastel nodded once, ignoring his captain’s obvious satisfaction. He was well aware that Kiro thought he closeted himself too much of late in the castle. In this very room. And it did matter, that opinion, deep down where Kastel secreted his inner most feelings, behind a thick armor of imperious disdain for the rest of the world. It mattered a great deal what Kiro, the people of the town and his far away friends thought of him, only he never allowed it to the surface. If he did and they censured him, it hurt too much. It brought back the flickering traces of memory of a time where he had known nothing but censure and he was no more able to tolerate that, than he was the nightmares that tormented him. So his facade of ice stayed firmly in place. None were ever the wiser what their lord truly felt.

* * *

They rode down from the castle and through the streets of Sta-Veron, warmly clothed for harsh weather, on thick-furred, heavy mountain horses that could wade

through snow chest high if need be. People were out in the gray of early morning, clearing the streets and the paths between houses and shops of snow, carrying bundles of wood inside for fires, and trudging to work. They looked up at the passing of the well bundled party, curious perhaps of the destination of armed men with pack horses for a long ride, but not overly so. Garlands decorated the doorways, in preparation of winter festival not more four weeks away.

Out the main gates, where snow had been shoveled into high piles to open the twin gates and beyond that was a stretch of pure whiteness that seemed to go on forever. In the far distance it met the sky, white to gray.

They set out at a mile-eating trot that the horses could maintain for hours. Kastel's great warhorse tossed his shaggy head in delight to be out after so long in the stables. He kicked snow with his massive hooves and pulled at the rein, eager to be allowed his head.

It was invigorating to be out himself, and he gave in to the simple eagerness of the horse and loosened the rein. The warhorse broke into a pounding canter and the rest of the party followed suit, snow flying up behind them. His men were in good cheer. He found himself tempted into it by the crispness of the morning and the good-natured chatter of his soldiers.

An omen, Kastel thought, of good things to come.

* * *

Dante was limping. Not much, he was hiding it as much as his leg would allow, his pride a prickly thing, but Sera noticed anyway. The horse falling on him, then the mad flight through the forest with a giant on his heels had taken its toll. Tonight, if he complained of it, she would attempt a healing spell. She doubted he would let her, being prideful and male, the two combined making for a stubborn streak when it came to a woman's pity.

She gathered berries as they walked, trusting him to be alert to the dangers of the forest, which she was certain now, there were a great many of. She would pluck a handful, of which she would give him the majority, and slowly eat the remainder. They passed a brook, not quite as steep as the one he had slain the giant in and paused to drink.

She searched the banks for mud-hen nests and found two ripe with eggs. She harvested half of what she found, not wishing to deprive a hen of all her hatchlings, and counted on roasted egg for dinner as a change from tubers and mushrooms.

It was near dark by the time he found a place he felt safe to stop for the night. He made a fire the old fashioned way - - it galled him to have to strike flint to stone, that was clear - - and she wrapped the precious eggs in leaves and nestled them on the outside coals of the little campfire. She gave him four and had two herself and sat on the opposite side of the fire from him after that listening to the sounds of the forest night dwellers as they came awake for an evening of hunting and courting.

He rubbed absently at his leg.

"I can try a healing, if it pains you overmuch," she offered. He shook his head.

"No. It's not bad. Just bruised. There is a kink in my shoulder." He rotated the shoulder in question hopefully. She sighed, hiding a smile and moved around the fire to kneel behind him.

"Here?"

"Lower."

He discarded the cloak so she could better work on him. She kneaded flesh and muscle and he purred under the attention. She was careful around his ribs, remembering the nasty bruise there.

"Why won't you let me use a healing spell on you?"

He leaned his head back, looking at her from that odd angle. Shoulder length hair fell over her hands and wrists and she absently gathered it together, silken strands sliding through her fingers.

"I've an aversion to spells being cast on me. Not that I don't trust you -- I do -- it just makes me nervous."

"Something makes *You* nervous? More nervous than excruciating pain?"

"I can deal with pain."

She released the hair to fall about his neck and shoulders, fingers straying to his neck. He leaned back against her, reaching behind him to run his hands along her folded legs. Oh, goddess, she thought, this will go beyond comforting. How do I stop it? Do I

want to stop it? She had fought this desire for so long before, when she'd been young and uncertain. She was not so young now. A woman grown.

She leaned down and her lips almost brushed his --

-- and the sense of something watching intruded upon her awareness. She froze with her fingers on the pulse of his throat, and felt a *Presence* .

"Sera?" he murmured. She moved her fingers over his lips to shush him, and whispered against his ear.

"There's something out there."

He shifted, staring out into the night. She knelt behind him with her fingers in his shirt, listening for a hint of it and hearing nothing but the normal sounds of the night. But she knew it was out there. She sensed it as she sensed her own presence or his.

"Sera, there's nothing." He looked up at her. She shook her head.

"No. It's there. Can't you feel it?"

"How do you feel it?"

She slapped a palm against her chest. "In here. Something is watching us."

He did not dispute that cryptic claim, too much a creature of mythical portents to dismiss the augur of another. "Where?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know. All around us."

"Do you sense ill-intent?"

She shook her head, not knowing. A gust of sudden wind blew the fire out, scattering sparks in its wake. She gasped. He snatched for his cloak and scrambled to his feet. Reached out to grab her hand and hauled her up with him.

"What is it?" she moaned, as frightened of this elusive presence as she had been of the all too solid giant.

"Something --- something." His eyes were shadowed pits with the death of the fire. The wind gusted again, blowing leaves and forest debris at them with gale force.

Sera cried out, shielding her face, staggering a step backwards. He pulled her away from the source of the wind, abandoning their small camp. She ran blindly, the trees black shadows against the dark of the night. He swore once, rebounding off the trunk of a tree. She caught at him and pushed him on, desperate to escape the presence that followed them. The wind rattled the leaves, making smaller trees sway and branches

creak overhead.

There was a faint light ahead. A hazy glow that made the shadows gray instead of black. She felt him hesitate when he saw that illumination, undecided whether to travel on towards it or veer away. Wind tore at their backs, driving twigs and pine cones past them. Driving them towards the light. She did not want to go of a sudden, and he certainly did not, digging his heels in when the staggering wind wanted to push them forward. He tried to veer away from it, but a maelstrom of debris was swept up, creating a wall of swirling leaves.

With the force of nature at their backs they had no choice but to go forward. Into the small glade where fuzzy white light cast everything in a strange glow. The moment they stepped into the light, the wind ceased. It did not go away, for when Sera turned to look behind her the wall of swirling debris was a furious barrier around the small clearing. It circled the whole clearing in fact, like they stood in the eye of a tornado, only no slightest breeze intruded to lift their hair.

“Goddess,” Sera breathed, holding tight to Dante’s hand. He turned about, glaring at the trees, the sky, the whirl wind that had driven them here and demanded.

“What do you want?”

A mist seeped up from the ground under their feet. Sera hopped back with a little yelp, and Dante took a more dignified step backwards, eyes narrowing as the mist rose in cohesive form and swirled around them. Slowly, it brushed their bodies, leaving behind a warm mist on skin where it touched. There was something deep and all invasive in the presence she felt. Something that was elusive and at the same time inescapable.

It took form, a ghostly, translucent shape of an unclothed woman. She reached out smoky fingers and grazed Sera’s cheek, trailed her fingers across Dante’s chest. He waved a hand through the smoke, displacing her arm. A tinkle of laughter echoed through the wood. She pulled back from them and solidified. A lithe, ageless woman with hair that tumbled like green water down her back and over her shoulders.

“You’ve killed in my forest,” she said, her voice seeming to come at them from a dozen points about the clearing. Sera stared at her, at a loss.

“I killed a giant, who attacked us first,” Dante stated promptly, in full control of his wits.

“He was my servant. He had a task,” the strange woman said.

“Who are you?”

The laughter tinkled again, though she never seemed to open her mouth. “I? I am the Lady of this Forest. Glyncara.”

Glen Cara. It was the old name of the Great Forest. Sera opened her mouth in wonderment. “Glen Cara IS the forest.”

The woman inclined her head. “So I am. You’ve killed a servant of mine in my wood. You trespass where I no longer wish men to walk.”

“Since when is it outlawed to travel through the great forest?” Dante asked archly, and Sera wanted to shake him, because this thing they faced was not a lovely, naked woman but something much older. Much older than even him. As old as the oldest tree in this wood and as powerful as all the quiet force of the forest.

“Since men strive to destroy it.” The colors of Glyncara’s eyes shifted from moss green to bark brown and all the colors of the wood in-between. There was a flare of fury there and danger to them. The winds outside the clearing picked up.

“What men?” Dante asked.

“The men who raze the forest and leave nothing behind but stumps and broken ground. Who drive the animals away with their presence and their saws and their fires. Who slice the flesh of my trees and send them down the river -- corpses -- beautiful corpses -- to other men who might butcher them again.”

She spoke of the trees as though they were alive. To her, they probably were.

“We’re not those men,” Sera said in a small voice. “We mean you no harm. We’re sorry about your giant. We didn’t know.”

“It matters not. Those who enter my wood have sealed their fate.”

“Then why don’t you destroy these men who chop down your trees yourself?” Dante demanded. “Instead of bothering us, who haven’t toppled a single sapling. She won’t even kill a rabbit for dinner.”

Glyncara’s eyes flashed and some tendril of power coiled out to lash at Dante for his impudence. He staggered a step backwards, grimacing.

“I have power here, in the heart of my wood, but closer to the fringe, where they do their damage, my strength wanes. And as they cut acre after acre of my forest down, I

die. So every human who enters my power shall die, as my trees die.”

Her form started to dissolve and a sense of tremendous power washed over them. Sera felt her breath catch in her throat against her will. There was a pain in her chest, as of a fist contracting about her heart.

“Wait!” Dante cried out. “We can help you.”

The pain subsided. Glyncara resolidified marginally. Her voice came out of the woods at them. “How? You’re bound yourself with those hideous things on your wrists.”

“You can feel the wards?” he asked, a touch of interest creeping into his tone.

“They are abominations.”

“Can you remove them?”

Glyncara’s shoulders lifted. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“Do so and I will rid your forest of every threat that comes at it. I will place it under my protection.”

“And is your protection so great, you who destroy lands and peoples?”

He lifted one dark brow, acknowledging her knowledge of him. “It will be if I so promise.”

“Do you know the meaning of a promise?” she whispered. “In your heart, can you honor an oath?”

“I can.”

“We shall see. I’ll take your offer. You will stop the threat to my wood and I shall let you go.”

“The wards?”

“I don’t think you know the meaning of an oath just yet. Stop the threat with the wards in place and then we shall see.”

“With them I have no magic. How should I stop these men who destroy your wood without it?”

“Like any normal man. Use your wits. My giant, poor dumb thing that it was, took up the task. Are you less willing than he?”

Dante glared at Glyncara. His eyes narrowed and he waved a hand in acceptance. “All right. Fine. I accept.”

“Good.” The lady of the forest smiled, she reached out and touched Sera in the center of her chest. “There is yet one more thing. Should you decided to not honor the agreement and leave this forest to its fate. You will go alone. For this girl is cursed with my geas. If she steps foot outside the wood without the bargain being fulfilled, she will herself turn into a tree. She will forever be a part of this wood, unless the loggers cut her down.”

Dante cursed. He lunged at Glyncara, hands out to strangle her, but she dispersed in smoke when he reached her. Sera stood staring at the spot she had been. The whirlwind of leaves just stopped. The wind died and the mass of them settled to the ground in great clumps around the clearing.

She put her hands to her chest, trying to feel for the sense of the curse. What did a curse feel like? She had never had one on her person to know. Dante turned around to stare at her with anger in his eyes. She stared back with dismay in her own.

“Well,” she said in a small, shaky voice. “I suppose this gives us a purpose. We were rather without one before.”

“That bitch.”

“I understand her. Protecting what is hers. No one should destroy this old forest.”

“To hell with this forest,” he snarled. Then cried it out louder so that it echoed off the trees.

“Do you believe her -- about the wards?”

“I don’t know. I have damned little choice in the matter. I hate being a puppet.”

“You’re not,” she reminded him softly. “You could walk away right now with no repercussions. I’m the one she cursed. Do you think trees are aware?”

“You’ll never find out,” he snapped, glaring at her. “Do you think I would abandon you? Is that what you think of me? Is it?!”

“No.” Tiny little voice in the face of his ire.

He threw out his arms and stalked past her, kicking at piles of leaves as he left the circle of clearing. Then he stopped and screamed out into the forest.

“At the very least you could tell me where the damned loggers are, you underhanded shrew.”

The wind whispered past him, stirring his hair. *To the north*, it seemed to say and

then was gone.

Sixteen

Gerad had intruded into the walled recesses of Alsansir before without proper invite. Over the walls outside the town with none the wiser. Under the bridge and up the wall with all the dexterity of a spider and he was within the boundaries of the castle itself. One day, he thought, he would teach them a thing or two about security. But, on occasion their lack of it was useful.

Something was most definitely up. He had seen legions marching northward towards Ludas on his way in, though there was little sign of a foreign presence within the boundaries of the city itself. If these pirate kings had brought men with them, they were well cloistered behind the doors of the palace. He walked along the darkened pathways of the cathedral garden, a cloak wrapped about his person, his great blade shifted down to his hip to obscure its presence.

He might have been anyone on their way for late night confession. None of the few folk he encountered gave him a second glance.

Into the dormitory and down the hall. He counted the doors until he reached the one he remembered as Sera's. He pushed down the reflexive urge to pick the lock, if she even locked it, and slip in secretly. He respected her privacy enough to rap and give her notice of his visit. No answer. She was asleep then. He rapped again, louder and listened for sound of movement, for the soft breath of a sleeper. He heard nothing. Not even the crackle of a low burning fire in this chill autumn night. He tried the handle then. It moved freely under his fingers. The door swung inwards.

A cold, dark room. His eyes, already adjusted to the darkness, took in a rumpled bed, a fire that had not seen flame in many days. Clothes on the floor as if she had stopped caring about the monotonous task of washing or putting them away. Or, as if someone had been through her things.

He stood in the middle of it, with a certain dread pounding behind his eyes. Something was wrong. He had known. And a man in his profession learned to trust his

gut instincts.

He left her room and silently drifted down the hall to the rooms of her father. With Rab-Ker he gave no regard to privacy, turned the knob and slipped into the darkened rooms. There was a fire burning here. Albeit a low, much neglected one that had turned into little more than glowing embers in the blackened hearth. The smell of wine was strong. There was an empty bottle on the floor that he narrowly missed kicking. The rooms, both outer and inner were also neglected.

Most unlike the Great Priest to live in such squalor. Most unlike the Great Priest to fall into his bed clothed and stinking of strong drink. Gerad had not known Rab-Ker partook of spirits at all, being a prudish man of the cloth.

Roughly he shook the priest's shoulder, crouched next to the bed, elbows resting on knees. Rab-Ker snorted and grumbled in his sleep.

"Wake up, man," Gerad whispered harshly and jabbed him again.

"Wh -- what?" Rab-Ker sputtered, waved his hands at the sudden shock of rude awakening. He stared wide-eyed and blindly into the darkness. "Sera? Sera?"

"That's a good question. Where *is* Sera?"

It took a good moment for the priest to orient on the man squatting next to his bed. He recoiled, when his eyes finally focused on Gerad, and scrambled awkwardly up to a sitting position, his back to the headboard.

"By the Great Goddess -- what time is it?"

"Night time," Gerad supplied.

"I --I thought she had come home. I dreamed terrible things had happened to her. Because of him. Oh, Goddess watch over her."

Gerad rose, leaned hands on the side of the bed and peered into Rab-Ker's anguished face. "What's happened to her, Priest? Where is she, if not home?"

"Run away. From me. From marriage. With him. They're condemning her for it. Teo has sent men to chase her down. It's His fault."

"Who's He. What marriage? What in hell has been going on?"

"You weren't supposed to know. The king commanded it. The Prophet advised it." Rab-Ker lowered his face into his hands and sobbed. "But now it's too late. He'll be the death of her."

“Damn it man, who and why? And I was not supposed to know what?”

Rab-Ker reached out and grabbed the edge of his cloak, desperation in his eyes.

“Dante. Dante Epherian is who. From the grave. And she’s run off with him and they’ll both be killed.”

Gerad stepped back, breaking the Great Priest’s hold on him, his breath stalled in his chest. The babblings of a drunk old man who’d lost track of his daughter, his head told him. Then memory recalled several occasions where the Dark Mage in question had defied the boundaries of death. Dante had a habit of coming back from the dead. Or hell had a habit of kicking him out.

But Rab-Ker’s words made no sense. If Dante *was* back, his being on the run with Sera was about as likely as him declaring his faith to the High God. Dante did not RUN from things. Things ran from him.

“You’re drunk, old man. No men of Teo would chase Dante down. Much less kill him. Clear your head.”

“No. No. It’s true. The wards. The Prophet placed wards on him while he was senseless. He is helpless. They would have burned him on the witchfires, but the Prophet declared he would save his soul. I don’t believe that any longer. Sera didn’t. She helped him escape and now the both of them are hunted. The Prophet is mad to have him back. I can not understand it. He was always such a reasonable man before this.”

Gerad took a breath. Dante back from the grave. With wards preventing him from magic. With the forces of the church and the king hunting him down. With Sera in tow. It was all a bit much. But then, with Dante it usually was.

“You can’t just burn a man for being a witch. Drive them out of town, destroy their shops, yes, but send men out after them?”

“He killed men. Innocent men outside the Temple. The king has charged him with murder and the Prophet has called him a spawn of Satan.”

“And what else is new? Both are probably true to one extent or another.”

“The Prophet --- the Prophet is obsessed with him, though the king won’t see it. I do. Too late.”

Rab-Ker reached for him imploringly. “Gerad, you’ve got to find Sera. Protect her. From them. From *HIM*. He’ll only hurt her. You know he’ll only hurt her.”

Gerad didn't answer. He melted back into the shadows, leaving the priest to his drunken lamentations. There were other sources of information in Alsansir. He believed the priest. Rab-Ker, even drunk, was not a man to spin fables.

Dante was alive. Alive! He refused to think of the implications of that. For now, he merely needed to know the details.

* * *

The outer chambers of the rooms in the highest level of the Temple were darkened. The glass doors of the windows that looked out upon the city, slightly ajar, allowing the breeze to billow the drapery slightly. The stern stone angels outside were stolid reminders of those powers that looked down on man from higher realms. Gerad had used them as anchors for his lines.

There were chests in the room, with tops open, half packed or unpacked, the Prophet in the process of going or coming. Gerad slipped past them, to the half ajar door to the inner room. Fire burned in that chamber and candles, bright enough to denote a waking body, not a sleeping one. He hesitated at the door, silent as night. And from unbidden and unseen within the room a voice said.

"Don't lurk in the shadows, Nightwalker, come in."

Gerad drew breath, startled. Astonished that the man could know of his presence. He pushed the door open and stepped into the bed chamber of the Prophet, regardless.

Angelo stared at him from a small writing desk, his hand poised over a parchment he was scripting. As ever, his face was devoid of anything but serene good will. But the face of altruism, no matter how well crafted, did not fool Gerad into believing that this was not a man who valued power first and foremost.

"I've heard a rumor, Your Holiness, that disturbs me."

"Indeed it must, for you to violate the sanctity of my rooms unbidden. Have you reverted to your old ways, Master Nightwalker?" The quill was laid carefully down. The Prophet folded his hands before him, lifting one curious brow.

"I have heard that Dante is back among the living and that you have bound his magic and declared his life forfeit. Dare I believe such wild tales? Though the former is

not unprecedented the latter suggests a great deal of presumption.”

“Presumption, Master Gerad? And had he come back -- as an agent of the Dark Power that rules hell and killed innocent men in hell’s name -- then should he be allowed to run rampart over all the good and faithful people of the lands?”

“What about the not so faithful? You seem to continuously forget about them.”

“Yes, well, they create their own fates.”

“I’m told you wished to keep this information from me. Why, I would even assume you went to great lengths -- considering the priests on the road who spoke lies to prevent my coming.”

“If priests spoke lies, then they are no true servants of the god. Who would ever think to block your passage anywhere, Master Nightwalker.? Could it even be done?”

Gerad was a expert of reading men’s intentions, and yet with the Prophet he there was no give, no flaw in the facade. It had always been so with Angelo. And yet, there was some scent of peril just beneath the eyes, some sense that Angelo merely waited for the chance to lunge. It was an intangible notion that made Gerad nervous and few things made the Lord of the Divhar uncertain.

He had his answers. The Prophet had not said in so many words, but he had said all the same that Dante was indeed back and that church and king, most assuredly in that order, were on his heels.

“Did you think to keep it from us forever?”

“No,” Angelo said. “Just long enough. And I do thank you for coming, it will make my case so much more justified.”

“What?”

The Prophet smiled, then jerked, clutching at his side. Blood seeped from between his fingers. He screamed, as if in great pain and half stumbled from his chair. Gerad stared, shocked, until he heard running feet from the outer room. Then it occurred to him that he was being set up. He snarled, briefly considering taking the sword from its sheath and truly bloodying it on the deceitful bastard. But, damned little good would come of that -- the assassination of the Prophet - - other than to make his case.

He whirled and made for the window even as two priests came running at the Prophet’s scream. They saw him and cried out in alarm, yelling for guards. The Prophet

called weakly for help from the other room. Then Gerad was shimmying down the line with the agility of a spider thinking himself a fool twice over.

* * *

They brought the Prophet to the castle, where the king's own physician might care for his wound. It was the puncture of a sword, just above the kidneys, and thank the one God that it had not been lower or higher or the Prophet might have suffered a grueling death. The town was in an uproar, squadrons combing it for the foul assassin that had attempted the Prophet's life. There was no sign.

"Waste not your time." Angelo lifted a weak hand and placed it over the King's who sat near his bed, anger on his pale face. "You shall never find one such as he."

"Gerad. Gerad!! How could he, damn him, after I gave him lands and honor. How could he betray us so?"

"It was not his doing, my lord." Angelo smiled gently. "It was the taint of Dante that drove him back to his old murderous ways. He'll influence all of them - - the Stormbringer - - the Winter King. His dark allure was always strong, but now it has the power of hell to back it. There will be war, my lord. God save us all, they will gather forces and descend upon us as they did in the past."

"I'll gather the legions. Call in troops from all the south." Teo paced, hollow eyed and determined. "This will not happen again. I have seen too much of war to allow it."

"Send not the troops after them. They are his puppets. Send them to find Dante. He is the crux of the evil that faces us." The Prophet paused, wincing in great pain. The healer offered him an herbed tea to soothe the discomfort. He bravely waved it away.

"My Lord King, send your forces north of Ludas, for that is where HE is. It is he that has spurred this attack and will spur others. Cut off the head of the snake and the body will die. So it will be with his Dark Brethren."

Teo turned, a deep breath filling his chest. "I do not want war brought upon my people again, Prophet. I truly do not wish to suffer them that, when they have only begun to recover from the last. Tell me that finding Dante will stop that from happening. Tell me that is what you see, Prophet."

“It is what I see, your majesty. What the High God shows me. Find him, majesty. Corner him, strip him of support and leave him to the church to deal with. That is how I prophesy that the horrors of war might be avoided.”

Teo nodded once. “Then it will be so.”

* * *

A days walk from the unfortunate encounter with the lady of the forest and Dante and Sera happened upon the first sign of the logging operation that so distressed Glyncara.

There was a trail in the wood that was wider and more well traveled than a game trail. There were signs of wagon wheels and hooves having passed it in abundance. Dante boldly stepped onto it and began following it northward. Not certain that such a direct approach was wise, but still somewhat preoccupied over the disturbing curse placed upon her, Sera followed without argument. Very soon they heard the laughter and conversation of men.

Three men, in the hardy, plain clothing of woodsmen, two with axes over their shoulders and one with a bag of supplies strolled down the trail. When they chanced to notice Dante and Sera walking towards them, the conversation stopped, which was never in her opinion a sign of good things to come. Dante did not seem to care. He strode onwards as if strange men bearing axes in the forest were no concern for him.

“You there. How far is your camp?”

Sera rolled her eyes at the bluntness. One might as well announce to them that they were on a mission to drive them out of the forest.

The three loggers exchanged looks. Then looked them over in turn, all three sets of eyes lingering in an uncomfortable manner on Sera.

“Why? You lookin’ for work? She’ll find plenty on her back.” They laughed at that, convincing themselves they were of high wit. “Nothing like her in Thraxtown.”

“Thraxtown? Is that your camp?”

The loggers shifted, moving about them, obviously more interested in looking Sera up and down than concentrating on Dante’s questions. Nervously, she moved closer to

him, pressing against his arm.

“How much for a romp in the leaves with the little lady?”

Dante lifted a brow. “She’s not for sale or rent. Romp with each other if the urge is so strong.”

They chortled at that, but it was not a pleasant laughter. “Bet she’d be happy to have a real man ride her ‘stead of a pretty boy like him.”

“Three real men.”

They circled closer. Sera clutched at Dante’s arm.

“So, let me get this straight,” he asked in a silky tone. “You’re not going to tell me where your camp is?”

“No, but we’ll take your woman there.”

Dante smiled. The sword came out of the sheath with a smooth motion and he whirled two handed and sliced into the unprotected belly of the man on his right. Sera yelped and crouched under the return arc. The two loggers who were not trying to hold their intestines in cried out in rage and attacked. One swung his ax madly. Dante blocked it with the blade, caught the ax head in the cross guard of the sword and kicked his opponent in the gut. Then when the man bent double. Sliced his throat.

Blood splattered Sera. The third logger was smart enough to realize he faced a swordsman and had no sword himself. He dropped his bag and started running. Dante did not dignify the retreat with chase. Merely hefted the sword and flung it like a spear. It lodged in the back of the escaping man. The logger sprawled flat on his face with the blade sticking up from his back.

Sera gagged. She wiped blood from her face and glared at Dante. She was trembling. Her stomach was queasy. Fear and reaction begin to turn into anger.

“By the Goddess - - what did you do?” she screamed at him. “Are you mad? You just - - you just *killed* them. How could you just kill them?”

Dante stared at her incredulously. “Should I have let them have their way with you? Have you picked up a taste for gang rape while I was gone?”

“You imbecile!” She climbed to her feet and stalked towards him. He took a step back warily when she raised her clenched fists. “You cannot just go around slicing people open.”

“Would you have felt better if I’d burned them to a crisp? I would have preferred it, believe me, but that option wasn’t open. Besides, she told us to stop the loggers. This is as good a way to start as any.”

“Do you see this blood on me? I don’t like blood from other people’s slit gullets spurting on me. It was hot and it was disgusting and if you ever drop a bloody corpse at my knees again I will make you regret it.” She waved a finger under his nose to emphasize her point. She took a breath, trying to calm the nausea. She had seen death before. A great deal of it. She had killed out of necessity. Had seen him kill for lesser reasons. He had more deaths to his credit than Gerad and all his nightwalkers combined. She had forgotten what it was like to walk in the company of Dante Epherian.

She took another breath, calming herself, and said primly. “If you insist on butchery - - do me the favor of giving some warning, so I might get out of the way. And I want a knife or a sword or something, because I am tired of cowering like some helpless woman every time something threatens us.”

She planted her fists on her hips and glared up at him, waiting for a response. He stared down, a very slight smile touching his lips.

“Are you finished?” he asked finally.

She sniffed and admitted. “I think so.”

“You are so beautiful when you’re angry.”

Goddess. She rolled her eyes and stalked away to check the corpses, grisly job that it was, for a knife or dagger she could claim for her own.

“You look good with blood on you too,” he added, as if that would reconcile her with the feel of the sticky stuff spattered about her person. Then she recalled thinking something similar of him not too long ago and blushed. She found a six inch knife on the one with the slit throat and wiped its sheath clean of blood with leaves before sticking it in her belt.

Dante retrieved his sword, similarly cleaned it and rummaged about in the pack of the dead man after he had dragged the three bodies from the path. There was food stuffs, extra clothing, tags for marking trees, canvas, cord and various other simple survival supplies. Everything but the tags was a goddess send.

“Don’t even think about eating here,” she warned, when he looked like he was

going to delve into the food then and there, corpses and all. He cast her a pained look, which turned into one of resignation, then cast the pack over his shoulder and ushered her down the trail the way the loggers had come.

“Why this way? They were headed the other direction?”

“Because Glyncara said north. That way is west.”

She couldn't argue with that. She had to admit not being particularly clear on the part of his conversation with the lady of the forest after the curse had been laid on her. One tended towards distraction when one learned one might turn into a tree.

So she followed him down the trail, away from the carnage, rubbing at the blood spots on her skin. She hoped they would come upon a stream soon so she might wash the stuff from her body and clothing. She mentioned that desire and he said sagely.

“Oh, we will.”

It was not until later that afternoon that she realized how far they had come since the flight from Ludas. She heard the rushing of the river before they came to it. The Ahrend River, which divided the South from the plain lands of the lower North. It cut through the Great Forest from the mountains of the east and traveled in an ever widening channel towards the sea. It was the longest river on the continent.

One moment they were walking through the wood, intent on the sounds of a great deal of running water and the next, the trees simply stopped. The wood ended in an abrupt and savage swath of razed land that extended for as far as the eye could easily see. Dry, drying undergrowth coiled and twisted around the stumps of a thousand trees. It was so shocking, so devastating a destruction that Sera almost walked out of the wood to better see the wreckage. Dante caught her arm and yanked her back before she could step foot from beneath the shadow of the foliage.

“Remember the curse,” he hissed at her. She blanched and hugged herself.

The river Ahrend ran to their left, cutting through both forest and razed land. It would be, she thought numbly, the perfect vehicle for transporting logs down stream to the docks and lumber yards of Ciziran and Thacon which sat on either side of the gulf that the river emptied into. How very convenient a means for the death of a forest.

“Oh Goddess,” she whispered. “The Great forest went for fifty miles past the Ahrend. What have they done?”

“The march of civilization,” Dante said in disgust. “They’ve got to rebuild everything we destroyed during the wars. Look.”

He pointed into the expanse of devastation. In the distance, at the edge of the river sat a wood walled compound. There seemed to be activity about it. There was a road alongside the river leading to it and the forest. Many such roads, from the look of it, including the one they stood on the edge of. Roads for wagons to haul back lumber to be sent down the river. It was a huge logging city, with no doubt hundreds upon hundreds of men working within and without.

She shuddered, despairing of how they were to stop so ponderous and huge an operation?

Seventeen

Sera stayed in the woods, well off from the trail where any passing loggers might find her. She had her knife, which she assured him she well knew the use of, the supplies they had scavenged from his kills and his stern direction to stay out of trouble. She had primly told him she was neither a child nor an idiot and not to treat her like one. He had arched a brow at her imperious lift of the nose and the rigid set of her back and drove down the urge to press her against the soft earth and tell her exactly what he did think of her. She more than likely would have had something to say about that as well, so he merely inclined his head at her, and swept her an exaggerated bow.

He walked down the trail towards Thraxtown. Sera had complained that if he were going to inconspicuously take a look about a rough and tumble logger town, then he might not want to stand out like a lord in a pig pen. He had stared at her in blank incomprehension. How could he help but stand out? He was Dante Epherian. Subterfuge had never been a practice of his. He thrived on attention. He could not imagine NOT making an entrance.

“But then they’ll be wary of you, or scared or contemptuous ---” she had argued.

“Contemptuous? What do you mean contemptuous?”

She had taken a breath for patience, which annoyed him, as if he inspired a

shortness of it. “Like those poor butchered men --”

“Rapists.”

“Yes -- on the trail back there. Of course they didn’t think they were better than you --”

“I should hardly think so.”

--But they were able to recognize the class difference and that usually puts people off. You can’t stroll into town and let everyone know how great and magnanimous you are and not expect them to distance themselves. You won’t find out anything useful that way.”

“What do you suggest?” he had asked, warily.

“Well for one -- that hair.”

Both brows went up. “What, prey tell, is wrong with my hair?”

“Nothing. I love your hair. But – you rather stand out in a crowd.”

He stared at her levelly. He could accept that explanation. One was aware of one’s attributes. He waited for her to justify the wasted time in bringing it up.

“We’ve got to do something about your hair and you’re not really dressed like a man that belongs in a logging town ---”

Hence, after argument and distaste on his part, he approached the thick lumber barricade around Thraxtown wearing a flannel shirt from the pilfered pack of a logger, his silver hair hidden beneath an abhorrent knit hat. He despised the hat. He had argued vehemently with Sera about the nasty thing. She had yanked his hair and told him in no uncertain terms that it was an important part of the disguise. People had died for lesser offenses. With her, he sat placidly and let her have her way.

The gates were open. A wide wagon pulled by two large and bored looking mules lumbered out as Dante was going in. The mules were in no mind to give way to a single man on foot and he had to scramble back to avoid being trod under hooves and wheel. His boots squelched in thick mud at the side of the road. He glared at wagon and mud, as if both had contrived the day long to practice this indignity upon him.

The town inside the barricade had been put up hastily. There were canvas tents and shoddily constructed wooden buildings. The streets were mud, churned ankle deep by heavy wagons and the passage of hundreds of feet. A rustic, crude town of lumber men

and their followers, beggars and crippled that hawked for charity at the road side and camp whores, who were as used and unappealing a lot as Dante had ever seen. The herb women and hedge witches had their own row of tents, boasting healing salves and wards for snakes and spiders and poison ivies, pouches that could drive away rats and cure crabs and any other sexual disease picked up from the dirty whores who serviced these men.

He doubted the latter much worked. There were some things more stubborn than simple magic could deal with. The preachings of the Prophet had not reached here, to drive away the witches. These rugged men, who worked in the wilderness and suffered from it, more than welcomed the plain cures the hedge witches offered. Religion be damned when it came to chasing the wood rattlers away from where a man worked.

Dante stopped under the awning of one such tent, drawn to the hint of magic in the many pouches the old woman hawked. A true witch, he thought. Not a powerful one, if she was reduced to following this camp, but not a woman without arcane knowledge. The withered old hag behind the plank counter eyed him gleefully, a potential customer within her grasp.

“What is it today, for such a handsome, handsome boy as yourself?”

He cast his eyes over her charms and pouches, wondering if she could even imagine how old he was.

“None of your wares today, grandmother. Just a bit of information.”

“Information, huh? That’s rarer than magic in these parts. What will you pay?”

He leaned on the counter, fixing her with his gaze. “Make it a professional courtesy. One - - practitioner - - of the arts to another.”

She stared back, searching his face. “Do I know you?” she asked warily.

He shrugged. “Anything’s possible.”

“I seem to recall seeing you before.” She shivered, not able to grasp the memory she sought. “What information, then, fellow artist?”

“How long have they been cutting at this wood? How long has this town been here?”

“Oh, for almost a year now, the lord Thrax has worked on this great forest. The town has moved three times.”

“Thrax? He’s lord here? He owns the lumber operation?”

“He does. The greatest lumber baron in the known world he is and proud of it.”

“Really? So one might consider him the ultimate power here?”

“Oh, most assuredly.”

“Where might I find him?”

“His house is the biggest in town. You can’t miss it. But he plays Pirates and Kings every night at the Busty Whore.”

When he lifted an inquisitive brow at her, she cackled and gestured out the tent and to the north. “Tavern down the street.”

“Thank you for the help, grandmother. Perhaps I’ll send some business your way.”

She sniffed at the improbability of that as he walked away.

In the middle of daylight, the logging town was conspicuously shy of men, the loggers out deforesting the Great Wood. He walked about the town, getting a feel for the lay of it. Simple really, a main street lined with wood buildings that housed general store, tavern, lumber offices, with tents in-between where pimps offered tired whores and physicians made their offices amidst the mud and squalor.

A man screamed inside a tent that boasted the sign of a dentist. At the end of this street was a large, well constructed log house, with a fence about it to keep passer bys from churning the yard to mud like they had the rest of the town. There were stables to the east where work horse and mule were housed, and to the north, beyond the lumber baron’s house were a sea of tents that belonged to the loggers themselves. Hundreds and hundreds of them. A small army of men to discourage from razing Glyncara’s wood.

If Glyncara hadn’t been a stubborn, mistrustful spirit and lived up to her claim to remove the wards about his wrists before the task she set him to was complete, it would have been a simple matter. A Venom spell, multiplied, would have melted the whole expanse of tents and loggers within them. But far be it from a woman, and one of unnatural origin to boot, to ever take the simple route.

No, make as much of a job of it as possible. Put him to as much trouble as one possibly could. Make him wear the damned cap.

He seethed over the cap for a few streets, glaring at passerby, who dared to stare at his passage. Came to the western side of the town where the barricade drove right into the shores of the river and where a lumber yard had been set up. A fair number of men worked at positioning the cut trees into broad groups of flotsam in the water, before they

were set loose to drift downriver.

He tired of touring the dreary little town and made his way to the tavern the hedge witch had told him of. There were only a few customers this time of day, the men still hard at work. The lone barmaid pounced on him with single minded, rabid attention. If she had been even vaguely pretty he would have passed time entertaining himself by flirting with her. As things were, he nursed watered down, poor quality ale and attempted to drive the wench away with an imperious disregard only kings and very powerful wizards could achieve, but it was lost on her.

One suspected the cap and the logger's shirt worked against a particularly good air of regal contempt. She kept reminding him that she usually charged a copper coin for a romp in the back, but since he was so clean, she might consider a lowering of fees. He would glare at her frostily until she went away, only to be back in short order to bother him with something else.

Eventually, when the shadows grew long outside, the loggers began drifting into the tavern, tired and sweaty from a long day's work. With them came a tremendous buzz of raucous laughter and coarse conversation. He sat a small round table in a back corner of the tavern, and even though the place became full to overflowing with patrons, no one intruded upon his little island of privacy, warned by the dangerous look in his eyes. They watched him, though. A stranger in the midst of a crew that knew and worked together.

Eventually a trio of truly untalented musicians struck up a tune. The loggers, well into their cups, stomped along with the melody, many of the men taking up their work mates as dancing partners and tromping with an abominable lack of grace about the floor. The whole of the tavern thought it uproariously funning when one ungainly couple crashed into a table, spilling ale over themselves and its occupants. Dante watched the whole thing with growing scorn and thought no one in their right mind would terribly mind if he did send the whole town up in flames.

Eventually the lumber baron Thrax made his appearance. He arrived with several burly men guarding him and a passingly pretty, if not plump young woman on his arm. Thrax himself had logger written all over him. Granted, he was a logger who had removed himself from the woods, attempted to clothe himself in somewhat fashionable garb and wear his hair in the style of a gentleman.

Thrax stomped into the tavern, swelling visibly as every eye in the room fixed on him. A man who thrived on notability. Who had worked hard to achieve it, even in the midst of this dismal, rustic little town. A man who thought he was someone of consequence.

He and his entourage moved through the crowd to a table that cleared quickly for him. Chairs were pushed forward to accommodate he and his, the woman sidling up close to him, her hands sliding under the table to no doubt entertain him there. A game board was brought out along with a bottle of wine that no doubt never touched lips other than his. Everyone else got common ale.

He sat the game pieces on the board and called for comers. A thick bellied logger took the seat opposite him and they began a game of Pirates and Kings. Dante remembered another name for the game, but like everything else of old, it had disappeared into the ages. Same game basically, same goal, similar rules. Just a difference in the labeling of characters.

Thrax beat the first comer in short order and a new challenger approached. After a while the interest in the game wavered, other than a core group of loggers either unusually intelligent for their class, or particularly willing to brown nose their lord. Men turned back to their conversations, their drinks and their clumsy attempts at dance.

Another opponent beat and Dante rose and gradually eased his way through the crowd into the circle of observers. Thrax fancied himself a master of the game. That was clear from the superior smile on his lips as he watched his opponent make inevitably bad moves. His King always took the Pirate.

“Who’s next? Who’s next to give me a run for my money?” he called after vanquishing the latest foe.

Dante stepped forward. “Are there wagers involved?”

Thrax looked him up and down, frowned. “A day’s pay either gained or lost, if you’ve confidence enough to bet. But I don’t recognize you as a man on my payroll.”

“No,” Dante agreed and slipped into the chair. “What shall we bet then?”

“Are you looking for work?”

Dante shrugged. “The right work.”

Thrax laughed. The men around him did. “Lumber’s the only work here about’s.”

“Then I suppose that will have to do. A day’s pay without the work, then when I win.”

“When you win?” Thrax guffawed, genuinely amused. “All right and ten days work without pay, if you don’t. Since you have so much confidence in yourself. I always play the king.”

Dante smiled wolfishly. “And I the Pirate.”

The game began. A knight moved here and took a picaroon. A privateer took a holy priest. The royal advisor cornered the Pirate’s Lady and a simple buccaneer crept up from the side and took the King when Thrax’s attention to focused on his siege of the Lady and the Pirate had never moved from his secure vantage at the rear.

There was silence. Thrax stared at the board, as though searching for some sign that Dante had cheated.

“Gawdess,” Thrax’s lady exclaimed, breaking the uncertain silence. “He took you in seven moves and only lost one of his men to boot.”

Thrax turned a seething glare her way, then stanchd it, not wanting to seem the sore looser. He could not quite force a smile when he turned back to Dante.

“Well, you’ve got a day’s pay and no work to show for it. Will you be wanting real work after that?”

“I don’t know. I suppose that depends on whether we play another game.”

Thrax’s frown deepened. A muscle twitched in his jaw. He seemed torn between taking this as a terrible insult or letting it go. Finally a slight grin touched his lips and he called for another bottle of wine.

“Fair enough, stranger. The next game I’ll pay more heed. A man let’s his guard down playing with simpletons.”

No one seemed particularly offended by that claim. The barmaid poured Dante a glass of Thrax’s private wine. It was of poor vintage and barely better than the ale.

“What’s your name, stranger?” Thrax asked.

“Dante,” he answered.

“Logger by trade?”

“Many trades.”

“Where did you learn the ways of Pirates and Kings?”

“Oh, here and there. I’ve been around.”

“Well then,” Thrax swallowed the remainder of his wine and slammed the cup down with gusto. “Another game, then.”

* * *

The snow was beginning to fill the passes through the Great Northern Range. The tracks of the monster led over the ridge and down into the valleys on the southern side of the mountains. It had not long passed that way, for barely a day’s worth of snow obscured the trail. Any normal riders would have found passage after it troublesome, what with snow past their horses noses filling the narrow passages through the mountains. But, Kastel was not hailed as the Winter King for merely the domain he ruled. Snow was blasted from their paths, or walls of ice raised to dam the thunderous tumble of avalanche. They crossed from one side of the range to the other and descended to the snowbound forests of evergreen that covered the slopes.

The thing they followed was huge. The way it passed was littered with split trees and gouged earth. Sometimes it grazed on greenery. They could tell by the stripped growth from high up on the trees. It preferred meat, but was slow in catching the antelope that populated the forests. Human prey was slower and easier to take.

They had passed one village on the northern slopes of the Great Northern Range that the thing had passed through. If there were survivors they had fled deep into the forests. Kastel and left two men to see if any returned, and to burn what was left of the remains, which was not much. No reason to let other, smaller scavengers ravage the villagers, who had been oath bound to him.

If it and others of its kind, (they had no true name for it yet) had not learned the ease of hunting human prey, they might have coexisted with it. He would have been content to let it roam the high passes unmolested. He had no particular love for the hunt. He always, deep down, sympathized with the prey, though he hid the weakness vehemently from outside eyes.

They followed the winding trail down the side of the mountain, plowed through snow deep into the evening until darkness made Kastel summon a witch light to reveal

their path. He despaired stopping when the trail was so fresh. Recent sap oozed from the broken trunks of pines.

There was a great rustling of limbs before them. A guttural sound interspersed with a crunching, grinding of bone or teeth.

Kiro drew his sword. His men did. The warhorses pricked their ears in expectation, great hooves stomping in the snow. They rode forward and in a great clearing a beast crouched. Blood splattered the snow around it and in its great jaws, held by two long clawed forearms was the carcass of one of the giant mountain bears. The bear was small in the monster's grip. Its shoulders were the height of four men end to end, tapering down to a ridged spine that ended at a long, thick tail that thrashed in the snow like a cat's.

There was nothing feline about it. Its back legs were long and jointed like a wolf's, save that the feet were long and broad and wickedly clawed, four claws to the front and one prehensile one projecting from the rear for the tearing of prey. Its snout was long and filled with bristling teeth and two great horns protruded from the bones above its small black eyes.

A most fearsome beast, and a most irritated one at the intrusion upon its feeding. It cried out, a rumbling screech that echoed up the slope. The knights did, brandishing their spears and swords, eager to be at the thing, eager to engage in the kill as much as they had been the hunt.

The beast dropped the bear and whirled, lashing out with its tail. A horse went off its feet, screaming. The man on its back tumbled and came up with sword still in hand. A spear stuck in the thing's hide. It seemed not to notice. It lunged at men and horses, testing their strength and their speed. Kastel kept his horse in check, wondering as always at the sheer insensibility of men to engage in hopeless battles. He had seen so many go to their deaths in battles that seemed impossible to win. And yet they went. Out of honor. Out of misplaced loyalty. Out of courage that held more a grip on them than common sense.

Well, perhaps these men today, did not go blindly into a fray that they knew they had no hope of winning. They were well aware that their lord rode among them. They were well aware of his capabilities. Kiro got knocked from his horse by the sweep on

one clawed arm, armor was torn and blood drawn. Kastel had watched enough.

He mouthed the words to a spell. Felt his horse dance nervously under him, the animal familiar with the flavor of the arcane when it was in the air. He summoned a mid-level ice spirit to do his bidding. Set it to a specific spell task and sent it on its way. The ground under the beast's feet began to crystallize. Ice began to creep up the monster's legs, entrapping them in a white, faceted prison. It screamed its rage; its fear as the ice reached its upper body.

The knights stood back, well away from the edges of the spell. Kastel thought he had it. With a great, frenzied cry the thing convulsed, tensing all its mighty muscles and ice cracked. It shattered, spraying outwards and pelting his knights. The thing launched upwards, desperate to escape the icy fingers the ground sent up at it. Twenty feet it bounded up, and came crashing down in an ungainly fashion some four feet from Kastel's suddenly terrified horse. The warhorse screamed and scrambled to distance itself from the monster. The thing pounced ready to tear to pieces the closest human attacker. Kastel cried out the quickest spell he could think of and ice spears radiated out from his outstretched hand and pierced the monster's neck, shoulders and lower jaw. It staggered, frothing blood, in deathly pain and mad now.

"Xeris Zathus, do my bidding now by the covenant made with blood and ice." He cried out the incantation of a nasty, nasty little offensive spell, wanting the thing dead now. It made a step towards him, then arched backwards, mouth open in soundless shock. Its internal origins would be freezing right about now. The blood stopping in its veins. The flesh turning cold and rigid as its body turned to ice from the inner core outwards. It took maybe eight second from the time the spell began for the monster to topple over, frozen in position and very, very dead.

He dismounted. Took a moment to calm the frightened horse; the horse meant a great deal to him, then handed the reins to one of his men and walked though the trampled, blood spattered snow to see how badly Kiro was hurt. A rent in leather armor and thick padding that seeped blood from a gash in the ribs below. A bruise to the side of his captain's face that was red and blistered with blood. Kastel did not ask the obvious question, which was, If I was here, foolish man, why go to all the trouble to attack the thing with swords and spears? He knew the answer, of course. Honor and all that.

He placed fingers over the wound and whispered a healing spell. Surprisingly enough, to work a simple healing took more concentration than a powerful and destructive ice spell. One had to be careful when one was working to restore a thing rather than destroy it. A great healer, which he was not, invested a lifetime's worth of study into his trade.

Another of his men had a dislocated shoulder, which was set back into place by mundane means. They had lost a horse. His men discussed the taking of trophy horns, if not head. Kastel left them to that grisly talk, having no interest in such a prize. More concerned about two injured men and one horse short and snow beginning to fall from the sky. He might convince it to hold back a day more, but it would only make the storm harsher by far when eventually it did let loose. Better not to tamper with the weather during the winter. It was fickle enough without his help.

There was a trading outpost further down the mountain, he thought. Not far if the map he visualized in his head were anything close to the truth of their position. They might get another mount there and a day or two's rest for his wounded. His men would revel in the tales of the killing of the beast. The mountain men who always frequented such outposts would likely tromp up the mountain to see the frozen corpse. Yet one more fable to grace the highlands.

Yes, down the mountain to the trading post. Further south than he had been in almost a year.

Eighteen

Gerad was out of the city before the guard had the chance to be summoned and set in motion to stop him. Not that they could have. But they would have inconvenienced him. Slowed him enough so that someone who might have stopped him, like Teo for instance, would have time to reach him. The entire time he slid in and out of the shadows, and hurried through the lands outside the city walls where his horse was hidden, he cursed himself for not finishing the job the Prophet had started.

Damn the man anyway, hiding secret arcane talents under that facade of holiness.

Nasty little trick, to create sword wounds in one's own body out of thin air. Not one Gerad ever hoped to learn.

Dante was alive. That thought kept ringing through his head. And behind that - - *Kheron. Kheron. She'll run back to him. Better that he were still in the ground.* Then he shook that notion back, chiding himself for shallowness and lack of honor. To wish a friend and a comrade dead for the sake of a woman was not the act of a true man. Especially when he had never had the woman in question to begin with. Better that he thank the fates that she might be happy again.

He avoided the roads, traveling well away from where prying eyes might spot a lone traveler. Not that they wouldn't know where he was heading. Not that they hadn't means, wizardly ones, to send word ahead and let the garrisons along the road know that a nightwalker was on his way past.

He pushed the horse past its endurance and had to rest in the wee hours of the morning, hiding like a bandit in a copse of trees twenty miles out of Alsansir. His first impulse was to wait the day out, secure and hidden. Sheltering night would hide his passage. It was the way of the nightwalker. But he feared forces from Alsansir would overtake him in their zeal to stop him and he would then have to work his way through their lines. So he took to the saddle again after only a few hours rest and carefully weeded his way through the most underdeveloped lands, skirting from wood to wood. There were too many planted fields this close to the city for total anonymity. Too many small homesteads to go far without passing a road or a distant farm.

But he was good at what he did. And careful as only age and experience might make a man careful. He passed the day at a slow pace, conserving the horse's strength so that it might travel into the night. He had water and jerky to break his fast and allowed the horse an hour's grazing at the side of a stream. He dozed fitfully, trusting the animal to alert him should anything venture near. That little sleep and he was back in the saddle. He had operated on less.

Two miles to the west was the place the priests had stopped him on the road, warning him away from Alsansir. He could have ridden east from there and encountered the foothills of the Eastern Range, but chose instead to hold his course. It proved to be a wise decision, for a day later he spied a small troop of riders making haste south along

the trade road. He watched them from the hills until he was certain he recognized armor and riders.

He broke his cover then, riding down to intercept them on the road. Six armored men and two of his nightwalker, led by an armed and frowning Kheron. Her golden glare was enough to scald a man where he stood. She jabbed a finger at him and demanded.

“So you send cryptic messages now to draw me out? Have you good reason to cause me worry?”

He blinked at her in surprise. “You were worried about me?”

Her expression never wavered from stern disapproval. “That is neither here nor there. What was the meaning of the babbling your men came back with? Is there amiss in Alsansir?”

“Well -- you might say that.” He didn’t know how else to say it, with her staring at him expectantly, with the men shifting behind her on a road touched with evening’s purpling light. His fingers tightened on the reins so hard the leather bit into his palm. “He’s alive, Kheron. Again.”

She stared at him, not understanding -- or refusing to. Gerad shook his head, his mouth gone dry, his heart hammering in his chest as if a great battle faced him. He regarded this woman higher than any other. He loved this woman. And here he sat facing her, with an explanation on his lips that would forever keep her from him.

“He’s alive,” he repeated it.

Her lips moved. She sat as a statue in her saddle. A statue of living flesh with a core so hot he was warmed by the mere closeness. “What do you say, Gerad?” she whispered.

“Dante came back. It shouldn’t surprise us. He’s done it before.”

“When? Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I know damned little, save what drunken babble Rab-Ker told me. The Prophet it seems is a cat of a different breed than we thought. He’s clipped Dante’s wings - - somehow - - and wants a meal. The church is condemning him - - no news there - - and Sera and he have fled the city. I do believe Teo has forces out after him.”

“Did you talk with Teo? Did you demand he cease this - - pursuit?”

“Ah - - no. The Prophet circumvented that. I wouldn’t advise talking sense to any

of that lot just yet.”

“How did you know?” Kheron shifted minutely, betraying emotion behind the facade of Stormbringer. “What made you go to Alsansir?”

“I don’t know. A feeling. A gut instinct. More to do with Sera than Dante. He was the last thing on my mind.”

“They sought to keep us from the city? From finding out?”

“It seems that way, lady.”

“Then they shall pay,” she hissed. “If they’ve harmed him in any way, I shall see them all burn.”

“Kheron.” Gerad held out a hand. “Think a moment. We don’t know the details here. We don’t want to go up against Teo and his clerics and the devil knows what powers the Prophet has hidden away, without thinking it through first. We don’t have the forces. Your own are scattered. Mine are mixed so thoroughly with men from Alsansir that I can’t muster troops without infringing on the loyalty of half my men. We need to figure out where Dante and Sera are. Teo was sending troops north, up the river towards Ludas. Good bet there’s a reason for that.”

“Kastel has forces to spare,” Kheron said. “He never let his army disperse.”

“Fine. Then contact him. Tell him the situation and get him out of hibernation up there in the cold north and down here. For now, we gather what forces we know are loyal to us and we avoid Teo’s troops.”

She nodded, impatient and not wishing an argument, wanting to move and do something. Her fingers reached out and she touched his arm. There passed between them a private look, her eyes gone liquid and her lips trembling.

“He’s really alive?”

He nodded. She shuddered, then withdrew her hand. Her back straightened with determination and the Stormbringer was back.

* * *

Sera felt ghastly rummaging about a dead man’s belongings, but there was little help for it. As she had told Dante, if one did not wish to stand out like a sore thumb, one

dressed the part. Which in her case was disguising the fact that she was a woman. Not that she had a particular plan. She was forbidden from the logging town by verdict of Glyncara's curse. So the only option she had, after hours of boredom drove her to the decision that she had to do something, was to follow the trail to whatever logging operation it led to and see what there was to see.

She bound her breasts and donned a bloody coat pilfered off the body of a corpse. Shifting about stiffening limbs was truly an unpleasant task. She had cringed and swallowed back nausea the whole time. She knotted her hair in a bun and wrapped a bandanna about it, then pulled on a woolen cap (also taken from the dead) to cover the whole. The cap had long flaps that came down over her cheeks, covering to some degree the soft curve of feminine jaw. She thought she might have passed for a boy, if not a man grown. At least she would not be hailed as a woman from a distance and have half the loggers in the woods salivating on her heels. Why did men have to be so uncooperative and bothersome? If the world were run by women it would be such a nicer place to live.

With that surly historic thought in her head, she followed the trail west for some while before coming to an area that was newly being stripped of trees. Why they chose this area instead of any other along the trail to work their destruction, she did not know. One supposed a type of tree more vital to their profits grew here and not there.

She cared not. She skirted about the operation, watching twenty or more men work in teams with great saws longer than her body. Other's had shimmied up to the heights of trees and severed limbs from the torso. Other men collected the droppings and tossed what they had no use for in a great pile of discarded wood, and loaded what they did want onto a series of waiting mule carts. Some of the carts were huge things, with wheels taller than she, and beds broad enough to sleep a dozen people comfortably. A picket line of mules and heavy horse rested idly, munching contentedly at grain sacks about their noses, while the carts were loaded with lumber.

They had cleared in this site alone, perhaps twenty acres of land. She wondered how long they had been at it. With the gusto these men displayed in their work, not long, she guessed. She despaired ever being able to stop them. She hated them, and not alone for Glyncara's sake, but for the trampled nests she saw littering the ground and the silence of the wood all around the campsite, as if all the animals had fled the destruction

of their home.

A man cried out warning in the distance and all the others hesitated in their work, watching as a towering forest giant fell with a thud and a billowing of debris. There were a few whistles and hoots at the achievement, then the men returned to their work. The mules and horses rolled their eyes nervously at the commotion in camp, but soon went back to their chewing. She watched them thoughtfully. There were eighteen draft animals here, waiting to haul the wagons back. Though it would surely be no mortal blow, it would be inconvenient if they were to break the picket and run away. She thought she might, if she worked at it, be able to place an urgency in their simple, equine minds, to flee to the south. It would keep them from turning up back at the logger town and being brought back into service.

It was something she could do to help, at any rate. She had to do something other than sit passively in the woods waiting for Dante to fix matters. It was her continued existence as a human being in question, after all.

She slipped through the trees to the picket line and no one noticed her, or if they did questioned her presence. She scratched under the forelock of the first large horse in line. Its gentle eyes observed her patiently. She knew the ways of simple, animal direction. It was one of the first spells taught to those in the Holy Sword. It was an exercise in patience and concentration that when learned properly made other, more complicated spells easier. All she had to do was plant in the animal's mind a fixation on the south. A need to reaching some unknown destination that lay in that direction. A warm stable, a manger full of barley and sweet grasses. A rubdown. Anything that would drive a horse with single-minded clarity to travel.

It wouldn't last more than a day or so. Her compulsions were not that strong. But it would be enough to get the animals well away from here. She left the first horse with its head turned southward and its ears pricked and moved to the second. The mules were harder. Their minds more closed. They had never had the desire to please or accommodate man bred into them like horses and were less inclined to be receptive to her coaxing invasion of their small, beady brains. Twice the work with them and she was sweating and exhausted by the time she'd finished the line.

It was just a matter then of loosening the picket and drawing the line out of the

halter loops. They didn't know they were free at first and she waved her hands in their faces, hissing *Shoo Shoo* at them to get them moving. Once the first horse realized it was free to pursue the southerly urge it bolted across the edge of the clearing, with the others following on its tail.

The loggers did look up then, and dropped their tools to rush across the camp in efforts to cut off the animals. Sera darted into the woods, running herself, wanting well clear of the area when the band of disgruntled men gathered together to place blame. She laughed as she slipped between trees, pleased with her own hidden stealth. Gerad would have been proud. She surprised herself sometimes.

She was so busy congratulating herself that she forgot to watch her step. Her foot twisted in a gully and she crashed down, grazing her leg on the jagged end of a broken limb that jutted up from the forest floor. She cried out and aborted the sound with an effort, biting her lip and squeezing her eyes tightly shut with the pain. She lay twisted, afraid to move in case she felt the grating of broken bone. Afraid to look for the same reason. Her ankle throbbed and her leg did, above the knee on the outside of her thigh. She moved a hand down to feel her thigh and her fingers encountered wet. She forced her eyes open and shifted, which movement itself brought great pain, to see the damage. There was a rent in her pants leg, and a deep gash in her flesh that bled copiously. Tears leaked from her eyes, as much from frustration as pain.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. To cripple herself hours walk from the forest edge where Dante would expect to find her. What would he do when she wasn't there? Something equally stupid. No, no. His blunders generally came from the arrogant assurance that he was better than the rest of the world's inhabitants. He never bollixed things out of sheer clumsiness. But he would be worried about her. He was likely to go off looking for her in the most likely place, the very place she had left, assuming the loggers had somehow captured her. It was what she would do.

She wiped tears out of her eyes and pulled the cap from her head, taking the bandanna under it to wrap around her leg. There were splinters of wood in the gash, but with no water to clean it, she hesitated poking about in it just yet.

Her ankle throbbed with each movement of the leg. She prodded it gently when she'd finished bandaging the cut and thought with some relief that it was not broken.

Bruised, sprained maybe, but with a little support, she might be able to put weight on it.

There was a stout branch a few feet away and she edged towards it, using it to lever herself up.

Ohhh, pain. She saw stars. Blood trickled down the inside of her lip where she bit it. She took a great breath and hobbled a step forward. The cut didn't hurt so bad as the ankle now. The ankle felt twice its normal size. Clumsily she began limping along, cursing with each step.

Time blurred and became meaningless. She traveled with unwavering determination down the path back to the edge of the forest. It was like someone had placed an urgent need in *her* head. It grew dark and she hadn't even the stamina or concentration to summon a witchlight. She cried off and on, without realizing it until the tears collected in her mouth. At one point she heard the trampling of boots behind her on the trail and the raised, angry voices of men. The loggers forced to return to camp and get more draft animals.

She hastened to the side of the path, fell amidst the bramble and brush and curled up in a helpless, trembling knot not five feet from the edge of the trail, praying to the goddess that they would not notice her in the darkness. They did not. They passed her by, in a hurry to reach home and report the desertion of their equine labor. She lay there for a while after, head spinning. Then collected her courage and managed to gain her feet again.

Down the path. She had no idea how far she was from her destination. Something came out at her from the darkness. An arm grabbed her about the neck and yanked her savagely off her feet and against a hard body. Her breath left her, her vision grayed. The hands shook her and thrust her back against a tree and a blade appeared before her spinning sight. It took her a moment to recognize him, what with the cap she'd made him wear and the rugged clothing. She stared up at him and her mouth formed his name silently.

His own mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. The sword dropped between them.

"What in hell are you doing out here dressed as a man and not in the place I left you? I thought you'd been taken by those damned lumberjacks."

“By the what?” she asked hazily. He stared at her closely and his brows descended in apprehension.

“What’s wrong? Why were you limping?”

“I fell down,” she said in a tiny voice. She was so tired and the strength that had sustained her all the while to get her, deserted her now that she had found Dante. “I cut my leg and twisted my ankle. It hurts, Dante,” she moaned and slipped down the tree to the ground. He caught her and eased her down, ripping the hat from her head and tossing it aside.

“I almost struck first, thinking you were some man from the camp,” he complained. He felt along her ankle and she hissed in pain.

“I can’t see well. Can you summon a witchlight?”

“I don’t think so. My head’s fuzzy.”

“Silly girl. What’s this?” His hands touched the impromptu bandage. “Still bleeding. “

“I’m sorry. I tried to help. I chased their horses away. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid. I don’t associate with stupid people. You just have abominable luck.”

He slipped his arms under her legs and back and swung her up into his arms. She whimpered at the jostling and clung to his neck. “Which way was that brook?” he muttered, tromping through the woods with her. She drifted into darkness.

Came to with pain in her leg. He was a dark shadow bending beside her. There was the thin trickling sound of water. The little brook they had found not far from the edge of the wood, almost dried up, but still spouting some water. He took off her boot, his hands gentle. But the pain was inevitable. She drew sharp breath and he apologized. His fingers probed the swollen ankle, then he took his sword and cut a few swaths of cloth from his cloak and bound it. He rinsed the bloody bandanna in the brook and swabbed at the cut.

“Sera, are you sure you can’t summon a witchlight. I could clean this better if I had something to see by.”

Her head was a little clearer now. She concentrated and whispered the summoning spell.

“Illumina.” A very small, unsteady light appeared before her face. It bobbed there uncertainly, casting Dante in a wavering light. He looked up at her, silver eyes sharp and worried.

“This is deep. You’ll need to try a healing on yourself when you’ve rested. I can clean it now, but you’ll be no good unless magic hurries the closing of the wound.” He picked at the edges of her trousers, trying to get to the extremity of the cut.

“I had no idea,” she murmured, meaning it from her heart. “That you were such a good nurse. You surprise me.”

He looked up at her, taken off guard by the statement. “These need to come off, so I can wrap it properly.”

She swallowed and nodded. She lay her head back and felt his fingers working at the laces of her trousers. He slipped them off, careful of the wound and of the ankle. She shut her eyes and shivered, her legs bare to the cool night air. The cold of the water as he touched rag to wound once more was more of a shock this time. The touch of his fingers a warm after effect in its wake. She let the witch light flicker in her fall from concentration.

“Just a little longer,” he urged her, soft voiced.

He lifted her knee and wrapped her thigh with more pieces cut from his fine cloak. Then let his hand linger on the skin of her leg, above the bandage.

“Don’t do that again.”

“What?” she asked.

“Worry me like that.”

“Oh.” She sighed and let the light fade. “I hadn’t meant to. Really. What did you find out?”

“Nothing of great import. I had planned to go back tomorrow, but I don’t know if leaving you alone is so wise.”

She opened her eyes in dismay. “No. You must. I’ll be all right. I won’t move an inch. I promise.”

“You said as much before.”

“I wasn’t crippled then.”

He canted his head. “You have a point.”

His fingers traced a circle in her flesh. Her eyes traveled down to them. The coat and shirt came down far enough to cover the depth of her modesty, but her thighs were naked. Her face burned in the darkness. She was happy that the witchlight had died. She shifted her leg nervously and winced at the stab of pain.

“Don’t move it.” He reached for his mangled cloak and covered her with it, lay down beside her and enfolded her within his arms. He was warm and solid. She felt protected and oddly unsatisfied that he did nothing more than hold her. Then the weariness overtook her finally and she fell into slumber.

* * *

She woke up to a pair of birds chattering over her head, fighting over some tasty morsel one of them had found. She was entirely comfortable, her pains forgotten, her body neatly fitted into Dante’s, one of his arms her pillow the other resting across her hips slackly. Loose strands of his hair tickled her nose. She twisted her head to look at him. The insouciant superiority was washed from his face in sleep. He seemed deceptively young and innocent of all the terrible and awesome things associated with his name. It was illusion of course, but she found she hardly cared for the big things, it was the small, inconsequential ones of a more personal nature that caused her pain. She reached out and touched his cheek, tracing the fine line of bone. Black lashes flickered. His eyes slitted open and caught her in the act of admiration. She did not blush. She was too warm and comfortable to do anything but smile. He slowly blinked sleep from his eyes, regarding her with those brilliant black ringed moonlight colored pools.

The rational part of her wanted to say good morning, but that wasn’t what she felt on waking to this purely physical pleasure. What she wanted to say, she could not of a sudden, express in words. What she could think of was his gentleness with her last night. His uncontrived concern. His fingers tracing patterns on her skin. She thought, selfishly, that if it weren’t for the evil chasing them, that she might like him stripped of magic, forced into a humanity that he had used only at his convenience before.

Her fingers drifted to his jaw, touched his neck where the hair slid away from the skin. She could feel the heat of him through cloak and clothing. His chest rose and fell at

a quicker rate, his hand on her hip moved up her ribcage, up the underside of her arm where he found her hand and curled his fingers about it. He brought it to his lips, breath hot on her wrist, on her palm, brushed it with his lips, then his tongue.

Sera shuddered, enraptured by that simple act, a spasm traveling her body all the way to her bandaged ankle. The twinge of pain as she stretched her toes was nothing to the sensations she was feeling.

She said something soundlessly, some incoherent whimper, and drew their twined hands towards her and kissed his knuckles. He pulled her closer, a slight shifting of bodies and kissed her temple, her cheek, her eyelids. She made a sound in the back of her throat, the best expression she had for the pleasure she felt. She made it again when she tasted his lips. The feelings were so strong in her that she pressed hard against him. Wanting more.

“Slowly, sweet. Slowly,” he whispered against her mouth and set the pace with his hands and his mouth, slow, languidly. Her body relaxed and she entrusted herself to him.

The sound of the brook trickling nearby seeped over them. The moss and leaves cushioned them as he rolled over onto his back and gently pulled her atop, where his weight would not hurt her wounds. It began to mist, a fine, gentle precipitation. Larger droplets of cool water began to patter upon the leaves. They glistened on his skin. She kissed them off, having no more care for the rain than she did for the rest of the world at this moment.

"Oh, Goddess, Dante *Please* --" she whimpered.

He shuddered under her, clasping her hard, suddenly inside her body and trying to find his way into her soul. And her soul welcomed him, while some detached part of her rebuked her for being a fool, that he could not be trusted, that he would hurt her as soon as another pretty face caught his eye. As soon as Kheron reentered his life. The rest of her ignored it, all the complications and possible betrayals and danced.

Nineteen

“Good morning,” he said after the fact, when the rain shower had stopped and sun

dappled the mossy area about the brook. She snuggled comfortably against him, the both of them damp and overheated and she in a lazy state of euphoria and wonderment that she had not done this long before. She felt as if something that had been missing had been found again. Some deep, deep part of herself completed.

“It’s long past that,” she sighed. “Whiled away and here we are like slugabeds.”

“Hardly a proper bed. But it sufficed. How do you feel?”

“I feel lovely.”

“I meant your leg.”

“Oh. I’d forgotten it.”

“Ah. That, I’ll take as a complement.”

She looked up at him, wide eyed, innocent. “Why didn’t you ever suggest this before?”

He blinked at her then half laughed. “I seem to recall a hundred -- no a thousand times I might have mentioned it, but you were too prudish to engage.”

“So you found others,” she said, and the mood darkened. She frowned, more a mind to recall all the others now that her head was clearer. He hesitated in answering, composing the proper answer.

“I will admit to a certain -- promiscuity. But of a whole, they meant nothing. Not like you.”

“And Kheron?”

Another pause. In this situation, after this intimacy, she had him at a certain disadvantage. She pressed it, feeling justified in it.

“And Kheron,” he acknowledged. “It is not the same.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. Yes - - I do. I raised her as an apprentice and it turned into something more. I cherish her. I want to see her happy. But,” he frowned, formulating words that she thought he might never have truly considered before this. “I can’t help but remember her as that urchin I took under my fold.”

“And me?” she whispered, terrified of the intensity of feeling in his tone when he spoke of Kheron.

“You - - sometimes I can’t explain you. Sometimes it’s so clear it hurts.”

“I hurt you?”

“No. I do it to myself. Those years when you were my only grasp on the mortal realm - - when my essence was anchored to yours - - I will admit that before you I was not so benevolent a man. You were the purest, most honest thing I’d ever known. You still are.”

It was no small responsibility, being the reason the Silver Mage changed his ways. A frightening one, to think her influence might have been the thing that swayed him from his loyalty to Galgaga and saved a world.

It warmed her heart, all the same, that he admitted it. That in the comfort of her arms, he let the persona slip and allowed soul deep truths to surface.

Perhaps the missing place within her that had been filled, was the corner of her soul reserved for love. Maybe his words hinted at the same thing. She wished it more than she wished for any one thing and was no small bit terrified of the wanting.

“Father said that you would hurt me. I always told him it wasn’t so. But that was before - - before this. I think maybe you could.”

“I would not.”

She sighed, thinking that perhaps she knew him better than he knew himself. What had been simple jealousy before, would rip her heart asunder now. She thought she might have done herself a grave injustice.

“Sera. I would not cause you pain,” he pulled her closer, pressing her head against his shoulder.

She made a little sound and relaxed against him, having fouled the pleasant morning with her pessimistic musings. He had told her truths she had not been completely prepared to hear. He had not instigated this. He had not tried to sway her with pretty words. She wished she had never brought up his past dalliances.

“Will you return to Thraxtown today?” She touched the smooth expanse of his chest, hard, lean muscle with skin only a shade darker than her own. His hair was stark and pale against it, silken strands falling loose across his cheek. No man of her acquaintance was finer to look upon. He was dangerous in more than the arcane.

He sighed. “I’ve a notion not to. There are better ways to pass time. But, I’ve been invited for lunch and a game of Pirates and Kings in the lumber baron’s own house.”

She sat up, feeling a dull ache in her thigh. “You were? Why didn’t you say? How did you manage that?”

“I was. And you distracted me. I forgot to mention it. He was impressed by my skill at the game. Besides he owes me more gold than he had on his person last night. I could put it off.” He rubbed his knuckles along her hip. “I’m loathe to leave you alone in such condition.”

“I’ll be fine.” She shivered at the touch.

“Can you place wards about this area? Do you have the skill?”

“No.”

He frowned, drawing his brows in frustration at his own inability to do so. She found her tunic, discarded and damp a few feet away. She pulled it on, the feel of cold, wet cloth making chill bumps rise. With more care she pulled her bloody trousers up over her bandaged ankle and thigh. He watched her, reclined on his cloak, making little movement to dress himself. She glanced shyly at him from under her lashes, admiring the languid, beautiful length of him. He had never possessed an ounce of modesty, which to a church raised girl, could be disconcerting. She looked away, rubbing her ankle.

“It’s almost mid-day. If you’ve a lunch appointment, then you’d best be on your way.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“No.” *Yes.* His presence jumbled her thoughts and she needed to think. “I just want this over. This curse. I don’t see how they can be stopped.”

Worry over that came tumbling back and she bit her lip. He rose with an exhalation of breath and knelt behind her, kneading her shoulders. Oh, that felt good. That made her want to lean back and delay him. But it was only his *presence* working on her mind, not reason.

“Nothing is impossible.” A whisper in her ear. For him maybe. When he had full control of his magic. The rest of the world had to work with unattainable goals.

* * *

Dante was in a pleasantly good mood. The cap had been left behind. Sera hadn’t

even noticed in her distraction. It had been a very good morning. It had been a wonderful morning. He could not quite recall a better one. He didn't mind the mud on the streets of Thraxtown at all.

Well -- not much, at any rate. He smiled at the invitations of the camp whores and was even so extravagantly generous as to toss a copper at a legless beggar sitting in the muck at the side of the street.

She had gotten over her gloom, which he had to admit she had some slight cause for, even going so far as to wrap her arms about his neck and murmur an affection in his ear before he'd taken his leave. At which point he almost had been delayed until he rolled atop her injured leg and caused her to cry out, cutting the dalliance short.

His mind was preoccupied more with thoughts of his return to her than it was on the chore the lady of the forest had set him to, or placating Thrax in hopes of gaining knowledge of some weakness that might be used to drive the man away from here. He was almost giddy, which was an unusual state for him. Giddy with power perhaps, during certain exceptional summonings when the energy cursed with undue force through his body, but never quite brought to the same state by the act of sex. One had to allow that after four centuries of engaging rather vigorously in the act that after a while it lost some degree of its wonder.

He stood in the street outside Thrax's house, his mind wondering, until a wagon trundled by and spattered mud on his ragged hemmed cloak. He glared indignantly after it. Someone had gone to the trouble to plant a few shrubs and flower beds along the walk and the facade of the house, a hypocrisy if ever there were one, considering how much effort Thrax was putting into the destruction of the forest.

Thrax's plump little mistress answered his knock and ushered him in with a twittering little laugh and an under the lash look that was anything but shy. She left him in a room off the main hall. There was a fire burning in the hearth and the trappings of genteel civilization on the walls and in the glass fronted shelves. A garishly brocaded tapestry of a hunt with hounds chasing after a stylized deer hung on one wall. There was a small book case with gold bound volumes, which surprised Dante considerably, Thrax not giving him the impression of being a man much inclined to scholarly pursuit and books being rare.

He browsed the titles and found a genealogy of southern aristocracy. A book of courtly phrase and bearing. A series of geological studies, written by a scholar some hundred years past that Dante had actually been acquainted with. Various technical books and histories and a fair bit of fluff. Most of the spines looked as if the books had never been opened. Save for the courtly manners one and the royal lineage text. One supposed they were here for appearance. As were the majority of the things Thrax had collected. All medals of a sort to proclaim him as a man of taste and worldly airs to the rustic folk that revolved in his domain. None of them would know the difference.

“Afternoon, Dante.” Thrax appeared at the doorway, in a silk house tunic and a second plump mistress at his side. The man had a taste for well rounded women. “Here for me to win my gold back, I see.”

Dante shrugged. “At your invitation. At your risk.”

Thrax laughed, more willing to accept Dante’s arrogance out of the witness of a tavern full of loggers. “We shall see. Have you lunched or shall I bring out the board?”

“Lunch, please.”

The women brought it in. Arranged it on a small table by the fire and left the men to consume it on their own.

“I’m surprised,” Dante said, willing to offer complements to gain the man’s confidence. “To see such an impressive array of adornments in so a rustic place as this.”

“Yes. One does what one can to bring civilization to the back woods. Would that I could make my home in a finer climate, but for a man to garner honest wealth he needs keep his hands in the business.”

“Ah. Understandable. You’ve a sizable operation. All yours?”

“And my father’s before me. We came from the east, but the increase in the darklings across the mountains made it treacherous to work. I lost as many men as I sent out and there were few willing to hire on when the chances of murder at the hands of the half men was so great. Far riper pickings here and a quicker route to the lumberyards on the coast with the river so close at hand.”

“How far do you intend to go? With the cutting of the wood? Its rumored to hide within its depths things of a -- magical nature. I’ve seen tracks myself of an unusual nature.”

“Oh, those old wives tales. I pay them no heed. There’s nothing in these woods but the occasional giant, or creature left over from the war. Nothing that won’t flee the saws and the axes. We’ve years of cutting ahead of us.”

“Who ceded you the land?”

“No one. Its claimed by no one, unless you count the Nelai’re that used to inhabit it. But they killed themselves off long ago, fighting amongst each other. Ludas will barter for taxes once we’ve gotten closer to her territories, but that’s a long way down the road. Why the interest? You’re not one of those soft hearted forest lovers are you? God help me if I’ve invited one of those into my home.”

Dante smiled. “No. Not one of those, I assure you.”

They finished the meal, and after the remains were cleared, Thrax brought out the game board. The pieces he used here, in his home were finely carved jade. Very expensive. Very rare. Fit for a true lord. Thrax, of course, took the side of the King. Dante had a tendency to prefer the Pirate himself.

“Lovely set,” Dante remarked fingering the Pirate’s lady. Thrax beamed.

“I bought them from a jeweler in Alsansir who had been commissioned by a lord for them. The lord had a drop in finances so I bought them. I’ve heard that the old king used to play a great deal.”

Dante shrugged. “Probably did. Wasn’t very good at the real thing.”

Thrax blinked, suddenly interested. “I’ll have a place in court one day. Titles are for sale, I hear. So many great houses were depleted of heirs during the wars that a good many lands are vacant of their lords.”

“You’ll fit right in.”

“I feel it,” Thrax agreed, missing the sarcasm. “It’s my destiny. With the Southern alliance growing stronger each day, to hold lands there will bring great power and profit. I heard the regent speak, perhaps a year past, after his coronation and he foretold of a great future for those willing to invest in the south.”

“The regent Teo? Optimism is his forte.”

“You sound as if you have visited the court at Alsansir.”

“Oh, I’ve drifted through now and again.”

Thrax leaned forward, eyes gleaming, practically salivating for news of the court he

so badly wished he were a part of. "Have you ever spoken to the king?"

Dante thought about that before answering. "We might have exchanged a few thoughts. It all gets so muddled around the royals. You know how it is."

"Of course," Thrax agreed, not wanting to seem the country bumpkin. "I even attended the same services as his majesty and listened to the Prophet himself. Have you ever --"

"No! Your gambit I believe."

Thrax looked at the board, recalling the game. After some consideration he moved a piece. "Have you ever met the Princess - - -?"

* * *

Thrax had certainly studied his royal lineage's. He must have slept with the book under his pillow. He knew the names of the lords of the south better than Dante did and *he'd* fought with most of them at one time or another. It was almost dusk and though he had wanted to get away sooner, Thrax had held onto him like a dog with a favored bone. He had even offered a bed for the night and one of his mistresses to warm it. Declining that was a delicate matter with the lumber baron and his plump mistress looking on in expectation. Dante could be tactful when he tried. He was getting better at it daily.

The thought of getting back to Sera had gnawed at him for the last several hours of his stay and his mind had drifted so badly that Thrax had actually won a game. He was so distracted that he stepped in front of a lumbering cart and a solicitous logger had to grab his shoulder and haul him back, saving him from being trampled under hooves and wheels. He shook his head in amazement, thinking how ridiculously besotted he was behaving. One would think he'd never had a woman before. He'd seen love charms confuse a man less.

He passed the witch's tent he'd talked with the day before and heard her hawking flea repellents. He strode past her tent - - and stopped, thinking. Thrax was so single minded in his obsession to gain enough wealth to buy a title that there was little or nothing that would sway him from his race to fill the western lumber yards. Nothing but another obsession. Something he wanted even more desperately than a place in Teo'

court. Something that in the heat of the moment, a man would forgo power and wealth and even dignity to get.

“Hello.” He ducked under the flap of the hedge witch’s tent. A lantern burned on the counter. There was a citrus odor that kept the mosquito’s away burning with the oil. She squinted up at him, in the process of filling a pouch with herbs.

“Oh, back are you? Is it more information you’re looking for this eve?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you do love charms.”

She canted her head, studying him. “And what need do you have for such, looking as you do? Besides any woman in town will take a tumble for a copper and mug of ale.”

“Not for me. For a friend, who’s in love with a person that won’t take notice. A stubborn person. Do you do personalized charms? Not the generic ones, but the really good ones?”

“I could,” she said carefully. “For a price. It’s not considered good business to alter a person’s thinking, which is what we’re talking about when you get right down to it. They’re burning witches nowadays for that kind of thing.”

“Ah, but you and I both know that the most powerful love charm constructed will only last for a few weeks -- if that. The heart being the fickle thing it is.”

“I might know such a thing,” she said warily.

He put four gold coins on the counter and her eyes bulged. It was probably more than she saw in a month or more. He had won it from Thrax this afternoon.

“I’ll need something from your friend who desires a lover. A nail, a lock of hair. Something *of* them.”

“I know. Don’t use cheap herbs. I want this powerful and as long lasting as you can make it. I’ll come back tomorrow with what you need.”

“I like a man who keeps his word. You told me you’d send profit my way.” She beamed up at him, yellow toothed and haggish, but possessing a certain sparkle to her eyes that gave her character. He smiled back. “I like a witch who can live up to her claims. Tomorrow.”

* * *

“Sera.” He swept down on her, embracing her so enthusiastically that she peered up at him warily through the shadows.

“I have an idea. How is your leg?”

“It’s better. I did a healing. What idea?”

“If we can’t make Thrax leave the forest, then we make him embrace it.”

She stared at him blankly. “You’re making no sense. Have you been drinking?”

He gave her an offended look, then waved his arms about the glade. “Look, right now he wants wealth to impress all the noble asses in court - - so we make him want to impress the forest more. We make him want to impress the Lady of the Forest. If he falls in love with Glyncara, then he’ll be desperate to please her. And that means he’ll stop cutting trees.”

“You have been drinking.”

“I have not and I wish you’d stop saying it. Look, I brought you dinner.” He tossed her a package he’d picked up from a vender by the gates. Sausage and grilled vegetables. “I need to make a very quick trip deep enough into the wood to get her attention.”

“But - -” She stared at him, very obviously stymied by his impromptu genius.

“Just stay here. Take my cloak.” He put it around her shoulders and her own cloak, then kissed her half open lips impulsively.

“I wish you made half as much sense to me as you did to yourself,” she grumbled, when he’d pulled away.

“But you adore me anyway.” He grinned at her and didn’t wait for a nay or yeah on that statement before he was trotting through the shadows.

Quick, he figured, was an hour or two’s journey into the forest past where they had first picked up the trail. It was probably as close as she would or could appear to the edge of the wood. He alternated between a brisk walk and a trot, being careful of his footing in the dark, having no wish to end up in a predicament similar to Sera’s. That would be hellishly embarrassing. When he was tired of walking and impatience had started to gnaw at him, he yelled her name.

“Glyncara! Show yourself.” Every five or ten minutes as he walked he would call out. The animals would quiet themselves for a while, then return to their nighttime serenade.

“If you value this wood, appear forest spirit.” He put as much command in it as he would if he were summoning a fire elemental to do his bidding.

Something brushed against his neck. He started, turning and nothing was there.

“Glyncara,” he warned. “I’m too tired of tromping through your damned forest for games. If you hear, then come out.”

The misty coolness touched him again, a caress along the lower back that seemed to bypass his layers of shirts and brush his skin.

What do you want? The voice drifted around him, a fog seeped from the ground.

“I need something from you.”

The men are still in my Forest. You have not completed your task..

“Nor will I, if you don’t appear before me in solid form. I’m not in the mood for the cryptic whisperings of voices through the trees.”

The mist circled up, growing denser and denser until the form of Glyncara stood before him, clothed as before only in her trailing locks.

Testy. Testy. Age will give you patience, child.

He sniffed. “I’ve years to spare.”

You are an infant yet, compared to the forest. And there are things that make IT seem newborn. You know nothing of the TRUE earth, only of that which grants you the power you yield. It has always been the way of wizards.

“Whatever. Listen, I need a lock of your hair.”

She stared at him with as much a blank expression as Sera had.

“And how close can you appear to the edge of the wood?”

I can appear to where the trees stop if I so wish, but my power is weak there. What mischief do you plan?

“I plan to get you a suitor, lady.”

* * *

Kastel sat and listened to the tales exchanged between his men and the trappers who also took shelter under the roof of the trading outpost. They had brought the head in this very evening, a combined party of his knights and the trappers who had been at the post

when they had come in. It sat out in the yard now, an icy, horrid thing, staring with malice at the world out of glazed black eyes.

He did not enter into the conversation and no one, not even his men attempted to engage him. They knew him too well, and the trappers were wary of him among them at all, being common men. Though they were eager to hear tales of the magic used in battle to defeat the monster, they were not easy with the man who had wrought it. It was no new occurrence, the wary glances and the flickering of superstition and fear in the trappers eyes. Kastel expected it, usually shunned gatherings such as this if possible, but was neatly trapped now, with men of his in need of time to recuperate from their wounds.

He gave them the fire in the small common room and sat as far as he could manage in a corner, with his armor beside him on the floor, his cloak wrapped about him, preventing him from being totally unarmored before strange and mistrustful eyes. He would have gone up to the loft above the post where there were billets for sleeping, if he hadn't feared the dreams. He had no wish to wake with a cry upon his lips with witnesses about.

Kiro came over and sat on the floor beside him, his arm bound in a sling at his side, his face somber and perhaps a little guilty. They sat for a while in silence, Kiro a good enough companion to his lord, for he shared the distaste for useless words.

"I was wrong to attack," he finally said. "We should have held back and let you deal with the thing and none of us would be licking wounds this night."

"You seemed to enjoy it."

"Until it hit me. Yes. After that bitter travel to find it, we were spoiling for a fight. It was unwise."

Kastel thought so too, but he did not voice it. Kiro admitting it was hard enough on the man. "No real harm done, other than Sento's horse. Forget it."

"I know you dislike lodging here."

"Forget it, Kiro. It's no great discomfort."

His captain sighed, rubbing at an aching shoulder. "They've mulled hard cider by the fire, would you like some?"

"Yes," Kastel said, because Kiro seemed intent on seeing him comfortable.

He sipped at the cider, which wasn't half bad and strong to boot and listened to the

hum of conversation. His mind wondered, thinking about the frustrating spell lore in the book he was studying, of the winter festival to come and the onslaught of people down from the mountains that would be entering Sta-Veron.

Merchants from the south and the west would come, eager to buy the furs and the mined gems the north had to offer. With them would come the inevitable priests, trying to gather converts. The fanatics who would wave their holy symbols and preach about salvation and damnation. They never changed, only now only the boldest would dare to denounce him to his face. It didn't matter, that they held their tongues, the looks, the holier than thou, venomous looks still shook him to the core, because he could never quite repress the memory of his grandfather and all his righteous cronies doing the same thing. So long in the grave that terrible old man, and he still haunted Kastel. He would haunt him forever.

He shut his eyes and forced the tremulous memory away to that dark corner of his mind where he kept all the bad and horrible things hidden. Made himself relax and reconsider the logistics of the winter festival. There were a hundred preparations still to be made.

He let his guard down and something slipped past. Some sibilant, powerful presence that eased into his conscious thought and clung there stubbornly, even when startled to awareness of its presence he attempted to snap his defenses down and force it out. It struggled to be heard, a faint, familiar flavor. Not harmful, but insistent. He expanded his awareness enough to regard it and someone else's mental voice filled his head.

Gods damn you, Kastel, you're harder to crack than an iron husk nut. Open up. This last was demanded with a complete air of exasperation and impatience. He recognized the tone and the mental signature.

Kheron. What do you want?

I wanted not to be up all night trying to get your attention, stupid man.

He did not respond to that, used enough to her shortness with him to be terribly offended. Having grown up together, there had always been a certain sibling like rivalry between them for Dante's affections. Not that the Silver Mage had not played them both, reveling in being the center of their young universes.

You've got to come south with your army, Kastel. You've got to hurry.

Prey tell, why? Are we invading again?

Silence from her. He felt her tenseness -- her consideration -- her elation, and he became wary of a sudden for the reasons behind it.

Dante is back, Kastel. He's alive. Gerad found out. Teo and the Prophet are after him. He bound somehow. Gerad didn't get all the details. Just that he's been stripped of his magic and that the Prophet did it. We think he's somewhere north of Ludas. That is where Teo is sending his forces at any rate. They mean him harm. We need your help.

It all blurted into his head in a jumbled mass. It took him a moment to sort it all.

Are you certain, Kheron?

Do I make mistakes of this magnitude?

No. She didn't. She was entirely competent, when she was thinking straight.

Which he wasn't sure was the case now, in light of the clamor he felt in her mind. Then the other name she had mentioned hit him.

The Prophet? That man's face had been a regular in his nightmares for sometime now. No rhyme or reason there, just a silent, malicious condemnation that he couldn't shake. He recalled the fleeting images from the first dream he'd had of the man. The one in Alsansir. The man had hurt things that he loved.

He took a breath and another. Her impatience became palatable.

Dante's alive. How very predictable of him. North of Ludas. How far north?

We don't know. We're trying to gather loyal forces and chase Teo's army down.

How much of an army?

Gerad only saw a legion or so leaving. There could be more. How long will it take you to gather forces and get from Sta-Veron across the mountains?

I'm on the southern side of the mountains now.

A pause on her part. A contemplation. *You're closer than we are then.*

I have only a handful of men with me. It will take weeks to gather and move an army this time of year.

Then send word and have them follow. You're a force unto yourself, Winter King and he may not have much time before Teo is upon him.

Twenty

There was a certain delicacy involved in delivering a love charm, if one did not wish the victim to be aware of its existence. It was not as easy as it sounded in fables and village lore. One did not merely buy the charm, carry it within close proximity of the girl one wished to tumble and abracadabra - - instant lust. It was one thing to make the charm and recite the incantation and quite another to secret it about the person of the charmee and have them not notice it for long enough for the spell to take effect.

Dante had never in his long and prestigious career as a wizard, had the occasion to personally deal with a love charm. He had certainly never needed one for himself, and it had never crossed his mind that there was any other person who deserved adoration other than himself that might benefit from one. He had always tended towards extreme egotism, though he might be loath to admit that it was anything but deserved.

He had gone back to the witch with a lock of greenish hair - - the old woman had lifted her scraggly brows curiously at that, but made no comment - - and sat in the back of her tent impatiently while she chanted and sweated over a burning tray of incense, reciting the spell. Herb based magic was so tedious, reserved for those that hadn't the actual power to perform a simple summoning and have some demon, spirit or elemental do one's will.

He took the finished pouch back to Sera, along with lunch and discussed with her the possible ways he might secret the thing on Thrax without the man knowing it.

"Well, did he invite you back to his house?" she asked, munching on a crust of hard bread. There was a bottle of ale between them that she took delicate sips at, screwing her face up in distaste after each taste.

"No," he admitted. "I believe I took too much of his gold the last time. He probably would, if I pushed it."

"He seems to like you."

"Why wouldn't he?"

She smiled, as though his honest question amused her. "It probably wouldn't work in his home anyway. In the comfort of one's own house, an inconsistency is more likely

to be noticed.”

“He plays Pirates and Kings every evening at the tavern. That place is always crowded. Perhaps it might be slipped into a pocket and he would never be the wiser in the press.”

“That sounds good. You said it needed a couple of hours to really take effect. Will he stay that long?”

“It can probably be arranged.”

“Can you get it off him once it has. So he doesn’t find it later and suspect?”

“I suppose I’ll have to.”

She tidied up the remains of lunch. “What will you do in the meanwhile.”

A sly smile crossed his lips. “I believe I could think of something to pass the time.”

* * *

“But, my Lord. It could be weeks before we can follow through the mountains. The passes might be snowed in. The weather could turn bad. I highly recommend against this.”

Kiro was upset. Kiro stood in the trampled snow around the trading post and gestured at the gray morning sky with his one good arm. Kastel intended to send him, the other injured man and two others back to Sta-Veron to marshal troops. Kiro would have had to go, regardless of his injury, being the captain of Kastel’s guard the only man he would trust to lead a legion south on his heels. The other fifteen men of the hunting party would accompany him.

“I am decided,” Kastel said quietly. “And you are wasting time, captain.”

Kiro was too much an officer to whine. He merely nodded, hearing the finality of his lord’s words and spoke sharply to the men in his command who were to accompany Kastel south. Gave them orders of conduct, stern directions to keep their lord from harm, as if he were not capable of it himself. Then with a frown that neatly told how disconsolate he was with the path events were following, mounted and signaled his small party into motion.

Kastel watched him go. His own men finishing the final packing of supplies onto

the backs of their horses. By the time Kiro was out of sight within the shadow of snow crusted pines, he was mounted and leading his men down slope. He kept them at a steady pace, the trails on this side of the mountain winding and sloping gently enough to allow it. The composure he had experienced when Kheron had first told him of Dante's resurrection had turned to an urgent expectancy over night. He had an itch of a sudden to see Dante in the flesh. To prove that it was real, because he could not quite accept it from the ghostly tidings brought by Kheron.

The day passed, cold and clear and the heavy footed horses blew goutts of steam from their nostrils, keeping to a pace that was unnaturally vigorous, by benefit of Kastel's impatience. He lent them strength of his own, a casual gifting that his men did not comment on, but were sure to have noticed, since their mounts never exhibited a weariness of step.

It did wear of course, by the end of the day. On him more so than the animals. A simple, prolonged lending of strength was more draining than a quick, large exhalation of magical prowess. They had covered, by rote of many twists and turns, perhaps no more than twenty miles of terrain and that only with great effort. There were easier trails through the relatively mild Great Northern Range, but this one had been the closest at hand. Kiro and the forces he would gather would travel further west and take a less harsh route. Even then, they would be many weeks behind, an army traveling generally at a slower pace than a small group of men. Knowing this, Kiro would go damned light on the supply train, hoping for faster travel.

When they broke for camp, after dusk, he settled in his cloak while his men picketed the horses and prepared a meal. He closed his eyes, regathering energy he had spent all the long day. Someone offered him a cup of hot tea and he took it wordlessly.

He flung out his senses, hunting for that aura that he knew so well. He had always been aware, at some degree or another, of Dante. The utter force of his personality made a mark. The extreme degrees of his magic were unique and left a scent. He had never been circumspect in his wizardry. One tended to know he was about. But there was nothing of him in the eathor tonight. No slight trace of the presence that was Dante. A mind that familiar he should have been able to locate, but there was emptiness. Kheron had mentioned a binding. That was perhaps the reason.

What power could create a binding ward strong enough to suppress Dante Epherian? He knew of places where magic was null. Small inconsistencies of place and dimension which certain holy sects had discovered and warded into sanctuaries against *unholy* intrusion. Elementals could be bound, as any creature without a true soul could be, with an effort of will, *if* one was more powerful than the elemental itself. One could bind a minor wizard with relative ease, though the binding spells themselves were complicated, hellaciously monotonous things to perform, though why one would bother when it was just as easy to place a geas of loyalty. One simply did not bind the magic of a powerful wizard. It was not done, not with any spell that he had ever heard of. The notion that the Prophet had at his call such wardings made Kastel uneasy.

Snow began to filter lightly down through the pine canopy. A few delicate flakes warning that a front moved somewhere. He broadened his awareness, hunting for the source of the storm and found a great boiling disturbance to the north east. Bad weather coming. The passes through which his army needed to pass would be snowed in. That would be a great inconvenience. He rose and waved a hand at his men that he needed no escort, then walked away from camp and into the grayness a snowbound landscape made of night.

He preferred to avoid working magics before his men. They were well used to it, but still he did not like the wariness that came even into the eyes of his most trusted knights when arcane things were afoot.

He stood in the snow and whispered words of summoning. One need not shout to gain the attention of an elemental. One need merely be prepared for a battle of wills. A wind elemental answered the summons, one of the gusty northern ones with cores as cold as the tundra and spirits as strong as the winter was long. He knew its name. *Eheezarha*. That knowledge was power and it swirled about him in a tantrum that he had pulled it to him and sought to bind it to his will. It raged and howled and the snow flew up in a maelstrom, coating the rough bark of the trees. None of it touched Kastel. He stood with his cloak billowing about him and witnessed the tantrum without remark, exerting control and power over the thing while it thrashed and exhausted its strength.

What do you want, halfling? It hissed, finally subsided and hovered insubstantial before him. Streamers of conical wind trailed behind it.

“Careful,” Kastel rebuked its discourtesy. “Or I shall send you to a void where there is no air for you to play with.”

It shimmered, humming. *What is your wish, master?* A much humbler hissing.

“A game. Keep the storms from the mountains - - twenty miles west, twenty miles east - - clear and free of snow for the next cycle of the moon. Blow the storms elsewhere.”

Where, master?

“South,” Kastel said. No use to dump all the weather on Sta-Veron and one thought that if armies were traveling north from Alsansir, a bit of bad weather would slow their pace.

Is that all?

He waved a hand. “That’s all. Go.”

It dispersed with hardly a gust. Satisfied that Kiro would find little to block his passage when he returned with the army, Kastel returned to camp.

* * *

Dante watched Thrax from beneath his lashes, sitting at a place of honor around the gaming table, but not invited to play. At least not here under the gazes of the unsophisticated louts who worked for the lumber baron.

Thrax’s ego could only take so many defeats in the public. But he was more than willing to share his dreadful wine and his overfriendly mistress, the hands of which kept wondering under the table.

The spell pouch was in Thrax’s pocket, an easy enough task to accomplish in the press of bodies within the tavern. It had been there all night, throughout twelve games of Pirates and Kings and countless bottles of wine and rounds of hard liquor. There was not a sober soul in the tavern, Thrax chief among the inebriated. Dante’s vision was starting to tunnel.

It was considerably easier to hold one’s liquor when one had the arcane ability to banish intoxication at whim. That simple skill - - or the lack of it at the moment - - had slipped his mind when he’d sat out at the beginning of the night to wait for the effects of

the love charm to start. Thrax's concentration hardly wavered from the game and lording his skills over his loggers. He was single-minded and stubborn and entirely frustrating, which made Dante consume all the more wine in the boredom of waiting.

The midnight hour was long past before the congregation began to break up, staggering home to their tents to get some sleep before they had to rise in the morning and trek back into the forest. Thrax rose, bellowing out what a fine night it had been. He finished off the last dregs of wine in his cup and banged it down on the tabletop. His body guard began gathering the playing pieces together and handed them and the board to the barkeep, who put them under the bar.

Dante rose and staggered a step sideways, prepared for cooperation from the room at large and not getting it. Thrax laughed, grabbing at his shirt to steady him.

"Maybe I should play you now, Dante and get all my gold back."

Dante refrained from answering, busy trying to make the floor settle under his feet. The reflex urge to magic the intoxication away was so strong the wards at his wrists tingled warningly.

"Come on, you can sleep it off at my house tonight." Thrax offered good naturedly, putting one arm about Dante's shoulders and the other about his mistress. They made it to the street, with Thrax's body guard trailing behind, the lot of them none too steady and Dante cursing the old witch for making a dud charm.

"Go on ahead. See her home," Thrax told his bodyguard and put his mistress into the man's care. "I want to talk with Dante."

When they were a good ways up the street, Thrax sighed and belched, then laughed at himself. Dante watched him warily.

"You know, I like you, Dante. I really like you." Thrax squeezed his shoulder and Dante had a moment's fear that the old witch had miserably screwed up the charm.

"And I couldn't talk with her around - - by the gods, I've had these urges all night. I can't get them out of my head."

Cautiously, Dante disengaged himself from Thrax's embrace. Thrax threw out his hands in frustration. "I just -- these feelings - - in my head I hear a voice. I see a face. She's so lovely I can't think of anything but her. I know her and yet I've never met her."

Ah, that was better. "Really? A woman?"

“A woman. The woman. My woman. She’s somewhere. I know she is, but I don’t know where. It’s like an itch, knowing she’s out there somewhere and - - and I know she’s waiting for me. I need your help to find her.”

“Well,” Dante said slowly, careful with his words. “Do you know what she looks like?”

“Like night. Like the brightest sun. Like flowers. Like the most beautiful thing you’ve ever laid eyes upon.” Thrax was looking up into the night sky with rapture on his face. He swayed slightly, whether from inebriation or the effects of the charm, one was uncertain. Regardless the spell seemed to have taken rather sudden and devastating effect.

Dante held up a finger to comment on Thrax’s energetic description and lost his train of thought. He took a breath, in efforts to clear his head. “I believe - - that I’ve seen a lady that fits that description in the forest.”

Thrax stared at him in drunken hope. “You haven’t.”

“Well, actually, yes.”

Thrax grasped his arms with enough gusto to force him back a step. “Where? Who is she?”

“Her name is Glyncara. I might show you.”

“Glyncara,” Thrax breathed the name like sigh. For a moment his eyes grew dreamy and far away. “Show me. Show me where she is.”

One had to be incredibly grateful to strong spirits imbibed in mass. No sober man, even one altered by a love spell would so blindly follow a stranger into the forest to meet a heretofore unknown woman.

Thrax only fell down once on the pitted trail that lead into the great wood. Dante managed to avoid that indignity only by the grace of having Thrax to catch hold of when his balance left him. Thrax kept asking how far. Dante wasn’t quite certain himself. He stopped in the darkness, well into the wood, and Thrax stopped with him, peering into the night.

“Where is she?” he whispered.

“Glyncara,” Dante called out. “Come out. Come out. You’ve company.”

“There’s no one here.” Thrax complained, sounding spooked, alone in the forest

that he was destroying.

Dante laughed and flung out his arms. There was fog on the ground around them. Thrax didn't notice. Thrax wasn't so subtle in his perceptions.

She came up out of the ground like a banshee, a sudden formation of mist and fog and wind that rustled the limbs on trees and sent debris up into the air. Thrax cried out in fright and threw up his arms to shield his face from flying leaves and dirt. Glyncara stood before them, clothed in nothing but hair, a greenish glow infusing the air about her. Her eyes were alight with power and anger.

Is this the man who destroys my forest?

"This would be him," Dante said and leaned against a tree, picking leaves out of his hair.

Thrax stared at her, eyes globes of awe. His lips trembled, sweat stood out on his face. "It's you." He whispered. "You're so beautiful."

You foul human refuse. Glyncara spat. She actually spat on the ground at Thrax's feet. Thrax stared at the spot her spittle had landed with reverence.

"My love. My beautiful Glyncara. Don't speak so. You wound me to the heart."

I shall tear out your heart. You have destroyed in a few years time what has taken a millennia to grow. And you care not. You do it on a whim.

"No. No. I do it build an empire. An empire I shall devote to making you happy. Tell me what I need to do. What will make you love me?"

Love you? She cried, then turned her forest colored eyes to Dante in stupefaction.

"Give him a task to win your love," he suggested, shrugging.

"Yes. Anything." Thrax agreed, a dog willing to please. It was a very good charm. The hedge witch deserved a bonus.

Bring back my forest. Glyncara cried. *Renew the life you stole.*

"But -- how?" Thrax dropped to his knees, almost crying. He looked from Glyncara to Dante helplessly. "I would do anything. Tell me how?"

Glyncara fumed, her skin changing colors like a chameleon in her anger. Brown to green to yellow.

Stop cutting down my trees.

"Yes. Yes. Of course, my love." Thrax nodded enthusiastically.

“Plant a tree,” Dante suggested and laughed. The whole thing seemed so terribly funny, he was having a hard time controlling his mirth.

“A forest of trees,” Thrax agreed. Glyncara lifted a brow in thought.

Yes. A forest of trees. Set your murderers to planting saplings on the land you devastated. That is as good a start as any.

Thrax smiled. Dante had a thought and chuckled. “Of course, when he does all this, it will only be fair to consummate your love.”

Thrax absolutely beamed and nodded. Glyncara, in control of her composure again ignored Dante completely. *Go then, if you wish my good will and prepare the seeding.* She flung out an arm imperiously and Thrax started. He blinked, looking miserable at the thought of leaving her. Miserable at the notion of disobeying his true love. Then he climbed awkwardly to his feet and stumbled past Dante, fleeing into the wood towards Thraxtown.

Dante laughed so hard tears ran down his cheeks. He slid down the tree and sprawled in the leaves, holding his sides. Glyncara glared at him a moment then started to fade.

“Don’t you even think about it, wood witch,” he snapped, humor evaporated. “You owe me.”

Do I? It remains to be seen whether the devastation ceases.

“It will. He’s your lap dog, now. Direct him as you will.” He did not see fit to mention that the spell would probably only last a few short weeks.

“I lived up to my part of the bargain. You live up to yours. Take these damn things off.” He lifted his wrists savagely. She stood there, half transparent, her legs faded into mist.

“I cannot,” she said.

“What?” It came out a low, vicious hiss.

I do not have the power. Perhaps not even when my forest was whole.

“You lying bitch. You tricked me.”

I did not. You mislead yourself into thinking that I did. I never said as much.

He started cursing. He struggled up, willing to attack her with nothing but hands since there were no other options open to him.

“She didn’t. Say that she would,” Sera’s voice came quietly out of the night.

He whirled, caught at the tree to his right to steady himself, and saw her emerge from the shadows, wrapped in her cloak and his, limping only slightly.

“How--?”

I summoned her here. Between the two of you, she has more the head for reason.

Dante glared. Sera looked down, arms wrapped about herself.

“Damn you.” He felt sick. He was so angry the whole of his body shook. His vision blurred and he blinked wetness away, furious. “I hope your forest burns.”

“Dante. She never promised. She only said *perhaps*.”

“To hell with you too. You would take her side.”

Sera blinked at him, shocked, hurt. He didn’t care. At the moment his own hurt was worse. He needed his power back. He had to have it back. He could not endure this *helplessness*.

Go to Saldorn. In the mountains to the west.

“What’s in Saldorn?” Sera asked when he refused to.

Mother.

“Who’s mother?”

Everyone’s. Glyncara smiled serenely. Mother will have the power to grant your request. Mother can grant all requests. Here. Take this and the way will be clear. Present this and Mother will honor your wish.

Something glowed in the air before Dante. An intense, blue green light that hovered at his chest. He put a hand out under it, and it dropped into his palm. It was not hot or cold, it merely was. The light faded and all that was left was a simple acorn. He stared at it dubiously. Sera shifted closer to see what he had been given.

“An acorn?” she murmured.

Dante lifted a caustic brow. “You have got to be kidding? First you lie to me, then you suggest I go on some fools errand after some great being I’ve never heard of and you give me an acorn to trade for a wish?” He let it drop to the ground disdainfully.

I never lied. I have given you the way to freedom. It is not my concern that you are so jaded as to not accept it.

“Jaded? You crazy bitch. Play your games, then. And may the gods help you when

I do get my power back.”

“Dante.” Sera knelt to pick up the acorn. She held it against her breast.

“Shut up, Sera.” He whirled, stalking away.

“Please,” she cried. “You’re not being reasonable.” She turned desperate eyes back to Glyncara, who was fading into mist. “He didn’t mean it. He didn’t.”

He did. But he may change his mind. It is his way, is it not? Your curse is gone.

Farewell.

And then she was gone.

* * *

“Where are you going?” Sera paced him, despite the ache in her ankle. The healing spell had cured all but the residue ache. The gash in her leg was almost gone. Mentally, she still favored the leg and probably would for several days to come. He wasn’t talking to her. He was in the midst of a tantrum, she realized, having not gotten his way and not used to it. He was also weaving slightly in his step. Which was unusual and worried her.

“What’s wrong with you?” she demanded. He sniffed ignoring her.

“Ooohh,” she hissed, exasperated. “You are so impossible. As if you have never led anyone astray or used someone to your own ends. Most certainly not. Not you. You were always so angelic and honest in your dealings.”

He turned on her, eyes flashing dangerously, a finger stabbing at her face. “When have I lied to you? When have I not said what I meant? What need did I ever have to lie, when the truth was always so much more entertaining?”

“Oh, as in, why bother with a lie when you can piss more people off with the simple truth? Is that what you mean?” She smacked his finger away and matched his glare.

“Exactly,” he snarled back. “But it doesn’t answer the question.”

“To hell with the question, you idiot. She’s told us where we can find someone who can remove the wards. Isn’t that enough?”

“And you believe her? After she made me jump through hoops leading me to think she could remove them?”

“YES. I do.”

“Naive, foolish girl.”

“I believe in a lot of things the rest of the world thinks are terrible. You tell me how naive I really am?”

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and started walking again. He careened off a tree and cursed.

“Are you drunk?” she accused.

He refused to answer.

“Fine. Be that way. Stubborn man. I don’t care what you do.” She sniffed, crossing her arms, veering off from the trail in the direction of the little brook that had become her temporary home. She plopped down next to her stolen sack of goods and listened to the sounds of the forest, brooding. Angry at him being angry at her. As if he had any right, when she was just trying to make him see reason. Irritating, nasty tempered wizard.

She heard him crashing through the underbrush, ungainly and noisy in his current state and presently he stumbled into the little glade. She glared up at him. He ignored her. He slid down a tree to sit in the soft moss, his arms resting on his knees, his hair obscuring his face. The silence began to wear. She hated it.

“She removed the curse,” she finally said to break it. “She kept her word on that.”

He said nothing. She sniffed. His head was bent. All she could see was the tip of his nose through a fall of silken hair.

“Dante?”

Nothing. She rose to her knees and crept over to him. Touched his shoulder and he started so violently that she shied back, afraid that he might hit her out of reflex. He blinked at her, blurry, silver eyes veined with red.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Forget it,” he murmured, reached out and caught her, pulling her in towards him. He smelled of cheap wine. She placed her hands against him, trying to push away, not ready to forgive him yet, but he wrapped his other arm about her and without twisting and turning violently, she was trapped. However he did not seem to have more in mind than holding her, for he relaxed back against the tree, shutting his eyes and was very soon asleep. Wonderful. An irritating, nasty tempered, *drunk* wizard. She only preyed he

might be more open to reason in the morning when he was clearer of head.

Twenty-One

Kheron had eighty men in the mountains of the east. Eighty men out of the ten thousand that had once followed her. Her armies had been hit tri-fold over the years. First by Dante himself when he had protected Alsansir against her after his change of allegiance. Then battling Kastel while he was under Galgaga's control and finally against Galgaga itself. She'd had no desire to rebuild after that, with Dante gone and the wars over. She had little desire to do anything. Her remaining forces scattered, returned to home and families in lands that she had taken and still held fief over. Only the most loyal stayed. Her knights, those whose lives had known nothing but war and following the Stormbringer.

Gerad had more. Gerad's nightwalker were ever more elusive in battle than men on heavy horse and knights who sought out the front lines in the name of honor. His men struck from behind and in the shadows and survived more easily because of it. Still, he was damned short on men, considering the integration of southern forces under his command on the border. There had been marriages and liaisons between his men and southerners. Unions that it would be hard to break and harder still to betray if it came down to hostilities between Teo and the them.

Damned inconvenient. And damned short on fighting men. What they did have on their side was an impressive array of arcane might. Gerad and Kheron alone were the match of most legions. Of course so were Teo and his warrior clerics and the gods only knew what sort of power the Prophet had been hiding all these years. Gerad hated going up against unknown enemies.

The only advantage to their limited resources was alacrity. A small force could travel quickly and quietly, where an army moved at a snails pace, requiring tremendous supplies and tearing a swath across the land that no one could miss. Of course word would get back to Alsansir what they were doing. The men in the garrisons along the border who were not trusted enough for them to recruit would see that it did. No one

would stop them or even attempt it. Gods knew no one of the southerners along the border knew what was going on in the south, but they would be honor bound to report it. Gerad didn't fault them for that. They were good men and he hoped he never had to face a single one of them on a field of battle. He despised killing comrades.

It took two days to gather forces and supplies. To outfit them and find mounts for the lot of them and then they were off. Kheron was champing at the bit. Focused and more alive than she had been in years. The power and the strength radiated from her. Gerad wished she might have found it before this. He mourned that her vitality seemed dependent on Dante. Even if she never turned her heart his way, he would have wished better for her. Would have wished she loved herself enough to find happiness without relying on another living soul.

But wishes never came true and reality was a harsh and malevolent mistress. He was used to the crack of her whip and protested only vaguely. Accept and go on if a body wanted to live without the world on his shoulders. Gods help Kheron and even Kastel, who had never seemed to get that concept.

And then there was Dante who had no cares at all, about the sacrifices of honest men and the turmoil that his crusades created.

* * *

There were cannons and explosions and various other nasty, painful things going on inside Dante's head. His stomach rebelled violently at whatever substance he had partaken of last night. At least Sera wasn't talking to him. That was one good thing. Otherwise he would have had to scream at her to be quiet and he had the notion that that would have only invoked her screeching back at him in an explosion of anger and frustration that had been building since the little scene with the forest bitch.

At the moment he could have cared less. At the moment he was soundly and thoroughly cursing Angelo's ancestors, any offspring he might produce and his black soul for depriving Dante of the simple magic of banishing a hangover.

It was windy and rainy just to make the morning perfect. He stalked down the muddy road to Thraxtown with his cloak wrapped about him and wet hair clinging to his

face. Sera marched before him, her hood up and her head held high, full of righteous indignation.

They'd had a short, aborted fight this morning, upon her waking him, concerning the damned acorn and Glyncara's ambiguous instructions. It had started with her telling him what a fool he was and him telling her to shut up because the sound of her voice hurt his head and gone on to name calling and her throwing cloak, sack and a handy stick her grasping little fingers had happened upon at him, before she had stalked out of camp with the declaration that she was going to see if the curse had really been lifted.

He had held his head and cursed, then scrambled up to follow her just in case she did turn into a tree - - he wouldn't put it past that lying wood bitch - - and he had to mark the spot where she put her roots down for future reference. But, she didn't. She stepped out of the forest onto the muddy trail and stood staring out at Thraxtown, where a fair bit of activity was going on outside the town walls. She turned and gave him an imperious glare and announced.

"I'm going to find out if anyone there knows where Saldorn is. You can do whatever you want. I'm sure I don't care."

He waved a hand at her negligently, ushering her forth. She sniffed and started marching. He'd stood miserably at the edge of the forest for a few minutes, leaning against a young tree, massaging his temples. One supposed she deserved whatever reception she got upon entering Thraxtown. She would probably get a rather friendly one, considering the only women there were either ancient hags like the witch who bartered in goods to make their livelihood or whores who served the loggers. And bearing in mind the quality of the whores he had seen, Sera would be a pearl in the midst of swine. If she got past the gates without being tumbled, it would be a miracle.

"Stupid bitch," he muttered under his breath and followed her.

There were wagons coming in from the forest, but they were not loaded with lumber. Rather they were filled with hundreds of tiny saplings. Befuddled loggers accompanied them past the town and out into the razed land where it seemed the majority of Thrax's men were cultivating the earth, pulling up dead stumps and planting the young trees.

Sera got immediate attention before she even reached the gates. Men stopped their

work to stare and make lewd suggestions. She ignored them, on her mission and Dante glared and put his hand on the hilt of his sword when they made to follow her inside the gates. The hedge witch had closed her shop. The tent flaps down and fastened. He supposed she had put two and two together and figured her love charm had something to do with Thrax's sudden and erratic change in behavior. One hoped he never figured it out and took vengeance on the old woman.

Ahead, Sera had stopped a man and was talking with him. The man, his hands full of shovels and pick axes was practically drooling upon on her. Dante stopped a few yards behind her and crossed his arms, moving his cloak enough to make the sword visible. The man's attention flicked to him, then back to Sera, then nervously back to him, recognizing him as Thrax's new friend and making the bright assumption that he was Sera's protector. The excited look died in his eyes to be replaced by a wistful one, and he answered her question with a shake of his head and went on his way, glancing back once to admire her from the rear.

"What are you trying to do?" he inquired. "Find a new profession?"

"Oh, go away. You're bothersome when you're hung-over." She waggled her fingers at him in dismissal. He drew a sharp breath through his teeth, offended.

"Somebody has to make an effort to find out where Saldorn is?" she added, looking about for someone else to accost.

"And you think you're going to find them in this backwater pit? Dream on, Sera. I haven't heard of anyplace called Saldorn and believe me, I've been around."

"Glyncara said it was in the mountains to the west. That's a lot of ground to cover."

"Well, I hate Glyncara."

Sera waggled her fingers again, brushing aside his animosity. "I wonder what she meant when she said the Acorn would guide us?"

"I could care less."

She sniffed, tucked damp hair behind her ear and began to walk towards the tavern. He ground his teeth in frustration, figuring that even with his magic, Sera was impossible to deal with when she was in a snit. And without it, he was not in the mood for a fight in a tavern to protect her virtue. What he had left of it, at any rate.

"Wait a minute, Sera."

She turned to look at him inquisitively.

“I think I might know where we can find Saldorn.”

“Really? Where?”

He shrugged. “Let me introduce you to Thrax.”

* * *

Thrax was riding high the wave of infatuation. His mistress's had been reduced to housemaids and were not happy with the demotion. He ushered Dante and Sera into his house, wrapped his arms about the former, to his distaste, hugging him and bowed to the latter. Sera smiled in bemusement.

“I see you've wasted no time,” Dante remarked dryly.

“There is none to waste if I'm to find my way into my ladies heart. And her bed,” he said the latter aside to Dante, but Sera heard and rolled her eyes. “And I've you to thank, Dante. How you knew where to find her, I'll never know, but I thank the gods.”

“Fine. Whatever. Might I look at your book collection?”

Thrax was willing to allow him anything. There was a volume Dante recalled seeing on his first visit concerning the geology in the western hemisphere. He took the volume down and sat at the small gaming table before the fire while Thrax went on to Sera about how lucky he was to have discovered his everlasting love for Glyncara. Sera kept casting dark glances at Dante as if she were not pleased with the man's gushing. Well, he couldn't blame her for that. It was getting old fast.

There were maps and maps and maps. On every thing from rock formation to glacial movement a million years ago. The old man who had written it had a grasp on science that hadn't been seen for over 400 years. It was mostly boring, dusty stuff, and going over it with a head aching from too much drink was not pleasant in the least. But there, finally, in a section devoted to listing provinces and ancestral claims on the mountains he came across the name Saldorn. A hundred miles of rocky, uninhabited land in the heart of the central western range. No one owned it or claimed it.

He tapped one sharp nail on the map in irritation. A whole damned chain of mountains, Glyncara gave him to search for this *Mother*, who might or might not exist at all.

“Thrax,” he snapped, interrupting the man’s conversation with Sera. They both looked at him in surprise. He was not feeling pleasant or courteous enough today to care. “I need mounts and not those damned draft horses. And supplies.”

Thrax blinked at him, love charm or not, not a man used to being ordered about. Sera touched his arm and smiled. “Of course we have gold.”

“He already owes me gold,” Dante said, closing the book, but not before surreptitiously tearing out the map of Saldorn. If he was going to embark on this, he might as well have a ghost of a clue to where he was going.

* * *

Four hundred miles from the foothills of the Great Northern Range to the plains where the north and the south met. There was no exacting border. No city - - at least not anymore - - that claimed the vast plain lands. One just ceased to be in the north at some vague point and gradually delved into southern territories. Over two weeks of constant riding and lent strength or not, the horses were at their limit. Kastel was at his. It was one thing to sustain a single horse, but fifteen was pushing it to the breaking point. When he slept at night, he was too tired to dream. That was some slight consolation. They passed a small farming town and bought three remounts, the only horseflesh of good quality the town had to its name and that relieved the pressure some small bit.

His lieutenant wisely pleaded that they slow the pace, having covered incredible distance in so short of time and Kastel consented finally. The plan had been to stop at the next village, give the horses a barn to rest in and good grain to put the fat back over their ribs. Planted fields told that they were not far from a settlement. A narrow, muddy track wound through them, leading the way. The rain had been a predominate companion for the last week. There was only so much complaint one could utter, considering the forces one had set in motion to send the bad weather south. There was standing water in the fields and the horses hooves made suckling sounds as they plodded down the track.

Over the rise and the small town spread before them.

“My Lord.” One of his men exclaimed and Kastel looked up, wiping water from his eyes. One the road before them, riding up the rise was a band of armored men. And

beyond those, peppering the area about the town were many more.

His men moved for their weapons, road weary and easily agitated. He held out a hand to halt them.

“No blade drawn save on my word,” he said quietly, scanning the men that had hesitated on the track at the sight of them, but now road forward warily. Eight armed men. Two archers among them. All of them outfitted for speed. Scouts more than likely. They approached and stopped a few yards from Kastel’s party and their leader held up a gauntleted hand in greeting.

“Ho there. What business have you on this road?”

Kastel lifted a pale brow. “I was not aware that one needed particular business to travel these lands? Have the border lands been claimed by some sovereign state?”

The leader narrowed his eyes in consideration, taking in the armor, drenched and road dirty though it was, the quality of the horses and tack and came to the conclusion that these were not common travelers. “They have not. But for the safety of my men, I must ask regardless. Who are you and what business have you here?”

“My business was to find dry stables for my mounts, but it seems from the look of things that the stables are full.”

“They are,” the leader agreed. “You didn’t say your name, traveler?”

“No. I didn’t.”

A frown. The man did not like the answer, or perhaps he was leery of his duty. “My orders are to detain all travelers, who do not live in these parts. You clearly do not. Until I know your business and that you are no harm to the men that follow, I must ask that you come with me.”

Kastel’s men rustled, indignant at the threat. Kastel sat unmoving, eyes calm. “Who’s orders?”

“King Teo of Alsansir.”

“Ah. And is he hereabouts?”

“I see no reason to answer your question, when you won’t answer mine.”

Kastel allowed the ghost of a smile to touch his lips. “Lord Kastel. Tell him the Winter King would very much like to speak to him.” No reason not to impress upon the man the nature of what rode among them. Fear, he had learned from long association

with Dante Epherian, went a long way to garnering respect.

The man's eyes widened. The men behind him exchanged nervous glances. Hands drifted to weapons, which caused Kastel's men to shift uneasily. The scout leader whispered something to the man next to him and that one whirled his horse and galloped off down the track towards the town. The leader of the scouting party straightened his back and eyed Kastel with more deference.

"My lord, forgive my brusqueness. Are there more men than these?"

Kastel shrugged, not willing to ease anyone's mind about the forces at his command. The scout looked as if he hadn't expected an answer. There were more riders coming up the slope, leaving the northerners fairly outnumbered. There was nothing to do but cooperate unless he wished to bring magic into play and Kastel did not just then. Really, if one wanted to find out if the rumors concerning Dante were true, then one ought to go to a reliable source. Though the presence of these men and the hint of an army behind them was evidence enough to suggest that Teo was after something.

"If you would come with us, my lord," The scout beseeched, aware that if Kastel did not wish to cooperate there was no way their small numbers of men could make him.

Kastel merely inclined his head and urged his tired mount into a trot. The southerner's surrounded his men, wary and looking none too happy about the duty. They bypassed the town, riding across newly harvested fields. The rain had begun again, this time a drenching downpour that obscured the sound of their passage. A man cursed the weather. The shower obscured the land in a gray mist. Visibility was limited to mere yards. It shrouded the vast encampment until the very last and then only the outline of tents was discernible. Hundreds and hundreds of tents, staked to the sodden earth, hiding an army beneath their canvas roofs. Men looked out from beneath the flaps at their passage. Dim, miserable faces besieged by unnatural weather.

A rider sloshed through the mud to intercept them. He and the scout leader exchanged low words.

"My Lord," the newcomer said, a man in a tunic and armor that might have been very fine dry, but was sodden dark material in the rain. "Your men must stay here. They may not venture further into the heart of this camp."

"No," Kastel said simply.

“My lord, it is the will of the king and for the protection of the king. Please abide by his word and he shall grant you guest rights in his camp.”

“Guest rights? I have come here under armed guard. What guest right is that?”

“My lord, it is a delicate situation. Please. You have my word that your men will be safe. As will you.”

The man waited, earnest desperation in his face. Kastel thought at least that this one man did not lie. What vows Teo would break remained to be seen. He inclined his head, motioned to his men to cooperate and rode past his guard in the company of the king’s man. Through rows upon rows of tents, enough for him to estimate that no minor force bivouacked in these waterlogged fields. The tents grew larger, officer’s quarters, and the guards grew more numerous. A large tent seemed the center of a fair deal of traffic. Men stood on duty outside it in the rain. His escort ushered him in, nodding to the guard as he passed. They did not bother to ask he give up his weaponry, not fools enough to assume he would be helpless without it. An outer section housed administrative staff. A harried man sat behind a field desk, conducting the business of an encampment this size. He looked up - - they all did - - at Kastel’s entrance.

“My lord,” his guide said. “Let me take your sodden cloak.”

Kastel waved him away. “No need.”

With a whisper that was barely a breath from his lips he cast a spell and dried himself. It was not vanity, precisely, more a desire to meet Teo on equal footing, rather than as a drenched rat appearing before a lofty and dry cat. Someone exchanged whispers from a corner, one priest to another, the both of them fingering holy symbols at their chests, no doubt to protect themselves from the evil in their midst.

His guide held the flap to the inner sanctums of the tent aside and Kastel walked through. There was lantern light and warmth from a brazier behind that flap. A spacious inner room protected from the weather, but little more luxury than that. Teo had never been particularly vain. A field desk, a broad cot, a wooden stand which held the king’s armor, a small table upon which a bottle of wine sat. The king stood with his hands to the brazier. He looked up, and was not so political to smile in greeting when Kastel came in. Kastel did not himself, but stood waiting for Teo to make the first move.

“Well, you’re a bit far a field from your normal haunts, Kastel.” Teo moved over to

the table and sat down, motioning Kastel to take the second chair. Kastel did, carefully, gauging his response.

“As are you. Practicing maneuvers in the borderlands, are you?”

“Ah. One can never get enough practice marshaling troops in the rain.”

Kastel didn’t answer. He folded his hands before him, watching Teo’s face. Not vain, Teo, but impassioned. What he believed in, he believed wholly in. He could be, as Kastel well knew, a deadly enemy.

“I had heard you no longer cared to visit the south, Kastel.”

“Did you?”

“Do you come casually, or is there an agenda planned?”

Teo knew exactly why he was here, Kastel could see it in his eyes, in the faint pensive smile that touched his lips.

“I’ve heard a rumor, your majesty.”

“Have you? What will you do about it?”

“I haven’t decided. It would depend, on whether it holds truth or not.”

“And if it does?” Teo reached for the wine, poured himself a glass and motioned at a second with the lip of the bottle. Kastel shook his head. Teo shrugged and sat the bottle down, taking up his glass.

“Is that why you’re here? Chasing rumors?” Kastel asked.

“Oh, very much so, Winter King. I’m very much committed.”

“Well then, it seems as if our purposes may clash.”

“That would be unfortunate. Quite unfortunate. I value trade from the north.”

“As I do from the south. I’ve heard disturbing things. Perhaps you might enlighten me as to the truth of the matter.”

“Ah- - and then we come to the truth. Yours, mine or *his*? There are so many to choose from and so little chance of you believing any but that which benefits your dark lord.”

“I owe allegiance to no one. “

“Really, Kastel who are you trying to deceive? Me or yourself?”

Kastel looked away, into the bright center of the brazier. Teo was baiting him. For what purpose he could only guess. He chose not to rise and take it. He did not need to

ask questions to get the answers he wanted. Since Teo and his army were parked here, they had not located Dante. Since they sent scouts along the northwestern road, then they sought him in that direction. Kheron had mentioned the Great Forest, which might have been two or three days ride from this position to the south west.

“I think,” he said slowly. “That I’ve tired of this conversation.”

He began to rise. Teo held out a hand. “I can’t let you interfere in this.”

Kastel lifted a brow inquisitively. “Shall you try and stop me now and save yourself the trouble later?”

Teo put down his glass, meeting Kastel’s eyes steadily. “I would hardly be an honorable host, if I did.”

Kastel realized of a sudden that Teo did not wish to be here. In this place, doing this thing. Oh, he performed the task because he thought it needed doing, but there was a weariness behind his eyes that spoke of distaste. Teo did not want a fight with him, but he would if pressed. Teo had always gone against the odds. And at this moment, with an army behind him and who knew how many clerics at his beck and call hidden among those many tents and Kastel’s own exhaustion from weeks of magic draining travel, he might actually win.

“I hope, that we do not meet save under better circumstances,” Kastel said, a veiled pleasantry at best. “Shall I find my own way back or will your man take me?”

Teo waved a hand. “He’ll take you.”

* * *

Fifty miles to the south, a second great force traveled at the fringe of the Great Forest. Holy knights on heavy horse, church foot soldiers in talberts that bore the symbol of the High God. Angelo rode at the fore, beside a standard bearer who held the emblem of the church proudly. His demeanor was quiet and fragile as befit a man who had only recently recovered from an assassination attempt. His men were awed at his strength of will to take to horse after such grievous wounds and follow in the footsteps of his king. Well, almost. Teo had gone north and Angelo had directed his forces more westerly, claiming to have had a vision urging him in that direction.

When he closed his eyes in meditation, the men around him hardly spoke in fear of disturbing him. He sought after something not at all holy. It was a frustration, tracking the location of the wards, when it should have been a thoughtless task. They swam in and out of focus as if something blocked their presence. Some contrivance of Dante's to throw him off his track. But it wouldn't work. Angelo had enough of a glimmer from the wards he knew so well, to lead him in the right direction. He sought after them now, concentrating on locating a magic that stood out from the mundane world around it. There were presence's in the Great Wood that tickled at the edge of his awareness. Great magics and small ones, but none of them what he sought. And to the north he felt the familiar presence of Teo - - a dim throbbing power, a great mortal power, no small thing, but not that of a true creature of the arcane. And with Teo was something else. Something more potently magic. Immense, banked power. Something cold and bright and familiar.

The Prophet's eyes snapped open. He drew a breath in surprise. He had expected the Winter King eventually, but not so soon. And not in the same vicinity as Teo. He focused his inner vision, and saw nothing but rain and mist. And the Winter King was leaving. Angelo felt a sudden irrational anger at fools and kings. Teo had him in his grasp and he let him go. The incompetent. God curse the fate that placed Angelo fifty miles from Teo and incapable of stopping the Winter King himself.

Priests of his were in that camp though. Men who were well used to their lord and master using their eyes and ears for his own. He sent a message with strict instructions to his man and cursed under his breath afterwards.

"Your holiness, is something amiss?" The standard bearer asked in concern. The Prophet smiled serenely. "Nothing my son. Nothing at all."

Twenty -Two

King Teo of Alsansir sipped thoughtfully at the finest vintage of western wine to cross the mountains in a dozen years. Kastel had been stupid to turn it down. But Kastel was unpredictable, as wizards tended to be, and not to be forced into anything not of his

own conception. He had after all, learned at the feet of the master of stubborn pride, so one could hardly be surprised at arrogant superiority. Teo had a full quota of it himself, being the son of a line of great kings and holding the south in his hands. It was not a responsibility he took lightly. He cherished his position and not for power alone, but for the fact that the people and the devastated lands of the south needed a strong leader and he felt there was no one more capable than himself.

He hated letting Kastel walk out his tent. There would be hell to pay for that courtesy, when they finally did catch up with Dante. But, aside from declaring open war on the North and testing his strength and his armies against the Winter King, there was nothing else to do. One did not hold a wizard against his will, without paying a price in blood and death.

There was a commotion in the outer section of his tent. The hushed tones of excited voices. His aide shifted the separating flaps and stepped in, a wild-eyed pair of priests behind him.

“My Lord, these priests have a message from the Prophet.”

Teo beckoned them in. “What has his holiness to say?”

“Majesty, a holy sword has just ridden in with a message. The Prophet has had a vision days past and desperately sought to get his message here in time.”

“A vision? Where is this message?”

A rolled piece of parchment tied with a blue ribbon was handed to him. He unfolded it and read, while the priests exchanged anxious looks.

Your Majesty

May the High God grant this warning reach you in time. The God has sent me a vision.

Dante’s allies are grouping. The Lord of the Divhar and the Stormbringer come from the east and the Winter King descends from the North. They must not be allowed to reach him.

I saw the Winter King in your grasp. You must not allow him to slip free or all is lost. Use any means to snare him that you must. I am three days hard ride behind you.

Angelo

Teo crumpled the paper, swearing. The Prophet had known days ago that this would happen. The man continued to amaze him. He also did not know what he asked. But the warning only served to heighten Teo's own sense of unease in letting Kastel free to work whatever mischief he might in the name of Dante.

He threw the missive on the floor and stood, barking an order at the priests to gather their peers. And to his aide.

"Sound the horns and get my armor."

And with disquiet on their faces they ran to do his bidding.

* * *

The faint klaxon of horns sounded in the distance. Kastel's horse pricked its ears, lifting its weary head in nervousness at a sound it well knew. A call to arms. How very predictable for Teo to change his mind after the fact. Kastel couldn't blame him. If their positions had been switched, he would never have let Teo leave the camp.

Kastel's men looked to him expectantly, as any fifteen men might that would shortly have an army on their heels. He said nothing and kept to the slow, steady pace that his tired mount was able to maintain. He did not wish to slaughter those men. He did not wish to see the Lion guard, a great many of its officers made up of men who had fought Galgaga with him and his, die under his hand.

Past the sodden fields and the town that supported them and one of his men said softly. "They come."

He turned his horse to look. Through the mists in the distance a dark line appeared. Faintly the jingle of tack could be discerned. The Calvary first and the foot soldiers after that.

"What shall we do, my lord?"

"Nothing," he said quietly. "Just ride. Don't kill your horses."

They stared at him and at each other, then with a short nod from their lieutenant, they kicked their mounts into a canter and sloshed forward, leaving Kastel alone. He folded his hands on the saddle horn and whispered a word. Power gathered in the air, fickle and truant and needing to be harnessed. With more force he spoke the lines of an incantation, adding power and purpose to the force he had summoned, directing and melding a certain spell to his needs. The rain and the saturated ground were his allies. The breath from his horse's flaring nostrils began to steam with a sudden cold.

The air turned white with snow. The fields before him glazed over. First a transparent, thin layer of frost, then quickly a thickening slab of pure ice that spread like a living, hungry thing, devouring the earth in its path. He let it run wild for a great distance, a league or more to the north and south, then forced it into remission with an effort of will and strength. It took a moment longer than it should have to control the wild forces he had set in motion, a testament to how much the journey had drained his energy. It was just as well he had chosen this route over one of combat.

The ice would stop them for a while. Until it melted, or they blasted a path through it magically. Regardless, he had gained hours if not days on them that they would be hard pressed to regain.

* * *

Sera and Dante were arguing. This time it was about her father. It had been one thing or another for the last week, he being in a sour mood and she unequivocally not putting up with it. Intermittently they sparred and then rode silently at odds. They disagreed merely to disagree and the only thing they did find to share their antagonism against was the weather. It had gone from simply being an inconvenience to entirely miserable. The further they rode into the foothills and the lower ranges of the western mountains the worse it got. Rain turned to light snow, which melted during the day and then froze at night to make the trails treacherous. Dante cursed and maligned it, wasting breath on something they had no control over. Sera rode, dripping, sodden and cold, fighting a runny nose, enduring it in silent discontent.

"It's beyond me why you defend him," Dante was saying with that overtly superior

tone in his voice that made her want to smack him. “He promised you in marriage to Angelo, if I remember correctly. That alone should be enough for you to want to sever ties, if not a limb or two.”

“He didn’t do it to hurt me. He didn’t know what Angelo was. Maybe he still doesn’t know. He was just trying to protect me.”

“He’s always been underhanded about it.”

“Oh, you just say that because he got the upper hand on you and you can’t stand the thought of anyone doing that.”

“That’s not true. Did he or did he not use you -- unbeknownst to you -- to try and control me?”

“He was desperate. You weren’t exactly on his friendly list back then.”

“I am now?”

“He tried to help you -- which you so conveniently forget, when you were in that dungeon.”

“How?”

“He did what he could, trying to keep them from burning you. He tried to convince you to act rationally and make amends so they would let you go, but no, you would have nothing of it.”

“Let me enlighten you on the facts, Sera. First. Angelo would have burned the lot of his parishioners before he let me burn and second, I could have begged for baptism in the holy fire and he wouldn’t have let me go. And your father was a blind, favor seeking ass, to even consider a marriage.”

“He wanted to see me safe and protected.”

“He wanted favor with the new power.”

“You are wrong. Maybe Angelo really impressed him with his suit. Maybe he thought he would take care of me.”

“Angelo wanted you for one reason and one reason only. To get at me.”

“Oohh, you are so conceited. He was courting me before you even came back from the dead and he was a perfect gentleman about it.”

“Oh, so now you’re defending him, as well? Did you like his smarmy attentions?”

“No, but that’s not the point.”

“What is?”

She opened her mouth, searching for that illusive element that had started the debate in the first place. “Well - - it seems to have disappeared, but I’ll find it, if you give me a second.”

He lifted a brow. She half smiled, hiding it behind her dripping hood. “Would you be jealous?”

“What?” He sounded incredulous.

“If I had liked his courtship?”

“I’d be sick,” he snapped.

“Oh.” Her smile widened.

They rode for a while without talking, only the sounds of the horses and the patter of rain on the leaves breaking the silence. Her fingers, buried in the pockets of her tunic, under the cloak, turned the acorn over and over. It was pleasantly warm to the touch. A sensation that she only gradually became aware of. She took it out, stared at it in the palm of her hand, but it seemed no different than any other acorn one might find on the forest floor.

“Are we in Saldorn yet?”

“How in hell should I know?”

“I think we are. Or we’re close.”

He turned to look at her, brows drawn in question. She held up the acorn and shrugged.

“It’s getting warm. I’ve - - I’ve the feeling we’re going the right way.”

He stared at the acorn a moment longer before tuning back around, but the hostility had passed and his face was thoughtful. Goddess, please, please let them be close.

* * *

Where a forest had once stood there was nothing but mud and the severed stumps of trees beyond count. The devastation it seemed, went on forever. Kastel and his men picked their way through, passing a sapling here and there that had escaped the fate of its brethren. The underbrush, shadow loving stuff that it was, had died back, exposed too

long to direct sunlight. None of them spoke as they passed through it, for words seemed immoral and out of place in the midst of such desolation.

The rain had ceased, and the sun valiantly tried to force its way past swift moving clouds. Clothes began to dry. They came upon a rustic, barricaded town in the midst of the cleared land. Around it were rows upon rows of newly planted saplings. They rode between the rows, and the few men that tended the fields looked up at their passing.

How very, very odd, to destroy a forest and then plant it anew. It seemed enough of an inconsistency that he felt compelled to stop and inquire what flight of fancy had infected the men hereabouts.

“Thrax has gone mad.” Grumbled the man inside the barricade who waved them to a common trough where they could water their horses. “He sees spirits in the forest. But, it’s his money. If he wants to pay us to plant trees, then so be it.”

They paid a man to fetch grain for the horses. A party of men came down the central street to observe the strangers in their town, the town’s master among them. The man gushed. The man remarked on the fine horses. He went on about the planting and the forest, talking nonsense. Kastel blocked him out. His lieutenant made some perfunctory answer. There was an old woman who had come out of her tent to watch the strangers. She wore charms about her neck and had runes sewn into her shawl. Her old eyes were intense, staring at Kastel as if he had sprouted horns. Her lips formed a silent sentence and her hands went shakily to her breast. She looked as if she were about to faint from shock.

He glanced back to his lieutenant who was bargaining for supplies with the lord of this odd little town, then stepped carefully around the mud puddles and towards the old woman. Her eyes widened, and she took a step backward as if she were about to flee inside her tent.

“Wait,” he commanded, holding up a hand and she froze like a rabbit under the gaze of a fox. She bowed her old head in respect.

“Why do you stare so?” he asked. Sometimes seers of great potency could be found practicing their talents in such backwater settlements at this. He had an interest in prophesy.

“I know you, great lord,” she whispered.

“Do you?”

“When I was a younger woman and new to my powers the city sorcerers where I lived called for all with magical talent to give aid to defend against the invaders who sought to destroy us. Dante’s armies. You were there, my lord. I recall as clear as day and you haven’t changed bit. What they say must be true.”

But he had, he thought and didn’t voice it. “What do they say?” He had to ask it, it was a impulse that he could not repel.

“That your father was an immortal demon.”

He stared down at her, unblinking and she averted her eyes. “Until I saw you just now, it never occurred to me who he was. I knew I’d seen him.”

“Who?”

“Dante Epherian.”

“You saw him? Here? When?”

“Two weeks past, since he left. He’s the cause of this, you know?” she said the last in a conspiratorial whisper, waving a bony hand to indicate the general area around the town.

“The planting of saplings?” Kastel asked in wonder and half laughed at the incongruity of it. Dante was most certainly not known for his delving into environmental restoration. “Amazing. Do you know where he went?”

“The girl he was with was asking after a place called Saldorn. He looked at maps in Thrax’s house. That’s what I heard.”

“Saldorn?”

“Never heard of it myself,” the old woman admitted. “Though they took supplies for mountain travel. Due west they went.”

Due west. He whirled, marched back to his men and waved them into motion. They mounted with hardly a word to the men who had been talking with them by the well. Wide eyed, the loggers turned planters watched them ride out.

* * *

“Teo let him go. And now the Winter King travels on Dante’s heels.” The Prophet

stood looking into the darkness of a cloud covered night. His robes fluttered about him gently in a breeze that hinted at more rain. Sinakha stood behind him, silent witness to his master's musing. Impenetrable guard at his master's back.

"Gerad and the Stormbringer have crossed the South Alderon River and make quicker time than Teo's army. They will be at his back before he reaches the western mountains."

"An army can not move in those mountains," Sinakha said quietly.

"No. And I'll have lost both Dante and the Winter King by the time they reach the foothills."

"Can the Winter King break your wards, my lord?"

The Prophet shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. They are not things fully responsive to magic workings, which is what makes them so useful. I would prefer if he did not have the chance to find out. He needs to be slowed down."

Thoughtfully the Prophet toyed with the holy emblem at his breast. Dante was only a vague, fluttering presence in the eather, hard to track at best. But Kastel was easy to locate, radiating power. The woman was the same, but further away. Her, he could track, though Gerad was invisible to his arcane senses.

Six days past they had crossed the Ahrend River and moved steadily southward on a parallel course with Teo's army. At best they were two days behind Kastel and he was almost at the foothills of the western mountains. What Dante's goal was in those mountains, the Prophet could only guess at. There were things in that range that held great meaning to the Prophet personally, but he could see no way Dante or any of his would know of them. Not yet, at any rate.

"Tell the men that I go alone to meditate." He finally smiled back at Sinakha. "Keep them well clear."

His captain inclined his head. "Of course, your holiness. I shall see to it."

And Sinakha would. He trusted Sinakha with a great many precious and sacred things. Sinakha's only goal in life was to serve the Prophet and he did it well.

Angelo walked into the darkness, putting a cluster of pine between himself and the encampment. He walked until the earth felt right beneath his feet. Solid and deep with veins of rock running through the dirt. He uttered a word of summoning and put power

behind it. The air remained still and heavy, but he felt a faint twinge of response from the earth. He curled his fingers and chanted an archaic mantra. Something buckled under the earth. The pines trembled. In the distant darkness the crust of the earth swelled, as if some great serpent forced its way just beneath the surface, traveling in a fast, straight line towards the Prophet.

And just before it reached him, it burst upwards, a rearing, dark slab of rock and dirt and clay that shifted and changed as it moved, towering twenty feet above his head.

“Canambra,” he hissed the name of the thing, names being all powerful in the right hands. For a moment it writhed, fighting his dominance over it, an ancient, powerful thing that was not well used to being woken from its earthy slumber. But it had known his mastery before and was wise enough in its age, not to rebel uselessly. It subsided, and the earth creaked with its motion. As if from the depths of the world, its voice rumbled out.

“What is thy wish, master?”

The Prophet folded his hands. “There are men riding to the mountains in the west that I wish delayed. I shall show you where.”

“I shall crush them, master.”

“I don’t believe you will. Sorcerous power is among them. You will find it not so easy a task, but all I need is delay.”

“The mountains run deep, master. The power of rock and earth is strong there. I shall do as you bid.”

“I know you shall. Even to your demise, if that be the case, Canambra.”

The great, craggy head bowed. Bits and pieces of earth showered the ground. An elemental, properly bound, had no will but its masters, only the slyest and most powerful of them could break the bonds that chained them once properly called. Though an earth elemental was powerful beyond belief, it was slow of wit and not likely to conceive of misconduct. Fire and air elementals were much more difficult to work with.

“Go,” he commanded it, and it sank into the earth, leaving bits of itself on the cracked ground where it had risen. The dirt and stone swallowed it with hardly more a trace than that. Angelo turned and strolled back to camp, much satisfied with this night’s deeds.

* * *

“It’s vibrating,” Sera said softly, reverently, as she cupped the acorn in her palms. Her eyes were large and bright, entirely engrossed in looking at the damned, annoying thing. Dante wasn’t getting anything from it. He did not entirely doubt that she was, but she might have been convincing herself that it was more than it actually was in her great desire believe Glyncara had not lied. On the other hand, it might not be responding to him because he was so adamantly against it. He was very much aware of how fickle certain types of magic could be. Some of them were down right elusive if one did not want them bad enough.

“Again?” he asked, exasperated. It had been giving her little nudges and signals for the last three days. They had been riding through the mountains in intermittent rain aimlessly during that time.

He hated the woods. He had come to that conclusion. He loved cities. He wanted dearly to be in a nice, comfortable city somewhere - - anywhere, with no trees in sight. Keladedra on the West coast was a wonderful sea port city. He had conquered it maybe two hundred years past, when he’d been on the world domination kick. The people had been so accommodating that they’d showered the invading forces with flowers. Subsequently he hadn’t let his men run amuck raping and pillaging. Who needed to in a city where the women were so accommodating and the populace so willing to please. Yes, Keladedra would be a wonderful place to be, in one of the great villas over looking the sea.

“I wish you could feel it,” she said softly, her voice shaky, as if the feel of the thing gave her pleasure. “It’s so peaceful and all encompassing. Everything is so clear.”

She sounded enthralled. She sighed happily and offered it to him. “Hold it and try, Dante.”

He took it and felt nothing. Just a hard little nut. Sera’s smile was still in place. He drew his brows warily.

“Do you still feel it? When you don’t have the thing in your hand?”

She nodded. “It’s like - - euphoria. I can’t explain it.”

“How long exactly have you felt this strongly?”

“I don’t know. This morning.”

He looked around him, at the rays of light piercing the pine canopy, at the moss and the flowering vines that wound about the trunks of trees. The sound of bird call was a symphony of chirps and whistles in the air. The smell of honey suckle and pollen was a fragrant sweetness.

It wasn’t the nut, he thought. It was the place. The valley they passed through, nestled between the protective slopes of two mountains. A valley that Sera through her insistent attention to the acorn had led them to, in a roundabout, winding course. He thought about what Glyncara had said. The acorn was a guide and a gift. And Glyncara had summoned Sera because she was more reasonable - - or more receptive to whatever power lay hidden in this vale. It had called to her because she believed. Because she was pure of spirit and some of the age old, fey powers - - the things that had existed before men had risen to walk on two legs - - responded to purity.

He leaned across the space dividing them and caught her arm, pressing the acorn back into her hand. “Find the center of this place, Sera. Find the source of all those things you feel.”

“But it’s all around us,” she protested.

“No. There has got to be a focal point. A hub. Concentrate and find it. Let the acorn lead you if need be.” An excitement built. In his awareness of the existence of the magic, traces of it became clear to him. There was *something* here.

Twenty-three

They walked the horses through a particularly rock strewn stretch of forested slope. A tiny stream ran past them, its bubbling song competing with the crickets that were awakening with evening. Sera carried a handful of black berries she had picked a ways back, savoring the flavor, which like everything else in this valley was more intense than she could ever recall tasting. The world was filled with so much color and sensation that her head sometimes swam with faintness and she had to close her eyes until the dizziness

went away. And Dante didn't feel it. Oh, he admitted to the awareness of something more than the norm in this vale, but he did not experience it as strongly as she did. She pitied him that inability. It was so wonderful. So entirely fulfilling to experience the world in such glory.

"Should we stop for camp?" she asked, when the ground beneath their feet became hard to see and she stumbled now and then over roots and rocks that were hidden from sight.

He did not wish to, that was clear. He stood staring into the evening, as if its hidden secrets were just around the next bend. His one hand rubbed absently at the bracelets about the wrist of the other.

"The horses are done for," she said, feeling their weariness and their single minded desire for the grain they could smell in the saddle bags. Her own stomach grumbled uneasily. Berries and jerky were not the best combination, but it was all they had eaten during the day.

"All right," he said finally. "Here's as good a place as any."

Sera sighed and swung her head to look for a good place to picket the horses. A wave of dizziness assaulted her. Her legs trembled and she grasped at the thick neck of her horse. She swallowed bile and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Sera?" She felt his presence behind her.

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm okay. This is just a little too much intense nature, I think, for a city-bred girl."

She tried to laugh and it came out shaky and tinged with a sour flavor. She fought the dizziness away and looked up at him, smiling weakly. He frowned at her, took her horse from her and led both animals to the brook where they could drink.

"Maybe we're getting close," she said. "Maybe that's what it is. Everything just feels stronger."

He looked at her wordlessly, hair pale in the faint light that breached the forest veil. She wished she knew what he was thinking, but Dante was impossible to read when he so wished. There had been a time, when she'd been young and he the essence of a soul that wafted about her, when she had been able to feel his every mood.

"It'll be all right," she said in a small voice, because she thought he was worried and

she felt quivery and uncertain inside and needed to voice that opinion for the both of them. She wondered what Father was doing. If he was worried for her, or cursing her name. How long had it been since she had left home? Two months almost. Almost three weeks since they had left the logging camp in search of mother. Three weeks during which Dante's moods had dipped to deepest melancholy to flighty irritation to small bouts of belief that there was something indeed that the little acorn drew them towards.

He built a fire and they heated water for tea. He offered her a strip of jerky and she waved it away, not willing to risk further quarreling with the blackberries. She sipped the tea, holding the tin cup in both hands and basking in the feeling of warmth. He sat beside her and she leaned against him, listening to the night sounds and watching the crackling dance of the fire.

"What will you do when the wards are gone?" she asked. It was the first time she had broached the question, too afraid perhaps of what his answer might be.

"Find Angelo." he said softly.

"Revenge," she whispered against his shoulder.

"Don't you think he deserves it?"

"I suppose. The king and Father will try and protect him."

"Then they'll die. As will anyone else who sides with that snake."

"All the Lion guard will and all the men of Alsansir."

"They're all fools."

"Maybe, but a fair number of them are good men. Friends. I - - I wouldn't want them killed just to satisfy a need for blood."

He didn't respond, but she felt his muscles tighten. He was angry. She ducked her head and said. "Charul died by Angelo's hand or his order, but if he hadn't he would have fought at the king's order to protect him. Even though I despise the Prophet for that, until Teo can see his true colors, he'll fight for him. They all will. They shouldn't die for misplaced loyalty."

"I will find Angelo and I will make him pay. If they stay out of my way, then I have no quarrel with them."

It was something. She nodded slightly and shut her eyes.

He put an arm about her, pulled her closer and she nestled against him wordlessly,

grateful for the warmth and the comfort.

The horses rustled in the leaves. The brook babbled idiotically and somewhere far off, the land trembled faintly as rock and earth shifted.

* * *

With morning came rain. Kastel began to detest his own summoning which had dumped this string of foul weather on the south. In the gray distance the foothills of the Western range broke the line of the horizon. Beyond those were the mist-obscured peaks of the mountains themselves. Not as treacherous a range as the snow covered ridges of the north, but a wider and longer running chain of mountains to be sure.

Breakfast was cold and unappealing. His men were dour and miserable, huddled in their cloaks and forgoing their usual quiet conversation among themselves. The horses were unequivocally displeased with the entire situation. Their legs and underbellies were coated with mud and it had been too long since they had gotten proper rest. Kastel hated to treat them so, but war was war. And this verged on just that.

The pace was a plodding walk and both horses and riders rode with head down, turning faces from the rain. The ground sloped upward towards noon, the first of the foothills. Water lay in the valleys between them a foot or more deep. In the distance a herd of huddled deer lifted their delicate heads at the sight of human riders and warily moved up slope towards the line of pine that separated the last of the foothills from the first of upwelling of true mountains.

There seemed an easily passable trail to the south and they headed towards that. It was a steep enough slope, littered with rocky outcroppings and stray pines. Narrow streams of water ran down the slope, cutting furrows into the earth. The trail followed a zig zag pattern up the hill, the top of which was obscured in rain and fog. It was a slow climb, careful as they were to find solid footing for the horses. There was a rumble not far off. Thunder perhaps.

“My lord.” One of his men called and pointed.

The trees above and behind them seemed to shift. Mud slide, he thought anxiously. Not surprising considering the amount of rain dumped upon these mountains. He started

to urge his horse to a quicker pace and leave the dangerous area behind and rather suddenly the ground under the animal's hooves heaved upwards. The world tilted and gray sky was blocked out by an eruption of dark earth and stone that towered overhead like a solid, heavy wave of water. Horses screamed. Men cried out. His own went down in a tangle of limbs and Kastel was so shocked by the earth's errant behavior that all he could think to do was scramble to escape being crushed as his mount tumbled down the slope in a rush of dirt and mud and crushing stone.

He hit the ground and there was no stability, no chance to gain balance or footing in the current of earth that swept them all down slope. Something hit his shoulder hard and he thought it might have been his horse. It hurt bad enough to trigger defenses and he called up a shield a fraction of a breath before a slab of mountain thirty feet long and half that wide slammed down on his head.

It jarred badly. He cried out. The shield held, though Kastel felt it pressed back into the earth and mud and himself with it. There was nothing but darkness overhead and tons of rock. Panic at being tamped into the ground, surrounded by utter blackness sprang up and with it a frantic wellspring of power. He spat out the words of a spell, gathered the energy from the center of his being where it resided and released it. The earth exploded outwards. Shards of rock and dirt flew high into the air, pelting the slope for hundreds of yards in all directions.

Mud covered and furious he clawed his way to his feet, slipping as mud kept rolling down. Impossible to keep his feet. He took to the air, escaping the slide and something came at him out of the rain. An arm of rock and dirt that grew out of the slide as if it were alive. He was prepared this time.

"Vash Nabar!!" he hissed and the fist of earth shattered. Bits of it bounced off his shield. He threw out his senses for the culprit. There. Something heavy and ponderous that moved as a part of the vein of rock and earth itself. An elemental. An earth elemental. It surprised him. Earth elementals were not easily tamed. He could not name a wizard off hand who had the skill or the vocation to master them. Someone obviously had, since it was unheard of for an elemental of any kind to go about attacking passing humans. It knew he was here. It was aware of him personally, which meant it had been set on him specifically. Which meant Teo had some unknown and powerful wizard in his

employ.

How did one go about destroying an earth elemental? Never having fought one, he was not quite certain. Fighting one on a mountainside seemed a particularly odious task. If he stayed to the air, it was relatively helpless against him.

Then a strangled cry from below reminded Kastel that he was not the only one at risk. There were men of his caught in that eruption of mud. A man struggled of the mud, up to his waist in it. The earth rolled towards him like a slow undulating fist. Kastel swept down, landed in the oozing ground, whispered a word and froze the wave solid.

“Find the others,” he cried, hauling the man out. He began searching for them arcanelly, looking for the spark of life under the onslaught of dirt and rock. Found a horse and man and blasted the dirt away from them. The horse staggered down slope, dazed and stumbling. Then men were much the same, but they stayed to find their fellows.

The roll of earth Kastel had frozen trembled. The ice splintered and cracked and flaked away as the power of the rock under it became overwhelming. Something rose up out of the earth, glazed with ice of Kastel’s making that had shape and form somewhat more distinctive than the slabs of blunt earth that had been thrown at him so far. The elemental itself, that had taken dubious human form, as elementals tended that had been called forth by man. It was no minor summoning. He could feel the depth of power residing within it, the utter age of the thing.

“Get away,” he hissed at the ragged, mud coated men around him. “Down the slope.”

“But, my lord --” his battered and bloody lieutenant cried, terrified of the thing towering over them, loath to leave Kastel. There were eleven of them out of the mud and some seven or eight horses. The other forms buried under the earth held no spark of life that Kastel could sense.

“Go.”

They went, ever obedient to his orders, even if it plagued their sense of honor.

The elemental did not hinder the retreat. It stood like a finger of solid rock, unmoving, unmovable, its massive arms held out from its sides like stumps.

“Who summoned you?” Kastel asked softly. There were four dead men under the earth. His rage built. The thing about elementals was that if you could strike them down

when they were in physical form, you could beat them, but once they dissolved into air, fire, water or earth, they were hell to get at.

It did not answer. It swayed and with a shower of dirt and broken ice, one arm swung down upon him. He brought up the shield and a fist the size of a small wagon rebounded off. Not a living thing as living things went. No blood and flesh to turn to ice. It had to be shattered then, and even then, the pieces might reform.

He chanted the words to a spell quickly under his breath, then shouted out the last word and threw his arms forward. Explosive power shimmered in the air around him. He found the core of the elemental, the center of its solid form and focused the energy at that point, released it with an inarticulate cry.

The mountainside shook. Kastel, shield or no, was forced backwards by the exhalation of destructive energy. He skidded down slope some twenty feet. The Elemental shuddered. Cracks appeared in its rocky hide. One arm shattered at the shoulder and dropped off, rolling down the hill. The chest exploded outwards, a thousand shards pelting Kastel's shield, piercing the crust of earth and mud on the slope. The ground split. One jagged line appearing northward, a second traveling down the slope almost beneath Kastel's feet. Oozing mud filled the indent almost immediately.

Silence. He cast out his senses searching for traces of the thing. There was nothing that caught his notice. He let the shield down and took to the air, letting the rain wash away the filth of the mudslide. He hovered above where the elemental had stood and there was nothing but rubble covered with slow moving mud. The water from upslope ran in turrets down the mountainside, bringing more dirt and debris with it. The trail, for as far as he could see in the dismal light of dusk and storm, was obliterated. Had it been only him, he could have continued. Could have merely levitated over the worst of it, horse and all, but he hadn't the resources left to him to take his men that route and he would not abandon them. Not with Teo on his trail.

He returned to the foot of the mountain where they waited. A ragged, wounded lot, who looked at him with great relief when he sat foot on ground in their midst. The horses stood trembling, with heads down in exhaustion and shock. All of them were covered in mud and blood.

"Is it dead, my lord?" Someone asked.

“Perhaps,” he answered quietly.

“Should we go and look for the others?” A more hesitant query. Kastel looked up the slope into the shadows, shut his eyes for a moment, blaming himself for not reacting quickly enough to save men that had depended upon him. Too long out of practice, the thing had taken him completely off his guard.

“No. They’re gone.”

“But, Lord Kastel ---”

“I said no.” It was not safe for men or horse to climb that slope. Not until the rain let up and the mountains stopped pouring all the gathered waters down their slopes.

His horse was among the surviving animals. He was ridiculously grateful for that. It butted its nose wearily against his chest when he went to inspect it for injury.

“What shall we do?” His lieutenant, the man’s name was Chanto, asked in a subdued voice.

“Find shelter for the night.” He scanned the hills behind them. There was an outcropping of rock that sat at an angle off the side a hill that would shield them from some of the rain. It was big enough to squeeze men and horses under its protecting bluff. They walked the horses, save for one man who was unconscious and had to be draped over his saddle. Kastel almost hesitated in stepping under the lee of the rock, the memory of the slab of earth that had crashed down upon him vivid in his mind. He cast every awareness he had of arcane stirrings to the area around them. And nothing came back to him. Only the still resonance of the earth and that he found distrust in, not knowing all the predilections of earth elementals.

With the worst of the wounded, he did what he could, then sat with his cloak wrapped about him and senses stretched taught, listening for the strain of arcane rustling that would hint something foul was afoot.

* * *

There were flowers blooming in the last weeks of autumn that Sera informed him, should not have been. There was a great deal amiss with this warm, rain free vale. It was quite the perfect place. And that much perfection worried him. Sera woke before he did,

and he rolled over to find her walking down the bank of the little stream, humming to herself in a vaguely disoriented manner. The way this place effected her made him nervous. He knew well the influences of strong magics could have upon an unprepared mind and spirit. Sera was naive. She was trusting. She was an easy victim for a thing that seemed too good and might very well hide a dark nature. He of all people knew how easy it was to corrupt a guileless soul.

He pulled on his boots hurriedly, leaving his cloak where it lay, the vale warm enough not to need it, and went after her. She moved along the thin strip of sandy earth that made up the bank, her boots leaving soft imprints. She passed under the overhanging branches of an ancient willow and stopped, staring down at the source of the brook. The roots of the willow, great gnarly things that they were, trailed into a round, dark pool. The whole of it was cocooned in twisted willow limbs and green moss.

She turned when he approached, her eyes luminous and wide.

“Are you all right?” he asked it again, because he kept doubting her answers. She stepped into him, wrapping her arms about his neck, drawing him down to kiss, which in itself was a morning ritual that could easily become addictive. She pulled back, fingers lingering in his hair.

“I love you,” she said dreamily, a statement that made something in his chest catch, and held out the acorn. There was something else other than Sera in the faint smile on her lips and the dreamy glitter of her eyes. Warily he took the acorn from her palm.

“What should I do with it?” he asked carefully, not certain if it were her or something else that he asked.

“It’s an offering,” she said. “Offer it.” One of her hands fluttered towards the dark pool. He looked towards it dubiously.

“This is it? This is where I’m to find *Mother*?”

“You won’t know till you try?”

He turned to face the pool. How did one address a pool of water? He was enormously terrible at asking for the favor of others. It was so much easier merely to take what he wanted.

“Glyncara said to bring this. Here.” He tossed it into the pool. It disappeared with a plop, sending ripples concentrically outward. Sera sat down on the moss under the

willow.

“I think I’ll take a nap,” she said, curled up and was asleep in a moment. Dante stared at her, mouth open to complain that she’d just gotten up. Water lapped his boots. He had been standing several feet back from the edge of the pool. He looked down and found the toes of his boots at the edge of the water. He blinked at the displacement. His heart beat like a drum in his ears. He shook his head, bringing a hand to his temple. He shut his eyes for a moment and when he opened them water sloshed at his ankles.

A beat of his heart and his senses swam dizzily. Sunlight dappled the glade and he saw spots of brightness mixed with shades of darkest black. The water was up to his waist.

A beat of his heart and the world faded into sudden and utter night. He was drowning in it. It filled his ears and his mouth. He breathed it in and it weighed his lungs down with ebony fluid. Pain pressed against his chest and yet he didn’t struggle against it. He was weightless and heavy at the same time. In darkness and light juxtaposed.

A beat of his heart and the veins of the earth pumped in unison with his own blood. The molten core of the planet coiled and churned, pulsing out in a thousand thousand veins of lava that worked their way inexorably towards the surface. A living core to a living world, warming from within, what could never be reached by the life giving heat of the sun.

A beat of his heart and a billion nurturing roots broke through the crust of the earth, seeking nutrients from the rotting remains of their forefathers, feeding off the bones and the flesh of the billion things that had died before them. Grass, reeds, vines and trees that held the network of soil together, that covered a world and created life even as they lived off of death.

A beat of his heart and the oceans surged against one shore then the other, tearing land down and creating new land grain by grain. Unstoppable and unchangeable, where life had begun and where life was renewed, protected from the violence that raped the land.

A beat of his heart and source of a planet’s life surrounded him, invaded him, encompassed him with the staggering aura of its power. In all his thirst for power and magic he had never experienced *this*. Had never known this existed, not this

concentrated aura of force that flowed through him. No single being this, but a conglomeration of a million life sources that were overwhelming. He was small and inconsequential in the midst of it. The images kept flashing through his mind, his being, and they might never have stopped, if he had been a little less sure of his place in the world. A little less certain of his worth in the scheme of things. A lesser being might have been reduced to blathering idiocy at the scope of Earth's power. For it was the earth that battered at his soul.

Mother. How appropriate. The mother of everything mortal and physical. Only Dante was beyond mortality. He was not certain if he had ever been a creature spawned of this physical earth. Mother, though it very well might have produced every other living soul on this planet, might not have been responsible for *him*.

With a force of will he pushed the images away, forced the pounding of his heart to a faint beat in the background of his awareness. He was floating in a hazy field of bright light. There was nothing of the forest of the physical world around him. All his trappings of that world were stripped from him. It tried to strip all his defenses, but he held onto them stubbornly, and eventually it let him be.

"Who are you?" he cried, though not with his voice, though he thought he knew the answer.

Mother. It echoed in his head, a sonorous, thumping blow to his senses.

He cringed and curled up, hands to his ears even though it came not from without, but within.

"That's not the answer I want."

It did not answer him. It pulsed, with the beating of its own slow heart. He shivered and supplied his own answer.

"You're the earth source. The planet's life energy. You feed everything."

Yes. No.

"What does that mean?"

We feed each other. I die the earth dies. The earth dies I die.

He thought of Glyncara and her precious forest. If it died, then so would she. This thing was of such a larger scale than that.

"You've been here forever?"

Forever. It agreed. It was not much for conversation, this Mother. He was impatient, even with such a thing as Mother, to fulfill his needs.

“One of your daughters sent me here. There are wards on my person, she said you could break. I did her a favor and you, I think.”

No response. Merely the pulse of earthsong. Dante seethed, but did not push, figuring that so ponderous a thing as Mother was slow in its decisions.

They are abhorrent to magic and nature, what binds your power. The voice thrummed in his head.

“Technology,” he uttered the blasphemous word, the word that had been banned since technology brought about the summoning of Galgaga and the end of the old world. He had thought as much. A blending of technology and bastardized magic. A cruel and deadly efficient combination that he had never personally thought to attempt. “Can you break them, or am I wasting my time?”

Time means nothing.

“To you maybe.”

There is a price to be paid for every thing.

God, prices again.

“Can you free me of these bonds?” He would not be played a fool again.

I can.

He took a breath, shuddering in relief. “What do you want of me?”

Of fleshy creatures you are unique.

“I’m aware. What of it?”

You have power that is not entirely of this realm. You are a creature of more than my earthly influence. Of you I wish blood.

“Blood?” Warily. Sudden chills ran down his spine.

Blood of your blood. Firstborn.

He drew back in shock, in rage. The light would not let him go, it grasped him and held him firmly and waited patiently for his composure to return. “You’re crazy. Insane in your old age. I make no bargains of that nature.”

Of all the women he had had and there had been so many he could not begin to name or count them, he was aware of no child that had come of the unions. No seed of

his had sparked life. Perhaps it was his unique nature, of his unearthly heritage. Perhaps he just hadn't wanted it badly enough. Why bother to bring a child of his into a world he had been intent on bringing destruction to? That reasoning might have influenced him centuries ago.

With the mate of your soul, you will spawn life. Firstborn shall be mine.

Mate of his soul. The other half of his soul. She who made him more than he was. He shut his eyes, but her image flared regardless. Sera laughing. Sera yelling at him. Sera defending him against all her good sense. Sera believing in him and not letting him walk all over her as he did with practically every other living soul in the world.

"Damn you to hell," he cried. "Stop it. Why? Why a child of mine? Don't you have enough of your own?"

Not of my own. Not of blood as powerful as yours. The time will come, when a protector is needed. A defender against that which will threaten the Source. Your blood will do.

"If you need defense, then I'll pledge to do it."

You are not pure. You will never be pure. Your power is tainted. The protector of the Source must be of the Source and loyal only to the Source.

"No. I won't promise that."

Then you will remain as you are.

Twenty-four

Two men Kastel had sent out as scouts in the early hours of morning came back over the rise to the east at a gallop. The sun was high in the sky, though one would never know it from looking, the clouds were so thickly grouped. The mists had risen perhaps an hour past and with them had gone the rain that had kept up through the night. It only came down as a fine spray now, barely perceptible to men who had lived perpetually in it for days on end.

The men looked up from under hoods and helms, warily awaiting the approach of the riders. Kastel came out from under the shelter of the overhang as the horses skidded

to a halt and the scouts swung down. All it took was a look at their faces and the men knew trouble was behind them. Kastel lifted his chin and tightened his lips even before they caught the breath to report.

“My Lord. The southern army rides behind us. No more than two hours away.”

They must have killed themselves to make that time. Teo was desperate then to catch up with him. He would in short order, with three lame horses and wounded men to hinder Kastel’s speed - - with the very earth against them.

“We go south,” he said. “I won’t have this impassable mountain at our backs. Double up on the sound horses. The men not wounded can walk.”

They grimly nodded at those orders, not unaware of the tactical disadvantage of this place. Slowly they put distance between them and the mud covered slope of the mountain where the earth elemental had attacked them. The mist let up entirely and some small scrap of sun peeked through the cloud cover.

“My lord.” Chanto walked next to his horse. “Will they attack out of hand or will they parlay if they catch us?”

“I’m through with parlay,” Kastel said. “Whatever comes, they brought it on themselves.”

The lieutenant nodded, face white, young enough and new enough to Kastel’s forces not to have seen the wars of past years. The most he had seen were skirmishes with winter bandits in the mountains. But, Kiro must have trusted him if he put him in charge of those men he sent with his lord.

Chanto looked as if he might ask another question, but he paused, attention drawn to the east. An arrow sprouted of a sudden, from his neck. He did not even cry out as he was born into the side of Kastel’s horse. He clutched at the saddle briefly before the startled horse shied away. Men cried out. Arrows from a copse of trees to the east sailed through the air. Kastel cursed and slashed a hand diagonally before him. The lot of arrows burst to pieces in mid-air, shattered bits falling harmlessly to the ground.

“To cover. To cover,” someone was crying. There was nothing but rocky slope behind them, and they hurried for that, sending pebbles and rocks rolling down the hill in their haste to climb it. Kastel stayed where he was, holding his mount under tight rein, daring the hidden archers to fire another volley at him.

They did not. From out of the cover horsemen emerged. Armored knights on heavy horse, with emblems of the church on their over tunics. Holy swords, who were not only swordsmen but knew a spattering of magic to boot. They galloped into formation in preparation of a charge. Kastel cast one look over his shoulder to see that his men were up the hill and under cover, before drawing breath and summoning the power for a spell. He needed something to rent the earth between here and there, making it unpalatable for horses to cross. A *Vujar* spell. Messy and cumbersome, but it would do the job.

He spoke the words, felt the power gather to its climax and released it to do its damage. The ground split not twenty feet before the charging heavy horse. The earth shook and rock exploded upwards like charges had been set every ten or twenty feet. It tore the earth like a sword going through soft flesh. Horses screamed and riders frantically sought to turn them away before they tumbled into the jagged, gash in the earth. Fifteen feet wide and five deep, it ran for perhaps a thousand yards in either direction.

A knight wheeled his horse and spurred the animal down the rough slope, calling to his fellows to follow his suit. The animal clattered over loose rock and lunged up the opposite side. The holy knight cried out in victory, sword held high.

“No,” Kastel said simply, narrowing his eyes. The sword crusted with ice. The arm did and the man screamed. The cry was abruptly aborted as his head and neck were frozen solid, followed by the rest of his body and the body of his horse. From one step to the next and the animal stiffened, toppled over and shattered into pieces.

The men across the rift had second thoughts about following their leader.

* * *

Priests of the High God chanted and prayed under the Prophet’s watchful eye. He sat on a field stool amidst them, hands steepled before his face, listening to the monotonous chant, his mind elsewhere. He felt the release of magic and knew his Calvary had reached Kastel and foolishly tested him without the benefit of magical backup to ward them against his spells. Fine. If they died, it was a useful enough distraction to keep The Winter King busy until Teo’s main force could catch up with him.

Martyrs in the name of a higher purpose.

He rose and the priests faltered in their mantra. He waved them to continue and walked out of their circle. Sinakha became a shadow on his heels. It was time that he went to a place where he might better oversee this battle. It was time that the Prophet used the powers he had gained in the name of the high God to His benefit.

“Canambra,” he whispered and felt the faint stirring of life force. The elemental was alive still, but wounded. It wanted nothing more than to hibernate in the cold, dark earth. The Prophet would not allow that. He did not need it to come to him to direct it.

“They’re still alive. The men at the mountain. Go south and find them.”

There was sluggish acceptance of his words. The elemental shifted into motion, groaning in its agony as it did. Angelo lifted his thin nose in satisfaction, the pain of a godless, soulless creature bent to his will was the sweetest bounty of all. Now all he needed was to snare a wizard or two to make his beatitude complete.

* * *

Chanto’s blood was on his leg and his saddle. Cold anger seethed inside him. He took it out on the holy sword that dared to attack him and his. He called an ice elemental that was particularly gleeful in the handing out of destruction to do his bidding, setting it on the field of knights and letting it slice through them, freezing them as they ran screaming from it, then shattering them where they stood. The forest that hid the archers turned to a glade of icy spears and all the ground was covered in frost. Someone put up a shield and Kastel wiped it away contemptuously.

They tried to retreat and he almost went after them, but for the sudden flaring of power behind him. The rocky face of the slope surged up, between him and his men. Shards of rock rained like hail upon his back and he barely got a shield up in time to deflect the worst of it. As it was he got hit by enough of it to hurt and pain spots danced at the edge of his vision. He hadn’t the luxury of time to work a healing because the mountainside was intent on swallowing him.

It reared up like a great wave, blocking out the gray sky, and crashed down hill towards Kastel. It was easier to try and avoid it, than summon a spell that might or might

not dispel it. He kicked his horse into motion and the animal was more than happy to comply with a burst of frantic speed, greatly affronted with the dishonest way the earth had been acting under its hooves. The swell followed him, like some great creature glided under the surface of rock and dirt as easily as it might under water. His horse leapt awkwardly over a convulsing finger of rock that Kastel hadn't even noticed. The ground was damned treacherous, and good sense said take to the air, but he balked at abandoning the faithful horse.

He was developing a distinct distaste for earth elementals. The damned things were ridiculously stubborn and hard to kill. He was tired of dealing with it, ready to use a high powered, energy draining spell to banish it once and for all. He wheeled his horse about, riding almost to the rift he had made in the field, trying to give himself enough distance to summon the spell before the thing was upon him. He spoke the words quickly, intensely, the ritual bidding punctuating the gathering forces that swirled around him.

It came up out of the earth before him, a ragged rendition of the elemental he had faced before, scarred from his prior attentions and all the more deadly looking from the jagged protrusions and gaping chunks missing from its earthy hide.

The air coalesced around it, turning hazy and thick. There was a sound, like the tinkling of glass, only deeper and more resonant, that quickly grew to a screeching crescendo. Of a sudden, it was like a thousand panes of glass had shattered. The air itself turned into shards of razor edged death. Spears the width of a finger and the thickness of a horse came from every direction, an inverted sphere that pierced the slab of moving earth a thousand times. That kept coming, forming out of the air and the very moisture of the earth itself. It writhed. Ice shattered on the ground about it. Pieces of itself fell with them. And it didn't stop. The cocoon of death around it grew, expanding as it sucked moisture out of the air to feed itself. Kastel had to move away, the outer edges of it threatening even the spell caster. Anything it touched it would engulf. A thing of flesh, any thing of flesh no matter the size would have been long dead of it. It took more effort to destroy living earth. But it did. It broke away at the elemental until it was nothing but chips of dirt and rock on the ground, then continued to wreck the earth, creating a great crater that ate into half the mountain side before the shards of ice grew less and finally dissipated into a pool of frozen water that lay at the bottom of the pit.

Kastel expelled the breath he had been holding, shuddering in exhaustion. The spell had drained greatly his reservoir of power. He rode to the edge of the crater and stared down at it, rather satisfied with the intensity of the spell. All the rain in the air had fed it to a surprising crescendo. He heard distant shouts from his men, which he thought were celebratory, and his horse stomped skittishly, tack jangling. He looked to the north east, a darkness catching his eye. Over the hill top appeared a moving shadow that obscured the line of horizon and slowly spilled over the gentle slopes of those not too distant foothills. Teo army had arrived.

* * *

The Prophet's church ordained heavy horse had made a poor showing for themselves. His light horse he would use more carefully. The infantry was a half day behind them and beyond them the baggage and supply train had been left far in the wake. The king's army was in much the same situation. Six legions of foot soldiers left to make as quick a time as they might through soggy fields, while the not inconsiderable Calvary sped ahead at the Prophet's dire urgings.

Teo would have preferred not to have split his forces. Teo was canny enough a general to realize that sheer numbers spread wide were an opposition that even a wizard couldn't deal with for too long a time. There were only limited spells available to even the most powerful sorcerer and once they were employed only mundane means were left. With enough sacrifice, and enough men to make it, any battle could be won against magic. The Prophet embraced that creed. The king was not eager to employ it, but he would not balk if there were no other choice.

Kastel was already weary. The Prophet was well aware of that, having kept a scrutinous eye to his activities. He felt the demise of Canambra, well and truly gone now, with no coming back. He felt a moments vexation over the loss of such a valuable tool. Elementals of that class were not so easy to enslave. It had taken four lifetimes to conquer that one.

He scowled blackly, out of the sight of his faithful, to whom he never showed more than serene tranquility. The foot of his staff dug into soft earth, planted there by the

pressure of his grip. He stood on a hillock half a mile from the point of conflict. Sinakha stood behind him, silent and wary, hands folded over the pommel of his great sword which he had unsheathed before him. He saw the black ants that were Teo light horse spill over the hill, bypassing the far edge of Kastel's rift that had stymied the church knights. Angelo felt the faint tingling of magic in the air. A spell being cast. Mist formed on the narrow strip of land between rent earth and steep mountain slope and from it sprang forth creatures of ice. A fair sized coiled reptile that hissed frozen vapor. The horses balked, wanting nothing of such a creature.

Angelo smiled slightly and chanted the words of a spell of his own. He extended his staff and from its tip spewed fire. Sinakha had to catch the reins of their own horses, who spooked at the sudden heat and light that occupied the hill top with them. The Hellhound spell left his staff, as if it had been shot from a cannon and rocketed towards the ice creature. It hit with a combustive boom of sound. The reptile screeched. Steam wafted skyward. Ice cracked and melted, dissolving into harmless water.

The Winter King wheeled his horse, searching for the originator of that spell both physically and magically. Angelo felt the whisper of the seeking and repelled it. He was a master of shadows and nothing earthborn or spawned of hell could pierce the vale if he chose for it not to. He imagined even Teo was wondering where that strike had come from. He would look to his priests, who were Angelo's minions and whom the Prophet would feed power to if need be to protect the secret of his own strength.

* * *

There were enough infantrymen to lay siege to any city in the south slogging their way through the muddied foothills of the western mountains. Gerad passed without them ever being aware of his presence. Kheron swung further north, not as interested in spying out the numbers of possible enemies as making swift time without being delayed by inconsequential foot soldiers when the core of Teo forces had clearly hurried west. She was not one for subterfuge. When she had a goal she was single minded in its pursuit.

And that goal at the moment was getting ahead of Teo, even if they hadn't a clue what path he followed. Gerad would have preferred to slink along in the army's wake

and let Teo do the detective work, then reap the benefits. Kheron wouldn't hear of it. Which made Gerad remember why he had always preferred to work alone. Knights, lords and wizards were always so damned pretentious.

He felt the working of a magic great enough to prick even his dull arcane senses. Something had started. Something had definitely begun. The mountains loomed ahead, green sloped, mist covered giants. The ground underfoot was trodden and torn, passed over by many a horse. They passed another rise and a large group of horsemen appeared to the north. Kheron and her men. Gerad waved for his own to continue on and veered off to intersect her passage. She didn't slow. Her face under her helm was tense and focused.

"Did you feel that?" he asked.

"Kastel," she replied.

He blinked in surprise.

"Already? Damn, but he made good time."

"There's another power there. I can't pin it down or recognize it."

"The Calvary left the infantry far behind. We'll ride right up their rear end."

"Good. Let them feel my wraith."

"My men do better slipping in unnoticed from the sides."

"Assassins generally do."

He didn't comment on that. He split from her, figuring that while she hit hard and fast from the rear, he and his would slip around the sides and pierce the center. There were too many of them to take by sheer force alone, which meant he had to get at the heart of the matter.

Another rise and the unsuspecting back of an army was revealed. Gerad and his nightwalkers scattered in either direction, blending in unnoticed with horsemen who had other targets in their sights. Fire flared a quarter mile ahead, past five hundred armed riders, a dozen banners waving in the breeze and what seemed a giant trough cut through the very earth at the center of the valley that lay between hill and mountain slope. Perhaps he had another goal.

* * *

Kastel's men were down slope and at his back against his will. Foolish, foolish men to think that their piddling numbers would make a difference if his magic could not. Kastel was spooked by the spell that had so efficiently destroyed his ice creature. Not so much by the magic itself as from the way the source of it seemed non-existent. Any powerful enough wizard had a flavor to his magic. A unique and personal scent of a sort that was easy enough to identify if one had sensed it before. With this spell there had been nothing. No spoor, no trail of power to lead back to the caster. No hint that it had not come straight out of the heavens on a whim of whatever gods looked down upon this field.

He drew his sword from its saddle scabbard and felt the power of the thing pulse in his hands. He let them come, bunched in the bottle neck made of mountain and rift. There were shields protecting them. Shields of a holy sort that he could trace back to a cluster of sources in the midst of the mass of riders, further up the hill.

Lord of the cold depths. From the heart of darkest glacier . . .

A faint mantra to stir the already hungry soul that resided within the Ice Saber. He sliced the blade horizontally through the air and the front ranks disintegrated, blown backwards by a force that ripped the armor from their bodies and the skin and flesh from their bones. Their shields were nothing compared to the force of the Ice Saber. And over the bodies of the dead, the second rank spilled, faces dark and murderous under their helms at the havoc done to their comrades.

He struck again, slicing back the other way, standing with the blade extended while its destructive fury ate at the bodies of mortal man. There was an answering boom of power from across the hill to the east. A flare of light that momentarily made the dull gray of the day bright. He turned his head that way and sensed a hint of familiarity.

* * *

The Stormbringer lived up to her repute. The crack of lightening that skimmed across the rear line of Teo's army was followed by a deafening boom of thunder. The ground shook at the resonance of it. Men across the field cried out in shock, most of

them unawares that they were suddenly beset on two sides by wizardly powers.

Angelo knew. He whispered a blasphemy under his breath that he hadn't used in - - well, since Dante's escape - - but not for several lifetimes before that. The priests were towards the rear, he felt their fear and panic as a wave of destructive energy washed towards them. Then Teo, who commanded from a vantage closer to them than to the low point of the valley, threw up a shield that protected them. He rode out, despite his general's protests to face the Stormbringer. Fool. Angelo thought. He didn't have the strength of Rab-Ker's clerics to back him and Angelo himself was busy with other things. If the Lady Kheron overwhelmed him, it would be entirely on his own head.

The Prophet turned his attention back to Kastel, who had managed to gain an advantage with the restricted passage the Calvary had to get at him, and the power of his Great Sword augmenting his own magic. The longer he held them off, the more chance of that nelai're bitch wrecking havoc from the rear and the two of them combining forces to wipe out all of Angelo's carefully laid plans. He stalked a few yards down the grassy slope, looked up at the black clouds that drifted over the valley. It was time for a miracle, he thought. A sign from the High God that he smiled upon their venture. It was time for the Hand of God to strike down the unclean.

De voy, Lachesis, Tandum and Rovh. Powers that troll the gate ways between, hear my call and heed my summoning. Cleave the sacrifice of blood on blood and honor our pact. I call you to my bidding. Hand of God, strike my enemies.

He threw out his arms, his body suddenly spasming as power surged through it. Foreign energies that twined and merged with the layers and layers of stolen magics that he had collected throughout the centuries. His mouth opened and ghostly shapes streamed out of it, coiling towards the clouds. His eyes glowed bright white in their sockets. Behind him, Sinakha crouched, turning his head from the spectacle.

High above, the churning dark storm clouds parted and a light as white as sun off of new fallen snow shone through.

* * *

"Kheron." Kastel almost laughed the relief was so tangible. He felt the ebb and

flow of her power unseen across the hill. He saw and heard the tell tale signs of it. His spirits rose at the much needed aid. Even the afternoon seemed brighter for it. A ray of light shone down upon the valley. He spared a glance skywards at parted clouds and shimmering sunlight. Light so bright it hurt the eyes to look upon that seemed to pulse behind the clouds. The air turned still and static. He felt it a moment before it hit. Put up desperate shields as it came crashing down. Heat and light and energy, so concentrated it pierced his strongest shield. Blasted into body and mind and sent him spinning into pain and numbness. He was burning and he was not cognizant to stop it. The shields faltered and went down and the light engulfed everything.

He curled into a knot and tried to block it out. Tried to force awareness back into a light and power shocked brain. He thought the power might have ripped the world apart, but he vaguely heard the cries of men not far from him, the screams of blinded horses. Concentrated on him then. So finely crafted a spell, so very very delicate in what it destroyed. Dante couldn't have done better, at least not without taking out half the landscape with the effort. Kastel was somewhat amazed that he was alive to contemplate the workings of the spell that had downed him. He blinked his eyes, and past the spots found himself face to face with the great brown equine eyes of his horse, its head level with his in the dirt. Blood ran down the aquiline nose and no breath stirred the soft nostrils.

He felt sick. His vision swam. What he with magic to sustain him had survived - - barely -- had killed his mount. He couldn't stand it, the light behind his eyes, the ringing in his ears and the inexplicable loss of a favored horse. He put an arm over his eyes and lay there, until the sound of swords clashing and men crying out in rage brought him back to harsh reality. He rose to an elbow and regretted it, head spinning dizzily. An unhorsed knight ran up the hill towards him, sword drawn back, a battle cry on his lips. Kastel stared, not able to think of a single action or spell to counter the attack.

The sword swung down at his head and another crossed paths with it, striking sparks. The second sword slid under the first with the speed and grace of a striking snake and sliced open the knight's belly, heedless of armor protecting it. No usual sword then.

Gerad squinted down at him, a shadowed silhouette in his light splotched vision.

"You might want to get up and lend a hand."

Kastel blinked. Gerad reached down and hauled him up. Steadied him with one hand when he swayed, vaguely disoriented.

“Where’s my sword?” He looked at his hands as if he expected it to appear in them. Gerad pointed to the earth some few feet away, where the Ice Saber stuck, point down, then the Lord of the Divhar met another charge, this one horse based and had no more time to waste while Kastel’s reclaimed control of his senses.

Twenty-five

Mother let him writhe in resentment for he knew not how long. He was helpless in the scope of her grasp, with no more notion of how to free himself from this place - - in his own mind? - - in a place aside from the physical world of *Mother*’s making? - - than he had of freeing himself from the wards Angelo had put on him. He screamed in frustration, railed in his rage at the unjustness of it all. To be in such a position. To be so helpless was a shame that ate at the core of his being.

Angelo did this to him. Father Angelino. The oh, so benevolent snake who wore the robes of a priest and the smile of a missionary out to save the world. He wanted Angelo dead so bad the need for revenge pounded a crescendo behind his eyes. He needed to place blame and take a toll for the indignity done him to soothe his own bruised ego. And he could not do it with these damned wards on his wrists.

He clawed at them - - so close to freedom and stymied by yet one more being that wished to bend him to its will. He bent to no man’s will or creature’s or world’s. He cried that anthem out to the eather at large and nothing responded. The silence left him feeling petulant and childish.

“Ask for something else!” he demanded. “Gods damn you, ask for something else, you bitch.”

There is nothing else of you that I need. There, the pulsing beat of *Mother*’s response inside his head. So reasonable. So patient. He frothed in his rage and *Mother* ignored him.

He drifted, wondering how long *Mother* would keep him here. Till he agreed? Till

she tired of him - - did the whole of the earth tire of anything? - - and would she then cast him out. And if she did, would she ever respond again? What if there were no other way? What if he lost this chance and no other came around. Would he play out the rest of his life powerless, having to flee Angelo's grasp - - looking to others for succor?

Oh, God, god, god. He'd rather die. He clutched at his hair in misery, squeezing his eyes shut and seeing the exact same thing he had when they had been open.

He is there.

Dante moved his head at that commentary. Stubbornness vying with curiosity in the battle of whether to respond to her observation or not. Curiosity won out. *Mother* could wait forever.

Your enemy. And that was all she chose to say, even though he demanded she speak more. Oh, clever, clever *Mother*, to bait him so. He strangled on his fury, fingers clutching at the gray bands at his wrists. Rage tears streamed down his cheeks, into his mouth and they tasted like blood.

"All right!" he cried at her. "I agree."

Firstborn.

"I remember the deal." A hundred things crossed his mind. Ways to renege, paths of betrayal of a bargain made with something not quite corporeal.

The vow will be honored. The thought pounded in his head like a fist. *The path has been chosen. Follow it.*

Darkness engulfed him and shock that raced through his veins like molten fire. Something deep in his mind's eye sparked and crackled. His body arched, his fingers grasping at nothing. Sensation filled him like wine in a ready cup. He cried out - -

- - and came up gasping from the center of the pool, flinging water as he whirled looking for any sign of the doorway he had been thrust through. Wet hair clung to his face and neck. His clothing clung to his body, a cold, clammy weight. He was in water up to his chest and his boots sunk into a mucky bottom. There was no light, no doorway, no sense of power so great as to fuel the life energy of all the world.

He pushed hair out of his face, and there were bits of water grass and debris clinging to his arm. He shook his hand to rid it and stared at the unblemished skin of his wrist. No metal band adorned it. No scars from his own frantic attempts at removal of the

wards. He turned his hand, not daring to breathe in fear his vision might clear and the bands would still be there, mocking him. He brought his other hand up and it too was naked of restraint. He laughed. A low, amazed sound that did not even sound like his own. He clenched his fists and laughed louder.

He cried out in inarticulate glee, willing the strands of a spell, and burst out of the water into the air, hovering with his arms strewn wide, water streaming off him back into the pool while he gloried in the sensation of magic streaming through his body, his soul. He did not even need to utter the words of a spell to dry himself. To rid himself of the ragged, travel worn clothing he had been forced to don and create attire more worthy of this most satisfactory occasion. He stayed with black, that being an intrinsic part of his mood at the moment, but most glorious black. Leather and shimmering silver of a most fashionable cut. A sweeping black cloak with silver inlaid dragons sprawled across its surface. Matching dragons on the backs of his gloves and silver and gem encrusted inlays in the black metal of his armored shoulder pads.

A movement at the side of the pool caught his eye. Sera stretched and yawned, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her fists. His breath caught in his throat and for a moment the rapture of freedom sat like a leaden weight at the pit of his stomach. He landed on the little sandy strip of beach and stared, no words coming to mind to greet her with after what he had promised of the both of them to gain his freedom.

She would never understand. Never. It was not in her to make such a sacrifice. She would hate him with all of her soul for making it for her. And he, for all the power he had gained back, could not summon the courage to tell her of it. Better she never knew. Better he avoided paying the price of the bargain in a way that *Mother* could not contest.

“Dante?” she said sleepily. “You’re all bright.”

He looked away from her, clenching his jaw. The pool sat like a silent, black trap no more than a few feet away. Damn *Mother* to hell. He spoke a word, an archaic, demonic key that brought power to his fingertips. He slashed an arm violently down at the pool. It was like a giant invisible hammer had crashed down upon it. Water exploded outwards, the earth that formed the cradle for it split and crumbled and all that was left of it was a devastated muddy pit, that a small trickle of water struggled to leak back into.

Sera squealed and flinched back, staring at the ravaged pool, then back to him with wide, astonished eyes.

“Your power?” she cried, struggling to her feet. “You got it back. How?” She ran to him, grabbing for one of his wrists, pulling it up to examine it, then staring bright eyed, up at him. She stepped forward to throw her arms about him and he caught her arms, stopping her, stepping back from her as if he feared she might contaminate him. She would, with her infectious smile, her soft, sweet body, her very presence.

“You led me here. Don’t you remember?” he asked, when she looked at him with uncertain, wary eyes. She shook her head.

“No. I can’t recall. I remember riding and riding and - - things get blurry after that. We found *Mother*. I told you she existed. You have no faith. She freed you.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you do that?” She waved a hand at the destruction he had wrought. He glanced that way, shadowing his eyes with lowered lashes. Wishing there were something more concrete he might take his wraith out upon.

“Are you okay?” She was catching on to his mood.

“Of course. I’ve got my power back.”

“What - - what was *Mother* like?”

“Like nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

She opened her mouth, hurt at that sharp retort and he steeled himself against the look. Some hurts were easier to take than others. Something rumbled faintly from far away. They both looked eastward. There was power in the air. A great amount of power had just been discharged. He could feel it now, where before he had been too preoccupied to notice. Spells, and a great many of them, were being cast not too far away. Mother had said “your enemy is there.”

Had Angelo been this close on his heels? And the other castings. He thought he caught the flavor of Kheron. She had come looking for him then. Good girl.

“What is it?” Sera asked softly.

“Sounds like a little war going on. I think I’ll join in.”

He caught her about the waist and took to the air, bursting through the treetops like an avenging angel out of the mists. It was fast going, as the raven flew, as opposed to

wending one's way up treacherous hard to find mountain passes.

He shielded them from the wind for Sera's sake, though he would have preferred to feel its bite against his face and its fingers in his hair. She clung to him, burying her face against his shoulder and all he could think when he looked at her was *Firstborn*, *Firstborn*, *Firstborn*.

So he stopped looking at her. Tried to imagine she wasn't a solid weight at all in his arms. Then his attention was gratefully drawn elsewhere, for when he passed the tree-lined top of the last mountain before the western range tuned into hilly plain land, a war was spread out before his eyes. A thousand men dotted the valley between hill and mountain. And from his vantage of high, he could see a line of more troops approaching from the east. A flare of explosion erupted from the eastern line. He felt the surge of a Tempestas spell. One knew then where Kheron was in all this.

He plummeted to the high slope of the mountain, where the pine trees stopped and a rocky grade began.

"Stay," he told Sera. Letting her down. His own feet never touched ground. She stared up at him when he left her, but he refused to look back. *Firstborn*. *Firstborn*. *Firstborn*.

He sailed over the fringes of the battle, and cried out; *Zerak'veharo!*

Energy ripped out of his hands and tore a path through men and horses. There were cries from below. Men looked up, tiny, white faces. He came down among them, cape flaring about his body, hair floating like a living thing as the energy crackled around him. He called up another strike of power and slashed his arm carelessly in a semi-circle about him and cleared a path for himself. He cared nothing for these men. They were insects, pawns in a greater game. Angelo would not be among them. Angelo would be secreted somewhere that he might spin his web of destruction without giving up his true nature.

A great fist of fire fell out of the sky upon him. He looked up at it and let it fall, put a hand up at the last moment and created a buffer that diverted the flame, channeling it out into the field and the men there. Screams began. Dante ignored them, concentrating on the path that spell had come from. It evaporated as quickly as it had come and he cursed. Tricky, tricky, Angelo to hide so well from him. Wait for another attack. Let it come and trace its origin while it was in the midst of being delivered. He would find the

Prophet.

A knight on a warhorse charged at him. He tilted his head and waited, staring into the eyes behind the visor. The lance faltered, the man suddenly had another goal that seemed more significant and veered his horse roughly away. He cut a swath through the field and any that dared his path died. Power gathered, aimed at him. Not a spell he recognized. He didn't care. The spell wasn't important, it was the direction it came from.

From the south. It came, a shrieking fist of destructive power, and he was too preoccupied tracing its lineage to bother with shields. There, a silvery elusive scent that lead to a fading familiar aura. The spell hit like a comet bent on singular destruction. He knew pain and the shock of impact and finally put strength into the protection of his body. Regrowth, regrowth, regrowth, he had to focus everything into that goal as his body was battered and broken and thrown back a hundred feet into a cluster of horsemen. The residue spell ate at them, melting armor and flesh.

It took more concentration than he might have thought to shake the effects of that spell. His bones ached from it despite a frantic series of healings. Impressive, nasty little spell. If it had caught him a little less powered up, it might have done more damage. As it was, his adrenaline level was at a frightening high, months of pent up power hammering to be released.

At the last moment before it had hit, he had targeted where it had come from. A hill to the south was where the prophet watched. Let the Prophet watch his own death then, for Dante was on the way to deliver it.

* * *

Of the many bodies that the Prophet had taken over the years, some had been vastly powerful, some only marginally so, some unique and taken to gain some skill or power he coveted.

The slyph had been an odious, repulsive host, but Angelo had desired the one true skill that was a slyph's and a slyph's alone. They were one of those misbegotten half breed creatures that had come about after the destruction of the old world, partly human

and partly something else entirely. They were things to be burned with prayers chanted about the pyre as their unwholesome flesh crisped and charred, sending its soulless body up in ashes, but for several weeks, Angelo had existed within the tainted shell, because of all the creatures great and small that lived within the world, only a slyph could open doorways to other places. Not a great deal of other places, they were not so powerful as that, but to one place, one safe haven; their burrow. Home. Being creatures timid of nature and prone to be hunted that escape route was all that had kept the species from going the route of extinction within the first century of the new world. By the third they were all gone. And only Angelo possessed the talent to open a doorway to his 'burrow'. His chosen sanctuary.

He didn't use it often. He had not the need to. But his plans were falling about him in disarray. The Dark Brethren had appeared when they shouldn't have. The Winter King had taken up more of his energy than he would have thought possible and now - - now the greatest disaster of all had taken two of his strongest spells in stride and still stalked through the battlefield, as if the men on it were no more than ghosts, towards *him*.

Dante should not have been free. Should have been powerless and yet very clearly he was not. Very clearly he was bursting to overflowing with magic. It shimmered about him in a fashion that made Angelo, in his presently weakened state, distinctly nervous. Sinakha moved to stand a few feet down the hill before him in a protective stance. As if Sinakha's sword and his dubious arcane powers would make a difference against The Silver Mage.

Teo's army was in disarray. Even with the approach of the infantry, what chance had they against Dante and his minions? What chance indeed. He had to have time to think.

* * *

Kastel blocked a blow with the Ice Saber. That blade did not usually see combat of this nature. It usually cleared the field before conflict ever got this close to its master. It was as gleeful at this violence as it was with any other. It thrummed in his hands. Another blow parried, the warrior that was intent on hacking him to bits, wildly beating

at his defenses. From somewhere nearby he heard the hollow echo of power as Gerad used the his own arcane weapon. From the corner of his eye, a line of men were cut down. His own attacker hesitated, looking that way and Kastel slipped under his guard and sliced through the armor at his thighs with the Ice Saber.

Not a killing blow with any normal blade, but all it took with the Ice Saber was the taste of flesh and it sat its icy grip upon a body. Not a pleasant experience, Kastel knew from first hand experience and one that no normal man could survive. The knight opened his mouth in shock even as the ice spread up his body, invading flesh and bone and organs. He was stiff as a rail before he toppled backwards into the mud.

There was a flare of explosion to the east. A *Tempestas* spell. Kheron 's work. He was trying to summon the strength for a spell of his own when another strike hit the center of the field of battle. A high power energy blast that had seemed to come from above. Not Kheron. Not her flavor, though very close. He looked up, scanning the sky for the source. Then stopped dead, the sword tip drooping to the ground. He caught of glimpse black and silver, pale hair streaming about dark cloak, then a armored warhorse plowed into him from behind and he went down, steel shod hooves pummeling the earth around him. A spear tip came at his face. He cried out the first spell that came to mind and horse and rider literally exploded overtop him. Blood and flesh rained down upon him. He ignored it, scrambling to his feet, slipping in mud and blood and other grisly things. He scanned the sky but the apparition was gone. But the power still sang.

* * *

From her vantage, Sera could see everything. The battle was a visage of horror, as any battle was. But this one was worse, for she recognized standards that fluttered on the field. She knew the combatants. And she knew the wizardly powers that cut through them. It was nightmare. Purest nightmare. And he left her here to observe it all, while he went down to deal his own brand of destruction.

She knew exactly where he was. There was a path of devastation around him. She saw when the first fire attack hit him and saw him repel it and watched dozens of men burn for the effort. She was looking for a way down the slope when the second spell

came. She cried out in fear when it seemed to engulf him, but he seemed to come out of it unharmed. And then he was moving southward, cutting through the army as easily as he might wade through water. Something was south that he wanted and she thought she might know what it was. She began slipping and sliding down the rocky slope, crab walking to the south as best she could.

Somehow she had to stop this carnage.

* * *

Dante saw the silhouettes of two figures on the hilltop. He narrowed his eyes and took to the air. Angelo stood waiting for him, leaning on his staff, face composed and peaceful. His guard captain, Sinakha stood before him, sword held at ready. Dante sat foot on the ground and lifted a brow at the threat.

“Shall I kill him slow or fast?” he inquired, low purr of a voice.

“Not at all,” Angelo replied. “I see the spawn of hell has managed to escape the bonds of righteousness.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do I dare ask how?”

“The devil did it. I thought that was a given, as far as you were concerned.”

“And where is my lovely fiancée?”

“Think about her when you die. It’s all you’ll ever see of her.”

“I suppose she is - - tainted now. You do have a reputation.”

Dante snarled. He whipped out a hand. A pulse of energy knocked Sinakha off his feet and tumbled him back to land at the Prophet’s staff. It should have cut him in half, but it had only dazed him, which meant he was either shielding himself or Angelo was doing it.

“Do you know what your downfall will be?” Angelo asked.

“Oh, please tell me.”

“Your predictability. In your rages, in your vengeance’s, in your reactions.”

“Am I? Predict this.” He closed his fists and gathered power about him. The grass, wet as it was smoldered around him. He chanted the words of a spell. Angelo’s eyes

widened.

“Oh, no. Not that,” the Prophet said, just before he smirked and a slice of light appeared behind his back, like a zipper opening on a very bright room. Angelo stepped back and Sinakha tumbled back with him and the zipper zipped closed. There was nothing of it or the prophet and his body guard left behind.

Dante stared for a moment in astonished fury, the power crackling at his fingertips, the spell crying to be released. “Angelino,” he cried. “Goddamned you, come back.”

No one complied with his demand. A bit of rain began to fall. He screamed incoherently and whirled, extending his hands towards the battlefield. The energies of the a massive Hellfire spell sizzled forth. It barreled down the hill and cut a swath of destruction through the center of the army. He took a breath and summoned the power for another spell, wanting to see the whole of the field smoldering, lifeless bodies.

“No,” came a desperate cry as he verged on the release. Sera stumbled up the hill, out of breath and staggering, holding her side as pain stitched it from her run. “Don’t do it. Please, don’t do it.”

“Get out of the way,” he snarled as she fell to her knees on the slope below him. His rage at his enemies escape was too great for even her to pierce it.

“Please, Dante. Please. He lied to them, too. Don’t you understand? He lied to them, too! They’re honest men. Good men. They’re my kinsmen and countrymen. I’ve friends down there.”

“You have no country anymore, remember. You ran away from it. You think any of them will welcome you back?” Cruelty came to him, second nature.

“I don’t care,” she cried up at him. “Just because they turn their backs on me or disagree with me doesn’t mean I want them dead. He *lied* to them, too.” He aimed above her head. She climbed to her feet and stumbled towards him, caught his hands and pressed them to her breast, as though she wanted to take the burst of energy herself if it saved the lives of a thousand faceless men, most of whom she probably didn’t even know. And she would too, give her life to save others. Too damned conscionable for her own good. What would she give up to save a child of her body.

Firstborn. He took a sudden step back from her, ripping his hands from her grip. He couldn’t stand to face her. To see the look of pleading in her eyes and know how

quickly it would turn to deepest hate. Why not kill the lot of her countrymen and have her hate him for that? At least she might be able to come to terms with his reasoning for that crime. At least her rancor would be for a thing he did to someone else and not to her.

He brushed past her, not meeting her eyes. Took two steps then he went airborne. This would end. One way or another, this would end now.

Twenty-Six

Over a field of countless corpses, bodies mangled by magic, two armies waited. One was not much of an army. Less than a hundred nightwalker. Perhaps forty knights, both Kheron's and Kastel's combined and a handful of the most powerful wizards to grace the earth.

Kastel hadn't seen him come down from the hill. He'd seen the Hellfire spell rip apart the central corridor of Teo's army and felt the fringes of the blast himself, but there had been chaos after that. He'd been swept up in a confusion of retreat and attack so vast that he hadn't been able to extract himself fully from it until Teo's men were half way up the hill, being hit as they ran from one side by Kheron and her men and from the other by a series of spells that Kastel was absolutely certain belonged to Dante.

Somehow they had regrouped; their small, rag tag force, and Kastel found himself prowling the edge of the battlefield, where he and his men had made their stand for sign of the eight men of his that were missing. He wouldn't have done it if his army had numbered in the thousands, even in hundreds. He would have taken on the role as lord general and put the little inconveniences such as the loss of a few men behind him, left it to others to sort out.

Somehow, when the eight missing had been the greater part of his troops and had stood by him against tremendous odds, it was different. He thought he was getting soft. And what a wonderful time for it, if Dante had returned to the world. He would never hear the end of it.

Or perhaps he was afraid to go back to the camp they had made because he didn't want to see what death had done to Dante this time. He did not want to look into those

piercing silver eyes and see something altogether different from what he had known.

But of course, he had to. There was no putting it off. Across the field the black swell of Teo's men had settled mostly on the opposite side of the hill, but the vanguard stood watch on the crest. He watched them for a moment in the rapidly falling dusk, muddy cloak blowing about his legs. He was dirty and his side hurt where the horse had rammed him. He hadn't the energy to emend either.

They had set up three small tents, mostly for the wounded. They were all Kheron had been able to save from her baggage. There were two fires, around which clustered the survivors. He slipped in around the edges, saw Sera with her knees pulled up to her chest, sitting in the crevice between two rocks, but she didn't notice him, her attention fixed across the fire where Dante sat with Kheron clutching his arm as if she never planned to let him go. Gerad sat on Kheron's other side, nursing a canteen. He saw Kastel first and lifted the container.

"Kastel, where've you been?"

Attention was fixed on him of a sudden. A dozen sets of eyes turned his way, but Dante's were the ones that snared him like a rabbit. He met those eyes and stared, wishing that he had summoned the energy to get rid of the dirt and mud, instead of wondering into camp like a derelict.

"Looking for dead," Kastel said quietly, a little too flustered to utter anything but the truth.

"There's a field of them out there." Dante waved an arm, the one Kheron wasn't clinging to, toward the battlefield. "You didn't manage to overlook them, did you? You look like hell, Kastel."

He should have managed the spell. He wouldn't do it now out of pride. Dante was acting as if he'd never been gone. One might as well go along with the ploy, if one wished not to be pierced with Dante's wit. He walked around the fire to stand behind Gerad.

"They've scouts on the hill."

"I know. My men are out there watching," Gerad assured him.

"Let them come. I dare them to come," Dante said.

"They'll die for it," Kheron echoed, as ever his staunch supporter in whatever

gambit he employed.

“Sit down, Kastel, before you fall down,” Dante suggested, motioning the man nearest him to make room and patting the earth as he might do if he called for a dog to lay at his feet. Kastel ground his teeth and sat down beside Gerad. Dante shrugged and he thought he saw a slight smile of satisfaction cross Kheron’s lips. Wasn’t she the purring feline, back in Dante’s arms. He looked across the fire at Sera, but her face was half hidden in arms folded across her knees.

“So where did he go, do you know?” Gerad asked, taking up a conversation that had been going on before Kastel’s arrival.

“I’ve no notion. I don’t know exactly how he did it, but I would dearly love to.”

“With him gone, Teo may give up and go away,” Gerad theorized.

“It doesn’t matter one way or another. I’ve a few scores to settle with Teo, too.”

“With his infantry arrived, he’s got a pretty capable force out there.”

“I thought,” Kheron said. “That I told you to bring your army, Kastel.”

The snide superiority of her tone made his hackles rise. He leaned a little forward to fix her with his icy glare. “And where is yours? Scattered to the winds while you pined away?”

She bristled, glaring back under her dark fringe of bangs. Her mouth twitched, assuring him that he’d hit home. Dante laughed, amused at their bickering. Oh, he had always played them against each other to his own benefit and amusement. Kastel was very much aware of that now, even if Kheron refused to see it.

“So,” Dante said, drawing Kheron back against him. “Not even a ‘glad you’re alive? Happy to see you again?’”

Kastel looked down, grateful for the shadows of dusk. He had lost a glove somewhere and he absently rubbed at a spot of dirt on his hand.

“I am,” he admitted. “Do us all a favor and don’t die again.”

Dante thought that was dreadfully amusing. He laughed and let his hand slide down under Kheron’s cloak. As Kastel watched, from under his lashes, he noticed Dante’s gaze kept flickering back to Sera, as if he wanted to make certain she saw what he was doing. She was so huddled and miserable looking that it was hard to guess what she caught and what she didn’t.

The talk went on into the night. Gerad announced he would personally slink out into the darkness and see what mischief the southern army might be up to. Men made beds on the rocky ground, armored and armed in case they need rise quickly. Dante led Kheron into her tent and the flap closed behind them. Kastel searched the fire lit darkness for Sera, but she was gone.

* * *

She didn't understand. The pain balled in her chest like a fist trying to squeeze her heart to a pulp, it pulled the breath from her stomach and left her gasping. Nausea rose till she tasted it in the back of her throat. She couldn't understand it. Him. There had been a change - - when he had come out of that pool with power intact - - there had been a change. She had seen it in his eyes, in the way he pushed her away. What had changed, save that he had regained his power? Save that he was more now than he had been. What had she been, then, but a trusting fool, who believed him when he promised not to hurt her. When he said he loved her. But, had he said that? He had called her endearing things, called her *his love*, but had the words 'I love you', ever left his lips? She couldn't remember now.

She didn't understand. He had not uttered a word to her since the hilltop. She had followed him down, when the army had been pulling back, determined to try and stop further slaughter, but there had been little. The men were too busy trying to disengage. There was confusion, but not the blood and guts type. Evening had been falling. Where had the day gone? Has she slept through it?

She had tread between the bodies of men and horses. Broken blades littered the field, protruding from mud and soggy earth. She had stared at the twisted, burned faces, though she thought it better not to, searching for familiar features. Searching morbidly for men she had known.

There had been a regrouping of men on this side of the field. So few men that had held off an army and that by the grace of magic only. She wondered who they were until an armored form swung down off a limping warhorse and ran towards Dante. Kheron, who had flung her helmet aside, dark, chin length hair and crashed into his arms, armor

and all. And he had held her, as he might any long lost friend - - and, one hated to bring up the image - - lover. It didn't occur to her that she was being purposefully snubbed until later. Until he ignored her when she tried to get a private word, turning his shoulder to her and walking away to confer with the Stormbringer. Bending down to whisper something intimately in her ear while Sera looked on. Pulling her close for a fondle in front of everyone as if he were showing off the fact that he could.

There had been a time when Sera would have simmered or gotten angry or merely cursed him for being callous and thoughtless under her breath, but that had been before. Before they had shared - - themselves. Before she had realized what it was to give her body as well as her heart and truly be a woman.

Now, she couldn't rage or curse, because the pain choked her too much to do anything but hurt. And when he took Kheron into that tent, his arm about her waist, her hands caressing his arm and cast one look over his shoulder, eyes flickering for one quick moment on her, before he turned away - - then she wanted to die.

Blindly, she walked away from the fires and the hum of low noise from the camp. Out onto the battlefield among the dead. There was a great rift out along the center of the valley floor with dirt and rock piled jaggedly at its lip. She trailed along its edge, stumbling over uneven dirt.

"What are you doing out here in the dark?"

She kept walking in misery, not wanting company or witness to her wretchedness.

"Nothing. Leave me alone, Kastel."

A witchlight hovered into life behind her, showing her the tortured ground. A body lay inches from her feet, and a broken sword edge lay jutting from dead fingers.

"It is not safe for you to walk this field at night."

"Is it during the day?" she asked sharply. "Then I can see the faces of all the friends who lay dead here. Which is worse?"

"Go back to camp, Sera. We don't know what Teo plans? He could have archers on the prowl."

"Why are you here, then?"

He didn't answer that right away and she turned her head slightly to see where he stood behind her. The faint witch light, hovering low to the ground cast shadows over his

eyes. She could not see his expression.

“I came to find you.”

She laughed, on the verge of tears. “I’m fine. Just fine. I’ve survived this far, haven’t I? What does a field of dead have to threaten me?” She looked down at the dead man at her feet. His face was twisted in pain and fear, his eyes staring blankly up at her. A young man, who had died before his time. They all had. Because of sorcerous greed and plots. Everything was a power play to wizards. Even the good ones like her father all had agendas of one sort or another. They convinced themselves that somehow, for some reason it was okay to use and hurt people.

Her stomach rebelled. Tears welled in her eyes at this one more indignity. She wiped a hand at her cheeks furiously, but the wetness wouldn’t stop. Kastel was staring at her, aghast and she waved a hand weakly at the corpse.

“There are so many dead. Good men of Alsansir. And for what? How can the goddess let something like this happen?”

“The same as they let anything happen,” he said quietly. “The little things aren’t important.”

“The little things?” She sobbed and hiccupped and bile rose with it. She gagged at the taste and that was all it took to have her stomach attempt to heave the rest of its contents up her throat. She spasmed, and doubled over, dropping to her knees, gagging up what little she had eaten during the day. She felt Kastel hovering behind her, not knowing what to do to help her. She didn’t know what to do herself. She hated the sickness and the dizziness that came with it. She had thought it was all due to the effects of the acorn drawing her to Mother, but it still persisted. Work a healing, she thought, distracted in her affliction. Find the flu that ailed her and banish it.

She concentrated her will to summon a healing, focused it on her pain and discomfort and felt of a sudden a spark of luminescence living within her. A tiny speck of life that was not her own, that coiled, mindless and sleeping at the core of her being. She cried out, banished the healing and started backwards so violently she staggered into Kastel. He caught her before she could fall and frantically she ripped away from him, wanting escape from the enormity of what she had perceived.

“Let me go,” she wailed, when his fingers gripped her arms and refused to let her

go. She twisted, beating at his chest, kicking at his legs in desperation to flee. Flight was all she could think of. Flight away from everything here.

“What’s wrong? Sera, what’s wrong with you?” He half shook her, his eyes wide and his face shocked at her mania.

“How could he?” she cried. “How could he - - and then - - then treat me like this? I hate him!! I hate him so much!!” She gave up the fight and collapsed against him, surprising him further. He didn’t know whether to set her away from him or comfort her.

“Oh. Dante,” he said, as if that explained all. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” she cried. “You’re not preg - - he didn’t lie to you. I trusted him. I thought - - it would be different. I’m such a fool.” She clutched at his cloak and sobbed. “I don’t know what I did? If he had only told me what I’d done. I don’t understand. He was so cold. He wouldn’t talk to me. What did I do wrong, Kastel?”

“Sometimes he doesn’t think, Sera. Sometimes the only thing that matters is what he wants at the time. He wouldn’t hurt you on purpose.”

“He knows exactly what he’s doing. Don’t even try to lie to me about that. Don’t defend him.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes you are. You always do. You all do and he doesn’t deserve it. He’s arrogant and cold and I wish - - I wish he’d never gotten his powers back.”

She pushed away from him, disoriented and dazed, and he let her go. She started to hurry away, wanting distance, wanting darkness and solitude where she could pull her thoughts together.

“Sera.” Kastel called after her. “What you said? Are you pregnant?”

She froze, breath catching in her throat, heat beating thunderously in her chest. No, no. It could not get out. She would not let *Him* know of it and suddenly turn solicitous again, treating her like a broodmare while he romped with Kheron. She turned back to face Kastel, her eyes huge and pleading.

“Don’t tell him. Promise me you won’t tell him, Kastel.”

He opened his mouth, the beginnings of an argument at the edge of his breath. She cut him off, desperately. “It’s not yours to tell. He lost right to know when he treated me so in front of everyone. If this is the way he wants things, then so be it. Its not like a

baby would make any difference in what he did. It's not like he would care."

"Sera, you can't keep it from him. It's bound to show sooner or later."

"I'll have thought it through then. I can't if he's hounding me. Just give me time to think. Swear to me you won't tell him. Please."

He looked away, torn, took a great breath and inclined his head. "You have my word."

She sighed, could not gather the will to smile and nodded at him instead.

* * *

In the morning, a knight rode out into the field with a flag of truce tied to his lance. He sat in the middle of the devastated plain until Dante came out of Kheron's tent and stood at the edge of their small encampment, staring at the lone progenitor of parlay. The morning breeze was blessedly free of rain or even the hint of it. He folded his arms, standing there thoughtfully, while the knight was forced to bide his time and wait for a reply.

"Send somebody out to see what he wants," he told Kheron, who had come to stand at his side. She signaled to one of her men, and that knight mounted up and trotted out into the field. They met and spoke briefly, then her knight came back, leaving the other man still waiting amidst the dead.

"King Teo wishes a parlay, my lady."

"Does he?" Dante pushed hair out of his eyes and grinned, even as Kheron frowned. "Well, by all means go tell his man that I wouldn't miss it for the world."

He spun around, laughing when the knight had ridden off to relay that message, finding Kastel, who had come to stand a few yards away, and fixing him with his silvery gaze.

"Kastel, you'll come and Kheron. Where's Gerad?"

"Skulking about the fringes of Teo's army, no doubt," Kheron supplied.

Dante shrugged. "Find him. Someone needs to keep an eye for our own camp just in case his majesty attempts to be creative. Oh, I do believe I will enjoy this."

"I don't trust him," Kheron said sullenly and Dante caught her about the waist and

swung her around, in fine spirits.

“Does it matter? He can’t best us and he knows it. All he can do is play at politics and pray to all his gods that I’m in a generous mood.”

“Are you?” Kastel asked coldly, remembering Sera’s anguished face from the night before. Disgusted that Dante could be so gleefully insouciant while actions of his wounded to the core a young woman Kastel had come to regard highly.

“I don’t know, it depends on how much he entertains me,” Dante said and clapped a hand down on Kastel’s shoulder. Kastel stepped out from the touch, looking elsewhere when Dante lifted a brow at the avoidance.

They armed and armored themselves, more a matter of ceremonial appearances than anything else. The three of them combined and with a night’s rest were a force to give the greatest of armies nightmares. The army parted for them, escorted by six knights in full regalia to the king’s pavilion. The faces of the men who watched from the ground as they rode by were somber and battle scarred. The eyes of men who had survived less from skill than from the good luck to be elsewhere when the spells had hit and well knew it.

They were let into the tent where guards stood at rigid attention. A table had been set up in the outer section, and chairs set around it. Teo sat behind it, a line of advisors behind him, generals on either side and the moral support of a trio of robed priests sternly fixing the demon spawn who walked among them with their righteous gazes.

Teo stood when they entered. Dante walked right in, breezing past guards and aides alike, looking about the tent as if he expected to see someone who was not in attendance.

“Isn’t someone missing?” he said without preamble or introduction. “Where’s the Voice of God? The puppeteer who pulls your strings, Teo? Not headed for the hills, is he?”

“Blasphemer,” one of the priests muttered and Teo waved a sharp hand to silence the complaints.

“It was assumed you had killed him,” Teo said levelly, meeting Dante’s eyes without flinching.

“If only I had been that lucky.”

“Liar,” the same priest hissed and Teo turned an angry dark glare the man’s way.

The other two priests patted the arm of the malcontent soothingly, whispering for their fellow to keep his tongue.

“Oh, believe me,” Dante purred. “If I had, I would be crying it out for the world to hear. He skipped on you, Teo. He wasn’t the man you thought him to be.”

“Sit down if you will,” Teo offered, trying to be reasonable. Trying to put them all at ease. He looked past Dante for the first time, at Kastel and Kheron. “Lady. Lord Kastel, please sit.”

Dante sniffed disdainfully and plopped down in the center chair, sprawling his legs out before him negligently. “So what exactly do you have to say, Teo? You tried like hell to get me and you failed. I owe you, Teo. For what happened in Alsansir. For your little pseudo trial.”

“There were crimes that needed to be paid for. Justice is blind, haven’t you heard that phrase? Kings, wizards or laymen can’t escape her reach.”

Dante burst out in laughter, seemingly genuinely amused by that notion. The generals behind Teo stirred uneasily at the disrespect. “Are you quite insane? Not that I have to explain myself, but I feel the need to enlighten your obviously misinformed majesty of the hard facts. One. I didn’t cast the spell that did the damage at the damned temple. Two. If I hadn’t have been disoriented to the point of incoherency, you never would have taken me. Three. Are you such an incompetent wizard yourself that you forget how much concentration it takes to cast something with the complexity of an Hellfire spell?

“Put two and two together Teo, if I was coherent enough to cast the spell then why the hell is Alsansir anything but smoldering ruins now? A few measly priests couldn’t have held me if their immortal souls were in danger of roasting over the devil’s fire pit.”

The priest glared at him. Teo did, but it was not with quite the moral indignity as the priests managed to work into their eyes. “That remained to be proven. I would have seen you had a fair trial.”

“Bullshit. You jump at the Prophet’s word and the Prophet was out for more than my blood. He’s a body snatching, black-hearted sorcerer, *your majesty*, who thinks he’s got a direct line to god. He cast that spell. He had Charul killed. You remember Charul? One of yours, right?”

“He did not,” the priest whispered in outrage. But Teo had widened his eyes momentarily, some vague horror flashing behind them before he shuttered the emotion.

“Why’d you go to so much trouble to find me, then? Did you miss me that much that you needed an army to get me back? Tell me he didn’t urge you to it.”

“He did,” Teo admitted. “For the good of the land. You have a reputation, you know, for destruction.”

Dante smiled lazily. “Yes. I do, don’t I? I wanted to destroy your little army, you know. Bunch of mindless fools to follow my trail on the word of a hypocritical priest.”

“Why didn’t you?” Ah, there it was, Teo admitting that he knew he was outmatched, which surprised Kastel considerably. Teo was usually more stubborn in his campaigns.

Dante hesitated, glancing at the table top for an instant as some truer emotion than the dangerous sarcasm he had been exhibiting crossed his face. “A favor. You’re alive because of a favor, that’s all.”

“Well, small favors save lives do they not? I have no notion of whether what you say is truth or not. The Prophet is not here to defend himself.”

“It is slander, my king,” The one priest cried and Dante and Teo both looked his way, the latter with exasperation at the interruption, the former with lazy menace in his pale eyes. The priest blanched and cringed back among his colleagues.

“But,” Teo continued purposefully. “It seems as if the point is mute, considering I am not willing to risk an army to pursue it.”

“Oh, my, a rational decision. What a surprise.”

Teo narrowed his eyes at him. “Go your way and I shall go mine. But bear in mind, that you are not welcome in Alsansir, as Sera ‘Rab-Ker is not, until this matter is resolved.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?” Dante was out of his chair, leaning across the table to glare at Teo. “What the hell has she to do with it? It’s her home.”

“She is a traitor to church, king and city. Blame yourself for that. Surely you can’t place that responsibility on the Prophet.”

Dante straightened, lifting his chin. “I’ll go where I want. Harm anything of mine and this little skirmish will seem like a tea party.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Teo said quietly.

Dante spun on his heel and stalked out. Kheron was right in his tracks. Kastel hesitated a moment, looking back at Teo, who’s face had gone from the rigid strength he used to confront Dante to weary thoughtfulness. There was uncertainty in his face, in his dark eyes, but Kastel did not think it had to do with Dante. More for his own hierarchy of beliefs that he was only now beginning to question.

He looked up and at Kastel, at the flap of the tent. He inclined his head and said. “I would have let you go - - but the Prophet had a vision.”

Kastel nodded once, then let the flap fall behind him, walked among the company of knights to where Dante and Kheron waited impatiently for him to mount up so they might leave.

“What was that about?” Dante asked imperiously when they had cleared the camp and rode down the hill back across the field. “Did he say something to you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” After a long pause. Behind them, men from the southern army slowly moved out onto the field to collect their dead.

“That’s for me to decide.”

“Not everything is about you.”

Dante gave him an offended look. Kheron glared from his other side. He did not wish to be at odds with Dante. He did not wish to feel this animosity. He wanted to blurt out Sera’s secret and hope some honest emotion crossed Dante’s face because of it. He wanted very much to see Dante go and take responsibility for what he had wrought. But Dante and responsibility were often at odds and his promise to Sera forbade him speaking of it to him.

Twenty-seven

They took their dead, her country men from the city of her birth. She sat on the slope of the mountain and watched as the bodies were wrapped in cloaks and canvas on the field and taken beyond the hill and beyond her sight. She wondered what would become of them, all those young men of Alsansir.

Tears made crooked streaks down her cheeks, a silent, deeply mournful regret at the loss of life - - of the loss of innocence and trust. At the life blossoming within her - - which she treasured already, after only knowing it for a day -- which she prayed would never know of the hurt and betrayal her mother felt. Would never know that such a hurt existed.

She saw *him* in the camp below, doing this and that, generally in the company of Kheron, never once looking for her, never once bothering to tell her what had transpired at the parlay that morning. No one came and told her, not even Kastel, who had been casting her worried glances all afternoon, whenever he did pass by her perch. She had to hear the rumors by eavesdropping on the conversation of the Stormbringer's knights. She heard that Teo had banned her from home and pulled her knees close, burying her head in her arms in misery.

Gerad came by and climbed almost to her perch, shading his eyes against the light of the sun spilling over the mountaintop behind her.

"You've been up here all day, little girl. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Thinking."

"Thinking, huh? No good occupation for an honest man, I say." He grinned at her, but she could tell it was strained, an expression for her benefit only. His eyes were tired, bruised from too little sleep. She had heard he had been out all the night and most of the day keeping an eye on the movement of Teo's army.

"Will they take them back to Alsansir to bury?" She asked, because it was the one thing on this miserable day that mattered enough to break through her own wall of pain.

"No. Six, seven weeks on the road and they'd be little comfort for their families back home. He'll bury them here and take their swords back home for their families to honor as they will."

"Oh."

"Are you all right?"

She narrowed her eyes, wondering what he knew. Wondering if Kastel had let her secret slip. "Why?"

Gerad started to laugh, then aborted it, looking down at the camp. "Just - - he's being an ass - - who the hell ever knows what's going through his head."

“Doesn’t matter. You even told me once, that she was the only woman he’d ever really loved. That were everyone else were just temporary diversions. Why should I be surprised?”

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “I should have remembered it myself,” he said under his breath, then starting down the slope he called over his shoulder. “We’re breaking camp within the hour. Get yourself something to eat, because we’ll be in the saddle until well after nightfall.”

* * *

They rode north. North because it took them away from hostile lands. North because Kastel had an army moving towards them from that direction. It seemed the best of possible routes. They had horses and remounts to spare, having gathered stray animals from the field after the battle and no one from the other side daring to come and protest.

Kastel had avoided Sera during the day, because she needed the time to think without having to rehash her dilemma to someone else. He avoided Dante because he didn’t want a fight and he was still angry at him for the treatment of Sera. He would have talked with Gerad, but the Lord of the Divhar slept in the saddle, chin on chest, holding his seat as if he were part of the horse and Kastel figured he deserved the rest considering the busy night he’d had scouting the army. So he rode mostly among his few remaining men in silence.

They had started out late, and so traveled late into the evening. It was dusk when he decided he’d had enough of contemplative silences and reined his horse back to scout the line of riders for Sera. She was near the rear of the procession, riding with her cloak tightly clutched about her, her arms folded underneath it for warmth in the chill of the evening. Her eyes shifted towards him dark circles beneath them, wary and tired. She looked sick. Weak and nauseous; and he thought a day of riding was not the gentlest activity for a woman with child. There was little help for it.

“How are you doing?” he asked softly.

“Horrible,” she groaned. Which of course was apparent without the asking, but one had to be courteous.

“So - - have you thought what you might do?”

She looked away from him, blowing air from between her teeth in exasperation. She wouldn't answer for a while and he didn't press.

“I don't know.” Finally, miserably, she replied. “I don't know.” She sounded so hopeless, so terribly devoid of spirit, that he clutched his reins until his knuckles turned white in useless anger at the cause of it.

“I can't go home. Teo said. *He* wouldn't even come and tell me himself. Nobody would. I don't know where I'm going to go. I don't know anybody outside of the south. Where am I going to have my baby? How am I going to protect it?”

“You can come to Sta-Veron,” he uttered the words, knowing in his heart that they would prove heavier than he could at the moment imagine. Knowing that they would create rifts. “You have my protection.”

She swung her head around to stare at him, wide eyed, frozen in uncertainty.

“I can't go there - - if - - if he's there. I can't be in the same place where he is. I won't have this child with him there to mock me with his dalliances or - - or to claim it as his own and then disregard me.”

“He won't be. He's not much for the cold,” he said that lightly, but his voice trembled on the last word. He looked away, wondering what deadly blunder he had made in that offer of protection, in that offer of sanctuary against Dante. Sera had started crying. No simple tears but streams that ran down her face and great gasping gulps of air that allowed her to do nothing but nod her head at him in acceptance. It was sealed with that nod, and no turning back.

They made camp. Fire pits were dug, under the shelter of a scattering of pine and fur. Gerad went hunting with a group of his nightwalkers and came back with a string of rabbits and a dozen quail they had stirred up from nighttime nesting. It was enough fresh meat to supplement dried rations and the smell of it was tantalizing. Sera brought him a cup of tea, and sat down near him with her own, staring into the fire, somewhat less devastated he thought, with a safe haven provided her. They did not speak, merely sat and watched the men roasting the meat, listened to the talk around their fire. Gerad came and sat down next to Sera, hot tea in hand.

“The weather's being kind so far,” he observed. “I was beginning to think the sky

had sprung a leak, we were getting so much rain.”

“Sorry,” Kastel said, sipping the bitter tea.

Gerad lifted a thick brow at him. “It’s not your fault.”

Kastel shrugged and Gerad gestured with his cup across Sera to Kastel. “It’s *not* your fault, is it?”

“I might be somewhat responsible.”

“Do you know how many times I laid curses at your door, then?” Gerad laughed.

“I can imagine. I cursed myself for it rather poignantly.”

“I believe I called you few foul names, too,” Sera said quietly, a faint smile touching her lips.

“It seemed at the time, the prudent course of action.”

“What did?”

The smiles on all their faces faded. Dante stood just beyond Kastel, the glow from the fire lighting his right side, the other side lost in shadow. It made his hair orange and his eyes glow demoniacally. Sera looked down at her tea as if it held all the secrets of the world.

“Nothing,” Kastel said.

“Really? Nothing is generally the course of action I’d expect of you. I want to talk with you, Kastel.”

“Perhaps later,” he said it and held his breath waiting for reaction. Dante had never taken well to denial. Dante took a breath, then stepped forward, towering over Kastel. Kastel tightened his fingers around the cup, feeling of a sudden like a child that had overstepped his bounds with a stern and disapproving parent. Dante had the unique gift of making him feel that way with detestable ease.

“I said I wanted to talk with you.”

“And wouldn’t it just be horrible if you didn’t get your way?” Sera murmured, her mouth at the lip of her cup. Dante’s fingers twitched. Kastel tensed, not wanting a verbal battle between them. Not with Sera already bruised and hurting. He put his cup down, and climbed to his feet.

“Fine.”

Dante whirled on his heel and stalked away, expecting Kastel to follow. He did,

until they passed the last of the tents and had gone a few yards into the little grove of evergreen, then he spun and stabbed a finger in Kastel's face.

"What the hell is your problem?"

Kastel looked away. He did not do well in confrontations with Dante. He never had. He braced himself and said words that would start one anyway. "You're the one with the problem."

"I'm the one with the problem? Oh, oh, please enlighten me as to what you think that problem is, Kastel? You being the expert on emotional disorders."

Dante wanted a fight. He could see it in his eyes, in the cant of his mouth. He craved conflict and Kastel thought he had given him enough fuel in the last day or more of distancing himself from him to start it.

"What happened when you were dead this time to make you come back without a shred of conscience?"

"And what deplorable thing have I done to make you - - Winter King - - murderer of thousands - - shiver at my deeds?"

"You know what. You'd think you'd have the decency to at least talk to her after she risked her life and lost her home to help you. But, you snub her and jump straight into Kheron's bed without even a thank you."

Dante hand shot out, a back handed slap that snapped Kastel's head around. Then Dante's fists were wrapped in the front of his cloak and he was slammed back against the ungiving bole of a pine tree.

"That is not your business. Not your concern. You do not want to cross me in this, Kastel. Believe me, you do not want to cross that line." Dante's voice shook, so full of anger or some similar emotion he was. His face was so close to Kastel's that Kastel could focus on nothing but those moonlight silver eyes.

"You have no honor," Kastel said softly. "She deserves more of you."

"Why should you care. She's not your kin."

"She's a friend." *She's carrying your child*, he wanted to accuse, but the vow of silence held his tongue.

"She's my business. Not yours."

"Then tend to it."

Dante pulled him forward, still leaning close and Kastel braced himself to be slammed again against the tree, but Dante merely breathed against his ear.

“Don’t think you can dictate to me, Kastel.” And let him go. Kastel stood there, a shiver passing down his spine. Dante passed him an arched brow, dark glare, before walking back towards the camp.

He took a shuddery breath, trying to ease the tension of that altercation, the ever present apprehension that he had alienated one of the few people in the world whose opinion mattered to him. He very much wanted Dante’s approval, he could not shake that very old habit. At the same time, perhaps for much the same reason, he had to protect the things Dante loved, that he came to love because of it, even if Dante cast them aside thoughtlessly.

Kastel was never so thoughtless in his loyalties. Those very few things that he granted his allegiance to, he put his heart in and guarded fiercely. He had to for his own salvation, when the rest of the world was against him. When all the things he had ever loved before Dante, had in the end held no loyalty to him.

He took a step towards the light of camp and Kheron stepped out from behind the shadow of a tree to block his path. Her golden eyes sparkled with malice and her small fists were clenched in anger.

“What do you think you’re doing, Kastel?”

He wasn’t in the mood for Kheron’s petty jealousies. “Not now, Kheron.”

“No. Now.” She put out a hand and shoved at his chest. He glared, willing to take it from Dante, but not from her.

“Back off,” he warned and she curled her fingers as if she were going to pounce.

“You were always jealous of how close he was to me. You always envied that,” she cried. “Jealous that he liked me better than you. You push him at *her* so I won’t have him, is that it? Well, he’s made his choice.”

“Eavesdropping are we? You’ve sunk low, Kher.”

“You’ve sunk lower. You don’t care about her. You know he’ll always come back to me. Do you envy the fact that he came to my bed and never yours?”

“Shut up, you shrew. I defend her because she has no one else and he won’t take responsibility for the seed he’s planted. It has nothing to do with you or your much

contemplated spite. Look to the hearts you've broken yourself, woman."

She stood there, glaring, horrified speculation on her face. "What seed?" she whispered.

He hissed in disgust at his own indiscretion. He shook his head and started to brush past her. She cried a word and a line of fire shot up in his path. He cursed and spun, glaring at her, at her foolishness to set a blaze in this little forest with their camp so close. He said a word of his own and ice formed over the ground, smothering the flames.

"Are you insane?"

"What seed?" she cried.

"What does it matter to you? He chose you, remember?"

"Oh no," she whispered, and he stood a moment longer, before stepping gingerly over ice covered ground and leaving her to make her own conclusions. She would either tell Dante or not. And he rather thought not. She was not stupid enough to think he would ignore the woman who carried his child. She was possessive enough to want that attention for herself, even though she was pragmatic enough to realize she could never force the issue. She had that over Sera. She would put up with Dante's roving eye and always let him come back to her. Sera would never understand it and never accept it. Perhaps it was just as well.

* * *

He took her to a place with no windows. In all her years as a slave, Lily had always had access to the sky. To its limitless boundaries and its promise that there were things in the world that could never be bound. She did not realize how much she missed it, until it was taken away from her. Until she came to this place, knowing not exactly how she had gotten here and saw only stone walls and ceilings that made up the world.

The people here were silent and humble, never speaking save for the most basic of questions or directions. They went about their duties with hardly a spark of life in their eyes, heads bowed, lips murmuring prayers to the High God, as if they thought that worthy might save their souls. Their earthly lives certainly seemed to have no flavor worth relishing. They served him. The new master. A man of God. A man of the High

God, who wore religion like a fine outfit, proudly showing it off to all who looked upon him and yet underneath the robes he secretly donned the garb of corruption.

Lily knew corruption. Slaves saw the sides of men that they hid from their peers, from their constituents, but that they never bothered to shadow from someone they owned -- or rented - - or bought for a night's pleasure from another man. Lily knew the face of a man who pretended righteousness to the world all the while practicing depravities in his mind. Only her new master didn't merely fantasize about the dark side. He made it real.

He brought her here and he took pains to let her know her place in the world. He let her know how lowly she was, how tainted. And she accepted the belittlement, well used to submission. There was nothing to be gained from rebellion and much to be gained from meekness. A man like her new master, a man of power and cruelty, got more pleasure from the breaking that he did from the end result. What use to fight him, when it would all end the same anyway? Lily well knew the ways of survival. Pride was not a thing that mattered as much as broken bones and ravaged skin. She had her own brand of dignity, hidden away from all the world, but it served her well. She had her music, which had soothed all her masters.

It soothed her new one, the short while he stayed in the place without windows. Then he was gone and she was left with the silent worshippers who attended his monastery. She walked the cold halls, listened to the whispers of prayer from the chapels. Peeked into the dark, ominous cathedral with its nave dominated by a great stone symbol of the High God. Prayed herself, because *He* had made it clear that she must devote her thoughts to the God, when she was not devoted to *him*.

One master was as good as the next, she thought. She no more believed in the gods than she did in guardian angels. No god would let the things happen that did in the world. And if there were higher beings somewhere who watched over the progress of man - - then they deserved no worship for they accomplished no miracles.

This was not so terrible an existence, save for the lack of sky. She had known worse. And then her new master came back. There was no fanfare. No announcement of his arrival. He was simply there one day and the silent, sad forms of his acolytes moved with a bit more alacrity to their step and bit more desperation not to be noticed by their divine master.

One of them knocked a candelabra onto the floor into the master's path in frantic desperation to scamper out of his way. Lily happened to be hiding in the shadow of a stone stair and saw it. The master went into a rage. She had never seen the like. He beat the poor fellow physically, screaming curses upon his soul and then when he had exhausted himself with that, he stood over the huddled form and stared down. And the screams truly began. Blood began to pour out of ears, eyes, nose and mouth. It bubbled under the exposed skin until the pustules popped and spurted fluid onto the stone floors. Lily covered her ears at the inhuman screams of agony. She backed into the shadows and hid hoping the master would stalk past her unknowing. But he stopped and stared into the shadows as though she had made some sound, or he had scented her.

"Girl. Come here." He crooked a finger at her. She shivered and crept out, head down, eyes on the floor. She bowed, as a good slave should and he put his fingers under her chin. There was blood on his hands.

"Have you kept at your devotions?"

"Yes, master," she whispered. "Every day."

"Good. Fetch your instrument. I've a need for distraction."

She nodded and ran to do his bidding. Not for the world would she deny him anything. Not after what she had just witnessed. And that had been at a whim. At a flash rage that had passed as soon as it had come upon him. She pitied anyone who gained his ire and kept it.

* * *

Dante walked into the tent he had been sharing with Kheron and stood there, one hand on the center brace, staring at nothing. Anger shook at him. Indignation did, mixed with some small degree of hurt. There were few rare people in this world he valued. Whose support he expected, whom he did not anticipate would turn on him.

Impudent little bastard, to try and censure him. As if he had any right. As if he had any notion of what he was talking about. As if there were not already a pit of loathing in Dante's stomach from days of pretending to ignore Sera's bewilderment and misery.

Stop thinking about her. Don't feel guilt. Don't feel pity. Nether one would banish

the bargain he had made. Bewilderment and misery now were better than bereavement later. Guilt and pity would only make him weak. And weakness would make him take what he wanted. And when he had what he wanted and the eventual seed sprouted from the having, he'd be back to the bargain again. Full circle. So stop worrying about her feelings. Hurt them as much as possible to drive her away, because she had to be the one to go, he couldn't trust himself to do it. Not for long.

He wondered if she'd confided in Kastel. Why else would he take up her crusade. It annoyed Dante that Sera felt that comfortable sharing such a deep hurt with Kastel. It sparked jealous sentiment on the one hand, that she would go to him, and on the other that Kastel would side with her against him. Regardless of bargain or vow, they were the both of them his and it irked to find them sharing confidences against him.

"Dante."

He turned his head slightly when Kheron moved the flap to enter the tent. She hesitated on the boundary between inside and out, her hand gripping the canvas. Her eyes were huge and her chin canted low, clearly in the midst of dilemma. He couldn't find the generosity to wonder what was bothering her now, his own disquiet taking all his attention. He didn't answer her, so she let the flap fall and slipped into the tent, pressing against his back, her face to his shoulder.

"What do you want?" he asked, short, because that was the mood he was in.

"I - - I - - nothing really. Just looking for you."

"Well here I am."

She ran her hands about his waist, to his stomach and he shrugged her off, stepping away, detesting intimacy of any kind at this moment. She looked hurt. He looked away sullenly.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Nothing." All the world. He hated this. He hated feeling all the things that he told himself he wouldn't feel.

He glared at the tent wall. Weak. Weak. He cursed himself. He could not stay here - - in the same place as Sera was. He wasn't as good at self-castigation as Kastel was. He despised it vehemently. He sat down on the low cot, elbows on knees. Kheron stood watching him uncertainly, a look of such wretchedness on her dusky face that he finally

felt moved to charity. He patted the cot next to him, inviting her over. She came and sat there, hands clutching the rail of cot, eyes downcast.

“It’s just a mood, little one,” he reassured her. “Not aimed at you.”

“Did - - did you have a fight with Kastel?”

He snorted. “Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing that matters.”

“Oh. That’s good, then,” she said that with such distraction in her voice that he drew his brows, placing a hand to her face to make her look up at him.

“What’s troubling you, Kheron? Is something amiss?”

She shook her head, wordlessly, then wrapped her arms about his neck, pressing herself close. “We should go somewhere else. There’s nothing for us North. I’ve holdings to the east.”

He rested his chin on the top of her head thoughtfully. “I was thinking about Keladedra recently. I’d like to visit the sea.”

“Keladedra,” she echoed. “It’s been a long time. We could go there.”

“Yes,” he said, thinking more about what he would be leaving behind than the ocean side jewel of the West that lay in the future.

* * *

Kheron’s men would stay with Kastel and Gerad until the former met up with his southward marching army, then Kheron bid them either stay with Gerad or Kastel or return to their own provinces until she had further need of them.

Two wizards alone could move with considerably more ease and swiftness than two wizards burdened with a troop of knights and Dante was eager to head westward. Once a decision was made he hated to waste time implementing it.

Kastel stood staring at them both dourly, hurt almost, as if they were doing him some misdeed by their exodus. Dante was not yet ready to forgive him for his censure and chose not to speak. Perhaps in a year or so, he’d find him and see if Kastel were ready to offer apology. Gerad offered Kheron the reins of her horse, solemn and serious. He bade her safe journey and nodded once to Dante.

“Don’t let him get you into too much trouble,” The nightwalker added, a smile

flickering over his broad face. Kheron threw her arms about his neck and hugged him, to which Gerad did not quite know how to react. He ended by blushing and looking away. Dante hardly noticed. He looked surreptitiously through the faces of knights and nightwalkers for one smaller, more delicate countenance and saw her not. He had thought she might be there, lurking at the edges. He had thought to get one last look at her face.

Kheron mounted up. Dante began to, then paused, stepping close to Gerad and motioning him close. The big man bent his head to listen.

“See to Sera, will you?”

Gerad stared at him a moment, brown eyes pensive, then he nodded. “Of course.”

There was nothing to do then, but mount up and ride out of camp, leaving the rest of them behind, hoping that distance would make the regret less, but pragmatic enough to realize that it probably wouldn’t.

Twenty-eight

There was snow and snow and snow. It seemed as if all the world had been swallowed by white. Sera had never in all her life seen so much of the stuff. Even at the passage of a thousand men, it did not smear away and turn to brown earth underneath. She was lost in it, lost amidst an army who had come on the heels of its lord and she was amazed that men were able to function so efficiently in the abundance of it all.

Her horse more times than not, tread in snow past its knees. When they made camp she had no notion how they managed to clear enough of it away to pitch their tents and dig their fire pits. She huddled in layers of furs and soft leathers, her feet bundled in thick boots and her hands hidden away in fur lined mittens and drifted in her own world of heartache. Kastel talked to her and Gerad did, but she heard only a fraction of what they said and absorbed even less. They always left her with wary, concerned expressions on their faces.

And then after what seemed endless travel through biting cold whiteness, the walls of Sta-Veron broke the unchanging vista of snow. High gray walls glazed with a layer of

ice and frost. Stark walls for a stark city cut out of a frigid, unforgiving land. The gates opened and an army gone only briefly in the way that armies passed time, was welcomed back with enthusiasm muffled only by winter scarves and fur lined hoods. The people lined the streets and cheered for their lord, who rode with passive silence, as if he were continually amazed that they honored him so. The army dispersed, going to homes, or barracks or where ever an army went when it was no longer needed, save for her and Gerad's nightwalkers and the core group of commanders who rode with them into the inner walled sanctum of the Winter King's own castle.

There the noise and the crowd that had come out to greet them on the streets of the city lessened to a more controllable confusion of stable boys rushing to take charge of horses and servants scattering here and there in preparation of their lord's return.

Someone helped her down, Gerad she thought, he was so bundled against the cold, she had only a fleeting glimpse of eyes past hood and scarf. She stood within the disorder, a small, huddled figure, as lost here as she had been in all the endless snow. She was jostled by man and horse, so she retreated to the edge of the thick stone steps leading up to the castle. She leaned there, arms wrapped about herself until a gruff female voice from above demanded attention.

"You there. Why are you dallying. Don't you have work to do?"

Sera swung around, staring up at a thick, red faced woman of middle years who seemed to be looking over the activity in the yard. Sera opened her mouth, not quite knowing what to say, and the woman narrowed her eyes at her and stabbed a finger down at her.

"You're not one of mine. Did you come with his lordship?"

Sera barely nodded, teeth chattering, when the woman stomped down the steps, descending upon her like a wrathful banshee. She almost cowered, but the big, rawboned hands merely took her under the elbow and steered her up the steps towards the thick wooden doors.

"Never trust a gaggle of men to do anything right." The woman was complaining. "Leavin' you out in the cold like that, when there's a perfectly good fire blazing inside. What's your name, girl?"

"Sera," she stammered.

“Sera What?”

“Sera ‘Rab-Ker, ma’am.”

“Ma’am!” The woman snorted indelicately, as blustery as the winter that waited outside the gates. “I’m no Ma’am, at least not to guests of my lord. Keitlan is my name. I look after his lordship’s domestic staff and see to his household.”

She looked pointedly at Sera, as if expecting as concise a description of what station Sera occupied as in regards to her lord.

“He - - he invited me here,” she said quietly. “I’m a - - a friend.”

The woman looked mildly dubious. As if she either doubted the invitation or the claim that Kastel had friends. They entered a high ceilinged main hall. Tall windows let light in along both sides, though the illumination was stark and chill against cold gray stone with no adornment. Wooden tables and plank benches lined the walls near the far end where a great hearth dominated the greater part of the wall. A draft insidiously snaked through the hall, causing chill even with the roaring flames of the fire.

A plain, well constructed hall, made to house a great number of men if need be. But barren and stark and cold, much like the face its master showed to the world. There were doors along the walls and on either side of the hearth, leading deeper into the castle. Sera somehow doubted it got warmer or more welcoming, if the great hall, the facade all castles showed to the world, were any indication.

Keitlan steered her towards the fire and the tables near it.

“Setha, you lazy girl. We’ve people to see to,” the housekeeper called loudly and Sera winced at the volume. The lazy girl in question appeared from one of the doors at the hearth and hustled forward, eyes alight with curiosity at the woman in the company of her superior.

“Fetch a cup of mulled wine for the lady. And a bowl of hot stew to take the chill off. His lordship is coming in with a troop of cold men, so get those other lazy girls off their behinds and have them ready to serve them when they come in.”

The girl scampered off. Keitlan took Sera’s cloak and her gloves and scarf and the inner layer of coat and trundled off with a full armful of winter gear. Sera was left standing before the fire, shivering, her hair clinging damply to her face, her lips chapped from cold. The girl came back with a cup and a wooden bowl.

“Sit down. Sit down.” The girl gestured to the table closest the fire and set the bowl and cup down there. Sera did as she was bid, gratefully taking the warm cup in her hands and sipping the mulled sweet wine. Wonderful. The warmth. The taste. She closed her eyes in a moment of contentment and opened them with the girl staring at her from across the table.

“His lordship’s never brought a woman here before,” the serving girl stated, eyes very, very curious. Sera sighed, figuring that gossip would soon be running rampant. She knew the ways of servants and the speculation that would run the gambit of the staff, from stable boys to cooks to chambermaids.

“He offered me a kindness,” she said, in attempts to turn the tide of speculation to a path less destructive. “When there was no one else to do it. I don’t know how long I’ll stay.”

The maid did not have the time to comment, for the doors burst open and men stomped into the hall, bringing cold wind and errant flakes of blown snow with them. The girl, Setha, hurried for the kitchen entrance, no doubt to start bringing out wine and food.

They shed cloaks and winter gear, a loud noisome lot that tracked mud and snow onto the bare stone floors. Gerad, red nosed and red fingered, came and sat down next to Sera, a grin of flushed excitement on his face.

“Wondered where you’d got to. Damn, its cold out and not even full winter yet.”

“Oh, wonderful,” she murmured, not heartened by that fact. Men were crowding the tables, Gerad’s, Kastel’s. She did not see the Winter King himself.

“Where’s Kastel?”

Gerad shrugged, eyeing her mug of aromatic wine enviously. “Seeing to this and that. You know how he likes crowds.”

Setha and a half dozen other serving girls began to file out from the kitchen, bearing trays of bread, stew and hot wine. Gerad got his wine and pitcher of the same sat on the table within easy reach. He was happy. Sera was tired. She sat an elbow on the table and played listlessly with her stew. Her stomach complained and she feared to lose its contents, which made her think of what she carried within her and where its father was at this moment - - and with who. She sighed miserably and blinked back wetness.

She swam in a sea of noise and smells and her own unease until Gerad looked over his shoulder and a hand was laid on her own soon after. The house mistress, Keitlan looked down at her.

“Do you want to see your room, lady Sera? I’ve had a fire set.”

Blurrily, Sera nodded. She rose and swayed unsteadily. Both Gerad and Keitlan reached out to catch at her arms.

“I’m okay. I’m okay,” she assured them both, even though her vision wavered alarmingly. The house mistress hummed. Gerad drew his brows in concern.

“You look sick,” he remarked.

“Small wonder,” Keitlan snapped. “Poor girl being dragged along in the middle of an army and at this time of year. Come along.”

She gripped Sera’s elbow with fingers that Sera had no strength to shake off. Off the right and through a door. There was a hall and stairs. They went up the stairs to a second floor with doors lining its corridor. There was an open one, where a maid entered before them with an arm full of bedclothes. Keitlan led her into it.

A simple room, with high ceiling and one crystal paned window. A bed with the makings of a canopy but no cloth hanging over it. A chest of drawers, a table with a wash basin, a chest at the foot of the bed. A fireplace where a newly made fire crackled. A small room to the side where a door hid a garderobe. The floor was bare and cold. There was nothing to make it cheery or welcoming. Keitlan smiled her own welcome.

“I’m told you’ve nothing of your own, so I’ll have some things brought to you, until we can get something made for you. I’ve a few girls who are close to your size.”

“Thank you,” Sera whispered. The maid made up the bed. There were thick coverings over the sheets. It at least looked inviting.

“Are you still hungry?”

“No. I think I’ll just rest.”

Keitlan nodded, as if she had thought the same thing. “Shall I have the girl stay and help you?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

So they left her finally in peace. She stood before the fire, hands out, basking in the warmth, clearing her head of thought, merely staring at the hypnotic flame. She shed her

clothing, piece by piece by piece, draping it over the chest, until she stood bare to all the world.

Her skin pimpled at the cold, but she ignored it, wishing for a mirror, hands smoothing over the skin of her belly. She wished she could see if there was a swelling, but from the angle she looked, there was nothing but the flat tummy she had always had. She crawled under the cool sheets then, and pulled the blankets up over her head, hiding from the world. Breathing in the cold, fresh scent of the linens, telling herself that things would start to get better now that she was done with traveling. Telling herself that all she had to do now was concentrate on the life she carried and not on the things that had sparked it. She bit her lip and coiled her knees up to her chest, an ache so profound and painful that it took her breath, twisting in her chest.

Oh, liar. Liar, she cried on the inside, belittling herself for her optimism. As if she could push the hurt away when the wound gaped so cruelly open in her heart of hearts. Tears spilled from beneath her lashes. Bitter, silent tears. She never used to cry. She had always been so strong and all it had taken to dash the strength was a declaration of love.

Eventually, exhaustion conquered misery and sleep claimed her. The tears dried on her cheeks.

* * *

Kastel retired to his study, leaving the troops to Kiro's care. He had a very efficient staff, who performed their duties quietly and quickly in a manner they knew their lord preferred. He had faith in their abilities, especially when he had other matters on his mind.

Since he had heard of Dante and Sera's encounter with the forest spirit and the seemingly all powerful Mother, he had been bitten badly with the urge to find out more of the eldritch and very old powers that had existed on earth before this age or the one of technology before it. He had never had an interest before, being more consumed with the gathering of power that he could touch and use. But he was intrigued by the notion of the old powers now. In his vast collection of books, there were sure to be hints and

references. It might take a great deal of time to hunt them down, but the prospect was not daunting, for he enjoyed the solitude of his library. He was eager to begin the search, almost to the point of excitement.

His housekeeper stopped him on the stairs, her ruddy, broad face creased with wary speculation.

“Yes, what is it.” He had other things on his mind than domestic issues. She never bothered him with such matters.

“The lady, my lord.”

“What of her?”

“Um -- where would you like her placed?”

Why he should care was beyond him. “In a room would be nice. A warm one.”

Keitlan twisted her hands, nervously. She was not a woman usually given to nerves. His patience began to wear.

“I had thought - - that perhaps you would want her placed near your own rooms, my lord.”

He stared, understanding dawning. His staff thought he had brought home a mistress. His housekeeper, who had always been bold in her own deferential way, was posing the question to him. He gave her a cool, reproving stare.

“It matters not to me. The lady is here for her own entertainment and no one else’s, am I clear?”

His look intimated that he expected her to see that no tongues wagged in the byways of the servant’s domain. She nodded, accepting that without question and he was certain that Keitlan would see to matters. She ruled her people with an iron fist.

“Of, course, my lord. I’ll set things straight.”

* * *

The world settled down. It snowed and Sera sat in her room, on a stone window ledge that was wide enough to comfortably perch with knees drawn up to chest, and watched the weather through the leaded glass windows. Aimlessly she drew designs on the frosted glass. She’d formed a habit of staying abed slothfully late, taking her meals in

her room, having no desire to walk among other folk and see their laughter and their smiles while she had none. She moped dreadfully, with hardly the energy to eat.

Gerad came to see her, to try and talk her out of her rooms and into some semblance of life, but she drove him away with her heavy sighs and distant stares. Kastel did not come to visit, but if what she overheard of the maid's talk was correct, he practiced the same habits she did, closeting himself away for days at a time in his library or his study, with hardly a care for the outside world.

The maids thought she was morose and spoiled. She could see it in their eyes, when she took the interest to look, and hear it in the way they spoke to her. A sullen, spoiled lady from the south, who disliked the cold of their northern city. She had complained about the chill once to the maid Keitlan had assigned her, asking for more blankets and the word had spread. She cried a good deal and the maids were quick to catch on to that as well, seeing red eyes or her quick attempt to wipe wetness from her cheeks when they happened in with her meals or wood for the fire or hot water for bathing. She was sure they speculated among themselves as to what tragedy had befallen her, their lord's most melancholy guest.

Keitlan happened by regularly, always with a frown of disapproval on her face, when she found Sera sitting at the window staring distractedly outside.

"Can I bring you something?" she would ask. "Do you read? My lord has an extensive collection."

No. That was quite all right.

"Something to occupy your hands? Needlepoint?"

Some other time, perhaps. The snow is enthralling.

Keitlan would leave with as much disgust as she came with. Sera felt guilty every time she saw the woman. Weeks passed. Life began to become disjointed and meaningless. She began to hate the thought of waking up in the morning. She would happily have slept her life away, except for the occasional dream - - nightmare - - she wasn't sure which - - about him. He had always plagued her dreams - - caressing her sub-conscious with erotic hints and sexual innuendoes, only now she knew what it was like in the flesh. Now she knew how truly inferior the dreams were. She hated herself every time she woke with heart pounding in chest and sweat on her brow, balling her fists

into her eyes until the images passed.

She wanted to die. She thought about how much peace that would bring. She thought that it would make him feel some sort of remorse. Despite all that he had done, she *knew* he would feel remorse.

The maids, when they came, had garlands in their hair, and more sprite in their step than usual. Winter Festival, she heard. Sta-Veron was in the midst of celebrating the onset of true winter, while the rest of the world mourned it.

Kastel came by her room. Knocked politely at the door and entered at her somber bidding. He stared at her long enough to make her uncomfortable, concern growing in his eyes.

“Sera, you look – unwell,” he finally said. He looked very fine in an embroidered blue over tunic, over black trousers and boots.

“I’m fine,” she lied.

“There is a feast tonight, celebrating Winter Festival. Keitlan said you declined to come.”

“I’m - - not in the mood for a feast, Kastel.”

“Perhaps you should. Have you seen the city?”

“From the window.”

“I think you should come down and join the feasting. I think it would do you good.”

She shook her head, staring into the fire.

“Sera, what are you trying to do? Loose yourself in solitude. It never works, believe me. Sooner or later, you have to come out.”

“I’m not.” She tried to assure him, but her voice came out shaky. “I just can’t - - they’ll expect me to smile and laugh - - and I can’t.” She wiped furiously at a rebellious tear that rolled down her cheek. He looked at her, then away, appearing shaken himself. He took a breath, then approached her, crouched by her chair so he was eye level with her.

“I promised you my protection. I see I’ve been remiss in it. What are you doing to yourself, Sera? You can’t moon over him forever. He doesn’t appreciate it. I don’t know if he can. All it does is hurt you.”

“How long is forever?” she murmured.

“Too long. Please come to the feast.”

She sniffed and nodded.

Keitlan came by personally to see that Sera was presentable for celebration. Or more likely that she would not back out on her word to Keitlan’s lord. She saw Sera bathed and combed and brought forth a green muslin overdress and layers of soft warm under dresses beneath. Sera let herself be arranged. Let Keitlan fix her hair and only half listened to the woman’s comments on how thick it was, and how lovely an amber shade.

“So,” the housemistress said, putting a last ornamental pin in the shining coils of Sera’s hair. “Who’s the father?”

Slowly, Sera blinked, staring in shock at the wall before her, then at Keitlan as the woman moved into her line of sight, and stood there, hands on stout hips.

“What?”

“Of your child?”

“How - - ? Who told you that?”

Keitlan sniffed. “No one had to tell me, girl. You’re not far enough along to start showing, at least not obviously, but you’ve been here long enough to bleed and you haven’t, and I’ve seen women with child who went into sulks like yours. And with no man to claim you, a woman can understand why.”

“Oh, goddess.” Sera felt weak kneed. Keitlan patted her hand in a motherly fashion.

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault if you’ve been abandoned by the scoundrel. Men are like that sometimes. No good, the majority of them. Don’t let it weigh on your soul. For the child’s sake if nothing else. Go and enjoy yourself at feast tonight. Goddess knows you’ll be the first woman to sit at our lord’s side since I can remember. You’ll be the envy of many, that’s for sure. He’s a pleasure to look at, that one.”

Sera was speechless. She couldn’t quite catch her breath to talk.

“You need to find something to take your mind off your troubles.” Keitlan gave her one last word of advise, before there was a rap on the door and the housekeeper shooed Sera towards it.

It went by in a blur, the Festival Feast and the entertainment’s afterwards. There

was food that she ate, and watered wine that she drank. Gerad talked to her more than Kastel did. The Winter King sat and watched, eyes closed off even from the revelry of his own people. She thought this night was almost as much a chore for him, who disliked close association with people, as it was for her.

There were jugglers and musicians and dancing. The hall was close with people and talk. Outside the streets of the city were also full of merriment, of people toasting the winter and daring it to best them yet one more year. She had a sudden insight, as to the reason these people celebrated a season of lifelessness and bitter cold. Because if they did not celebrate it, then they would drown from the bitterness of fighting it. They had to do something to make it better in their minds. To make the weeks and months of winter storms that she had heard plagued the north seem a challenge rather than a punishment.

She listened to Gerad talk about the camouflage techniques he and his nightwalkers had been practicing in the snow, and only half heard him. She thought Keitlan was right. She had to do something to divert her mind, or she would drown. And she could not - - would not - - let him push her to that.

Twenty-nine

Kastel found a book that delved into legends of yore. He was not certain if it was mere fable or in some part based on fact. Anything pre-destruction - - and he thought this book was - - was not to be trusted when it discussed the arcane. They took magic so frivolously, not believing in anything other than their precious technology. He understood the withering of things magic in that cruel, old world. When people stopped believing and when civilization over ran the boundaries of sacred places, then magic drew away. Further and further away, until in the minds of men, it no longer existed.

It was the way with creatures of magic. Which was not to say it was the way of creatures that controlled magic. They were two breeds of a very different color. A man might not be magic to use magic. Mortal men utilized magic every day. Mortal men might, if technology had not been outlawed centuries ago, use both magic and science and not bat an eye.

Now a creature of magic, a creature that was in and of itself born of magic - - that was another story. Powerful though it might be, it could not co-exist with the world of technology. It could not survive the preponderance of a civilization dominated by technology. So, it might retreat to the most remote of places to exist within its own limited spear. That had happened, he thought, during the old age. All the things that had dwelled in the world before man overran it with his science, had retreated or been destroyed by disbelief until they were few and far between. The Lady of the Forest was once such. As were a good number of creatures that had begun to emerge over the last century or two, encouraged by the magic that had come back to the world and the destruction of a civilization technology had made.

Technology was anathema to magic, extinguishing it with its undeviating march, while magic could only destroy technology with the onslaught of violence. And then only by the hand of man. A hypocrisy of sorts. It fascinated him. Dante would have been a font of information. A wealth of facts, if he chose to reveal them, or remembered them. There were a dozen places Kastel had marked in books that he longed to ask his mentor about. They would go unanswered for some time, he thought, until this rift had been healed.

There was a soft rap on the library door. He was so caught up in a passage that he ignored it. It occurred again and he looked up in irritation.

“Yes?”

The door opened marginally and Sera slipped into the room, looking bashful and pale. His irritation fled. He had not seen her outside of her room since the feast four nights past. He was immediately worried to see her now.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She fiddled with the long braid that hung over her shoulder. He continued to stare, waiting.

“I was thinking that maybe I might take a look around the city. I was thinking that maybe I might buy a few things to make my room a bit more comfortable. A rug. Perhaps a wall hanging - - or something. I think it would make me feel better to do a little shopping.”

“Then by all means do it,” he encouraged.

“I don’t have any money.”

He half smiled. “Have whatever you want billed to me. No one will refuse you.”

She returned the smile shyly. “Thank you, Kastel. I- - I know I’ve been terrible. I’ll try to be better.”

“Do not fret over it.”

She backed out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her. One hoped this was the prelude to lighter spirits with her. She sorely deserved to smile again and truly mean it. Then his thoughts drifted back to the book and he forgot everything but his research.

* * *

Sera bundled up in a cloak and mittens and a scarf and prepared to plunge into the crisp northern afternoon. She was down the steps and half way across the courtyard when Gerad strode up to her and matched her pace.

“Oh. Hello.”

“Hello yourself, little girl. Glad to see you out and about.”

“I’m going into town.”

“I know.”

She squinted up at him.

“You’re not going by yourself,” he clarified.

She almost laughed. “I don’t need a body guard, Gerad.”

“Oh, well,” he lamented, shrugging.

“Gerad.”

“These are good folk, as a general rule, but they’re rough and hardened in a way that the people in Alsansir never will be. Different customs, different way of looking at a lone woman. There’s slavery in the north, little girl and even though it’s not practiced in Sta-Veron, slavers travel though this city. I’d prefer not to have to track you down through miles of snow if some slaver sets his sights on your pretty little self.”

“My pretty little self is not helpless.”

“I know.” It was useless to argue with him. Gerad was going into town with her.

They walked out of the gates of Kastel's castle and onto the streets of Sta-Veron. Buildings crowded close to the castle walls. There were shops and taverns right outside the gates. Most of those catered to the Winter King's militia.

"So, I hear you're pregnant."

She drew air in through her teeth and glared at him, exasperated. Did everyone know? Had word been posted on the castle walls?

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Humm. Don't much blame you. If it were any other black-hearted vermin who'd did it to you I'd have him on his knees begging for mercy before I castrated him. But, it wouldn't work with Dante. If you can regrow a heart, you can regrow a cock - - excuse the terminology."

She sniffed, not happy with the topic of discussion. She had come out here to not think about Dante. And now Gerad had her visualizing all sorts of lurid things. She folded her arms under the cloak and hugged herself. Gerad sighed and patted her shoulder.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. The castration thing was interesting."

He laughed. "So, Keitlan says we're going shopping."

"Keitlan obviously talks to much."

Most of the shops in Sta-Veron were geared more towards the utilitarian needs of the winter city. Sera paused at a tannery window, admiring a pair of high, fur lined winter boots. Gerad urged her to go in and look at them. They fit well and looked rather nice on her. She looked to Gerad uncertainly as she unlaced them.

"Go ahead, get them. Kastel's got deep pockets."

Which was all the encouragement she needed. She purchased from the same shop a large white fur coverlet for her bed, and a thick, soft pelt to cushion the window seat in her room. She directed everything but the boots, which she wore, to be sent to the castle. The merchant was all smiles when she left.

There was a weaver of rugs not far down the street. She wandered into the front showroom, fingering the utilitarian rugs that were on display. Rough weaves that would take the dirt and snow tracked in by heavy boots. She wanted something softer and more

appealing to the eye. Gerad lifted a canvas from a stack of carpets in the back, that boasted a bit more color and a finer weave.

“Why are these hidden away?” she asked the merchant, impressed with the pattern and the texture.

“People hereabouts aren’t as interested in luxury as they are in durability,” the merchant lamented.

Sera found a deep green one she liked and a smaller cream colored one to go before the window. “Do you have a carpet in your room?” she asked Gerad. He shrugged. “Stone floors are fine by me.”

“Give me this one too, for my friend,” she decided. “I’m looking for a wall covering. A thick tapestry to help insulate the cold. Can you recommend a shop?” The merchant did, and promised to have her carpets delivered that evening. The smell of cinnamon and spices caught Sera’s attention. There was a tavern where the smells originated and she gravitated that way. Apples right out of the oven, baked with sugar and spices and basking in a syrupy sauce. She had to have one. Gerad bought them both apples and mugs of ale. She found her appetite tremendously huge. The shopping had invigorated her. The apple was hardly enough and she ordered a bowl of stew and bread, gobbling it down with intensity that astonished Gerad.

Pleasantly sated she went in search of tapestries and found the little shop recommended. The merchant had a few small wall coverings amidst a cornucopia of odds and ends. He claimed to be an import/exporter who dealt in all manner of goods. She took the tapestries and was drawn to a bolt of fine cloth, thinking it would make a nice canopy for her bed. The merchant offered her a deal and she couldn’t refuse.

“If you’re interested in tapestries, I happen to have a shipment of large ones I had planned to ship south with the next merchant caravan. Captain Kiro refused to let it pass in the autumn when the army marched south - - so they’re stuck here till the spring thaw.”

“How big?”

“Oh, very. Fit for a palace.”

“Oh, my rooms not very big.”

His face fell. Sera chewed her lip. Gerad browsed among the knic knacs. “I could look at them anyway.”

They were in the back room. A great pyramid of rolled weavings that could have been carpets they were so large. The merchant, with her help partially unrolled one, which seemed to have a scene of some noble party hunting an impressive stag. It was western work, she was sure by the fineness of the stitching. There were six of them, all with different and delightful scenes depicted, the merchant assured her. She thought about the great, barren stone walls of the main hall and how nice they would look with a splash of color, with a buffer between them and the cold world outside.

“They’re probably very expensive.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“They would look very nice in lord Kastel’s main hall.”

“Oh, most assuredly they would. Tapestries of great worth used to adorn those walls.” The old man’s eyes gleamed. Sera lifted a curious brow.

“What happened to them?”

“Oh, years ago, when he took this city from the previous lord who ruled here, his men looted and stole a good deal of the riches the old lord had collected. When he decided to make Sta-Veron his home, he stopped the looting of course, and made restitution to the people here who had suffered under the hands of his army, but he never chose to refurbish the castle. He’s austere, you know and not much for the trappings of obvious wealth.”

“Oh, no,” Sera said, waving a hand in dismissal. “He’s just doesn’t take the time to notice. He gets distracted by his books and things.”

She was very certain of this. She was very certain that what Sta-Veron castle needed was a breath of life to chase away the somber cold grayness of perpetual winter.

“I’ll take them.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. And I was thinking - - there are bare halls and rooms aplenty - - do you know of a good weaver?”

* * *

Things began to appear in Sta-Veron castle gradually. Simple little things that one

hardly blinked an eye at, if one even chanced to notice them at all the first or second, or even sixth time one passed by. There was a long, narrow carpet in the hall outside the library that Kastel trod upon twice before realizing that it had not been there mere days before. He passed, on his way downstairs, a pair of chamber maids, who usually bowed their heads and scurried past him in silence, but today, merely curtsied respectfully before returning to their animated conversation regarding cushions for the new benches in the main hall. One hardly paid heed to the babbling of serving girls on a normal basis, but their excitement over the subject of mere cushions pricked a nerve of wary interest.

Down to the main hall, on his way out to the courtyard and the stables, much in need of a bit of cold, fresh air and a ride through the snow after days cloistered in his library, he noted that color splashed the tall walls of the hall. A fair number of people scurried here and there. There was the sound of hammering and sawing. There seemed to be a workshop set up near the great hearth. He stopped, half way across the hall, attention rebounding away from thoughts of riding and weeks of research into archaic lore, and snapping sharply to reality.

There were huge tapestries hanging from beneath the windows. Three of them on either side of the hall. There was a large, blue carpet covering the floor of the far end of the hall and at the doors a thick, coarsely woven mat that men carefully stomped their boots upon to rid them of snow and filth before proceeding on into the hall. Those that did not were scolded by any of the various maids working about the chamber.

A man carrying a long stack of planks over his shoulder came in from the cold, and Kastel had to step back to avoid the trailing end of the boards as the man half turned to answer some question from a boy carrying a bag of nails behind him. There seemed to be a fair number of new tables and benches gracing his hall. The old ones were stacked in a jumbled pile against one wall, some of them dismantled, for wood, one guessed, and ready to be hauled away. This was not the hall he had last set foot in - - during the Festival Feast? How long ago had that been? Time became elusive when he had his mind set on a certain goal. Two weeks? More?

He saw the stout form of his house keeper directing the workmen to keep off the new carpet and beckoned her over. She didn't notice him. He took a breath, beleaguered in the midst of the confusion in his own hall and walked across the hall towards her. One

of her girls saw his approach first and pulled at her mistress's dress to get her attention.

"Oh, my lord." Keitlan beamed at him, dusting her hands on her apron. "As you can see, things are going very well."

"So it seems." He gave her a look and turned and walked away from the fervent attention of the serving girl. When he had put distance between them and eager ears, he waved a hand around the room. "What, prey tell, is all of this?"

"Oh, the lady came to me and asked what I thought most needed attention and between the two of us we thought the great hall most needed the work, it being the face the castle shows to the world and all."

"You and the - - lady? Sera?"

Keitlan nodded. "She seems in such better spirits when we're about this, but I fear she still mopes when she's alone. It was such a generous thing you did for her. Nothing lifts a woman's mood like redecorating. The staff is enraptured by the whole thing, my lord."

He stared at her. He stared at the room behind her, vaguely recalling something about Sera asking if she might buy a few things. He had been rather distracted at the time. Keitlan was beaming at him. The staff was busily transforming the Spartan lines of the great hall. He wondered distractedly how much the lightening of Sera's depression was going to cost him.

* * *

The courtyard was more covered in icy mud than snow, from the passage of so many busy feet. One had to be careful treading across the slick surface, unless one wished to suffer the indignity of slipping. The air was frigid and still, the sky covered with a film of gray clouds that hid the sun behind their veil. It could be seen dropping to the west, a faint, glowing orb of brightness behind layers of distorting clouds. It did nothing to warm the day. Every living being in the yard expelled a cloud of fog with their breath.

Kastel made his way to the stables. Wagons trundled in and out of the gates, filled with lumber or goods of who knew what nature, or merely the daily produce that the

castle bought to feed its lord, staff and on duty guard. The stable master saw him coming and met him at the entrance to the stables, asking if he were up for a ride on such a cold day.

He was. He missed the white face of his favorite horse nickering at him over the edge of the most prominent stall door. The stable master had a thick coated, spirited chestnut saddled for him. The animal pricked its ears and nuzzled experimentally at his glove as stable boys rushed to give tail and mane a quick going over, aghast at the thought of their lord riding out on a horse not properly groomed.

Kiro appeared in the shadow of the stable doors when he was preparing to mount, looking as if he'd run to get here.

"Are you going out, my lord?"

"Yes."

"Shall I gather an escort?"

"No." Emphatically no. He was not in the mood for a procession of men following him on what would be more than likely an aimless excursion. He led the horse to the door, past his captain and paused.

"And what do you think of the remodeling of the great hall?"

"Oh, it's past due, my lord. A very good decision."

"Humm. I'd thought as much."

He swung up into the saddle and rode around a wagon stuck in an icy rut and the confusion of men trying to get the leverage to push it out. Down the cobbled streets of the city where the garlands of Winter Festival were almost gone. Out the main gates and past the surprised salutes of the city guard.

Snow. A vast field of that spread as far as the eye could see. Unbroken save for the packed trail leading into the city from the north, where the nearest line of forest could just be seen. Only the hunters ventured out this time of year. Sta-Veron had supplies to last the longest, harshest winter within her storehouses. Only the luxury of fresh meat and the furs and skins that came with it, prompted men to risk being caught in the wilderness during a long winter storm.

He headed down the trail, giving the chestnut its head. The young horse broke into a heady run, eager to stretch its legs after being confined to a stall for too long. It was

sure footed, bred to traverse snow and ice and hardly slipped or faltered along the slick path.

He thought that if Sera cured her melancholy with the revitalization of his castle, then so be it. He had never quite paid attention to the bareness of the floors or the stark nature of the walls. There were generally more dire things to occupy his attention. He wished he hadn't the need. He wished he could understand the reason things had gone so dreadfully bad for her. He had never, in all the years he had known Dante, truly understood the way his mind worked. Oh, he tried. He had spent years obsessing on it. And when he thought he had a clue, Dante simply changed. It was as if he did it apurpose, trying to keep everyone off their balance. Even those that loved him most.

Kastel had replayed his last conversation with Dante over and over in his head, trying to find a clue of what drove the man to repel what he had before cherished. It made no sense. It was as if he were punishing her for something, but Sera, from what small bit she would talk of their time together, seemed not to know what for.

It wouldn't last, though. It never did. Dante might hold his grudge and practice his animosity for a while, but eventually he always came back to place his claim on what he considered *his*. And when he did - - a year down the road - - two - - or even more, he would discover the secret they had withheld from him. Then there would be hell to pay.

Thirty

Keladedra sat upon the shores of an ocean, the blue western sea on one side and the hazy line of mountains on the other. It was a city of white stucco villas and flagstone streets that wound charmingly around the sprawling estates of its governmental palace. It was most certainly a retreat for the wealthy, for the prices were high and the services geared towards the tastes of people used to getting their own way in every matter. It sprawled about a protected cove, the shores of which were lined with exquisite and private villas, each with a private dock and grounds to match the gardens of Paradise.

It had been taken by the forces of Dante perhaps fifty years past. He had been so impressed by the lush charm of the place that he had kept it whole and unblemished by

the hand of his army. There had been a villa on the south side of the cove that he had claimed as his own and for some time had used it as a retreat from the rigors of conquering a world. He had not been there in a very long time.

Long enough for some fat merchant to have taken roost in it, no doubt paying a handsome rent to the city managers for the honor.

Kheron and Dante rode down from the mountain road and into the unwallled suburbs of the city. Brown skinned children ran laughing in the streets. Casual, if well-dressed men and women strolled the sidewalks, fat and content in life. Keladedra custodians patrolled unobtrusively, insuring that their sea side city remained a safe and trouble free haven for their wealthy citizens. There was no standing army in Keladedra. There was little threat of an attack from land, since most of the wealthy nobles of all the continents kingdoms had homes or at least vacationed in Keladedra.

There was a navy that patrolled the seas, keeping pirates at bay. Pirates were and always had been a problem to sea side cities, and doubly so for rich ones. But, Keladedra had one advantage to its neighbors up and down the coast. It had a barrier reef of unnatural origins that protected it during all but the highest tides. One had to know the channels to sail into the town unscathed, other wise the sunken skeleton of a city of old would rip the hulls from any ship heavy enough to ride more than a two meters under the waves. Sometimes, at low tide the ragged tops of the few remaining structures pierced the surface of the water, awesome reminders of how great the builders of the old world had been.

They rode through the city and down the colloquial road that led to Dante's villa. There were ivy covered white walls around it with iron gates locked tight. He corrected that matter with no more than a will and a touch and the gates swung open. The grounds were green with foliage even so late into the year. The flowers were not in bloom, but one could not have everything. Servants saw their approach down the lane and ran to the main house to inform their master of unannounced visitors. A fat, sweaty little ground hog of a merchant wheezed out onto the front porch to reproach their rudeness.

Dante swung down before his horse had quite stopped and tossed the reins to one of the dark skinned servants who stood gaping nearby. He looked over the facade of the villa. More ivy. More attention to the gardens around it. But, other than that changed

very little. It did not make him feel any better at the sight of it. He had hoped that it would do something to lift the black veil from his mood. All it did was piss him off that there was a grotesque little man waving a finger at him and demanding that he vacate *his* property. He thought about turning the irritating merchant into a puddle of molten sludge, but that would only have to be cleaned off the nice white porch. So he ignored him and stalked up the steps onto the covered porch. A few shy faces peeked out of windows, then quickly retreated when he walked by. Servants who were no doubt enthralled by the upset in their master's life.

The man marched after him, still babbling. He heard Kheron dismount and speak quietly to the almost hyperventilating merchant.

"You are mistaken. This is not your house. This is *his* house."

"It most certainly is not. I pay a hefty rent for this villa. I will have the custodians on you, if you don't leave."

"Do you know who he is?"

"I'm certain I don't care."

"He is Dante Epherian."

There was a long moment's pause. "The Silver Mage is dead."

Dante looked over his shoulder, black lashes at half mast. He smiled lazily, a glimmer of white teeth and malice. The merchant's sandals began to smoke. The man shifted uncomfortably, not understanding at first what was happening to him. Then he began to shift from foot to foot and finally looked down as smoke began drifting up from his feet. The soles of his sandals began to glow with red heat and the man screamed, scrambling backwards, falling onto his side and desperately kicking the burning shoes from his feet. The soles of his feet were blackened and charred. He kept screaming until Dante came to stand over him.

"Funny. I don't feel dead. You might be, if you're still here when I finish looking over the grounds. Oh and leave the domestics. I'll have use of them." He turned away and drifted down to the end of the porch, where steps led down to the beach. He heard the muffled complaints of the merchant. The threats of the man going straight to the city council with this outrage and Kheron's quiet encouragement to do just that. Then he was out of earshot and walking down the narrow path to the ocean, a cool wind from the

water bringing the smell of saltwater.

There was a pier a ways down the beach, with a small sloop rocking gently in the tide. His boots sank into white sand. He trudged out to where the sand turned dark from the soaking of the tide and stood staring out at the blue sea and the churning, smoke colored clouds that passed over her horizon. The wind whipped at his hair and sent his cloak billowing about him.

It had always been peaceful here, at the edge of a sea that seemed endless. It had always soothed his soul. He searched for some hint of the serenity, some small clue that he could find it if only he wanted it bad enough. And found nothing. Nothing but a hard, black knot that coiled somewhere between heart and gut and would not go away. It just lurked there and ate at him.

He gave it a name. Hate. He just didn't know who to aim it at.

He stood there for a long while. He heard Kheron's careful tread behind him. Her measured gait across the sand.

"He's gone," she said.

"Good. I wanted to burn him alive." He shivered. For a moment on that porch he had wanted more than anything to take that blathering life and reduce it to screaming ash. He had wanted to kill for the mere sake of slaking the thirst of that nasty little knot of hate inside him. And he did not want to be reduced to such a relief of pressure.

Somewhere along the way, he had picked up a semblance of morality that he had most certainly not started with. Sera's doing, he supposed. She had the most annoying habit of making him feel guilty or indebted, or responsible - - or miserable and on the wrong side of a matter when he had never doubted himself in all the long years of his life.

"Go away," he hissed at her ghost who plagued him even here on this beach.

"What?" Kheron looked up at him in surprise, her lips trembling in hurt offense.

"Not you. I'm not talking to you." He was able to get only a modicum of apology into his voice. She didn't ask, but he could see the plain question of just who he had been talking to in her golden eyes.

There was a gull in the distance that dipped and floated on the wind currents. He stared at it for a moment, then turned on his heel and stalked back towards the villa. Into the house and its cool, large rooms. A trio of servants, two girls and a boy, stared at him

in fear. Together they could not have totaled more than forty years. He stabbed a finger at them and ordered.

“Whatever personal things of his - - I want out of here. Dump them beyond the gates.”

They cowered, clutching at each other as if they expected him to cast some dire spell upon them.

“I only turn oily, fat merchants who don’t know their place in the world into frogs. Obedient servants are safe, I assure you.”

They nodded with superstitious reverence at the veracity of his words, then scampered towards the back of the house where the master bedchamber was to do his bidding.

“Well, we’re here. Now what shall we do?” He asked, after Kheron had come back in and he was sitting in the sunken formal room, his boots propped atop a glass topped marble table. There was a stray scarf on the floor that the servants had dropped in their march from bedroom to gates and back again. The merchant had had a fair number of clothes.

“Must we do anything?” she asked quietly. “We used to come here and do nothing but watch the sea and loose count of the days.”

“Ah, the good old days when I was out to conquer the world. Do you miss them?”

“Yes,” she almost whispered.

He lifted a brow. “What? All the widowed wives and orphaned children we left in our wake. I thought you had an issue with that?”

“I had you. None of the rest of it mattered.”

“You don’t now?” he asked archly, irritated.

She looked away, frowning and the little knot of hate pulsed, driving him to his feet in annoyance at all the hidden things behind her eyes. “Shall I prove it, Kheron?”

He caught her by the shoulders and kissed her, forcing her backwards with the roughness of it. She did not try and force him back. Her fingers caught at his cloak, trying to pull him closer. He backed her against the wall, tearing at the buckles of her armor, heedless of comfort or hurt in a driving need to release emotion. It worked its way down the hall and into the master bedroom and did not quite make it to the broad bed

itself, but culminated on the floor before it, with armor and clothing divested only enough to sate the passion.

Finally, when he was spent, she did push him off and rolled to her side away from him, clenching her fists to her breast. He lay on his back, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, having gained little satisfaction from the sex act.

“You vent your frustration on me,” she finally said. Not an accusation, there was no tone of that in her voice, but there was rancor and that he was not used to from her. “I don’t mind. But would you do the same to *her*? Or is she too pure to mar with violence.”

“Don’t go there, Kheron.”

She said no more. She rose, shedding the last of her armor and dropping it on the floor. She picked up an undergarment here and there, and donned them. Found her belt and her pouch and said.

“I’m going to buy some clothing. I’ve sore need of it. Would you come?”

He didn’t answer. Just lay there on the soft rug looking at nothing. So she left and the only other sounds after she had gone were the servants trying to quietly creep about their own chambers.

* * *

The Keladedra Custodians did not come barging down the gates at the merchant’s request. A trio of town councilmen did, bearing gifts and a conciliatory and abject apology for any inconvenience. Dante stared them down with a sardonic cant to his brows and an intimidating silence while they babbled on about how if he had just let them know he was coming they would certainly have made his villa ready. They had not forgotten what was his in Keladedra, after all. But, it just wasn’t good business to let such a lovely house go to waste. Surely he could understand that. Was there anything they could do for him? Anything at all? They would be most happy to accommodate any of his wishes if only he might refrain from injuring any more of their prominent citizens.

He agreed to think about it.

The eldest girl of the three servants was a passingly good cook. They took their

meals out of the verandah more times than not, with the sea as an ever changing backdrop. The weather was good on this side of the mountains. Winter brought cool air and water too cold for swimming, but true cold weather never marred the city. Spring time was a marvel here. He remembered it well.

He took the sloop out into the cove, where the water was so clear you could see the sand of the bottom. Nothing but water and more water and the quiet to loose one's self in. He spent hours out there, drifting, trying not to think at all, just riding the gentle swells and loosing himself to the motion.

Sometimes Kheron went too, but he preferred to be alone and she knew it. She would cast him dark, unreadable looks from beneath her thick fringe of hair when he came back in, but never commented.

He was bored by the end of a month. The knot still pulsed at his core. He slept with Kheron, but his dreams were plagued with images of Sera and he woke cursing his subconscious. When had she gained such power?

He supposed when he decided that he couldn't have her. That was generally the way of things. The forbidden fruit always being the most coveted. He tried to reason it out that way, but self-analysis had never held much allure for him. He was what he was and for the most part that was astoundingly good. He was doing an incredibly chivalrous thing here, he had to keep reminding himself. She was so much better off without him. She would find happiness elsewhere.

Which got him thinking about how and with whom. Happiness for a woman generally involved a man. The image of Sera with some other man sent fingers of cold rage up his spine. He much preferred the thought of her becoming a Sword Maiden and remaining a virgin in service of her goddess. Of course the virgin thing was out of the question now, but every one knew the Sword Maidens were not on a whole completely pure.

But, considering her banishment from Alsansir and her holy order, that was no longer an option. Which left her wasting away a lonely spinster or finding a man to claim her. She wouldn't have a problem there, being Sera and young and lovely and desirable in every way. She would find a husband very quickly, which meant he would have to kill a man. There was no way he could stand by knowing another man shared her bed and

not destroy the brigand who invaded his territory. Of course one would have to do this without her knowing, which raised a whole different problem. His head hurt with it.

One afternoon, after drifting in the sloop for hours, doing nothing more ingenious than staring at the movement of clouds in the sky, the boat drifted past the jutting, much corroded remnant of one of the channels ancient obstacles. Kheron, who had elected to come out with him today, leaned along the boat rail, looking down into the blue green depths at the dark shadows of a long sunken city. He moved to stand beside her, staring at the rusted, pitted shape of an I-beam. He tried to recall what the name of this city had been and the memory eluded him. He wasn't certain he had ever known. He thought he should have, but so much of the time before was shadowed in uncertainty. He crossed his arms over his bare chest, shivering of a sudden, unsettled by a change in the wind pattern. His hair blew across his face. Kheron's locks tickled his arm and back.

He had the urge to see what the centuries of decay hid below reef growth and silt. He wanted to see the bones of this city to absolve the sense of morbidity that he could not seem to shake. He stepped up to the side of the boat and Kheron demanded to know what he was doing.

"Nothing." He told her before he stepped off and into the water. The cold enveloped him. The darkness did. He closed his eyes and sank, enthralled by the feeling of drifting downwards, pressed by the weight of the water. He did something similar to a healing that staved off his lung's cry for oxygen. He was comfortable at the newness of water surrounding him. Water was not his element. The ocean was not an easily controllable force. That much water, so unfathomable a power, tended to overwhelm magic. There had always been the old legends that water and witches didn't mix. There was some truth in it.

He summoned a witchlight, that hovered over his head like a greenish spotlight, casting the world in an eerie, lurid glow. He sank past a great ridge. A barnacle, coral covered vertical drop regularly interspersed with cavernous openings. Windows. Row and rows of windows, all leading into blackness. Fish swam in and out of the openings, schools turning and fleeing from the sudden light that had invaded their world. He expanded the light and moved away from the ridge. They spread before him. An endless panorama of decay. Of bones, mostly broken and crumbled, but some still standing in

one form or another, of what had once been a city vaster by far than the tiny resort town that sat on the edge of land where this metropolis had broken off from.

A shark swam by him, interested, but not threatening. He watched it momentarily, fascinated by the sensuous rhythm of its movements. A pair of pilot fish swam in its wake, hoping to feed off the scraps of its kills. He sank deeper. The bottom was an uneven mass of coral reefs and sand covered secrets. All the bodies had been washed away long ago, picked to pieces by all the hungry denizens of the sea. All that was left were the things that could not be eaten so quickly, but were eaten all the same, by corals and barnacles and all the living things that needed surfaces to grow on and thrive. Something stuck perpendicular up out of the silt, so rusted and wasted away as to be almost unrecognizable. One section of a train, he thought. It was too large to be a bus or a trolley car.

A vision flashed behind his eyes. Fire, and booming explosions. Sirens blaring in the background. Cars, trucks, buses, all manner of vehicles crashing into one another in their efforts to escape the destruction. The screech of metal as a train tried to stop in time to avoid a section of track that had been ripped away and being to late. Buildings crumbled. People died by the thousands, killing each other more efficiently than the biological monster that had been released upon them. But only for a while. The monster caught up.

He forgot the spell and sucked water into his lungs. The witchlight faltered in his surprise, in his sudden disorientation. His ears rang. Out of the depths it seemed a thousand, rushing voices called for vengeance. He shot to the surface, breaking through the waves and into the air above, hovering above the mast of the sloop which rocked not far away. He coughed water, blinked it out of his eyes. Kheron stared down at him, her dusky face drawn with concern for him, when it was she that floated over a graveyard.

But they hadn't called out for her. He thought he was going insane. It wouldn't be the first time.

* * *

There was a round, central fire place in the sunken formal room of the villa. It was

seldom used, since the weather stayed so fair. It roared tonight. He had caused it to blaze without benefit of fuel and sat before it, unable to shake the clammy coldness of the sunken necropolis.

"I don't understand you," Kheron said, leaning against the doorway of the bed chamber, a goblet in hand. He said nothing, staring into the flames.

"You have your moods. How well I know them. But never this self-aimed morosness that you cannot seem to shake. What eats at you, Dante? Is it her? Why did you leave her if it is so? You never denied yourself anything you wanted in the past. Far from it. You took what you want and the world be damned. Why is it so different with that girl? All you've done since we left Gerad and Kastel is to moon over her."

Still he wouldn't speak. She moved into the room, her shoulder against the wall.

"Did I ever make you feel this way? Did you ever torture yourself over me, while you were sleeping with every woman that caught your eye?"

"Why should I have?" he said without turning, a low seething voice. "You were always so accommodating as to turn the cheek."

"Oh, should I have cried and showed you and the world the hurt so blatantly? Would it have made a difference, other than to make others pity me?"

"No." A whispered honesty.

"No," she cried in agreement, throwing the goblet past him. It crashed into the fire and the flames roared with the addition of wine as fuel. "So you know why I didn't. But she does and - - lo, you can't stop thinking about her."

"You don't know what I think."

"Why should you care? *You* left her. Your choice. What did she do to make you yearn for her so? What virginal little lies did she tell you? Was she even a virgin?"

"Shut up, Kheron."

"You shut up," she hissed at him. "I don't know what you see in her. She's not that special. Just another little pale skinned religious whore."

"Shut up! She's pure. In a way that you or I can never be. Don't slander her."

"I wish she were dead. I wish the child she carries were dead." She stopped suddenly, drawing a horrified breath.

He stopped breathing at all. The rushing in his ears that had persisted since the

ocean graveyard pounded to a crescendo. He whirled to face her, eyes blazing, fists clenched, a pit opening at his feet that seemed to want to suck him bodily into it. He fought the vertigo.

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t mean it.” She shook her head, some slight fear entering her eyes.

“What did you say?” He rose and stalked towards her.

“It was said in anger. I wouldn’t really - -”

He grabbed her arms and shook her so hard her head snapped back and forth.

“What did you say, Kheron? What child?”

She cried out in half anger, half pain and tried to wrench out of his grip.

“Don’t think you can bully me,” She cried, and an explosive force erupted between them, staggering him backwards a few steps. She fled towards the porch, tears streaking her face. He roared a word and the front of the house went up in a wall of raging fire. She skidded to a stop, and turned to face him, back to the flame, eyes wide with dread.

“What do you want of me?” she screamed past the inferno. “Couldn’t you guess? I half thought you turned away from her because of it.”

“No.” The breath shuddered in his chest. The flames went out. The smoke remained. His eyes went hollow and shaken. He felt as if all the power, the magic, the strength and breath had been stolen from him. The knot in the center of his being pulsed, laughing at him maniacally and he knew who the hate was pointed at. Himself.

He had perpetrated those cruelties on Sera and she had already been impregnated with his seed. Had that bitch *Mother* known? Of course, nature would. He had thought he was so clever in distancing himself from her, protecting them both, even if it hurt. And all the time - - all the damned time, it had been too late. Small wonder she’d looked so tragically disconsolate. Carrying his child and him snubbing her as harshly as he knew how. And hiding it from him. How had Kheron found out?

“Who told you?”

Kheron’s hands were shaking. She clutched them together to stop the trembling and lifted her chin proudly. “Kastel. She felt the need to tell him and not you.”

“Kastel?” Oh, beautiful. Not only did he criticize Dante’s action, he hid the fact that Dante’s woman was pregnant. The fire in the hearth roared up so violently it licked

the ceiling.

But indignation only lasted a breath, drowned by the notion of Sera having that child and loosing it to a bargain he had made, all by herself. He sat down on the back of the couch, stunned by the enormity of what he had wrought. No other monumental act of his had quite left him as drained and empty as this one. He had left her; driven her away to protect her and wriggle out of a bargain he hadn't wanted to make in the first place.

Kheron came up beside him, and he hardly noticed her presence. She stood with her fists clenched, her wrists crossed over her breast, staring at his profile.

"So she's carrying a child. Why does that change anything? Why do you suddenly give a damn about anyone but yourself? You never have before." She was trying to sound reasonable. She was trying to control her voice, but there was fear in it.

"You knew this and didn't tell me." He glared up at her from under his lashes. She drew a shaky breath.

"Don't place the blame on me." She threw her head back and laughed desperately. "I can't even convince myself you should place it on *her*, though she should have been the one to tell you. It is your fault, Dante. No one else's. Blame yourself."

He did. And damned if he wouldn't fix it.

* * * *

End of Book 1 of the Silver Mage series.

Look for the next books in the series.

Book 2: The Winter King

Book 3: The Black March