

Savant's Blood

Hecate's Bounty



Will Greenway

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Savant's Blood Book 2: Hecate's Bounty

By Will Greenway

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SAVANT'S BLOOD BOOK 2: HECATE'S BOUNTY

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All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names. Any resemblance to individuals known or unknown to the author are purely coincidental.

Dedication

To the unsung heroes of the creative world: comic creators. My hat is off to the page and cover artists who sweat blood for their craft and work a magic all their own. Not to snub anyone, comics wouldn't exist without the writers who provide the narrative and dialogue. Word-smithing has its challenges, but it is a chimera of an all-too-different color from truly skilled and inspired hero art. So, a sweeping bow to those artists who inspired me in my childhood, and made me struggle to bring involving and engaging written life to the "super" heroes (and villains) of the Ring Realms. 'Nuff said?

A Word (or two) About Mythology

Welcome to the Ring Realms universe, a cosmology populated by magic, technology, gods, goddesses, and multi-verses. Comic fans will feel right at home, but fandom is not necessary to be drawn into the world's magic and heroism. Those learned in mythology may see a name (or a score of them) that they recognize. Intentional. In fact, I've taken heat for not creating my own gods and goddesses. Key to the point is they ARE my gods and goddesses, and you the reader's as well. I wanted something familiar to the readership rather than add EVEN MORE bizarre names to the milieu--something that is one of the all-too-common pitfalls of fantasy writing. If you see a name you recognize, rejoice in that knowledge because where possible I have tried to keep to the spirit of those myths whilst incorporating them into a much larger cosmology. Notice, I say 'spirit of'--please don't flagellate me (however much I might enjoy it) for not adhering more closely to the source myths. Liberal dramatic license has been taken in order to heighten and enrich the story... Enjoy.

Other books in the chronicles of the Ring Realms

Reality's Plaything Series -- Tales following the adventures of Bannor Starfist.

Reality's Plaything

Neath Odin's Eye

Gaea's Legacy

Savant's Blood Series -- Tales following the adventures of Wren Kergatha.

Savant's Blood: Shadows of the Avatar

Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty

Aesir's Blood

Gaea's Blood

Shaladen Chronicles Series -- Tales following the adventures of Corim Vale.

Shaladen Chronicles: A Knot In Time

Shaladen Chronicles: Anvil of Sorrow

Shaladen Chronicles: Who Mourns the Creator

What Has Gone Before

Wren Idun-daughter and her partner Grahm Tuffala, members of the Brethren Guild are charged with a hit on the Malicent gem, the prize possession of the wizard Cinnibar. After a close scrape with the wizard himself, they make their way back to the guild only to discover a rival guild, The Cult of the Dagger, are now roaming the streets with plans of revenge on the Brethren and its guild mistress, Desiray. Wren enters the Brethren headquarters only to find their defenses a shambles and confusion rampant. She attempts to set matters aright but before she can do so, the Cult attacks. Grahm is slain and Wren barely escapes after a close run-in with the Dagger Guild leader, an axe-faced priest of Set named Hethanon.

Wren seeks out her long-time friend Ishtar Priest Jharon Ko who heals her wounds and consoles her loss. While asleep in the temple, Wren experiences a "dream" where she meets an apparently alive Grahm, who urges her to move forward with her life and meet him later. Upon her awakening, she has an amulet in the shape of a phoenix around her neck. Perplexed, but wondrously healed of her shock and grief, Wren, with the assistance of Jharon, seeks the assistance of a Sovereign of Isis to teleport her to the city of Ivaneth, the location where guild mistress Desiray is most likely to be located. There Wren seeks out the wizard of Ivaneth. Instead of finding the mythical wizard, she finds Cassandra, a star-eyed gold-skinned mage of incredible knowledge and power. Wren explains what has happened to the guild, and from a picture in Wren's mind, the mage recognizes the Dagger Cult leader as Hethanon, one of the avatars of Set. The mage has a powerful hatred for the avatars and entrusts the starwand dagger *Corona* into Wren's keeping and brings Wren and Desiray together. The guild mistress and Wren are immediate enemies, and before they fight the Dagger guild they resolve their own issues through force of arms. Eventually, they do confront Hethanon and both are seriously injured and fall prey to the Jikartandak poison, a magical toxin of concentrated hate.

Set's Jikartandak is so virulent that Cassandra's only solution to purge it from Wren's body is to burn it out. Life fading quickly and in a comatose dream-state Wren meets Damay Alostara the greatest of the force savants whose spirit has been trapped in the phoenix amulet. The elder savant encourages Wren and helps her to use her savant power to survive the ordeal.

Surviving, but critically injured, Cassandra takes Wren, along with Jharon, to the citadel of Loric Felspar to heal her destroyed body. There she meets a whole host of entities. There they get caught up in the games of immortals. Wren must step lively as her power as a savant of forces is revealed, making her a target for the many creatures of power who live in Loric's demesne.

A surprise encounter with the avatar Mishaka, reveals to Wren that the moon-witch has imprisoned her family, and that her parents and brother are still alive and being kept captive in an unknown location. Noble Jharon is slain in the encounter, leaving Wren to grieve the loss of her friend, and the frustration of not uncovering her parents whereabouts.

Wren's grief over her lost friends and family lasts seasons during which she begins to form a bond with Desiray, and Vera the house maid. She discovers that Vera is actually a master of open hand combat and begins practicing the G'Yaki 'dances' with her. These new disciplines help her to cope with her loss and strengthen her mind and body.

Wren eventually heals and learns of her heritage as a savant and their link to the ancient creatures the First-ones. She discovers quite by accident that she can summon the living doors to the First-one treasures, the phoenixes. In a fit of pique

she lets slip to the elders Sindra and Drucilla that she has this ability thereby setting into motion an eventual conflict.

In the interim, Wren has come up with a plan for dealing with Mishaka, she will get Damay out of the phoenix amulet and return her to the world of the living. This plan is complicated by a need for powerful magicks that she cannot perform without a rather large gem and the assistance of a powerful mage. By a process of elimination she arrives at the questionable choice of enlisting the aid of Gabriella Sarn Ariok, the Dragon Queen of Silissia. She succeeds in making the deal but getting far more than she bargained for.

Soon after, armored men try to kidnap Wren and only a vicious assault by Vera and Gabriella can turn them away.

In an outing to Ivaneth, Wren reveals to Desiray her secret power with the phoenixes and her deals with Sindra and Gabriella. This spurs Desiray to the decision that she and Wren should themselves open a phoenix, which they do. The mystic bird opens up the path to Starholme Prime, the last bastion of the ancient First-ones and a massive artifact for creating magic. It is there that Wren meets Gaea, the birth-mother of Eternity and the First-ones. Gaea gives Wren and Desiray several secrets and a weapon to defend themselves against the elders, and endorses Wren's plan to restore Damay.

Upon their return to Ivaneth, Wren runs into her old friend Ziedra who rapidly gets embroiled in the action. Wren moves forward with her plan to recreate Damay. It is during her final preparations that Wren learns that she has been entered in the great "game", which has a mandatory participation clause.

Wren rushes to heist the gem she needs, and do the enchantments that will restore Damay. She succeeds, but only barely. The game starts, and it is announced that the gem that Wren has stolen is also the single most important score in the game. Now, she must participate in a game with powerful immorts, not even knowing the rules, but having in her possession the very thing that all of them will kill for...

Chapter 1

Savant Down and One Hundred

Wren didn't have much time to decide. Desiray had already been to Ziedra's flat, and no doubt had figured out by now that Wren had managed to make the big score. Why she hadn't just teleported in, Wren didn't know. Either way it would only take the guild mistress moments to reach this spot, especially with it still being in the early morning hours. There was no time to conceal Damay other than to throw a blanket over her, best to simply try to lead any treasure seekers away.

She plunged out the door and down the steps. A sliver of dawn light colored the eastern horizon. Pernithius the harvest moon still loomed large and visible in the sky. A few lone people were moving about on the street. She reached the walkway, glanced north, saw no-one coming and ran south as fast as she could toward the guard-house. She ducked into an alley and put her back to a wall. Taking deep breaths, the salt tang and the fetidness of old refuse burned her nose. In the distance, the sound of waves crashing rode just above the edge of hearing.

She focused on that part of her head that tingled every time the moderator spoke. She remembered the way Desiray addressed the moderator, and the way she'd phrased questions.

<Moderator,> she thought. <Mortal proxy requesting information.>

Her heart jumped when a reply came back. This time though she sensed the words were focused for her perception only. It had worked! <Request for information acknowledged. State your query.>

She swallowed and glanced back toward the street. Best to keep moving, even if only slowly. She picked her way through the debris toward the shadows at the far end. <Moderator, where will points be posted?>

The voice spoke in a dry tone. <Official posting occurs in Riverback village, sector L-0, one half league due east-by-north-east of the lee side barbican. Advisory: freelance proxies may not post points until the last quarter bell of game play. Points must remain in play until quarter four. Proxy's score of six-hundred stays recorded even after transfer or possession change.>

Wren shook her head. Everyone playing would try to intercept her. ****Information requested, win condition stipulations, proxy Idun-daughter. Move logged.****

So, every communication or action was echoed to the players, but only after it was complete. Wren felt itchy, some sense said that people that she couldn't see or hear were looking for her. She would prefer to try and hide until the last moments of the game, and then ask the moderator for a teleport request. She wagered that wouldn't be allowed, otherwise that strategy would always win.

****Moderator intercession: game freeze is now enforce. All players will hold position. Information requested, pre-emptive proxy rules clarification. Complaint logged, judgment pending.**** Wren looked around. She thought she heard wood creak nearby. Someone on a roof? She looked up to buildings within sight. Damn mages could be invisible if they wished, and could make others that way. She wondered if the game had rules for that.

****Current rules, as written, allow mortal proxies to preemptively enter game play up to eight hours prior to start. This is a legacy rule enforced previous to the recent addition of random start times. Proxy Idun-daughter's**

score occurred within the stipulated window, and obeyed the letter of all game rules. Game balance considerations aside, it is the moderator's ruling that this is a legitimate score. Game play commences, all players have a ten count grace, judges to clash observance. Ten, nine, eight...**

Wren didn't wait. It seemed like a prime time to make herself as hard to find as possible. She jumped a low fence and ran through an inner courtyard and into the cover of a tight space where an old three-story house had collapsed into the side of another. She glanced back the way she'd come, still seeing no evidence of the presences she'd sensed.

The moderator had finished counting down moments before, but all she heard was the thumping of her heart. She needed to figure out her best option.

A cool but familiar voice rang in her head. <Wren? Where are you?>

It was Desiray.

She concentrated and answered the woman. <Avoiding getting my arms ripped off. What do you think?>

The woman's mental voice lowered. <Where are you?>

She decided at that moment, that where the game was concerned she couldn't trust anyone. She moved further into the cramped space, making sure she couldn't be seen.

<Wren?>

Her bet was that Desiray could locate her mental voice as easily she could if she were speaking aloud. It made sense that any group of people who used mindspeak as often as Cassandra's family would develop such a skill.

<Wren? What's the matter?>

She held still. Others besides Desiray were in the area. Poachers no doubt waiting for her to come up with the score, so they could take it. Last thing she needed was to get caught in the middle.

****Team Targallae, B-5, score fifty points, magic free bonus, bystander injury penalties apply. Score recorded. Move logged.****

She needed to know more about this game. Like--How did she protect herself? Obviously, if she had no score to gain or lose, some rules didn't restrain her.

She tried to tighten her thoughts down. <Moderator, requesting further rules clarification. I was entered into this game without clashes being explained to me.>

There was a trace of irritation in the moderator's thought. <You will have a one time 30 count grace to resolve these issues. Judge summoned. Transferring contact to judge Steelwood for consultation.>

****Consulting judge, teleport request, A-3. Transcript updated.****

Wren felt an odd sensation. What happened? She thought she was going to get an answer to her question.

A voice, low and feminine came from the darkness right beside her. "Hello, Wren."

The sound made her jerk and hit her head against the wall. "Ow!" She gripped her skull. "Shhh! Not so loud." The voice had sounded familiar, but she couldn't immediately put a face to it. In the darkness, she couldn't see enough details to identify the figure.

"I have control of this game sector, no one will hear us. What seems to be the problem?"

"This game is the problem! It started before anyone told me the rules. I didn't even know that gem was one of the goals in the game. Now, I find out the way I got it makes it worth six hundred points! I'm going to get slaughtered, aren't I?"

Wren's eyes had adjusted enough that she could tell that this woman was extremely tall. The lady identified as judge Steelwood sighed. "Yes, there's a good chance you'll

get mangled the instant you try to hand-off. There are ten players guarding this sector."

"Ten? I only heard three moves!"

"You heard three *teleports*. Movement on foot or by flight isn't announced or recorded. I've already told you more than I should. I was directed to give you clash clarification, nothing else. Clashes are resolved by a controlled non-lethal attack that has the potential to or actually causes injury of a superficial nature. The wound may not be any deeper than the length of an eyelash, and must be struck between the shoulders and knees. Clash goes to first-blood. The loser must drop all items and retreat for a ten count. Sorry, time's up..." There was a dim flash of light and a soft popping sound and she was gone.

Great. She mumbled to herself. *That* really cleared things up. She tightened the straps on the backpack. No matter what, if she stayed in one place she was fruit ripe to be plucked. Drawing a breath, she picked her way through the ruins of the collapsed house. Normally, she would have headed immediately to the rooftops where she would be able to see potential opponents, and her climbing ability gave her an advantage. Not with this group of people. She saw Desiray fly, and if the guild mistress had the ability... so would others.

The moderator crackled to life in her head. ****Team Ariok, C-3, 50 points, magic use penalties apply, bystander bonus applied. Score recorded. Move logged. Team D'Shar, D-5, 75 points, magic bonus, bystander bonus. Score recorded. Move logged. Team clash, A-3--Tarrantil defeats Felspar Scores updated. Move logged.****

Wren shook her head, the game was going on all around her, and she had not even a clue as to what was happening even with the moderator's narrative in her head. It sounded like Cassandra's team was getting pounded though. The gold mage was probably miffed about that.

She still couldn't shake the sense that there were players searching for her. Desiray at least was prowling nearby, no doubt thinking as did others that getting that gem would win the game. That was provided they could hang on to it. If Dorian was right, this gem was huge leverage were she to get in a position to negotiate. At the moment, negotiation didn't seem likely. When they found her, it would be a feeding frenzy. She didn't relish having a half-dozen warriors and mages locked in a tug-of-war over her body.

Her best bet was to stay under cover and get as close to Riverback village as possible while staying out of sight. She could break for the post in the last moments of the game when everyone else would be tangled up trying to score themselves. Instinct told her, even that simple strategy might be difficult to implement.

She placed her feet carefully, picking around the debris so as not to make noise. This was not a good time to try to move through the city unheard. This early, few people had risen and she didn't have the clamor of everyday life to mask unavoidable noises.

The alley beyond the ruin opened into a large square. The greatest danger would be getting across. She assumed at least one person able to fly would guard the open areas.

Wren crept forward, hugging one side of the alley, watching the slice of sky above, and keeping an eye toward the square.

"Got you!"

The wall seemed to come alive behind her. A hand clamped on her shoulder and an arm shot around her neck to cut off her air.

A hum went through the back of Wren's skull so fierce it hurt. A blue glow erupted around her body. The hand gripping her shoulder slipped off and the arm barring her neck shocked away.

"Ow! Hey!"

Wren caught a glimpse of red hair as she dove and rolled. Not knowing what other powers these people might possess she took no chances. She spun and launched three of her throwing knives, two from one hand, one from the other.

It was good that she did.

Wren's red-haired opponent was her size, dressed in a jerkin and leggings painted for city camouflage. Wren had thrown with all her strength, hard and straight. Her attacker swung her arms with amazing speed, two of Wren's blades deflected off thick metal bands on the woman's wrists. The third blade that she aimed for the side of the lady's thigh parted the cloth.

****Team clash, A-3—I dun-daughter defeats Felspar. Scores updated. Move logged.****

The woman looked down at her leg and slapped a hand to the tiny wound.

"Objection!" She screamed. "Clash must be controlled! No way was that intentional!"

As soft popping sound emanated from the air right by the red-haired woman. A shimmering surrounded the alley and a young man with short dark hair, dressed in a black leather vest and leggings, appeared--Loric's son Farveth. Silently, he gestured and a globe of what looked like water sparkled into being. In the globe, an image appeared. It showed the woman flicker, going from looking like a portion of the wall, to a person, she grabbed Wren and was knocked back as a blue glow shot around her body. The image showed Wren leap forward, roll, turn, and throw.

"Sorry, Arabella," the young man said in a flat tone. "She just suckered you. She clearly targets your left and right arms, as well as your leg."

"Dragon flop! Moderator! Nobody can throw three damn knives at once with control!"

****I can.**** The moderator's deep voice rumbled back with a dry tone. ****Team Felspar: penalty--ten points for arguing a judgment. Transcript updated.****

"Oh, *frig!*" Arabella smashed a fist against the wall, explosively turning several bricks to dust.

Wren backed up a step. Despite their relative size, she did not want this short tempered woman mad at her. She was at least as strong as Beia!

<Good going, hot head,> Wren heard Cassandra say in mindspeak.

The young man swung his arm. The globe vanished and the shimmering around the alley stopped.

Wren turned and sprinted down the alley as fast as she could go. As she reached an intersection, instinct told her to dive. Something snapped through the air as she lunged, she twisted, caught her weight on her hands and cart-wheeled to her feet.

<Damn, she's fast,> a man's mental voice cursed behind her.

<Shut up and chase!>

She caught a glimpse of something kicking up the dust of the alley behind her. It moved fast and only made distortions in the air. She didn't have any knives left to throw.

"Moderator A-10!"

****Exceeds 4 grid distance limit. Move request denied.****

"Oh dammit!" She dived around a corner, as something slammed hard into the brick, sending fragments of masonry shooting past her. She righted herself, charged a dozen steps and vaulted a wooden fence. Behind her, the wood shattered with an

explosive crash. Three figures resolved out of the shadows ahead of her. They all looked identical in dead-black armor with mirrored faceplates.

Hurtling toward them, she recognized these people were wearing the same armor as the ones that tried to kidnap her a few nights back. They braced to receive her charge. Wren felt the body hissing along behind her only hairs away. At the last possible instant, she dove at their feet. They never saw the juggernaut that slammed into them, there was a deafening crash of metal on metal, followed by scathing curses.

"Moderator B-6!" she tried again.

A black maw opened around her with a rasp of flashing magic. Sparks shot through her vision and a sensation of falling made her cry out. Wren dropped out of the air and landed feet first on an unfamiliar street. The crackle of magic sizzled into silence, the strands of the enchantment dissipating into smoke. It felt like she'd been punched in the stomach.

****Team Idun-daughter, teleport request B-6. Move logged.****

Panting, Wren looked around. This was bad. She had narrowly avoided those armored kidnappers. If it hadn't been for her accidental rescuer they might have already spirited her off. Could she declare an emergency.

"Moderator," she called. "Are their rules for unauthorized people interfering in the game? If there are, I'd like to report three individuals who have hindered another player pursuing me."

She waited, but the moderator did not respond.

"Moderator?" she asked again.

****State your request, team Idun-daughter.****

"I'd like to report unauthorized interference in the game. People after me."

Wren felt a cold chill as no answer came back.

"Moderator?"

****Idun-daughter, make your request, or you will be penalized for annoying the moderator.****

She didn't like this at all. The kidnappers were back, and somehow they were associated with the game master.

Chapter 2

Penalty on the Play

Heart still beating fast and throat dry, Wren looked around and saw nothing familiar. The moderator's teleportation had deposited her in an enclosed courtyard with an old three-story temple on one side. Vines and trees had overgrown most of the outlying buildings, and the air smelled of burned wood and street salts. Twenty paces up the side of the temple, a chunk had been broken out of the wall; probably from a ground tremor. It looked big enough that a small person might get through. Unless her pursuers knew about her climbing ability they wouldn't think she could get up the smooth brick.

Hiding was the only course of action right now. Having the moderator teleport her had been an act of desperation. Now, *all* the players knew what area she was in. That might include the kidnappers. Even if they didn't know, they could follow the players combing the area for her.

She sprinted across the courtyard and leaped onto the wall. Wren felt the snarl of her climbing ability in the back of her skull as she scrambled up toward the hole and squeezed through.

Inside, it stank of old dust and dead bugs. She flailed to get cobwebs out of her hair. The crack opened into a section between the supporting walls and not a room inside the temple. It was dank inside and the single slice of light from the crack provided minimal illumination. To be safe she moved so as not to be visible from the yard below.

What did she do now? It seemed that the moderator was either involved with the kidnappers or conveniently ignoring anything to do with them. What had happened with Damay? She doubted Desiray had found her, otherwise she'd probably have received some telepathic message by now.

Wren removed her pack. She saw no sense in risking the loss of the gem. She looked around and found a spot that would be impossible to reach unless the person could fly or climb on a ceiling. She clambered up and wedged the leather satchel into the opening. She pulled some cobwebs over the spot and threw a handful of dust across it for camouflage.

Now, as long as she survived to tell the tale she could always come back for the gem. She hated giving up the opportunity to possibly negotiate for allies to help get Mishaka, but she had to be realistic. If she didn't find some way to deal with those armored men she'd end up in a cell or worse.

Now to get out without being seen coming from this area. She noticed that the back half of the chamber opened into the temple proper where the tremor had shaken part of the ceiling out. Wiggling through the opening, she dropped down into the shadowy temple interior. The plaster and bricking of the walls was cracked and broken, defaced by names and pithy sayings scratched into the stone. Splinters and metal strapping strewn across the rubble clogged floor were all that remained of the pews, long since picked over by the street people.

She slipped across to the far side, seeing light coming through an opening. The sill opened into a section overgrown with bushes. She pushed into the foliage, leaves and twigs stinging her face as she dove under and rolled to her feet on the far side. She'd

heard no-one teleport or score for a while. What was going on with the game? Had she been cut off from messages?

Wren jogged down an alley and looked south and east. In the distance, half way across town she could make out the top of Cassandra's tower. How long had it been since she sneaked over that wall? It seemed like a lifetime. Little had she known her whole existence would change once she got to the other side.

She turned north and kept moving. It was still early, the sun barely painting the eastern horizon. The scud of early morning clouds looked thin enough that it would burn off by midmorning. This would be a hot day. People were starting to come out, beginning their mornings. She saw a few shopkeepers sweeping out their establishments in preparation for business.

Things in her head had been quiet for so long that when the moderator's thought boomed in her thoughts, it knocked her off balance and she had to catch herself against a wall. ****Falor defeats Tarrantil. Possession changeover. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Breathing hard, she held her breath from being startled. So, she hadn't been cut off. Apparently, they abandoned the initial search for her to go after other scores. Where did she go now? Back to Damay? She hated leaving her at such a critical stage. The elder savant was going to be confused and disoriented, wondering what in Hades had happened. Especially waking up in body that wasn't her own.

No, she might accidentally lead the kidnappers to Damay. Hiding was a bad choice. She didn't know how they found her, whether through informants in the game, luck, or some magical form of tracking. If they did it once, they probably could do it again. Logically, her staying in one spot it made it easier for them.

Keeping her feet moving, eying every side path and roof, she kept to the shadows. She scanned the sky overhead. It was so damn quiet. After all kinds of teleports and moves, abruptly this silence. She assumed players were stalking other players or trying for scores. If any of the other objects were anywhere near as hard as getting that gem, she could see why there might be a lapse. Whoever set up that score knew a lot about thieving, magic, and traps. Brin--that's the name Desiray mentioned--Dorian's husband. She guessed it was fitting that sneaks should marry each other.

Letting out a breath, she decided to chance getting up on a roof. She still hadn't seen a familiar street, nor any evidence of game activity save the most recent move.

At the next intersection, she checked to make sure she wasn't observed and crept up the wall of a two-story tenement building and scooted up the slat roof to the apex. She stayed low so her silhouette wouldn't be obvious.

Now, she knew the location. Ranfast's Emporium lay only a couple stone-throws away. That gave her a fair idea of how they broke up the sectors of the game. At Ziedra's flat, everyone had been going to A-3. Going to B-6 took her perhaps 300 paces east and maybe 300 paces south, so each section was probably a hundred paces on a side. She found out the hard way you weren't allowed to teleport more than four sectors at a time. She wagered that there were probably a limited number of teleports per game.

She needed to test to see if the moderator were still listening to her anyway.

<Moderator,> she thought. <Rules verification. What are the limits on teleport requests?>

There was a pause, then the moderator's dark boom rang in Wren's mind. <Teleport requests are limited to one transit per every twenty-five points earned by the team. All teams begin with three free tactical teleports.> Wren heard a slight hiss in her head. ****Team Idun-daughter. Rules verification requested. Transcript updated.****

Now, if the dark armored men suddenly made an appearance, she knew the moderator was collaborating.

She hurried down to the far end of the tenement, watching for signs of activity. After that initial flurry of action, the game had become boring. She frowned. Best not to get complacent. She suspected that situation could change with blinding speed.

A rope for suspending lanterns dangled across the street from the tenement to the next building over, a slightly taller stone crafts-house. She moved over to the rope tested the mooring to make sure it was solid and edged out onto it. In the morning calm, even on a thin rope such as this one she felt fairly safe negotiating the length.

As she moved across, she realized her neck was tingling. Thirty steps and she stood on the other side. She tried to remember back. Had it always felt like that when she was moving across narrow beams and precarious spots? Over the summers, she'd become casual in negotiating areas that made even the most experienced cat burglars sweat. In memory, she never lost her balance or slipped when she was focused. She never realized how many parts of her life her savant talents had permeated. She'd always thought it was simply good balance and better luck. Only recently did she really sense her ability working. After Hyperion had worked his magic on her, the talent worked with far more strength.

A few buildings away she heard a crash that sounded like breaking wood. The moderator's voice rumbled out an update. ****Team Ariok. B-5. 75 points, magic penalty, bystander bonus. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Ariok? Could Gabriella be involved in this game? If what she knew of the game so far was true, all the rough-housing didn't seem the Dragon Queen's style. Wren didn't doubt for a second that the woman could fight like a demon unchained. She simply projected that don't-get-dust-on-me demeanor that suggested she would feel this game beneath her dignity.

She shivered, hoping the name was a coincidence, it had sounded close by. She knew sooner or later, someone would find her. Wren moved across the building to the far side to look at the street below. Still not much activity. She felt stupid standing on a roof posing like a damn target. She needed a plan. Players weren't even chasing her anymore. So, she couldn't necessarily count on them to help against the ones Desiray had called Teritaani Sen'Gen. Ironical, that when she wanted to get caught, nobody was interested.

Light flashed unnaturally off to her right. Sunlight hitting polished metal or glass. She searched for the source and saw nothing. Now, what?

Keep moving. She teetered across a narrow pole to the next building, all the while keeping an eye out for anything unusual. Of course, she might not see anything. From her encounter with hot-tempered Arabella, she knew that some of these people could become camouflaged or invisible.

How many teams were there? She'd heard six announced. Tarrantil, Ariok, and Felspar had been the first names she heard. Later she heard Targallae, D'Shar, and Falor. Felspar was Cassandra's team, Targallae was Beia, and Falor would be Tal. Arabella was with Cassandra, and Tal had a male partner--the one that ran into those Sen'Gen. Was it possible he took care of them? With the powers of these people, it wasn't improbable. After all, Vera, handled three practically by herself. Wren sighed, there would be no reason for those armored bastards to stand and fight against that unknown player--and no reason for him to pursue them.

She needed Desiray. The Mistress would be on one of the other three teams. All she had to do was find her. A city a half league on a side--how hard could it be...???

Right now, she couldn't afford to be picky. Tal, Beia, Cassandra--anyone she knew would be able to help. She shook her head, after all that effort to avoid these people,

now her best chance for freedom relied on finding one of them. She shuddered. If she could explain the problem before someone ripped her arm off...

No activity in either hearing or sight. She edged up to the north side of the building and leaped across the three-pace gap to the next roof. Mentally, she thanked Vera again, she was in the best shape of her life. Without thinking, she jumped gaps now that a summer ago would have been white-knuckle lunges of faith.

Ears tuned for any unusual sounds she moved to the apex of the roof and started down the far side. Wren froze as she heard wood creak. It had been off to the west. She stared at the flat rooftop in that direction.

Nothing.

Her heart sped and her breathing quickened. This felt wrong. She sensed presences but simply couldn't see them. Instinct said it wasn't players from the game. Could the kidnappers be stalking her? Why? They'd just come at her head-on every time before this. It didn't make sense for them to be trying to sneak up on her now.

Move.

She jogged east down the roof edge and vaulted across wide gap toward a five story brick tenement. Hands outspread, she hit the wall feet first and leaned into it. The sharp buzz of her ability coming alive shot down her spine as she gripped the wall and spidered up it to the roof edge. Lunging up to the overhanging ridgepole she flipped up to stand on top.

Right as her feet found purchase on the narrow spar of wood she heard something hiss and thud into the brick underneath her.

"Damn!" She heard a thick male voice curse. A high pitched whistle pierced the silence. "Go! Go! Go!"

She glanced down to the roof she'd just vacated. A man dressed in chain-armor holding a crossbow stood half way down the ridgepole gesturing frantically.

Her whole body went icy as the roofs all around her began creaking and thumping with the sound of at least a dozen running pairs of feet.

Oh *spit*. She charged in the direction where she didn't hear anything. Loud clacks sounded, followed the whiz of something coming toward her at high speed. She ducked and rolled as crossbow bolts thumped into the wooden roof above and behind her. A glance back showed men shimmering into the view, discarding their bows and starting pursuit.

Who *are* these guys!?

Reaching the end of the roof she plunged off to the house-top nearest, praying the rickety looking shingles held. She hit with a crash, one foot piercing the flimsy structure. She fought to disentangle herself as two armored warriors jumped off the higher building toward her.

With a wrench, she rolled aside as a wiry man with a dagger in his fist punched straight through the thin planking. With yell of surprise and pain he shattered the rafters and pounded into ground floor below. His companion did little better as he thudded waist deep into the rotten roofing with a cry.

While the cursing, grunting man tried to keep from falling through the roof she righted herself and swung down off the wall.

In the wan morning light, the buildings formed an unfamiliar maze of corners and angles. The smell of rotting garbage and unwashed chamber-pots stung her nose. She hesitated for an instant and then ran as she heard the unmistakable thump of boots hitting the ground.

Wren charged east up the street and slid to a stop as two men with swords sprinted out of an alley to block her path. She spun to go the opposite way only to see three

more men blocking that path. The only choice left was a three story crafts-building at the edge of the square. She plunged for it as her enemies rushed in.

She leaped before she hit the wall, hands and feet thrashing the air as she scrambled straight up the vertical incline. Behind her she heard oaths of surprise and dismay as she practically ran up the side of the building. In ten heartbeats, she was standing on the flat roof gasping for air, heart humming in her chest.

The sound of crossbows being cocked shocked her into action. She glanced around, recognizing a roof she'd been on only a short time before. Her only route of escape was the narrow cord she'd walked across earlier. Those bastards wouldn't follow her across that.

She raced for it and hit braded cord at a jog. Scooting across at best possible speed, Wren froze half way across when she heard the snap of a crossbow lever being yanked back right in front of her.

A bald man in chain armor faded into view, his weapon aimed at her. It was the guard captain from Ranfast's Emporium! That's what all this was about!

She shifted to go back the way she'd come only to see three more men, also armed take up positions at the other end. Below, two more thugs stepped from an alley and took up ready positions.

"Missy, I must say, you are three kinds of amazin'," the captain rumbled, rubbing his hairless scalp. His craggy, seamed face was a study in bad skin, scars, and natural born ugly. His thin lips were pressed tight to his gray teeth. "For your sake, I hope you got that gem with you. I been up all night trying to catch your skinny ass and I'm in a foul mood."

Skinny? She rubbed her bottom. Had she lost that much weight? Inwardly, she smacked herself for having foolish thoughts at a time like this. While these morons had her cornered, those kidnappers could come and snatch her.

She drew a breath, slowing her heart and getting the shake out of her hands. She wobbled slightly on the line.

"You know, in a way, I kinda hope you don't have it. I'm goin ta enjoy watching you fall. Derick, light that torch!"

One of the men behind her pulled out a brand and a tinderbox. He thrust the wood into the box. The treated fabric wrapped around the shaft sputtered to life, spitting and popping.

Wren swallowed, watching the flames. She glanced down. It was a ten pace drop onto a hard cobblestone street. She might survive the fall, but it was a fair bet the men would hack her to pieces if she somehow lived through the drop. Nice options, fall and die, or fall, break both legs, and *then* die.

Suppressing a shudder she met the gaze of the captain. "So, let me guess. You guys are a little annoyed."

The man grimaced. "We're a *lot* annoyed, Girly. We've got a reputation to protect. Cough up the gem or take a dive."

Her insides tightened. Ironical she could face two avatars and survive, and here she was three hairs from being axed by a bunch of disgruntled guards with attitudes.

"Friend, I'd like to help, but you'll never find that gem unless I get off this rope alive to show you where it is."

The captain shook his head. "You get off that rope and you'll vanish on us. Think I wasn't watching? You're faster than a cat with its tail on fire, and climb like a bloody bug. A priest at the temple of Poseidon owes me favors. I hear he can speak with the *dead*. We'll get the information from your corpse. Derick, light it!"

The man behind her leaned forward with the torch and touched it to the rope. On the other side, the captain produced a dagger and started to saw through the strands.

"Hey," she protested. "Hey! Guys, honestly, I'll take you to it--*really!*" Her voice rose as strands parted. She drew her sword, there might still be a chance to get out of this mess.

Still sawing on the rope, Baldy glanced toward the sword in her hand. His dark eyes glinted. "Try anything funny and they'll shoot you full of bolts before you fall." The men on the ground and the two behind her took aim.

"Not much mercy in you mercenaries, huh?"

"No," he growled. "Hurry up and fall."

She glanced to the windows lower on the wall and estimated the length of the rope. Escape was possible. If she could swing fast enough to avoid being perforated by enemy bowshots. The timing had to be perfect.

The air erupted on her left causing her stagger back several steps on the rope. Wheeling her sword, she kept her balance, wincing at the twang of further strands parting.

A pace above her, a dark-haired woman shimmered into view. Long hair in tails, dressed in a red surcoat and black leggings, and carrying a huge jeweled staff she was, by far, the most welcome sight that had touched Wren's eyes in recent memory.

The woman seemed surprised that she'd appeared in the air. She flailed for a moment and started to fall. She only dropped a short distance before her decent halted. Scowling, she stared at the sky. "That wasn't funny."

****Team Ariok--teleport request A-6. Move--logged.**** Was that a humor Wren heard in the moderator's metallic tones?

"Dorian! Am I glad to see you!"

A mage's skin glistened with a golden light and she rose until her eyes were level with Wren's. "Wren--*darling*--I am quite *pleased* to see you too."

"Uh, Dorian, I'm kinda in bad way here...I need--" The rope frayed to threads to terminate her statement. Pitched off, she yelled and snatched hold of the braiding with her free hand. "*Help!*"

Dorian sniffed. "Help? I thought you didn't trust me."

Oh Hades. Last chance. She swung her sword to cut the rope. Hoping she could swing and keep the fall from breaking half the bones in her body. Right as her sword moved, the guard captain ripped through his end of the rope.

"Oh spiiiit!" she cried.

She realized abruptly she hadn't moved. She was hovering in the air.

"I guess it would be small of me to hold a grudge," Dorian said, hand on chin. "We have been through quite a bit together."

Dazed, Wren nodded vigorously. She glanced around. There were still half a dozen crossbows aimed in their direction. "Dorian, watch out! These guys are..."

A whirring bolt whacked into the mage's shoulder. The wood and metal shaft shattered into splinters.

"Ouch!" Dorian glared in the direction of the shooter. "None of that!" She gestured and his crossbow exploded into flames. She looked Wren in the eye. "They're armed and pissed off. Is that what you were about to say?"

"Uh, something like that," she responded in a weak voice. She looked back to the scowling guard captain. He had to be ugliest human she had ever encountered. She glanced again toward the ground and the guards waiting below. "You know, I don't feel safe up here."

The mage sniffed, her gaze flicking to the men below. "You shouldn't. It's a long way down."

That sounded like a threat.

"There will be a lot of people really ticked off if you just let me die."

"Stay out of this, Mage!" the captain snarled. "We saw her first."

Dorian glared at the man. "If you're not out of my sight in a ten-count, you will find yourself resembling a toad even more than you already do."

****Team Ariok, moderation warning. Bystander penalties apply. Deliberate accosting of locals will incite a level two penalty.****

The woman's eyes widened. "Level two!? For turning a toad into a toad?"

****Questioning a judgment is a level one penalty. This will be your second warning.****

Dorian made a disgusted sound and glared at the captain. "If I'm going to get penalized for it--better make it good, some kind of slime perhaps--" Her voice trailed off. She cracked her knuckles then rubbed her hands together.

The captain gaped at her. It was already apparent from the miniscule affect the crossbows had on her, that Dorian was nothing to be trifled with. "Damn you for interfering. You'll pay for this, Mage."

Dorian growled. "Five! Four! Three--!"

The men didn't need any more incentive. They broke and ran.

The woman nodded and slipped closer to Wren. "Now that nuisance is out of the way, back to business."

"Dorian. I'm in *big* trouble."

The line of the mage's youthful face hardened. "You certainly are. Especially if you don't have that gem with you..."

Ever fall off a three story building? That's what it feels like to get tackled by Tal. Sometimes I ask myself is it really worth it... is it actually *fun* getting hurt that bad? Hades, yes!

--Arabella

Chapter 3

Savant in Motion

Hovering ten paces off the ground, surrounded by an unknown number of possible enemies, Wren could only stare at Dorian. She drew a shaky breath and sheathed her sword with a clack. Up here, she was totally at the woman's mercy. A snap of her fingers and Dorian could send her toppling to the ground. She held her breath and concentrated on calming her thundering heart. She raised her chin and gazed into the mage's intense green eyes.

"You'd kill me for a silly game? Are you that mad at me?"

"Actually, I'm not mad at you at all. I'm just extremely disappointed about being dumped."

"Hey, Lady, who crossed who? If you only played straight with me, I'd be your biggest supporter. I don't know about anyone else, but you've done great good for me. I trusted you and you knifed me. That hurt a lot." She sniffed. "I thought we meant something to each other."

The mage pursed her lips. Her cheeks colored and she looked away. Wren couldn't be sure if she'd truly shamed the woman or if it was another act. The mage drew a breath and glanced around. "Well, the game is still on, and someone is bound to catch us." She grabbed Wren around the waist and they started to move.

With the wind rushing in her hair she focused. She had to make Dorian understand. They were both in danger now. "Dorian, I don't think you heard me. I'm in trouble-- *big* trouble."

"Those guys won't bother you with me around."

"Not them. Desiray called them Teritaani Sen'Gen. They tried to get me. I only got away because some invisible guy slammed into them. I called the moderator and told her about it. She wouldn't acknowledge anything I said about them!"

"Sen'Gen?" Dorian's eyes widened and they ducked around the corner of a building and dropped into an alley. She reached up and touched something on her chest and a sparks spiraled around them. Wren's skin tingled and a vibration hummed through her bones. As the light flickered around them, Wren realized the both of them were slowly growing pale and translucent. In a few heartbeats, she could see through her hand and all that remained visible was a faint outline. The woman pressed on Wren's shoulders and the two of them knelt together. "Sen'Gen? How do you know?"

"Same bastards that blasted my room and broke my knee."

"Cassandra said she hadn't positively identified the attackers."

"Desiray seemed pretty sure because of something dumb I said to Sindra and Drucilla."

"The twins? Are they mad at you? Damn, Aarlen might in on it then."

Aarlen? She'd heard that name before. Wren swallowed. Right now, trust or not, Dorian was the only person she could look to for help. "No, they're not mad. They want the phoenix."

"Phoenix?" Dorian's voice cracked. "You know where the phoenix to their key is?"

"Actually, they think I know how to find the phoenix for *any* key."

"What?" the mage's voice turned shrill. Her grip tightened on Wren's shoulders. "Is that true?"

A cold sensation twisted in her stomach. "Uh huh."

Wren felt Dorian's forehead hit her shoulder. Her voice sounded muffled. "Tell me you didn't... *lords*." She felt Dorian stiffen. "That's why you went to Gabriella. That's what got her so cranked up."

"Right."

She heard the normally unflappable mage sigh. "Girl--you *are* in trouble. I hope that body you had me make was some kind of secret weapon. You're going to need it..."

"The secret weapon angle I worked out. The problem is I'm separated from *both* of them."

"Good, I--" Dorian paused. Wren heard the woman sniff, her nose brushed Wren's neck and she sniffed again. "How in Hades did you get rid of Gabriella's bloodsong? Nobody can do that."

"Secret weapon number two."

Even though she couldn't see Dorian's face she could sense the woman's thoughts whirling.

<Dorian?> A dark sounding female voice burst into their minds. It made both of them jerk. <Where in Hades are you? I need you!>

The mage gasped. "Damn that scared me." She straightened and Wren heard the woman send a thought. <Acknowledged, Dominique. What's your grid?>

<D-6,> the other woman answered. <Put some pepper on your tail I got Falor breathing on my neck, and a 100 points in my pocket.>

<Damn it. Coming!>

Wren felt her rise.

"Dorian, this is more important than some game. If they get a hold of me, they're going to wring that knowledge out of me. I've seen what the First-ones can make and we don't want them near it."

The mage had taken Wren around the waist and had started to rise. She froze. "What do you mean? What have you seen?"

"Starholme prime. Hyperion. Gaea."

"You opened one of the keys?!"

"Yes."

"Frell. Frell. Frell. Wren, I can't get you out of this game. If you leave the grid, Jolandrín will just fetch you back. If she can't do it, Sindra and Drucilla do the honors. That's probably what they want. Only you'll get misplaced on the way back."

<Dorian!> Dominique's growling thought rang in their minds. <A little frelling *help* here!>

<En-route, Dee. I'm in A-6, coming fast.> She blew out a breath. "Come on." The blue radiance surrounded both of them and they rose into the air and shot south. Her voice was almost lost in the rush of wind. "At least if you stay with me, we can keep them off you. If we have to, we can team up like we did with the avatar. I'm a lot more heavily armed now than I was then." They streaked low over the buildings at breath-stealing speed. Wren's eyes watered in the rushing wind. They sliced down into the alleys, zigzagging at easily four times the speed of a horse at a full gallop.

Though she felt certain Dorian knew what she was doing, it didn't stop her from almost swallowing her tongue when passing within hairs of walls and overhangs as they shrieked down the narrow spaces.

<Hurry, blast it. In A-7 now, heading south. I'm on the run with both of them on me, and two vultures waiting in the frelling wings!>

<Coming to you, top speed.> Dorian assured. <I'm going to make a strafe run, so get ready to break into the open.>

<Understood.>

"Get the daggers off my belt," Dorian instructed. "Since I'm baby-sitting, might as well put you to work."

Wren grabbed the two weapons which hummed in her hands. She felt the magic sing all through her body. "Wow. Powerful! You want me to..."

"Eyelash deep, remember."

"Oookay." If she missed, somebody or something, enhanced or not, would get seriously injured.

<Dee, in range. Break in ten.>

Wren braced as they slalomed down a street full of carts and vendors, making canopies and clothing flutter with the shock of their passage. How did Dorian know where to go? It was a miracle in itself that they weren't hitting anything.

Dominique's voice echoed in their minds. <3--2--1!>

Dorian pulled up hard, accelerating so fast Wren's eyes pressed into their sockets. The mage rolled them as they skimmed the roofs and shot into the sky. In heartbeats they were well over a thousand paces up. A sharp ache in her ears made her wince. The city, the ship filled harbor, and the glistening shoreline spread out like a patchwork beneath them. Directly below, a figure dressed in black shrieked out of the canyons of the buildings. The woman pulled into a vertical climb, sparks and smoke abruptly erupting in her wake.

For the first heartbeat Wren wondered why Dominique was announcing her presence, then saw it wasn't intended to give away her location. The haze outlined the two figures roaring after her.

"Here we go!" Dorian angled down and their velocity increased even further. "Throw!"

Wren drew a breath, focusing her power on the two figures and what had to be their legs. In her sight, she saw threads connecting herself to the targets. She had never traveled this fast in her life, much less thrown while moving at such a speed.

She didn't give herself time to doubt or question but let fly with both daggers. The weapons actually accelerated as they left her hands, lancing out like bolts of light, making a high pitched whine as they traveled.

Both weapons flashed past the figures. The two blades speared through the sails of a big Nomar trade ship, and splashed down into Ivaneth harbor.

Wren didn't know whether she hit as planned, it had been such a close thing. They were moving so fast and she'd needed to lead by such a huge amount.

****Team clash, D-7--Team Idun-daughter as proxy for Ariok defeats team Falor. Target Tal neutralized. Target Algernon neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Tal and another burly man shimmered into view, both of them looking at their slashed pant-legs. "What the hell?!" Tal yelled. "Moderator--clash judge!"

"Moderator," Dorian called. "Team Ariok declines carry change-over."

"We do!?" Dominique yelled from high above them.

****Team Ariok declines points exchange. Team Falor retains all carries. Carry scores remain unchanged. Scores revised. Transcript updated.****

Dorian snapped her fingers and both of the daggers that Wren threw reappeared in her hand in a flash.

"I *still* want the fraggin judge!" Tal snarled. His handsome face looked red. He and Algernon had obviously put a lot of effort into catching Dominique, and both of them looked angry at being denied when so close to their quarry.

Dorian dropped herself and Wren down so they were level with Tal and Algernon. Arms folded the two men hovered together. It still amazed Wren at the nonchalance

of these people. They were well over a thousand paces up, and acting like they were standing on the ground.

Tal had his long hair tied back in a tail, and wore a patterned tunic and breeches that would make him hard to make out when near walls and in dark places. Algernon was considerably shorter than Tal, but built like a wall. He too wore a camouflage vest and trousers. Unlike his other clothes which looked new, his boots were old and worn, carefully crafted leather that had seen many a league of trekking. His face would have been handsome if not for fine lattice of scars down one cheek. His deep blue eyes, straight nose, chiseled chin and open expression gave the impression of a guileless straightforward man.

**** Judge summoned. Transferring contact to judge Felspar for clash dispute. ****

Dorian waved both hands at Dominique. "Go! Go! Take the points and run!" The dark woman didn't question, but faded out and shot down into the cover of the buildings. Dorian handed the daggers back to Wren.

Wren looked around. She disliked the fact they weren't doing anything about her problem. What had happened to Damay? At the moment, she felt fairly safe here high in the sky surrounded by these formidable adventurers. Those Sen'Gen weren't likely to pop out of nowhere and attack with them around.

She looked up at Dorian, fingering the fine blades. "I think you know I *want* one of these. Their balance is *perfect*."

"Get us that gem and you can have both."

Damn, that was tempting. Getting help against Mishaka was more important though.

A shimmering surrounded Tal, Algernon, Dorian and Wren. The young man she had seen earlier, Farveth, faded into view. Here in the brighter light she got a better look at him with his short dark hair, dressed in a black vest and leggings. He held out his hands and the seeing globe solidified. He peered into it, studying the image.

"Hey Tal," Wren said, leaning past Dorian. "I know what you're going to say. I can prove I did it on purpose."

The burly warrior frowned. "Girl, I heard Damrosil talking about the contest, so I know yer good." He shook his head. "Just ain't no way to be for real at that speed and range."

Algernon elbowed his partner. "I dunno, Buddy. She did do it *twice*."

Farveth, looked up from the globe rubbed the back of his neck. "The replay clearly shows her leading the shot. If she hadn't hit *both* of you in the same spot I'd be inclined to call in your favor. I've already judged one clash on her. When it comes to throwing--lady Wren there--just isn't *human*."

Wren snorted. "Hey! That's not a nice thing to say! Tal, I said I'd prove it. I meant it."

Dorian grinned at Wren. <Keep going Dee. While these guys argue, you find a safe spot for our points.>

Wren felt the dark woman grin in their minds. <Ah ha! Gotcha! If we hadn't declined, we would have had to stand our ground to do the exchange. Then they'd just be right back after us.>

<Exactly.>

Tal's dark eyes flashed. "Okay, Babe, you're on." He pulled a dagger from his side. "When I say 'go', you hit this."

Wren shrugged. "Done."

Farveth shook his head. "This won't change my decision, Tal."

"Hear me arguing, Kid? I still want to see her do it."

The young man put hands on hips and nodded. Apparently, he wanted to see it too. "Nice." Dorian whispered in her ear. "Keep them busy a few more moments."

Wren weighed one of the mage's daggers in her hand. The weapon reminded her of Corona. She loved the feel of the magic buzzing through her. Maybe Desiray was right, she was starting to become a magic addict. She spun the dagger on her fingertip, then flipped the handle to her palm. She could probably pin a flea to a wall from fifty paces with this thing.

"Go!" Tal threw and his blade whirled from his hand as though launched from a ballista.

Ready for it, Wren let fly with both of Dorian's weapons. The two shrieked out. A hundred paces up the first one deflected Tal's weapon and the second blade scored again intersecting the whizzing dagger on its changed course.

Tal's jaw dropped. "Well, frag me. I know who I want on my team next year."

Algernon ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks, buddy."

"Hey, you haven't been kissed by this girl. She sure as hell is nicer to look at than your ugly pan." He laughed and shoved on the ranger's shoulder. He mumbled a word, and the dagger he had thrown reappeared in his hand.

Wren frowned. Did everyone have magic returning daggers except her?

Algernon chuckled. "Better keep it quiet or Terra will break your leg."

"Yeah, guess I better keep you around then. You don't make her jealous."

"Satisfied?" Farveth asked.

"Yeah," Tal answered. He pointed a finger at Wren. "I'm keeping my eye peeled for you, little lady. Those are the last free points you get off us."

Farveth raised his hand.

"Wait!" Wren yelled. The young man stopped. "If the judge would forebear for just a moment more. I need to ask these two about an issue of clash interference earlier in the game."

Farveth dropped his hand and narrowed his green eyes. "Clash interference?"

She looked to Algernon. "Sir, that *was* you chasing me in that alley, right?"

The ranger rubbed his face and glanced at Farveth. His voice sounded tentative. "Uh--yeah."

"What happened to those three guys in armor you ran into?"

"Errr," Algernon frowned. "I apologized to that creep and he rounded on me anyway. Drak head clipped me pretty good too. Left me no choice--I *had* to thump him."

"Thump?" Dorian echoed.

"Okay, so there was a little property damage," Tal growled. "Those three walls will mend--*eventually*. The moderator didn't call a bystander penalty. If you ask me, the idiot deserved getting crunched. Alg apologized."

"I thought for sure we'd get smacked with a level two," Algernon mumbled. "Course it's not like we don't get at least two or three with *you* around." He shoved Tal.

Tal cuffed the ranger across the shoulder. "Hey, I can't help these sissy rules."

****Clash judge, team Falor and Ariok are to return to play immediately. They will incite a level two penalty if they linger further.****

"Damn, what bug flew up her butt?" Algernon asked.

"The same one that overlooked you knocking that Sen'Gen through three walls," Dorian muttered.

Algernon stiffened. "Sen'Gen?"

Farveth frowned. "Sorry, can't help you with the mystery. I got a job to do. Team Falor," he intoned. "Weapons sheathed, eyes to the sky. Moderator, judge to clash

observance. Team Ariok you have a ten count to safety." He faded out, and the translucent bubble around them vanished.

"Let's blow," Dorian said grabbing Wren around the waist.

The mage wasted no time. The wind hissed in Wren's face as they hurtled toward the ground. Dorian reached up to her chest and pressed a finger to a jeweled amulet. Both of them wavered and turned transparent.

Wren realized that the invisibility served a number of purposes. Not only did it keep players from too easily identifying each other, but it kept the local citizenry from being scared to death as players blasted by at bowshot speed.

"Guess your theory about the moderator being in on it proved out. No way would she miss a clash like that. Not with a whole building being destroyed." They whipped around a few tight corners, dodging awnings and narrowly avoiding a tall wagon.

Still forcing herself to maintain control, Wren struggled to stay focused on the conversation. "Tal didn't say a building was destroyed."

Dorian glanced back and slowed their speed. Eddies of dust spun out of their path as they turned down an alley. The dank smell of garbage made Wren's nose wrinkle.

The mage nudged her shoulder. "Wren, how usable is a house with only one wall?"

She laughed. "He didn't say they weren't all the same house did he?"

The auburn-haired woman half-smiled. "Typical Tal Falor information omission."

Wren swallowed. "So, what do we do now?"

"We?" The woman raised an eyebrow. "You called it quits with me. I'm not sticking my nose in an elder elite's business. Aarlen Frielos thrashed your hero Damay, and if anything, Aarlen is meaner and more powerful now than she was then. With nothing at stake, I'd take on ten avatars before I'd butt heads with her. Your concern with her and First-one keys is merited. With things as they stand between us, I have *way* more to lose than I have to gain. I have a family to consider."

A lump hardened in Wren's throat. "So, the moderator is the Ice Falcon... the same one that...killed...Damay?"

"Same one," Dorian said. They slowed at a stop and settled to the ground. "Wren, I like you a lot, but this kind of trouble is a little bigger than I'm prepared to deal with."

"But--"

Dorian wore a serious and sad expression. "Hate to say this, but you're on your own."

In few other games can you see brute force, animal cunning, masterful skill and pure terror all at work at the same time...

--Beia

Chapter 4

Backfield Scramble

On her own. Watching Dorian's silhouette recede down the alley, Wren clutched the knife the woman had left in her care. The weapon's name was *Vectra*. She had only to concentrate on an image of the dagger, think its name, snap her fingers and it would return to her hand. She had already tried it once and it worked. *On her own*. In a way, she couldn't blame Dorian. She *did* have a family to consider. Sindra and Drucilla, the daughters of Aarlen Frielos, were married to Dorian's twins, Cassin and Annawen.

Standing in the shadowy alley she felt very alone. Maybe Desiray had been wrong. Perhaps it hadn't been Gaea who arranged her being in the game, but Aarlen herself.

She skipped to a run. Her mind whirled. She had freed Damay only to be confronted by the very creature that had killed the greatest of the Kel'Varans. What chance did she have against her? Dorian had said she'd rather fight ten avatars than face Aarlen. Wren had seen evidence of this at work. Even with her tremendous power, the avatar Mishaka had been unable to do more than sting Sindra and Drucilla. If the children were that strong--their mother would be... She shivered.

What a mess. She knew for certain now she didn't want to accidentally lead any of Aarlen's agents back to Damay. She prayed that the elder savant was okay. Right now, her only recourse was to get through this game without being captured. If she managed to survive to the end, she could seek out the help of Loric or someone closer to Aarlen's level of power. She didn't know the true extent of the lord Felspar's ability, but she knew he was certainly nothing to be trifled with. Gabriella treated him with respect, and Sindra and Drucilla were careful around him. That gave her some hope that he might be able to keep Aarlen's minions off her back. If he didn't have the power--then it might be time to find out what an elder could do assisted by her abilities. Dorian's words rang in her head. *Your reach will always far exceed your grasp*. What if she didn't do the grabbing?

She turned a corner onto a smaller alley. The fact that she was so keyed up saved her. A shadow cut across her light and she instantly dove and rolled. With a hiss of air, hands snatched through the spot where she'd been. Wren caught a glimpse of movement. Cart-wheeling back to her feet, she took aim. She recognized it was someone in street camouflage rather than black armor and changed her target at the last instant as Vectra left her fingers. The whirling blade slashed across the inside of the person's leg.

****Team clash, B-7--I dun-daughter defeats Targallae. Damrosil neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"Frell," the white-haired Myrmigyne cursed.

Wren kept moving. The shadowy space between the buildings was too tight for maneuvering. She did *not* want to be too close to these players. Calling Vectra back to her hand, she sprinted for a narrow space between two buildings. When the moderator called a team member neutralized, that meant another was close by.

Hearing a thrum behind her, Wren dug in her heels, skidded and flipped backward. An arrow slammed shuddering into the wall. She lunged again as another arrow shrieked out. She oriented and threw along the path the arrow had come from.

Vectra whizzed out, clanged and slammed into the ground as Beia deflected it with one of her wrist bracers. The Myrmigyne closed the gap between them in heartbeat. In the time it took to call the dagger back, the blonde woman was already within reach.

Vera's G'yaki training kept her going when before she would have been dropped in the first exchange. She slipped the first swing, dropped, and spun in a foot sweep. She managed to hook Beia's leg and jerk her off balance. The Myrmigyne's follow up swing missed. Wren saw her opportunity and brought Vectra around.

Fast as she was, Beia was faster, she slipped inside of her attack, slammed her wrist aside, and drove the heel of her palm between Wren's breasts.

To Wren it felt like she'd just hit bottom after a three story fall. The air exploded out of her lungs as she was mashed up against the brick wall. All of her limbs seemed to turn to putty. The dagger fell from her grip and she gasped like a fish out of water, trying to get air and failing.

****Team clash, B-7--Targallae defeats Idun-daughter. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"That's for crunching me at breakfast," the Myrmigyne murmured with a sniff.

Wren slid down the wall and fell to her hands and knees. She wheezed and gasped. "Ugh. Uh. G--g" She shook her head. "Glad--to know--" She coughed. "You don't-- don't hold a--grudge."

The Myrmigyne patted her on the back. "We're even now." She bent down and looked into Wren's tear blurred eyes. "You've gotten better. A *lot* better. You made your opening, and took the shot." She held up a tiny space between her fingers. "A bit faster and you would have had me."

Wren tried to get some more words out, and simply couldn't manage. Her lungs just seemed to flutter in her chest like butterfly wings.

****Team Tarrantil, teleport request B-7. Move logged.****

"Desiray and Bertram are probably headed this way." Damrosil said in her deep voice, stepping across the alley. The huge woman was like Wren remembered from their contest in the bar. Not as big as the D'klace twins but big enough. She wore the clothing like the others did, suited for making her hard to see in the city environment. Her bone-white hair was done in braids and looped around her neck. She rubbed at the side of her broad mouth and looked around. "Give her credit, Beia." She bent and picked up Vectra. "She was fighting eight circles out of her rank. It took you five shots to get her."

Beia knelt down by Wren. "Got the wind knocked out of you." She took her by the shoulders and pulled her so she had her back to the wall. "Bend at the waist. Concentrate on holding your breath and letting it out slow." She patted Wren's pouches, fingered her pockets, and rose. "I am giving her credit. She's only been training a couple seasons. At least I got her. She got ten points off of *you* missus sticky-feet, you need to get back in training."

"Hmph," Damrosil grunted.

****Team D'Shar, E-9. Eighty-five points. Bystander bonus applies. Magic bonus applies. Scores updated. Moved logged.****

The Myrmigyne looked up. "Damn, Terra and T'Gor are on a roll this game." She flipped Vectra and caught it. "Wren here has moved up in the world. She sure isn't throwing rusty chunks of iron now. She have the gem on her?"

Beia shook her head. "No. I don't think she would have given it to Dorian. They had a falling out recently--right?"

Wren nodded. "I need--" The words cracked and died in her throat. She wheezed. "I need--"

"You need?" Damrosil prompted, making a circular gesture with her finger. "Girl, there's a game on, we have to get moving." She looked to Beia. "I think you hit her too hard."

"I was careful," the blonde Myrmigyne remarked. "Nothing is broke. You don't know how hard she hit *me*. Put cracks in Loric's granite wall, and my back hurt for two days."

"Oh *right*." Damrosil laughed. "This little snip of a girl hit you *that* hard?"

Beia shrugged. "Don't believe me then. Try it sometime and find out."

Damrosil bent down and shook Wren's shoulder. "Hey." She snapped her fingers. "Hello in there. What did you need?"

"H-h-ha--help!" she finally wheezed out.

The white-haired Myrmigyne grinned. "What--you *figure*?" She turned to the other Myrmigyne. "Did she hit her head?"

"She doesn't mean danger from us, Featherbrain," Beia cuffed the bigger woman across the shoulder.

"Sen--" Wren coughed. "Sen'Gen. After--me."

Beia stiffened and her expression hardened. "Sen'Gen?" She reached down and took Wren's chin in her palm. "Big men in black armor?"

Wren nodded.

"What the frell are Sen'Gen?" Damrosil asked, bending down and putting a hand on Beia's back.

The blonde Myrmigyne scowled. "Covert agents for Aarlen."

Damrosil's green eyes narrowed. "Aarlen? What would Wren have that she'd want?"

"Not sure," Beia whispered. "It's pretty big if she'd disrupt the game for it. Aarlen really loves the game."

"Oh yeah," Damrosil grumbled. "What she loves is watching us knock each other senseless."

"Why not? I do too."

"Never mind. I just don't understand you two being together is all."

Beia made an annoyed wave of her hand. "Later." She took Wren by the shoulders. "Are you in trouble with Aarlen?"

She nodded. "I told--I told Drucilla--" She drew another breath. "Told Drucilla about--about something I had. I think Aarlen knows now."

"What could she possibly--" Beia stopped Damrosil with a raised hand.

"Several reasons," Beia said. "I found out Hecate wants Wren for an avatar. In fact, I dropped Mishaka a while back, because she was after Wren. Unfortunately, Aarlen has some long-standing non-aggression agreements with Hecate. So, blasting her avatar like she deserved really caused a fuss."

"That's why the game was postponed?"

"Yes. So, Aarlen may be after Wren to smooth that incident over."

That was a possibility that hadn't even occurred to Wren. The Sen'Gen at the house might have been sent by the D'klace twins, but the ones in the game might be after her for a totally different purpose. Of course, neither option appealed.

"So, you going to let your darling get away with it?"

"Of course not!" Beia snapped. "Sometimes she has to be *reminded* to behave is all."

Damrosil rolled her eyes. "Oh, right."

Beia lifted Wren to her feet. "Guess you're on our team until I figure out what to do about, Aarlen."

Wren drew some deeper breaths. Standing helped. She winced and bent over hands on knees. "I--don't under...stand. What can you do--about *her*?"

Beia ran a hand through her blonde hair. "One of the privileges of being her mate is she usually listens to me."

She blinked. Had she heard right? "What?"

"Marriage?" Damrosil asked. "Ever hear of it?"

"But, she's a--*woman*."

Beia put hands on hips. "And? Come now, as long as you've been around Loric's house. That surprises you?"

"Well, it's just that you seemed so--" She paused. "*Normal*."

Damrosil burst out laughing and slapped her knee. "Aye yai yai!" Grinning, she thumped Beia on the shoulder. "Maybe you should cut off all your hair or wear a tattoo or something!"

Face scarlet, the woman shoved Damrosil away. "Oh, shut up."

"So, you really think you can help?"

Beia's cheeks still had some red in them. "Of course."

"We'll be especially nice if you tell us where that gem is," Damrosil added.

"I--" Wren coughed and for the first time got a whole chest-full of air. "I'm only trading that for somebody helping me get my family back, and killing Mishaka."

The white-haired Myrmigyne raised an eyebrow. "Whew. Don't want much for it, do you?"

Wren shrugged. "It'll win the game. Guess it depends on how much *that's* worth."

"Let's move," Beia said. She stepped to the spot where she'd originally fired on Wren and picked up a silver-colored bow. The weapon shrank until it was smaller than her hand as she shoved it into a sheath on her side obviously designed for it. "We've been idle way too long." She came and pushed on Wren's shoulder. "Stay with us." She nodded to Damrosil.

The bigger Myrmigyne led the way down a shadowy alley. Beia kept Wren in front of her.

"Don't you two fly or go invisible like the others?" Wren asked.

"Flight energy can be detected," Beia said. "Some mages like Dorian can conceal it, the rest of us have to be more careful."

Leave it to Dorian--the queen of sneaks.

They made several turns. The sounds of the city had grown more pronounced. The clang of the first morning bells echoed through the spaces around them. The smells of burning wood and cook-smoke drifted on the morning breeze.

"I know Bertram and Desiray are here," Damrosil whispered. She brushed at her white hair, and pulled a gleaming blade from its sheath on her side. "I can *feel* it."

"Watch your back," Beia murmured, looking around. "Desiray can hide anywhere."

"True--but concealing Bertram is like trying to hide a bonfire."

Wren wondered about the rules regarding proxies. Obviously, when a team had 'possession' of her, if she scored against another team those points were awarded to the team in control.

"Beia? In the game, I'm not required to help any team am I?"

"You don't have to, no. The team in possession has to persuade you to help. Control of you changes when a team defeats you or the team you're currently part of. So you don't have to help, but it's bad form to deliberately cost a team points."

"Shhh." Damrosil put a finger to her lips. The big Myrmigyne had come to a turning point in the alley and slowed to a stop. The woman scanned the overhanging roofs and the numerous places that could provide concealment.

Both warriors were keeping an eye on all the best hiding spots. All of them except for one--the ground. The orange-colored early morning light filtered down into the

narrow spaces creating overlapping shadows everywhere. To Wren's eye a couple of the shadows didn't look quite right.

She tapped Beia on the shoulder and pointed to some boxes. "Those were recently moved. See that dark patch on the ground." She indicated a place where tufts of grass were still bent over where they'd grown between the cracks in the cobbles. "That's where they used to be."

The Myrmigyne narrowed her emerald eyes. Would she go investigate? Wren hadn't *told* her to go over there. She merely pointed it out. She kept her features smooth as one of the shadows seemed to tremble.

Beia snapped her fingers. Damrosil turned. The blonde Myrmigyne pointed to the side of the alley and the boxes. The white-haired woman pulled three star-shaped throwing knives from her belt and held them at the ready.

Wren snapped her fingers and Vectra flashed from Damrosil's belt to her open hand. The big Myrmigyne grabbed the spot where the weapon had been and turned her dark eyes on Wren. She scowled. Wren shrugged.

The blonde warrior took a half step toward the spot Wren had indicated. Her foot lingered hairs from that trembling shadow. Wren wasn't sure what would happen, but she was ready to bolt just in case it wasn't who she thought it was.

Damrosil gestured to Beia. She pointed to her own eyes and shook her head. Indicating that she didn't see anything.

Beia took another step, her foot squarely in the middle of the shadow. The dark area appeared to wrinkle like fabric.

Wren saw the glint of something metallic near the alley wall. Beia appeared to see it too, and instantly took a shuffle step sideways--straight into the middle of the shadow.

The response came in an eye-blink as the blackness suddenly came alive with a sound like a whip cracking through the air. Beia yelped in surprise as she seemed to be jerked into the ground. As the Myrmigyne fell, another figure dressed in black exploded out of the ground, launching blades over Beia's head at Damrosil.

A 'sticky-foot' the big Myrmigyne might be, but you couldn't have told it by Wren. The giant woman leaped over the first dagger, deflected the second with her sword, and let fly with her own weapons. The attacker spun in the air, a night black shadow spread from its back and blotting out the light like something alive. The three blades vanished into the dark mass with hissing thunks.

"Frell!" Damrosil yelled. "Shadow cloak!" The woman had just enough time to get the words out before a hammer seemed to sprout from the wall behind her. The weapon scored between her shoulder blades with a flat thud that knocked the huge woman all the way across the alley into the wall.

****Team clash, B-8--Tarrantil defeats Targallae. Damrosil neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Beia tried to turn but was now up to her waist in rock trying to free herself. The ground heaved and groaned with the tremendous power the woman exerted.

The shadow that had swallowed Damrosil's daggers appeared to turn inside out and from its depths, Desiray appeared in a puff of displaced air. Beia swung at the woman but simply couldn't turn or move adequately to be a threat to someone with Desiray's amazing speed. The mistress whipped a dagger from her side grabbed Beia's braid, yanked hard once, and put the weapon's edge to it. "Call no contest, Beia!"

"Damn!" Beia slapped the ground she'd been trapped in. "Moderator, no contest!"

****Team clash, B-8--Tarrantil defeats Targallae. Beia neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"About time we scored on you two poachers," Desiray said, the shadowy blackness fluttering around her. She let go of Beia's braid and patted the woman on the head. "Good job, Bertram."

A figure stepped out of the surface of the wall, a tall blond man in mirror polished chain-mail. He made the whole alley light up with his presence. He wore his shoulder-length hair in single braid. He nodded to Desiray with a grin. Pulling at his long mustache, he turned to Damrosil with concerned expression. "I trust I didn't hurt you overmuch, Lady Damrosil?"

"I'm okay--*damn it*--good ambush." Leaning against the wall the Myrmigyne rubbed the back of her neck. That same strike probably would have killed three normal people, but as Wren already knew--these weren't normal people.

"Thank you, milady. We've been practicing surprise tactics extensively. It's gratifying to see our investments pay off."

"Harrumph."

"Moderator," Desiray called. "Team Tarrantil declines carry change-over."

****Team Tarrantil declines points exchange. Team Targallae retains all carries. Carry scores remain unchanged. Scores revised. Transcript updated.****

Desiray flipped her white hair and looked at Wren, green eyes flashing. She took her wrist. "You're mine now!"

I am aware that it does not seem like a gentleman's game. It is however played for gentleman's stakes, and the need for skill as well as muscle is oh so apparent. The broken bones and torn flesh are just a symptom...

--*Bertram Tarrantil*

Chapter 5

Turnover

There had been a time when Desiray would have been the last person in the world Wren would have wanted to see. Right now, her face with its jade green eyes, slim nose, and broad mouth was a welcome sight indeed. Wren threw her arms around the woman's neck. Desiray hugged her back.

"Oh my," Desiray said with a grin. "Missed me that much, eh? Sorry, the reunion will have to wait." She grabbed Wren around the waist and leaped into the air. They shot up out of the alley and over the buildings. Bertram trailed them into the sky. The burly warrior looked none too comfortable flying, his broad face and blue eyes were set in concentration--the focus of someone who hated heights and was controlling his reaction.

"You knew we were there didn't you?" Desiray asked.

"The shadows didn't look right. I guessed."

"Sending her over to look at those boxes was real close to cheating."

"Hey, you heard me ask Beia the rules. I just pointed out the box had been moved, I didn't say she should go over and examine it."

"Pretty fine line." Desiray laughed. "I love it!" She looked back. "I'm going to speed up. Those two are going to be really miffed."

"I shan't think Lady Beia will be after us in great haste," Bertram called over the sound of the rushing wind. "It will take her a bit to extricate herself from the ground."

"About one long breath," Desiray said. She focused on Wren. "So, are you glad enough at seeing me to hand over that gem?"

"You know what I want to trade it for," Wren said. "Beia can't help me against Mishaka because of Aarlen. Dorian can't be trusted. I don't know about Tal and Algernon."

"I'm still amazed you pulled that off," Desiray breathed. They angled down toward a small square filled with trees. They set down lightly and Bertram landed behind them. Desiray clapped her male partner on the shoulder. "We picked up twenty with that move. So we have to set up our next raid. Get our points from the cache in D-4. I'll meet you in E-7. We'll see if we can't catch someone going after that score."

The man nodded to Desiray, then turned to Wren. "I apologize for my wife's lack of manners." He bowed, took Wren's hand and kissed it. "Bertram Tarrantil--at your service, pleased to make your acquaintance. Desiray spoke your praises to me at length. Perhaps we shall have an opportunity to chat." He bowed. "Pardon, I must fly." And he did--north--at high speed.

Wren blinked. She was stunned. Everything about that man had been sweet; his voice, his manners, even the way he dressed. So sweet it almost made her teeth hurt. She simply had to be mistaken. "Desiray, he--can't be a--a--paladin. You can't have a *paladin* for a partner! Can you?"

Desiray laughed. "Actually, he's a more than my partner. Like he said--he's my husband."

Wren's jaw dropped. A guild mistress and a justicar? How in all the realms had *that* happened? The clergy had resisted her marriage to Jharon, and she wasn't an infamous crime lord--nor was Jharon a representative of church authority.

"He's gorgeous, Desiray," Wren muttered. "But a--*paladin*? How could you?"

"I promised to only steal from evil people."

Somehow that made perfect sense. "I thought you were married to Loric and Brin."

"I am--and Bertram too. It's a little different arrangement... kind of hard to explain."

"I bet." She put that aside, there was a far bigger matter at hand. "Desiray, I came to your team because I'm in trouble and need your help--Sen'Gen are on the playfield trying to get me. If Algernon hadn't flattened them, they would have already caught me. The moderator, Aarlen, is in on it. Dorian was going to help me until she found out--then she dropped me like a hot rock."

"That self-serving witch. Some friend she is," Desiray growled. "You're sure they're Sen'Gen?"

"Big guys, black armor, just like the ones that tried to capture me at the citadel."

The woman pushed a hand through her white hair. "Beautiful." She let out a breath. "I mean I'm armed about as heavily as I'm going to be, but those guys are pretty tough."

"We have Gaea's weapon," Wren said.

"Yes," Desiray agreed with a little hesitation. "What happened with your package?"

"Everything went pretty much as planned."

"So, tell me, did you know when we were casing Ranfast's that you were going to hit it?"

"Sure. You asked me if I thought it was possible. I told you, 'yes'. It took me about two bells to do."

Desiray took Wren's face in her hands. "Two bells--to hit that place without magic or hurting any bystanders?"

"Right. A little planning, bend a ward--hit the master switch... it certainly wasn't routine... but I could do it again."

"Damn," Desiray growled. "To think of the summers I wasted. I can only image how good you would be now if I'd trained you myself."

"I suppose," Wren said, her voice non-committal. She could only imagine what she'd be like now if she'd become one of Desiray's children. Would she be a walking library like Everia or charming business merchant like Caldorian? "What do we do about those Sen'Gen? It's only a matter of time before they show up again. I think the only reason they haven't been on me since is I've been moving around too fast."

"The air is definitely the best place for us." She took Wren around the waist and the two of them drifted up out of the courtyard.

"Can Sen'Gen fly?" Wren asked.

"I have no idea," Desiray answered, frowning.

"Oh, I feel safer now."

"Would you prefer I lie?" the woman asked with an arch expression.

Wren blinked. "Not really." She looked down. They had risen quite high above the city. The bay shimmered and flashed beneath them, the dozens of masts and sails like some strange forest. Further up the coast, waves rolled into a rocky shoreline. The wind blew cool and sharp in their faces, free of any of the city odors.

Desiray drew a breath. "Damn, I love flying like this. This amulet I bought from Cassandra is worth every copper I'm paying for it." With narrowed eyes she peered at the city below. "Before we go too far with this, I want to check your conspiracy

theory." She turned them so they were oriented as though standing. "Put your foot on my instep and hold around my waist."

Wren complied, wondering what the woman was planning. Situated like this she felt about as safe as she could, given they were suspended a thousand paces up in the sky with no visible means of support.

Desiray closed her eyes and her body stiffened. For moments she tensed, and a vein in her temple pulsed. Wren held tight as they lurched in the air. The woman's face tightened. She opened her eyes and growled. "Well, that's some confirmation."

"What?"

"Outside telepathic communication is cut off. It's been done in such a way so that we can still feel our outside contacts, we can even hear their thoughts. They just can't hear anything we send direct. I tried a dozen different ways of getting through to Loric and got no-where."

"That doesn't prove who did it though," Wren said.

"No it doesn't, but it sure narrows it down. We're way up here, any higher and we get penalized for leaving the game grid. It takes some sophisticated and powerful magic to blanket an entire *city*. I have one more test." She drew a breath.

"Moderator. Team Tarrantil requesting injury timeout and off grid escort for emergency care."

****Request denied Team Tarrantil. Probes detect no injury of a life threatening nature. Return to play immediately or be penalized.**** The deep feminine voice paused and its tone darkened. ****Need we remind you that should you attempt to exit the game grid before end of play, agents will be dispatched to ensure legal completion of your contracted obligations.****

"Probe, ha," Desiray muttered. "She answered *way* too fast."

"Dorian warned me about trying to leave the grid," Wren said. "They'd be delighted if I tried. Gives them an excuse to grab me." She paused. "What if we got everybody in the game in on it? I mean if everyone knew what was going on wouldn't they help us--back us up? I understand Aarlen is powerful--but against all twelve players?"

"I'd run with that idea Wren, but for one thing. Aarlen is just like any master of a guild, sure you might have the strength to defeat the leader, but to win the fight you have to beat the whole guild. Beia is the key--she's Aarlen's weak spot. If Sindra and Drucilla gave away you know how to find the phoenixes to the keys--even Beia may not be able to dissuade her. Our only chance is if Aarlen is simply trying to smooth out the issue with Mishaka. In that case, actually getting you is secondary, she simply has to make an effort."

The air around them began to swirl and a spot of light off to their right blossomed and grew. A figure solidified in the light. A tall burly woman dressed in blue chain-mail with dark hair, gray eyes, and a severe angular face. Here in brighter light Wren easily recognized her as Sebenreth's wife.

"You two better get back in the game before the moderator gets really hacked at you," Jolandrin told them. The woman's face looked a little pale. "She's already mad about something. I wouldn't push her. I don't know why she hasn't penalized you already. I was told to escort you to grid E-7 to join the rest of your team."

Wren swallowed and looked into Desiray's eyes. "You know those Sen'Gen are going to be waiting for us."

A muscle in Desiray's cheek twitched. "My thoughts were running along that line, yes."

"*Please*," Jolandrin said in her deep voice. "Mother Desiray, I know I can't *force* you, but I'm charged to try. You know who comes when I can't do it. They *like* twisting arms."

"We understand, Jol," Desiray answered. "You're just doing your job, and it's not like we didn't sign up to play this game. We'll come. Lead the way."

The tall woman nodded, her expression showing that she was thankful they hadn't offered any resistance. She obviously knew the kind of opposition she would have been facing.

The big woman obviously liked flying. She spread her arms and launched toward the ground like someone diving off a platform. With her long black hair trailing behind her, she looked like quite graceful.

"So, what do we do?" she asked over the rushing wind. "I'm still not all that thrilled about Gaea's plan."

"If Aarlen's pushing to get you now with me there, we may not have a choice. She knows what I can do."

Wren shuddered. "Both of us--in your body?"

Desiray frowned. "Well, don't think I'm real eager to test this out either. Gaea made it pretty clear you might just take me over."

"I wouldn't do that."

As they neared the ground Desiray sniffed. "If our situations were reversed, I'd be really tempted. I remember being soft and breakable. I would almost rather die than be ordinary again."

Below them, Jolandrin headed down into a cluster of warehouses. The sturdy looking brick buildings were adjacent a currently unoccupied pier, so few people were moving around. It was still early and the city had not yet come fully alive. Because they were visible, people were stopping in the streets to stare up at them as they drifted down. Magical flight was not unknown, but it was still rare enough to attract quite a bit of attention.

"I have a bad feeling," Wren murmured. "My bones are itching."

"Me too," Desiray said in a quiet voice. Their rate of descent abruptly slowed. She unsheathed the dagger Khairhavgul and handed it to Wren. "This is a krill blade. If you can't stop one of them with this..."

"I got the idea. What do I do then?"

"Grab hold of me and pray it works."

Wren shuddered. All the hair on the nape of her neck stiffened. "Frell." She looked around. Something more than the situation felt wrong. There was magic at work here. She narrowed her eyes letting her mind drift so that she could see ward energies. Her heart skipped at beat. "Desiray stop!"

The Mistress froze in the air. "What?"

"Wards--all over the place. I don't know what they do--but they're *strong*. They're strung across all the walkways and from the trees."

"Dammit," Desiray looked left and right. "Is there someplace safe to set down?"

"In there?" Her heart was pounding. "I--don't know. These things aren't like anything I've ever seen. They're bloody *moving*. I've never even *heard* of such a thing."

"I have--a frelling serpent web," Desiray growled. "No way do we want to get stuck in that stuff. It kills magic." She looked around. "Not a shredded chance I'm going anywhere near there." They started to rise again.

****Team Tarrantil will report to the start position as designated by the consulting judge.****

The white-haired woman made a snarling sound. "Moderator, I was never stupid enough to stick my foot in a jaw trap, and I'm not frelling about to start now!"

Above them something flashed. Out of the illumination two huge figures solidified. Each woman was a mirror of the other, their long hair pulled back into a tail, bodies

sheathed in dark close-fitting uniforms that gleamed like metal. Weapons hung from sheaths over their back, on their belts, and scabbards on their thighs and ankles. Silver eyes narrowed, teeth gritted, and hands twitching, the D'klace twins looked like nothing a sane person would willingly fight. Even when they were unarmed, Mishaka could barely sting these two.

"The moderator insists," Sindra rasped. "Don't force us to hurt you."

"Shreds," Desiray breathed. "Wren, give me a hug and pray..."

Chapter 6

Unnecessary Roughness

Heart hammering, Wren threw her arms around Desiray's middle, hoping and praying that Gaea knew what she was doing. The morning light reflected off Sindra and Drucilla's metallic armor and weapons. The breeze stirred their hair, loose strands teasing the chiseled perfection of their faces. The phrase 'lethal beauty' was coined for creatures like these two. If they were anywhere near as powerful as Wren guessed, it would take an army to stop them.

Wren found it hard to imagine that she and Desiray could become that army. They had no choice. Either they fought their way clear or they'd get herded into whatever trap waited for them below.

She heard Desiray draw a breath, and felt her hands clamp down on her arms. <Here it goes!>

She hadn't known what to expect, but never imagined it would hurt. It felt like she'd been doused with acid. Her vision blacked out and all the air left her lungs in a stunning rush. She tried to cry out, but couldn't move. Force seemed to slam down all around her as if she were a piece of parchment being crumpled into a ball. Something slammed, then hit again, and again. All the while--she burned, and the burning went on and on...

In the instant it felt as if she would be torn apart by the pain, it stopped. Everything stopped. She couldn't feel anything. Couldn't sense her body--wasn't even sure if she still had one. There was no light or dark--no aspect of distance or that time was even passing.

Slowly, a light seemed to filter around her with growing strength. As the brightness intensified, she realized that the illumination wasn't around her, but *from* her. She *did* have a body. With that awareness came a warmth that gradually grew more pronounced. The stronger the sensation became, the more she liked it.

Her eyes fluttered open. She was on her back. What happened? Rays of light stabbed down through a ragged gap in what looked like a high ceiling. In a warehouse? She lay at the center of a shallow blackened crater with fragments of wood scattered all around. Desiray must have lost consciousness and fallen. They'd been close to thirty paces up. She should have been broken to bits but she didn't feel hurt. She didn't know how, but she felt great.

What had happened to Desiray? She sat up and pushed the debris off her. Wren rubbed at her face and froze--that wasn't her hand. The nails were too long. She hadn't been wearing bracers on her wrists.

She drew a breath. With the air came a flood of strength. It hit her so hard and strong she couldn't contain the moan that escaped her lips. Every muscle twitched and seemed to swell.

"There you are," Sindra said off on her left. "That move was inadvisable." The big D'klace floated up from behind a line of crates and drifted down to stand close by. "Where's Wren? If she's dead, Mother is going to be really ticked at you."

Wood creaked and the other D'klace stepped into view on her right.

Wren took another deep intake of air. It felt like being charged up on bloodsong and biophase at the same time. She could feel Gaea's arms folding around her like comfortable blankets. She moaned again, and rubbed at the back of her neck.

"That was a pretty long fall, perhaps you shouldn't move," Sindra said, stepping forward. "Where's Wren?"

The third deep breath made a ripple of sparkles shimmer all along the surface of her skin. She could feel the energy of Starholme Prime so immeasurably distant flowing through her. In one smooth motion, she rose to her feet.

"You stay--put..." Sindra's voice trailed off and her silver eyes narrowed. "When did you get so big?"

Wren realized that she was indeed a great deal larger, only a few hands shorter than either of the giant D'klace women. She took a step and felt the dirt compress under her--bigger--and far heavier.

Sindra scowled. "You better start talking to me, or I'm going to drop you."

Clenching her fists, she shifted her stance. "You're so tough, Lady? Come on."

The reaction was instantaneous. Sindra was no green warrior, the first lunge was a feint. She aimed a punch low, pulled it, and spun to bring a spiked elbow home in Wren's forehead. The D'klace moved so fast the air cracked with the speed.

Before the merger, Desiray was already unbelievably quick, able to snatch an arrow out of the air with little effort. Sindra hadn't completed her spin before Wren drove her knuckles into the small of the woman's back. The wall of crates exploded as twenty stone of super-mortal flesh pounded through them, punched through the next line and smashed a hole in the brick wall behind them.

Wren winced. "Ow. *That* had to hurt."

She stared at her hand. Was she really that strong? She barely even focused, simply moved with the flow. Her attention was diverted as something whipped toward her.

She sidestepped as Drucilla's sword seared through air where she'd been standing. She leaped forward out of the path of the big woman's lunge. As big as these big ladies were, they were amazingly fast. Without the power of Eternity boiling through her, she would have been slammed by that elbow, and sliced in half by the first cut. She knew where they would strike, actually felt the air moving ahead of the attack.

As Drucilla pressed, Wren remained defensive until she sensed another body moving behind her at high speed. She waited until the last instant then leaped up and flipped backward. Let Sindra deal with that pointy sharp object her sister was waving around.

Both women screeched and slammed into one another, far too big and massive to stop quickly. Drucilla didn't impale her sister like Wren had hoped, but they did make quite an image with their arms tangled around one another.

Observing the thrashing of the two women she realized that something wasn't quite right with herself. She was moving and reacting differently. Certainly with more poise, but not just the confidence of having this stronger and faster body--but with the instincts of someone long used to it. She couldn't help but smile. Seeing those two over-confident witches falling all over themselves was pretty funny.

<It's more than funny, Wren, it's hilarious. Made them look like a pair of greens.>

That sounded like Desiray's voice. <Desiray? Is that you?>

<Of course, this **is** my body.>

<Where have you been?>

<Enjoying the ride. Damn this feels good.>

<We have to calm them down.>

Desiray chuckled in her mind. <*Good luck, they're really hacked.*>

"Look, let's cool down before someone gets really hurt." She said raising her hands in a placating fashion. "You struck first. I'm not sticking my head in Aarlen's trap, okay? It's staying here on my shoulders where it belongs."

Sindra made a hissing sound. "You *dare* mock us?"

Her voice changed becoming deeper and more resonant. "Of course I dare, I'm standing ten paces away. Sindra, we're not going to just roll over for you."

<Damn it, Desiray, don't antagonize them!>

<Sorry, I'm feeling pretty good right now.>

"Fool," Sindra snarled. "I'll--" She stopped when Drucilla grabbed her arm. She glared at her sister and her silver eyes widened. She looked back to Wren. "We?"

"Let us go, Sindra. Remember, we're family."

The big woman straightened. "Sorry." She drew a breath and squared herself. She clenched her fists and a sparks spiraled around her limbs.

<Watch out, she turned on her enhancements.>

<Turned on?>

<You want an explanation or to stay alive? Here she comes.>

The D'klace woman launched forward in a blur. Wren ducked out of her path.

Sindra skidded to a stop and turned. She flexed her fingers and grinned.

Wren looked down, four gouges and been raked out of her armor.

<Damn, she's tripled her speed.>

<I warned you. You better figure out how to counter or she'll have us for lunch.>

<Okay, let's try drawing on a little of our power.> She remembered the way Dorian had probed in her mind and found the part of her that saw the world in pastels of motion and energy. As she concentrated, the lines of force and spread across her vision. She remembered the biophase lines, and was startled to see how much bigger they were here. She hoped they could handle it.

Sindra surged forward as Wren mentally took hold of the magic. It rushed through them like a tidal wave. She felt the force of the woman's impetus, knew its strength and vector--and made it hers. She moved so quickly her skin burned as she pivoted out of the attacker's path and swung a round-kick into her posterior.

Wren's momentum assist fired Sindra at her sister like a ballista bolt. The silent twin raised some kind of screen to protect herself, and the two of them smashed backward through three rows of crates. The shock of the impact blew out the wax paper windows and cracked stone.

The two women lay collapsed together amid the shattered husks of a dozen storage containers. Sacks of spoiled grain, broken stoneware, and copper pottery spilled down over their bodies.

Wren realized she was breathing hard now. Her heart sped. Up until now, it had been easy. The room began spinning in her vision. She staggered a few steps and leaned against a crate. Her stomach tightened and in a muscle riveting surge, she vomited. Light-headed and dizzy she stumbled a few more steps and hugged a support pole.

"Oooh, this is bad."

<What's wrong? What did you do to my body!?!>

<How should I know!? I'm as new to this as you. I sure hope they're down. I'm not--feeling--so well.>

<Dream on, Wren. That just put a twist in their tails.>

Wren looked up. She managed to focus through her spinning vision. She saw fingers twitching and their heads beginning to move. <How in Hades can they *be* that tough!? After that, there wouldn't be enough of a normal person to pick up with an ink blotter!>

Desiray's tone turned dry. <They aren't anywhere near mortal. That ishtite force armor of theirs helps a lot too.>

Supporting herself along the edges of crates, she made her way to the hole in the wall made by Sindra's explosive exit from the building.

Stepping out into the sunlight helped. The fresh air flicking through her hair seemed to push back the illness she felt in the pit of her stomach. She felt like a broken clockwork. The tremendous strength that had been buoying her up was gone. Now, it was like she was in her old body with its relatively feeble muscles trying to push this far more massive form.

<Desiray, can we fly? It's the only way we're going to be able to move. I am done.>

<Sure. Relax.>

She eased back on her control and let Desiray take over. She reached up to the amulet on her chest and focused. The weight that was crushing down on them relented. Rising a pace from the ground they glided out of the alley and turned onto the main street. They weaved a path around startled people, skirting stalls and rising up over wagons.

****You two are annoying me,**** the moderator rumbled in their minds. ****I gave you specific instructions.****

"Moderator, if you told me to slit my own throat I wouldn't do that either." Desiray growled. "The game is supposed to be inviolate. You're breaking your own frelling rule. 'Outside grudges, business, and obligations are to be left outside the grid.' Those are *your* words."

They both felt the Moderator scowl. ****Seeking to lecture me is a risky proposition.****

They turned a corner into a small park, found a stone bench and settled down. The queasy feeling had not gone away, it had only grown worse. Desiray gritted her teeth. Wren could feel the woman thinking--calculating the right words. Diplomacy was not Desiray's strong suit.

Wren felt her mistress decide on a course of action.

"Moderator--*Aarlen*--seeking to tick off all twelve players and their spouses is *expensive*. You risk turning Gabriella, Brin, Loric, Dame Techstar, plus all of us children against you. Is what you'll get for Wren worth what that will cost? I know how much wealth you gain from distributing recordings of this game. If all of us stop playing, you'll have just stabbed yourself in the foot twice."

The air was silent.

<What do you know, I may have gotten through to her.>

<What's this about recordings? People are watching the game?>

<Lots of people. That's why you're bound to the game. There's millions of gold riding on this--gambling especially. That trick you pulled with the gem no doubt has a lot of odds makers on edge.>

Wren swallowed. <*Millions?*>

<Yep. That's why everything is so stodgy and formal. That money is what pays for the prizes.>

****You make a valid point,**** the moderator admitted in her deep tones. ****I will postpone pursuing this matter until after the game--*provided* both of you return to play--*immediately*. Fail to comply and I will take this matter up with you--*personally*.****

Desiray did not hesitate. "Moderator, we agree to your terms."

****Acknowledged. Proceed to grid E-6 to join the rest of your team.****

Desiray moved to stand up, wavered, and thumped back down on stone bench with the sound of groaning rock. <***This isn't going to work.***>

<I think it's me,> Wren thought to Desiray. <I'm the one making us sick. Can you undo what you did?>

<Let me try.>

She closed her eyes and focused. Wren felt Desiray composing energies down deep and channeling images in her mind. She sensed every iota of her being come alive and begin to buzz and vibrate. Their body began to melt and change.

Wren felt that burning sensation again, only this time it wasn't as bad. She felt herself shoved down into darkness, and her body sense went away. Currents seemed to push and pull at her, gathering her up, compressing, folding--reshaping...

No time seemed to have passed from the moment she had closed her eyes. She was lying on her side. She ached. Her joints and muscles felt stiff. She *had* to be back in her own body.

Opening her eyes, she was lying sideways on the bench. She drew a breath. She blinked. It hurt. *Everything* hurt. Was there really that much pain--or in that short time had she grown used to a body where simply *breathing* felt good? She decided it must be the latter.

With effort, she pushed herself up to sit. Khairhavkul the Krill dagger fell out of her hand and clanked onto the ground. Desiray who'd been staring down at her hand looked over. "I guess it worked," she said. The woman looked pale, her hands were shaking.

"You don't look so good," Wren said.

"I'll get over it," she said. "I have a bad case of body envy I guess. Gaea warned me."

"Yes, she did." She looked down and picked up the dagger. "This was actually inside of us. Could that have...?"

Desiray took the dagger from her hand. She frowned. "You know--it might have. With other shape unions, it might not have been an issue--but with us." She shook her head. "Next time, I'll make sure it's a clear joining without anything that could possibly cause interference."

"You think we'll need to do it again?"

The guild mistress shook her head. "With Aarlen, anything is possible..."

Initially, I didn't like the idea of playing against my husband...he's so competitive. Again, I have to admit there is a tantalizing lure in getting the opportunity to kick his arse...

--Terra Falor

Chapter 7

Line of Scrimmage

After separating from the shape union Wren and Desiray were shaky on their feet. With her magic-enhanced body, the mistress recovered in a matter of a few long breaths. Wren was considerably slower to get back to normal. Her mind whirled at the possibilities that had been revealed to them. *That* was what it felt like to be a First-one--and only a *baby* one at that. Desiray had only one fifth of the capacity of the original beings who gave rise to the pantheon lords.

Fractional or not, they barely touched the potential available to them, and easily kept pace with D'klace twins. That was until the powerful elders turned serious and began tapping into their magic. That forced Wren and Desiray to reach beyond the native strength of their combined bodies. That's when things had gone wrong in a big way. Desiray surmised that when they co-joined, magic from the items Wren had been carrying had somehow interfered with the integrity of their fusion.

Desiray talked Aarlen the moderator into a temporary truce. However, they had to agree to play the game--*immediately*. It wasn't the best solution, but Wren had to agree it was far better than nothing. They were now proceeding to where they would join Desiray's partner Bertram.

The two of them cruised along close to the ground, weaving through the increasingly more crowded streets searching for the man. Their passing was attracting a lot of attention as onlookers openly gawked at them as they drifted by. Wren couldn't help but wonder if the moderator would really withhold any further action. In any event, her best bet was to stay close to the players. The last thing she wanted to do was give Aarlen an excuse to get involved, she remembered her words. *Fail to comply and I will take this matter up with you--personally.*

"So, I guess now we have to play," Wren said. "I really hadn't been planning on it. I've only been participating in self defense."

Desiray blinked at her with emerald eyes. Wren could tell the Mistress was still a little dazed from the joining. "Some pretty sharp proxy play for simple self defense. That dead-eye dagger shot of yours has everyone whining about how you're a ringer."

"Me--a *ringer*? Oh sure. The only one who doesn't know the rules."

"Knowing the rules doesn't help you cut someone with a dagger. You've scored on four people. Usually you only hear about poachers scoring on that many people this early in the game." She chuckled. "Damn, that has to be playing Hades with Aarlen's odds-makers. You're a total unknown, they probably had you set as fresh meat for the others to score on."

"Great, just what I wanted to do--tick off an elder--"

Wren's words were cut short as a light flared in the air in front of them. Desiray pulled up to a hover and started backing away. Patrons on the crowded street ducked into doorways and dodged behind carts.

With a crack like thunder, two huge figures emerged from the light. The illumination faded out with rasp of displaced air.

Hovering a pace off the ground Sindra and Drucilla glared at them, faces scratched, hair mussed, and uniforms covered with dust.

"Ticking off an elder is indeed unhealthy," Sindra growled. "As you are about to find out."

Surprised people scattered with yells and warnings. It didn't take the smarts of mage to recognize a big fight was about to break out.

"Hey, hey!" Desiray held up her hands. "Your mom called a truce!"

"Frell that," Sindra growled. "You *hurt* me."

"You hurt yourself!" Wren snapped. Her voice dropped. "Okay, maybe I did kick you a little hard..."

"That's the last damn thing you kick." She surged forward.

****Sindra!**** The moderator's voice boomed in their minds and audibly from the air around them.

The D'klace woman halted and looked around.

****You will desist. Otherwise, I shall call you proxy and points-worthy.****

"You want to do that, *Moderator*?" Her eyes narrowed. "Go ahead. Then we can drub these two good."

****If you join the game, failure to comply with the established rules will have dire consequences.**** The voice warned in a rumble. The emphasis put on the word 'dire' made Wren's skin prickle. This Aarlen did not make idle threats. ****You are judges--you know the rules. Put aside your differences until after the game. You are advised to return to your duties--NOW.****

The D'klace woman stiffened and let out an animalistic growl. Drucilla grabbed her shoulder, silver eyes wide.

"What a couple of over-grown greens," Desiray remarked to Wren. "Great big *babies*. Take a couple of hits and they throw a tantrum!"

Sindra's lips pressed to a line. She brushed her hair back and her hands tightened into fists. "Desiray your mouth just bought you a bunch of trouble. I'm going to beat you like a dirty rug."

Desiray lowered Wren and herself to the ground. She thrust the krill dagger into Wren's hand. She bared her teeth in a cold grin. "Bring it to me, Sister." She made a coming gesture. "I'm right here." Desiray flipped the edge of her cloak out and wrapped it around Wren. The cloth when it touched her shoulder felt hot and damp, clinging to her exposed skin like something alive. "Get ready," she whispered.

Wren's heart tried to flip in her chest. She clutched the woman's arm. "Desiray!" she gritted. "Are you *crazy*!?"

Silver eyes flashing, Sindra yanked a glowing weapon from a sheath on her side and streaked forward.

Eyes fixed on the giant woman, Desiray swung the other edge of the cloak in front of herself. With the woman only arm-span away she turned and the cloak flashed. To Wren, it felt much like teleporting only they didn't move--the air itself seemed bend and twist.

Sindra appeared to realize what Desiray was doing and dodged around them. She hissed to a stop a dozen paces past them and spun around. "What--you think I'm an idiot? Don't insult--"

Like a meteor, a hammer exploded into the ground and Sindra's feet. The impact shattered glass and made rocks rumble. Debris pelted the area, hunks of smoking rock hissed at Wren and Desiray but passed harmlessly through them as though they were made of air. Wren was certain that anything less durable than the powerful elder would have simply collapsed. Sindra only staggered back a few steps gripping her ears.

"Free points!" A man bellowed at the top of his lungs.

Shaking her head, Sindra was just orienting in the direction where the hammer came from just as Tal streaked out of sky. The burly warrior moved so fast he was only a blur. The D'klace raised some kind of glowing screen between them but he tore through the colored force as though it were paper. Sindra's silver eyes went wide as the big man hit her in the midriff with his shoulder. The impact made the air shudder as though two huge boulders had smashed together. The giant woman flew back, crashed through a tinker's cart, and collapsed the building behind it.

The moderator's voice dark and final spoke in their minds and in the air. ****Team clash, E-6. Team Falor defeats Frielos. Sindra neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Behind them, Drucilla began to glow. Her perfect doll-face had an angry set and her silver eyes burned like flames. Wren felt lines of force all around them bend toward the huge D'klace.

"Oh no, this is going to hurt!"

"Tag!" Algernon appeared out of no-where behind the woman. A black radiance shimmered around him, his arms, legs and chest seemed to thicken and a blue glow filled his eyes. His fist crackled like lightning as he drove it into the small of the Drucilla's back.

Wren thought Tal had hit Sindra hard. Algernon raised it to a new level. He disrupted the spell Drucilla was casting and sent her catapulting down the street knocking cart-sized divots out of the cobbles.

How could anything that even looked human hit that hard? Seeing the half-dozen smoking pockmarks down the street, she had to wonder how a woman as soft and attractive looking as Drucilla could knock chunks out of cobblestones and still have a single bone intact. Wren could only shake her head in wonderment as the big D'klace clawed back to her feet only instants after being slammed with such incredible force. What in Hades were those two *made* of? She'd been touched by them, it sure *felt* like flesh and blood. No wonder Mishaka hadn't been able to hurt them.

****Team clash, E-6. Team Falor defeats Frielos. Drucilla neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.**** There was a short pause and the tone of moderator's deep voice turned dry. ****Apologies to the players, we have a mid-game rules shift. Elder proxies have been admitted to the milieu. Handicapping is now in effect. Higher level shields, sensory indicators, and magicks have been dampened. Full contact approved for clashes with elder proxies.****

Sindra exploded out of the side of the building, collapsing what remained of the good wall. She glared at Tal who was openly grinning at her. "Mother! You did that on purpose!"

The moderator's voice turned to a glass crunching rasp. ****Your point being?***

"You can't *do* that!" Sindra screamed.

****Moderation advisory. Fifty bonus points to the first team to score a full contact defeat on proxy Sindra Frielos. Medium level magic and enhancements have now been disabled for elder proxies.****

Tal clapped his hands together, a feral grin on his face. "Here kitty kitty kitty..."

Fists still glowing, Algernon advanced on her. "Bring on the fresh meat."

"Oh no you don't!" Sindra yelled, dodging Algernon's lunge. She whirled and pushed him past. She pulled a dark sword from its sheath with a shriek. The weapon disappeared from her grasp.

****Unlimited class weaponry has been disallowed for elder proxies.**** The dark metallic uniform on her body sparkled and was replaced with what looked like common chain-mail. ****So has class twelve force armor.****

"Yahhh! *Mother!*"

****Proxy Sindra Frielos is advised to start playing--unless she wishes further handicapping. If she attempts to escape the game grid, the moderator will be there to PERSONALLY to escort her back into play. The award for a full contact defeat of Sindra Frielos has been increased to 100 points.****

Desiray grinned and pulled the cloak from around them. "That should keep those two busy." She grabbed Wren around the waist and streaked toward the alley where the hammer that initially stunned Sindra came from.

Bertram stood in the shadow of the building slipping a hammer into the ring on his belt and strapping it down. Desiray let Wren drop and flew directly into his arms. The blonde man pulled her close in hug.

"Thanks for the save, Partner!" Desiray laughed.

"Why of course, Darling," Bertram responded, kissing her on the cheek. "I wasn't going to let that ogress touch your pretty face. Beat you like a rug? I think *not*." He cringed as a loud crack shook the air, and they caught a glimpse of Algernon bouncing past the mouth of the alley. "Aie, that can't have been pleasant."

"Looks like those two bullies have recovered enough to stop being punching bags," Desiray said. "We better blow out of here." She took Bertram's hand and led them out of the alley in a different direction.

"What strategy now, my Dear?" Bertram asked as they ran.

"Damned if I know," the white-haired woman admitted. They had to force their way through a crowd of on-lookers all peering down the alley, trying to get a glimpse of the fight taking place on the next street. Eyes wide, they seemed to recognize Bertram and immediately stepped back with gasps and apologies. "With a hundred points being offered for punching in Sindra's head, you can bet everyone's going to give it a try. Those are easy points compared to some of those nightmare item hits that Brin arranged. I'm going to stomp on his foot next time I see him. The hits this year are next to impossible!"

Wren laughed. "I didn't think it was that hard."

"Oh, shut up," Desiray growled. "Show off."

"So, she has not persuaded you to share in your find," Bertram asked Wren.

"No. My price is too rich for her blood."

"That price being?"

"Mishaka's head on a pole, and the whereabouts of my family."

The paladin raised an eyebrow. "An admirable sentiment. It is, as you say--a trifle--*pricey*."

"I don't know, that price gets pretty attractive once you think about it." A breathy female voice said from above and behind them.

Bertram and Desiray spun.

Wren whipped out the Krill dagger and drew back to throw. She oriented and found the two figures. She started to throw and recognized two things, first that it was Cassandra and Arabella hovering in the air as though standing on a platform, second that both of them had ward energies wrapped all around them.

"No, wait--!"

Desiray and Bertram had already released their weapons. Wren dived aside as the paladin's hammer and the guild mistress' dagger struck the web of filaments hovering in front of the two players. The instant the items struck, a blast of sound and force erupted outward in a fountain of color and scalding air that knocked both of them staggering backward.

Wren rolled to her feet and focused on Cassandra.

Desiray flailed in front of her and clutched at her face. "Damn you, Cassandra!" She growled. "I can't see!"

"That's the idea, Darling. It's only temporary of course--it *is* just a game after all."

Bertram staggered to one side and clutched the wall for support. "A foul strike nonetheless, Milady!"

Dressed in the same city camouflage as the others, Cassandra had her dark hair tied back and wore some kind of thick, clear, crystal strapped across her space black eyes. To Wren's special vision, the gold mage was shielded everywhere by the ward except for two tiny windows around her outstretched hands, probably so she could cast spells through the barrier.

She could hit a target that size with her eyes closed.

Adjusting her stance, she aimed to bring the dagger across the mage's shoulder that was in her line of sight. She had yet to throw this Krill dagger of Desiray's but she could feel its balance.

"Cassandra," Arabella warned. "Watch out, Blondie wasn't affected."

"Get her, Wren!" Desiray yelled. "Take a stripe out of her butt!"

Cassandra waved a hand at Arabella. "She can't hit us."

Wren threw. Khairhavlul left her hand with a shriek that sounded like a herald arrow whirring across a battlefield.

"Spit!" Arabella lunged and knocked Cassandra aside, interposing the large gold band on her arm. The spinning blade knocked a hunk out of the metal with a clang that sounded like a hammer striking an anvil, and veered away.

"Aieeeeeyowch!" Arabella danced in the air, shaking her arm. "Don't you frelling *ever* listen!"

Wren bet if the Krill dagger was anything like Dorian's blade it would work in a similar fashion. "Khairhavlul." She whispered, imagining the blade resting in her palm. Sparks spun around her hand and in a flash, the blade reappeared. She nodded, spoke Vectra's name and snapped her fingers. The other weapon appeared in the opposite hand. While Arabella was dancing around and Cassandra was disoriented, she might as well try again.

"What happened!? Did you get her!?" Desiray called.

"Not *yet*..." She drew back to throw.

Cassandra made a sweeping gesture just as Wren snapped her arm forward to release. Force pressed in around her with a rasping sound and sparks jumped and danced down her skin. Even before Wren released the dagger, it felt like someone had grabbed her shoulders and spun her. The weapon flew out of her hand in nearly the opposite direction, exploding into a building wall.

Her feet left the ground. "Whoa! Hey!" Her stomach lurched as the surroundings whirled around her like she'd become a child's top. "Whoa! Wh--oa! *Wwwwhoa!* *Casssandra!*"

"Little snip," she heard the mage rasp. "Try and hit me now."

Her surroundings were nothing but a chaotic blur and a rush of air. Her insides knotted up, and blood thundered in her temples. "Stop! Stop! *Stop!* I'm going to be-e-ee *si-ii-ick!*"

"Better back up, Arabella," Cassandra remarked. "I think she's going to blow."

The other woman laughed.

"Damn it, Cassandra!" Desiray yelled. There was a sharp cracking sound and a hurt gasp. "Owww!"

"Mind the ward, Desiray."

"A-aa-ah!" Wren groaned. Her vision flashed red and green. Her head felt ready to explode. "Ple-ee-ee-*ease!*"

"Concede, Wren!"

"Ma-ah-ah-derator! I fre-el-ling conce-ee-ee-de!"

****Team clash, E-5.**** There was an uncharacteristic pause in the moderator's speech and she could almost feel the distant woman grinning. ****Team Felspar defeats Tarrantil--**** The voice paused again, like someone drawing a breath and trying not to laugh. ****Proxy Idun-daughter neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged. Ten bonus points awarded for highlight worthy play.****

"All right, Cassandra!" Arabella cheered.

Wren stopped spinning with a jerk, and dropped to the ground. She might have stopped turning, but the world continued to pirouette and dance in a stomach churning blur. She staggered backward flailing for balance, knifed forward to correct, stumbled sideways and careened into the building. Wren clutched the bricks for support and slid down to the ground. "I--*hate*--magic--users."

"All right, Wren, you're on our team now."

"Come near me, and I'll bite you," she growled. "Lords, my *head*."

"Cassandra," Desiray snapped. "I still can't see!"

"Concede and I'll release the spell. Otherwise, you'll have to figure out how to lift it yourself. The spell obeys the rules. It can be lifted without magic--but you have to figure it out. That might take a while."

"The rest of the game, eh, milady?" Bertram chimed in with a growl.

"Could be. Guess it depends on how brilliant you think you are. Decide fast, there are others after Wren, I'm not hanging around to fight them."

"Are you sure she's worth getting chased around the rest of the game?" Arabella grumbled brushing back her red hair.

"Of course, you can never have too many free points. She's good for easy defeats on anyone not watching for a long range shot. Tal and Algernon found that out. Check the replay--*phenomenal*. I don't know why Dorian's team didn't get highlight points for that double takedown."

Arabella snorted. "Because our impartial moderator, Aarlen, hates her guts, that's why. I don't think she likes Dominique much better."

"A valid observation," Cassandra agreed. "You two conceding or not? I feel players on the way."

Desiray growled.

"We have to," Bertram determined. He raised his voice. "Moderator, team Tarrantil concedes for spell countering."

"Bertram!"

**** Team clash, E-5. Felspar defeats Tarrantil. Desiray neutralized. Bertram neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"Good choice," Cassandra said with a grin. "See, Arabella, I told you it would be worth it. Thirty points."

"I'm still going to bite you when my head stops spinning," Wren warned. "I hope you're ready to deal with the Sen'Gen chasing me around."

"Sen'Gen--*chasing* you?"

"Cassandra, lift the blasted spell!" Desiray demanded.

The gold mage snapped her fingers. "It will take a little while to fully clear. That gives us time to leave."

"Cassandra, be careful. Wren's not kidding, and Sindra and Drucilla are mighty cranked up. We hurt them bad and they're ticked."

"You two--hurt *them*. I obviously missed something marvelous. Oh well, Wren, tell me on the way." Wren felt that firm pressure close on her limbs and raise her into the air.

"I haven't bitten you yet," she growled.

"I'm certain you'll get your chance," Cassandra answered with a grin.

It's action plus insanity while wielding magic weapons at full strength that can crush rock and split steel. That's why it's a spectator sport...

--T'Gor

Chapter 8

Pass Interference

As they floated away from Desiray and Bertram, Wren wanted to do a lot worse than bite Cassandra. Not only was she dizzy, she felt humiliated. She knew the air would get let out of her ego eventually--but couldn't it have been someone besides Cassandra? Vera humbled her every day during training, but she didn't mind because the G'yaki turned cook was so self-effacing. She still held something of a grudge against the gold mage. Cassandra had forced her to fight Hethanon. She and Desiray came within hairs of dying in that encounter.

Cassandra took them down the street at the speed of a fast run. She kept them well over four paces up, but people scattered out of their path anyway. Fingers were pointed at the gold woman and it was apparent that she was a recognized and feared figure in Ivaneth. The woman didn't make any overt acknowledgement but continued on, dodging around turns and ducking between buildings. After a good distance, she turned into the shadows of an alley between two large four story buildings and brought them up to hover beneath an overhang.

"What's the plan?" Arabella asked Cassandra.

"Look for opportunities. Either that or persuade Wren to let us have that gem."

"Slim chance of *that*," Wren grumbled.

They all winced at a crashing sound that echoed through the buildings about a hundred paces away.

"Damn, they must still be trying to get Sindra and Drucilla," Arabella said, shaking her head. "They're all crazy. I want to stay as far away from those two as possible."

"What do you mean?" Cassandra stared at Arabella. "You make music with them. Why would you be afraid of them?"

"Don't be silly, Cassandra. Sharing some tunes is a little different than matching swords. They're--well--*lethal*. They're fine when they're happy, but lords help anyone or anything stupid enough to get them angry. Only Luthice is crazy enough to butt heads with those two."

"Well--Luthice and me," Wren said, raising a hand. "Sure you want me on your team? I'm certain they'd be glad to thrash both of you to get to me."

Arabella's blue eyes widened and she brushed back her flaming red hair. "What in Hades did you do?"

"Ummm, let's see, punched Sindra through a wall. Made Drucilla almost impale her sister, and knocked both of them through about a dozen warehouse crates."

"*You*--did that?" Arabella breathed. "You *must* have a death wish."

"I take it Desiray helped you," Cassandra remarked. "You look remarkably unscathed for someone who went at it with those two."

"We combined our resources, yes. We also didn't antagonize them without first being threatened. Aarlen was chasing me around with Sen'Gen and decided to send the twins after me to speed the process up."

"I missed something again. If you mixed it up with them, why aren't you two prisoners? They obviously didn't go down."

"Desiray negotiated with Aarlen to put it off until the end of the game. Sindra and Drucilla were still hacked about the fight and followed us. Aarlen warned them off, but

they pressed on after Desiray goaded them. That's when Aarlen called open season on Sindra."

"Desiray *negotiated*?" Cassandra said, black eyes wide. "Now, there's a first. She really must have been scared."

"Hey, look those two in the eye and see if you aren't scared too!" Wren snapped.

"Oh, I guess they're scary enough," the gold mage murmured. "What interests me, is how you managed to fight them."

"Desiray and I did a shape-union. It gave us more power--a lot more actually."

Cassandra narrowed her eyes. "That's what grandmother was hinting at."

"Cassandra, I hate to interrupt your sagely muse, but we have a game on, and if we just hang up here hovering, we're going to get spotted and thumped. Especially, if those two big silver-eyed witches are looking for her." Arabella indicated Wren with her thumb. "You and I have not trained enough to go clashes with them."

"Well, I just held up to see if we could persuade Wren to gift us with her gem. I heard she wants Mishaka smacked, I think I'd help with that for a game win."

Wren snorted. "Oh yeah, the way you helped against Hethanon? I can do without that kind of assistance, thank you. In case you forgot, Jharon is dead because of that bitch."

"I remember," Cassandra replied. "Perhaps your memory is short, but I pulled you two out of there."

"Right. *After* we got stomped. Your timing stunk."

Cassandra put hands on hips. "I had no idea you harbored so much ill will toward me over that misadventure."

Wren let out a breath and pushed a hand through her hair. She glanced around. Hanging in the air made her nervous, especially when there wasn't any visible means of support. "Dying does that to me."

"Funny, you don't look dead."

"Cassandra, I had the good sense to know I should stay away from that bastard. You pushed me into it, and cranked me up with that fight-happy dagger. That poison was a slow *painful* way to die. The girl that went into the Brethren guild disintegrated on the table in Jharon's temple. It's only because I have a savant's tao that you could put me in a new body. So, pardon me, if I harbor a little resentment over that *misadventure*."

"Oh," Cassandra frowned. "You know about that."

"Sure. I know I'm not as bright as everyone else around that house, but I catch on eventually."

Arabella looked at Cassandra askance. "You did that to her? Sent this baby to fight an avatar?"

"Hey, who's a baby?" Wren bristled.

"Guilty, I suppose," Cassandra admitted. "I gave her a star-wand to fight with. It just wasn't enough."

"Well, fancy that," Arabella shook her head. "I don't blame you, Wren. I'd want to crack her skull too."

"Hey, thanks, *Partner*," Cassandra snapped.

The red-haired woman shook her head. "Don't you hate it when mages get all high and mighty, and try to run your life?"

"I sure do," Wren agreed. Maybe this Arabella wasn't so bad after all.

"They're always sneaking around trying to make you think down is up, and left is right, feeding you drekked up information to keep you in the dark."

"Yeah!" Wren growled, thinking about Dorian. "It's really frelled!"

"Are you two done dumping on magic-users!" Cassandra growled. "Or do I have to let you fall on your pointy little heads?"

Arabella looked down seeming to remember they were twenty paces up. Her cheeks colored. "Oh, sorry, got a little carried away." She grinned at Wren, with a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes.

Arabella had a violent temper, but she was fun too, but that made her more human to Wren.

"So, is that a 'no', Wren? There's always a chance that I learned from my mistake last time. Maybe I might even go in with you from the start this time. We mages may be really 'frelled' at times," she shot a dark look at Arabella. "But we can be really handy to have around." She pointed at the ground. "Like when you need to fly."

Wren looked down. "You think you could fight Mishaka?"

Cassandra narrowed black eyes. "Well, I wouldn't stand and let her pummel me with magic, no. I know how Beia beat her and could duplicate that assault if it became necessary. Besides, you're not limited to me--there's a good chance I could persuade my husband to come along. I'm fairly certain he could take care of things."

Wren stared at the gold woman. "You really want to win this game don't you?"

The mage sniffed. "As a matter of fact--yes."

"We could start right after the game--within a couple tendays?"

Cassandra drew a breath, glancing around. "That would be acceptable. I would agree to that."

Wren held out her hand. "All right, Cassandra, you have yourself a game."

The mage's dark eyes widened. "Really?"

"Just because I don't like you, doesn't mean I can't trust you--you never lied to me... only bullied me around."

The woman frowned. "Thanks--I think."

"The gem is stashed way back in B-6, so I don't have to tell you it'll be tough to get."

"Damn it," Cassandra murmured. "Sneaking all that way this late in the game is almost impossible. Too many people on the streets. Guess we do a screamer. Where in B-6? What building?"

"It's an old unused temple with a cracked tower, there's big green hedge on the east wall."

"That's very ironic choice of a hiding place, Wren," the mage said with a shake of her head.

Nodding, Arabella smiled and pushed a hand through her red hair.

"What?"

"Well, before the paladins and lords smashed that place and killed everyone inside." Cassandra shook a finger at Wren. "That was a temple of Hecate. That's why it's still abandoned. Good clerics won't build on the defiled ground and the street people think it's cursed."

Wren gasped. "The frell you say! Gick!" Her insides twisted. Irony be damned. To think she'd been crawling around in one of that hated witch's precincts without even knowing it. "Let's get it out of there then."

"Directly," Cassandra agreed. "Wards down. Invisibility up." The mage spun her staff over her head. Around them a sparks danced around a spherical around them, then the light faded. The three of them wavered in the air as the woman made passes over herself with the staff. With each swing she became progressively harder to see. She went from solid to a faded image, then to a figure of shimmering glass, and on the third swing finally disappearing from view.

"Dorian's way seems faster," Wren remarked. "Your method definitely has more style though."

"Why--*thank you!*" A voice answered from empty air. The sincerity and enthusiasm in Cassandra's tone made Wren realize she'd inadvertently paid a high complement.

The mage was chortling as she repeated the process on Arabella. Wren pulled her calf sheath off her leg and strapped it on her left arm. She summoned Dorian's dagger Vectra and slid it into place. If they were going to mix it up with other players, she needed to be quick on the pull. She wished she hadn't needed to leave Desiray's dagger back at the alley. It had been a beautiful weapon.

"You really shouldn't encourage her," the red-haired woman said as she went from blurry to glass-like. "She needs a cart to carry her ego as it is." Wren heard a crack. Just as she faded from view, Arabella jerked putting a hand to the back of her head. "Ow!"

"Low bridge," Cassandra remarked. "Ignore her feeble attempts at humor, Wren. You go right ahead and compliment me any time you want."

Wren rolled her eyes. *Mages*, great big children with way too much power. In another moment, she was rendered transparent.

"A word of warning ladies," Wren said. "I might be good for points, but I have only one returning dagger--the one Dorian loaned me. The rest of my throwing daggers are scattered all over the city. One dagger, one throw--if you want more--you have to provide the weapons."

"Maybe you should take up the bow," Arabella mumbled. "I have a spare." Wren felt the air shift near her, and the hilt of a dagger was shoved into her hand. "His name is Quicklick. He's good to thirty paces then starts tailing left."

"Quicklick?" Wren chuckled. "I won't ask. Just think his name and imagine him in my hand, right?"

"Standard dagger of flight," Arabella agreed.

"Standard?" Wren rumbled. "Since when are magical returning daggers *standard*?"

"Since there were mages who saw the utility of weapon that doesn't get lost," Cassandra said. "Here's my back-up, Azimuth." Another weapon was shoved into her other hand.

Wren frowned as she realized something. "Can you two see me?"

"Sure," Arabella answered. "If we couldn't, we'd frell each other up half the time."

"I don't see either--" She felt a sharp rap of knuckles on the top of her head. "Ow! Why'd you do that?" she growled.

"Just blink three times and look," Cassandra ordered. "Bloody savant. Always have to tweak my spells so they work right on you."

She did as she was told. Herself, Cassandra and Arabella became perfectly visible again except every few heartbeats they shimmered like a reflection in a pond. She rubbed her head. "Did you have to put a dent in my skull?"

Cassandra shrugged. "You're just like my hard-headed kids, Wren. Sometimes you simply need a little sense knocked into you."

She snorted. "The difference is I'm not one of your stone-for-bone children. That hurt. Keep your hard knuckles to yourself in the future, please."

The mage rolled her eyes and three of them rose higher in the sky above the avenue. "Okay ladies, this is going to be really fast and a little rough."

Cassandra held her staff out horizontally in front of them and the red-haired woman took hold. Wren wrapped her fists around the iron and wood shaft. She felt her heart speed up. She knew this would be just like the high-speed ride with Dorian.

"On a count of three. One--two--*three!*"

The burst of speed was like being fired out of a catapult. Having a death grip on the staff definitely helped as they arced up into the sky the wind howling in their faces with eye-watering speed.

"Eeee-*haaa!*" Arabella cheered.

Flying with Dorian had been different. Perhaps the way that the auburn-haired mage had held onto her made it not quite so terrifying. Her chest hurt from controlling the fear. Maybe down deep she still trusted Dorian in ways she had never trusted Cassandra. Dorian never asked her to face danger alone. When the scheming woman put her at risk to test their powers, she had been in the fight with Wren.

Clothes fluttering at a high pitch they peaked out high enough in the sky to see the harbor and the shoals that shielded it from the open ocean. The white and black dots of birds in flight looked like the rise and fall of motes caught in the rays of morning light shining through a window.

Cassandra angled down. Wren could see that she'd picked out the temple that was their destination was making an arrow shot straight toward it.

The jagged lines of the structure grew with dramatic speed. Wren's heart pounded and it took effort to find her voice. "East side, the tallest tower!"

"Understood," the mage replied, narrowed dark eyes distorted by the crystal strapped to her face.

"Drop me at the bottom," Arabella said. "I'll be decoy. Meet me at C-5 if we get in a mix up."

The three of them swooped down into the temple courtyard and the red-haired woman let go while still several paces up. She hit the stone, rolled, and came up running, sword in hand.

As Cassandra angled up, Wren pointed. "That big crack near the top."

The mage whipped up to the indicated spot and Wren clambered into the opening. Eyes adjusting to the dimmer light and dusty confines, she glanced up to where she knew she'd hidden the bag.

A jolt went through her body as she noticed the brown color of the leather wasn't visible behind the cobwebs. Skin icy, savant power snarling in her head, she scrambled up the inner wall to the spot. That wasn't possible! She'd been certain that no-one had been watching. Even if they had, the hiding place had been nearly perfect.

Pulling away the cobwebs, she reached into the gap and her fears were confirmed. Her hand touched nothing.

"Frell!" She yelled. "Damn it!"

"What's the matter?" Cassandra called back, voice raised.

The words burned in her throat. "It's--not--*here!*"

"Whaaat?" Cassandra burst out. "No wait. It must be there, if someone else found it. It would have been announced."

Wren felt kicked in the stomach. No matter what, the universe somehow managed to conspire against her. "Maybe it wasn't someone in the game who found it."

Still hovering, the gold mage peered in through the opening, light reflecting off the crystal lenses shrouding her eyes. "Look harder," she said, voice distorted in the irregular space. "Maybe it slid or moved."

She didn't understand. How could anyone have found it? Even the cobwebs weren't disturbed. Grinding her teeth, Wren reached deeper into the spot. Her hand found only empty space.

"Damn! It's--*gone!*" Frustration and rage fueling her, she drew back her fist and slammed the wall. A flare of blue light erupted from the impact sending a hot shock up her arm.

Cassandra flinched away from the flash. At the same time, the aged masonry cracked and shattered along the support joists. Hunks of stone all the way down the wall broke loose and fell to floor.

Half way down the joists was the leather bag that had somehow shifted and slid down since she had placed it. Face still hot with anger, Wren saw the bag and let out a laugh that hurt like being stabbed with needles.

"Oh lords."

"What!? What!?" Cassandra yelled.

Wren dropped down and grabbed the backpack. Just to be certain she flipped it open and found the gem still swaddled in the rags she had wrapped it in to keep it safe. Stuffing it back in to the bottom of the pack, she cinched the top tight. Still tingling and breathing hard, she slipped her arms through the straps, shrugged into the pack, then climbed back to the opening. "I got it, let's go."

"Don't scare me like that!" Cassandra snapped, frowning.

She held out her staff and Wren took hold. As she gripped the iron bound wood, she felt the levitation magic take hold and the air seemed to become solid under her feet.

"We have to get out of here in a hurry," the mage warned. "We've been here too long, and that little outburst of yours might have been detected."

Cassandra angled down into the courtyard where Arabella was standing, sword raised and alert.

Before they reached the ground, Wren heard the shriek of something hissing at them from behind. She grabbed Cassandra around the neck and spun the two of them in the air and threw with her free hand.

"Hey! Acck!" the mage let out.

Barely a pace from them a speeding dagger collided with Wren's hastily thrown knife and both weapons veered. The spinning weapon passed through Cassandra's hair, sending parted strands flicking into the air.

Thirty paces away, a big woman with a wild mane of dark-brown hair wearing black chain-mail and polished thigh-high riding boots paused in the sky as though surprised. She blinked with brilliant gold eyes. "My my, you *are* good."

Down below, the street erupted with the sound of clashing blades. A bearded man dressed in gray and wielding a two-handed sword in great spinning arcs pursued a retreating Arabella across the uneven cobbles.

"Oh damn!" Cassandra raised her staff.

Unfortunately, Wren was still holding onto it, so the motion swung her around. "Cass--!"

A dagger appeared in Terra's hand and she threw. Wren released her own weapon with a gasp. The spinning steel again deflected the attack. She didn't hesitate but launched her last dagger at woman's shoulder.

Terra didn't dodge and in an amazing burst of speed snatched the whirling dagger out of the air. "Oh yes," the woman crooned. "You *are* fast. You'll have to turn it up a notch or two to hit me though."

"Oh spit! Cassaaandra..." She summoned Vectra and Azimuth to her hand.

****Team clash, B-6. Team D'Shar defeats Felspar. Arabella neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Wren glanced back and saw the red-haired woman had been backed against the temple wall and that the man had somehow managed to get her even wielding that huge blade.

"Now this should be fun," Terra said, lacing her fingers and gave them a crack that sounded clear to where Cassandra and Wren hovered. "Me against you two. I can't see your little blade master helping much while weighing down your staff like that."

She obviously can't fly under her own power, and I'll thump you before you can even start a spell to make that happen. Yes, yes, fun indeed." She crept forward, voice low and mesmerizing. "You can't afford to simply hang around up here either. Pretty soon everyone else will come sniffing after that juicy six hundred point gem that she so masterfully pilfered." Only a dozen paces away she paused. "I say declare a no-contest and agree to a team split on the score."

"Like *Hades*," Cassandra growled. "You haven't defeated me yet." She spun around, grabbed Wren by the belt, and flung her toward the temple wall. "*Run!*"

The movement happened so fast Wren barely had enough warning to focus her savant power and cling to the wall. Even as her hands and feet struck the stone and the buzz of her power hummed in her mind, Wren saw Terra's partner race to a position beneath her, holding up the huge blade. Daggers in her teeth, she scrambled toward the crack in the tower.

"Hey!" She heard yelled below. "Terra, opponent shift!"

Clambering through the hole and across the fragile spars toward the opening at the back, Wren listened for signs of pursuit. Terra seemed too big to possibly squeeze through that opening, but with the powers she'd seen displayed by some of these people, the woman could probably *make* an opening big enough.

Something loud rasped through the air and exploded outside. The tower shuddered, and objects hissed through the air.

"Moderator!" she heard Cassandra holler. "Unbind proxy Idun-daughter!"

****Team Felspar relinquishes control of mortal proxy Idun-daughter. Move logged.****

"Dammit! T'Gor! Forget Cassandra, we want the girl!"

Something made a high-pitched whine, then a low roar made the whole temple shudder.

****Team clash, B-6. Team Felspar defeats Karlin. Terra neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Wren dropped through the opening into the destroyed temple worship area. She hit the ground running, scrambling toward the shattered wall and the hedge at the back she'd encountered before.

Heart hammering she dove through the hole shielding her face from the sting of sharp branches and serrated leaves. Head down she drove through the resistance and plunged into the street. She glanced back, saw no pursuit and raced north.

Didn't she already do this once before? Where to now? Cassandra released her, but that was obviously to keep Terra's team from gaining control of her if Cassandra lost. She guessed the best thing was to go where Arabella had mentioned, C-5. Unfortunately, that was near Ranfast's emporium, and those mercenaries might still be around.

Only quick reflexes brought her up short and caused her to dive backward, hit her hands and handspring back to her feet. Terra's bearded partner T'Gor shimmered into view, a blur of whirling two-edged glowing steel, blue-eyes narrow, and a crooked smile on his square face. He spun the blade, flipped it to the other hand and whirled toward her like a tornado.

Wren lunged back, dove and rolled, leaped over a blade cut and summoned Azimuth and Vectra to her hands. She ducked a cut and dived at his feet, rolling and slicing. The man laughed, dancing around her swings reversing his great sword with seemingly impossible turns of the wrist and bends of his wiry body.

In the middle of flailing at this agile opponent, bolts of light shot in from a position above him. Blade abruptly aglow, he deflected the magic aside as if he had known it was coming.

Cassandra shimmered into view and dropped down behind him swinging her staff. Wren figured that was her opportunity to press the man while he was involved with a more powerful opponent.

"Good! Good! Bring it to me!" he called in a deep voice, grinning the whole time. He switched the sword from hand to hand, leaping and lunging between the two of them, guarding away Cassandra's staff and Wren's dagger cuts with maddening ease. He moved as though simultaneously made of wet cloth and steel, flexing like a reed one moment and hard as iron the next. He used every part of his body, elbows, knees, feet, and shoulders, pushing, blocking, and disrupting everything that came at him.

Wren felt the bruises all down her arms and shoulders from his body blocks. She made a mistake thinking that giant two-handed sword would be a liability up close, only to find tight-in is where he wanted both her and Cassandra. She blocked a grab, swung an elbow at his face, and leaped away as he ducked. Gambling every thing, she twisted in the air and threw both daggers.

Still laughing and using that same maddening flexibility and speed, he spun the sword and knocked the first dagger aside, and twisted to evade the second blade. Cassandra yelped, barely dodging the first blade and deflecting the second.

"Hey! Watch it!"

Yelling in frustration, Wren charged straight at him, leaping as he swung the sword into her path. Her feet came down on his hands, driving the blade into the ground. Pushing off, she launched forward, bringing her knee up under his chin with a crack.

The force rocked him backward off balance so that he fell to the ground with a grunt. She hit the ground, rolled and turned so she stood next to Cassandra. Chest heaving, she faced T'Gor who had righted himself almost instantly. Apparently, she hadn't struck hard enough to score on him.

****Team clash, B-6. Accumulated clash time exceeded. Proxy Idun-daughter and Team Felspar versus D'Shar ends in a draw. Ten bonus points awarded for highlight worthy play. Move freeze on Terra Karlin and Arabella ends. Opponents have thirty count to clear.****

"Damn," T'Gor muttered, shaking his head. "You're sharp girl, almost got me. What's your name?"

"W--Wren," she managed between gasps for air.

"Well, Wren, look for me," he grinned and winked. "I'll be looking for you."

"T'Gor," Cassandra said, breathing hard with hands on hips. "Has anyone ever told you, you're too good natured?"

He bowed. "Anyone ever tell you, you're too serious? This is a game remember? It's supposed to be fun."

"That--" Cassandra gasped. "Wasn't fun. That *hurt*."

The man shrugged. "Train harder! Better run girls, unless you want me to start on you again. I'm not tired, I could do this for at least an bell or so."

"I'm done!" Wren cried. "Run!"

She turned and sprinted up the street taking the nearest turn that would put her out of sight of the bearded man.

She ducked into an alley and zigzagged through a few more turns. What had happened to Cassandra? Why hadn't she followed? Certainly, she hadn't been incapacitated by that exchange. T'Gor had obviously not even been going as hard as he could have. That thought alone made her tremble inside. What kind of people had she fallen in with? She had thought Beia to be a uniquely gifted (cursed?) warrior. However, Tal, Algernon, and now this new man, T'Gor, all possessed such incredible capabilities that if she were asked to tell which was the most dangerous she wouldn't be able to say. The bearded man was different from the other men in that he didn't

seem to rely on strength the way Tal and Algernon did. He did it with speed, style, and reflexes. A quiet warrior that just smiled and did what he was so obviously good at.

Well, Wren, look for me. I'll be looking for you.

She couldn't help but shiver. As smiling and jovial as he seemed, she thanked the lords this was only a competitive game and not blood serious. Smile or not, she had no doubt he was the type that would track his prey to the ends of the realms.

Dodging through ever thickening crowds of people, hawkers, and merchant wagons, she continued to zigzag north-east toward C-5, where Arabella had said she would meet them. The city smells had begun to stiffen with the acrid reek of animals, smoke, and burning garbage. Her arms and shoulders still ached from the pounding she'd received. She couldn't even blame T'Gor, he never struck her--she hurt her own fool self trying to get inside that defensive maze of iron hard elbows, knees, and shoulders that always managed to interpose themselves. She sighed. Come to think of it, it was the same way when she practiced with Vera. The biggest bruises usually came from getting excited and putting all her muscle behind a kick or punch that she thought would score, only have the attack meet bone.

Practice. She needed practice to get anywhere near as good as these nightmares in human form. How long did Dorian say she'd been adventuring--five decades? She didn't think she'd live that long, much less get that much practice. All of these people were older than they looked, and amazingly powerful because of their knowledge and experience. She didn't doubt that Cassandra would be more formidable if her magic wasn't constrained.

She looked up and realized she'd been moving along the same main avenue without making turns. Most of the alleys had been choked with people and vendors. She wasn't sure whether the extra cover was worth taking the chance of getting tangled up. The serious danger was that she had the gem with her now. If she lost an exchange, the team would take it away and her negotiating opportunities would be done.

Damn, she wished Cassandra had stayed with her. The invisibility was gone and she was running in the open with nobody watching her back. Ducking around wagons, carriages, carts and horses she watched the sky and the streets around her. She was paralleling the main street where Ranfast's Emporium lay. She did *not* want to tangle with those guards again.

<Wren,> she heard in her mind. <This is Desiray. Are you in trouble?>

She sighed and struggled to continue running and focus enough to mindspeak. <I'm *always* in trouble.>

<That's what I thought.>

A huge figure materialized in front of her in a rasp a displaced air. She threw her weight backwards, heels stuttering across the cobbles as she attempted to stop out of arm's reach.

The dark-haired woman brushed her hair back, silver eyes glinting. "Hello, Wren," Sindra growled. "I believe we have unfinished business."

<Correction!> Wren gasped. She tried to make the volume of her thoughts echo the panic she felt. <I have *big* trouble!>

Chapter 9

Personal Foul

Confronted by Sindra, Wren searched frantically for escape options. Small shops and residences lined the narrow avenue, a few carts and water barrels sat at the street side. She had plenty of directions to go, but the only objects capable of withstanding the least of the woman's attacks was close to fifty paces away. A breeze gusted down the street, fluttering the big D'klace's dark hair.

Sindra's voice sounded heavy and dark. "Any last words before I thrash you?"

Wren took a step back. "How about, 'Please don't, I apologize'."

The woman's silver eyes narrowed. "Nice, but I simply *must* shove you through at least one wall before I call it even."

Wren took another step back holding up her hands. "Bricks make me break out in a rash. I'm a lot more fragile than you. Not to mention--*smaller*."

Sindra stepped forward. "Should have considered that before hitting me."

"You attacked us first!"

"Paybacks aren't fair, Wren, they just feel good."

Wren glanced around and took a fighting stance. There simply wasn't anywhere to run. She'd already seen how fast the twins could move when they wanted to. She wouldn't get twenty paces. "I don't want you more angry with me. You swing on me. I'll fight back." She summoned Vectra to her fingers, and gripped it for throwing. "A few days ago we were friends."

Sindra laced her fingers and bent them with a crack. "I'm still friendly. I'm not going to kill you--just hurt you a lot."

"Sindra," Wren growled, backing up. "You don't have all those fancy protections right now. Don't make me put a dagger in your eye. You think what I did hurt *before*."

The D'klace woman paused. "That *would* smart."

Wren clung to the hope she might talk her way out of this. This was bad, while she was confronting Sindra, other players could be sneaking up on her. Where was Drucilla? Those two were never apart. The back of her neck prickled. The other woman could be anywhere--invisible, flying, or disguised.

"Your eyes are too beautiful for me to be sticking sharp objects in them. Which I can do, *ten times out of ten*. You're fast, but not *that* fast."

Sindra raised an eyebrow. "You think my eyes are beautiful?"

"I think all of you is beautiful, I've said so before."

"That's right, you have--you were even sincere. Okay, I promise not break any bones or leave any permanent scars."

"Sindra, you have some serious revenge issues."

It was only her savant talent that allowed her to evade. She sensed and felt a body moving behind her. Vera's G'yaki training came to the rescue again as she dropped into the splits, grabbed the hurtling body, yanked and shoved in the same motion.

The dust on the cobbles plumed upward as a heavy body struck the ground between her and Sindra. Wren rolled sideways and launched to her feet and let fly with her dagger.

Sindra shielded her eyes with her arm. The dagger didn't go remotely near the elder's face, but thunked solidly into the target Wren aimed for.

She sprinted for cover.

The D'klace growled and then yelped in surprise as she stumbled forward running out of her left boot that Wren had pinned to the cobblestone with Vectra's amazingly sharp blade.

****Team Idun-daughter, ten point award for highlight worthy play. Scores updated.****

Well, at least Aarlen thought it was funny. From the curses hurled at her back, Sindra didn't think so. What happened to Cassandra? From Desiray's last message, she thought the guild mistress might be coming to the rescue.

Running around another turn, she called Vectra's name and concentrated on the weapon. In buzz of magic and a puff of air, the dagger's hilt reappeared in her hand. Damn, this thing was nice. She hoped Dorian didn't want it back, she'd have a hard time giving it up.

Pushing through and around clusters of people, dodging carts and wagons, she slid to a stop at another corner. She allowed herself to lean back and catch her breath. She wondered what might be going on with Damay. Was she conscious yet? What might be going through the woman's mind, waking up after millennia in a renewed body? Wren doubted that she'd be frightened. She might be miffed though for being left alone in a strange place with Wren nowhere in evidence.

<Still alive?> Desiray asked in her mind.

Wren let out a breath and looked around. <Barely. Sindra almost got me.>

<Sorry, I got waylaid before I could find you. I know you can't give out your location. I guess I'll just have to follow the sounds of a fight.>

At least Desiray was coming to help her. Where was Cassandra? Damn it, if she teamed with Desiray now, she'd have to give the gem points to her. The only way the guild mistress could help her against Mishaka was by them merging again. That just wasn't a dependable solution. Gaea told them they could only do it three times; they'd already used up the first time. Odds were they'd need to merge once more to fight off the Sen'Gen and Aarlen.

This whole thing was such a mess. She was running around playing games when she should be rescuing her family. Likely, her most powerful ally lay in Ziedra's flat, probably wondering what was going on.

A resonant female voice rang in her head. <Wren, where in Hades are you?> The sound and timbre of the voice made her certain it was Cassandra.

She looked around. The area still looked clear. She drew a breath and concentrated. <Running from Sindra, about eight streets from where you disappeared.>

<I heard you score on her. Sorry I left you, I needed to rescue Arabella. She had our points. Head east, the one bell warning will be announced in just a little bit.>

<Then I can run for the post, right?>

<Correct, just don't get caught.>

<Right, I needed you to tell me that.>

<Move. You want to be on the far side of town when Aarlen calls the warning. Snag a horse, and hit the northeast road for all you're worth. Hopefully, I'll catch you before then.>

<Okay, heading out.>

<Take care. I'll be looking for you.>

Behind her, she heard yells in the crowd and caught a glimpse of someone big thrusting people out of the way. The twins? They could fly though; or could they? Maybe Aarlen had stripped them of that too. All she could do was hope as she charged out of the alley.

It had been a mistake to stay in communication with Cassandra so long. To some of these telepaths she might as well be screaming across a courtyard. As she ran, she heard the ruckus getting louder, and the yells of protest became shouts of pain.

****Team Frielos, bystander injury foul. Ten point penalty. Scores updated. Further deliberate injury of bystanders will be punished harshly.****

The answering loud invective would have made the staunchest sailor cringe. The twins certainly hated not getting their way.

Wren watched where she was going, and focused on picking the fastest path through the ever denser maze of shoppers, vendors, and passersby. She grabbed a post and swung hard left onto Poseidon avenue, the north-south spine of the city that led to the gates of Tradeholme citadel.

A score of carts could easily trundle side-by-side up the huge broad-way which also lead south to the bay and the trade docks. Colorful market pavilions lined the cobbled fairway and trains of wagons and horses streamed into and out of the citadel district.

Breathing hard, she pushed into the throngs of people, hiding herself amongst the dense press of shoppers and travelers moving toward citadel square. She glanced around, heart still pounding. Men and women chattered, discussing the weather, politics, and the latest royal infidelity. It struck Wren then just how much normal people stank. After more than two seasons of being in Loric's well-groomed spotless household, she'd become spoiled. The everyday smells of the unwashed masses had become an unwelcome irritation.

She found herself trapped between a long-faced basket-lugging fruit seller, and a pair of shrill-voiced spindly-looking women toting babies. Between the rancid body odor of the man and staggeringly powerful essence of stone-flower that both women appeared to have bathed in, she felt ready to suffocate.

After only a hundred steps up the street she was already wondering which fate would be worse; being tortured by Mishaka or being trapped in a room with these three.

Glancing around revealed no pursuers. She needed a big jump on her flying adversaries. Requesting a teleport could take her to the north side of the city in a heartbeat and put distance between herself and the hopefully ground-bound Sindra and Drucilla.

It was worth the chance. Anything was worth not stifling betwixt these three for another fraction of a bell.

"Moderator," she called and thought. She braced and added. "G-1 please."

****Acknowledged,**** Aarlen Frielos' deep thoughts resonated in her mind and ears. Wren had just enough time to see the surprised and horrified faces of the people around her as the magic sparkled around her. Her heart stuttered and she caught her breath, as icy fingers seemed to play over her skin. The world went black, then splintered into a millions shards of light. She felt the now familiar 'falling' sensation of transition, then the sickening twist as reality bent and snapped back into place leaving her in a new location. As teleport magic evaporated into the air around her the moderator's voice boomed the announcement. ****Team Idun-daughter, teleport request G-1. Move logged.****

The gut twisting disorientation hit hard, making her stagger and catch her balance against a wall. Taking a quick breaths, she forced herself to focus through the discomfort. Because she'd scored so many points, she still had several teleports left. Now while everyone started scrambling for this grid.

Calming herself she drew herself up. "Moderator, K-1 please."

****Acknowledged.**** The icy feeling swelled around her again, and lights flashed in her vision. In another few instants, she was dropped in the middle of the north-east

tenement district. Heart and lungs aching she lunged a few steps to lean against a stone fence. Ivaneth's perimeter wall loomed high and large only a hundred paces away. Here among the houses of the city nobility the traffic was only a fraction of that in the trade's districts. ****Team Idun-daughter, teleport request K-1. Move logged.****

<You shouldn't have done that,> Desiray's thought rang in her head. <Now, they all know you're going for the post with the gem. I hope you have your running boots on. Watch out for silent moves, for sure they'll be called in now.>

Silent moves! Nobody said anything about that! Everybody probably got one unannounced move per game. She tried to will back her wind. Damn, teleporting was so much more endurable when she had Gabriella's bloodsong.

She forced her legs to move. Balancing against the fence, she staggered along to the end where the street split. She needed cover now. Awnings, anything, that would conceal her from flying observers. This area was about the worst possible location to do that very thing. Most of the angle-roofed houses had fenced in enclosures around them. She didn't want to jump any fences and give herself away by causing a ruckus. About fifty paces away she saw a hedge growing between two large brick buildings and lumbered toward it, gasping like a fish out of water. She had taken those two teleports too close together. She felt half dead. Wobbling around a couple of people and a fancy carriage, she dove in where the foliage looked thinnest.

Lying in the dirt, taking breaths with wooden lungs, she lay still and just ached. She was beaten, bruised, tired, and out of breath. If she had to fight anybody now, she couldn't even lift her arm to throw a dagger.

Wren saw how the game was exciting for the players. However, they'd all been training for seasons to play. She needed another cycle of seasons going through Vera's grueling workouts to be in the kind of condition required to endure the battering pace of the clashes. T'Gor had shown her how far her skills had come and how far she still had to go. Mishaka would not underestimate her a second time. She would have allies, and strong ones--especially if she caught wind that Wren had recruited help to fight her.

Of course, that recruitment hinged on her surviving this game and getting an ally. Damay was only part of the solution. She couldn't depend on the powerful savant being able to teleport around in the same way that mages and immorts did. She would need cooperation first to locate the avatar, and then transportation to get to the location.

She focused on calming herself and drawing on her reserves of energy. This hiding spot would only serve long enough to recover a little. Lords only knew what kind of magic the players might have for locating her.

Lying still felt good. She drew careful breaths and let them out long and slow. The pain and disorientation of the teleports wore off by stages. She could tell that she was getting more resistant to the effects. The first time she went through the magical transport, she feared death. Now, two jumps in rapid succession and she was even able to move and act coherently.

Toward the north she heard a crash, and the crack of shattering wood. Steel clanged and people let out cries of surprise and fear. Something whistled then there was the sound of more wood shattering.

****Team Falor, level 1 bystander and property damage penalty. Team Ariok retains all carries. Ten count to clear. Scores updated.****

"Hate those frelling cheap tricks!" Came the sound of Tal's unmistakable baritone raised in frustration.

"Run--just *run*!" An unfamiliar female voice yelled.

Damn, they sounded close. She still wasn't recovered enough to break for it now, she would bog down and get caught.

More shrieks sounded off to the west, then metal ringing together so loud it made her cringe. The banging continued for a few heartbeats.

****K-1, Targallae defeats Falor. Tal neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

There was a short pause.

****Targallae declines changeover. Transcript updated.****

It was as Desiray warned; everyone had come for her. Her only chance now was that they were so busy fighting each other that she could escape in the confusion.

Wren's heart lurched as more banging erupted right near the end of the buildings where she lay. Male laughter, grunts and the rapid swish and clang of weapons moving at hurricane speed. A thud sounded on the roof of the building overlooking her position and more clashes. Timbers creaked, blades shrieked, interspersed with the loud smack of flesh-on-flesh. Two people were fighting hard and going full force with enhanced strength.

Air whistled as someone thudded to the ground within a few paces of where she lay, and sprinted away. People nearby let out startled cries. Instants later another pair of boots came down with a thump and gave chase.

Eyes squeezed shut and hands clutching her chest Wren steeled herself. She needed to move. A pace more and they'd have come down on top of her.

Nearby, something small shuffled through the bushes. She flinched as tiny feet scrambled over her leg. The little creature stopped, rose up on its hind legs and squeaked at her, beady black eyes and pink nose orienting on her. A rat. That's all she needed, pests trying to hide in the bushes with her!

She wasn't afraid of the little creatures, but she didn't want them crawling on her. She waved her hand at it, trying to shoo it away. Apparently unafraid, the rat began preening itself.

Wonderful.

More squeaks came from near her head. She jerked as she felt something in her hair. That was it. Ready or not, she was moving.

Wren started to sit up when something flashed through the leaves around her. An arm shot around her neck and dragged her against a soft and feverishly warm body. At the same time a hand clamped over her mouth, stifling her cry of surprise.

Hot breath that smelled of mint spice breathed against the back of her neck. She struggled but stopped when she felt something metallic and sharp press against the back of her neck.

<Call 'no contest',> a smoky resonant voice said into her mind. <I'd hate to have to cut you.> Wren heard sniffing. <Mother is right. You *do* smell good.>

Mother is so very picky, I am surprised when she likes something. I was stunned when she chose Dorian as an apprentice. Then I got to know the woman, and now we party together. Mother mentioned Wren and I wondered... would I get to play with this toy too?

--Dominique Ariok

Chapter 10

Penalty on the Play

Surrounded by leafy foliage, hidden in the shadows between two buildings, Wren tried again to struggle against her captor. The effort availed her nothing, the person knew holds and how to brace. On top of that, she was enormously strong, tugging at the arm locked around her throat was like struggling against a steel collar. The mint smell was strong, and she felt the woman's heavy breath in her ear. Wren felt the lady's powerful heart beating against her back. Around them clashes continued to happen. Any moment now, the both of them would be discovered.

<Now don't be stubborn,> the woman's thought rolled into her mind, heavy and not at all unpleasant. The woman's lips came next to Wren's ear. She spoke in low breathy whisper that sent trembles down her spine. "You wouldn't want me to have to bite you."

Wren stiffened. Bite? Mother? Smell? Wren realized then that 'team Ariok' was indeed related to Gabriella. Why did it surprise her that the daughter was a vampire too? It made perfect sense!

<Do--*not*--bite me,> she thought back.

<I haven't heard you concede yet,> she said in Wren's mind.

Wren drew a breath. <Isn't there a penalty for players--*biting*--one another?>

<Not yet,> she responded. <Concede, Cuteness. Don't make me cut you.>

Cuteness? <I won't give my gem to your team. That witch Dorian abandoned me.>

<Yes. It was a mistake too. You want that avatar dead? Fine. I'm not afraid of Mishaka or Aarlen. Call no contest please.> Wren felt the woman's lips on her ear something sharp pressed into her earlobe. She struggled to move but still couldn't wrench away. <If I have to ask you again, it will be unpleasant.>

Not afraid of Aarlen? Who was this woman? Even Gabriella thought twice about crossing Sindra and Drucilla. What point was there waiting to get cut? Either way she would end up on their team.

"Moderator," she said in a low voice, mumbling through the fingers still over her mouth. "I--"

The woman holding her let out a grunt, and bent backward, hands shuddering.

"Hi Dom," another pleasant female voice, this time familiar. "You know that's my girl you're trying to snack on?"

"Desiray!" Wren let out in a voice that she was forced to keep quiet.

"Des!?" the woman responded in a cheerful voice that still sounded dark and syrupy. "How nice to have your breasts--" She let out a grunt, and squirmed. "--and knife pressed against my back. Oooh, you know I love it when you're rough."

"In your dreams, Dominique. Call 'no contest' please."

"Sweetling, you are indeed in my dreams. You have the most--pardon the pun--succulent neck I have ever seen. Sorry to say it, but calling a 'no contest' might be a trifle premature at this moment."

Wren rolled her eyes. "Someone has to let go or concede or we're all going to get caught!"

Desiray's voice dropped to a growl. "Dom, I'm giving you until three to call out, before I take a nice long strip out of your backside."

"Desiray, you say the sweetest things!" Dominique laughed.

"Onnnuh--!" The guild mistress' word stretched out into a surprised gurgle.

There was the smack of lips kissing flesh. "Darling! Miss me? I think you're the one who needs to concede."

Desiray growled.

"Dori Dear," Dominique said in her throaty sweet tones. "Nice of you to show."

"My pleasure. It isn't easy to sneak up on Desiray. She's such a suspicious nit."

The guild mistress growled again.

"These bushes are getting very crowded," Wren said. "So far, nobody is any closer to conceding!"

"Indeed," Dominique said. "However, if Desiray wants to rub against me all day, I'll welcome the diversion."

"Dom, I can't believe you sometimes," Desiray grumbled.

Dorian sighed. "Des, give up. I don't want to thump you."

The mage made a squeaking sound and gasped.

"Excuse the grip, Lady Dorian," a deep voice said. "I do seem to have the advantage however."

"Bert--!" Dorian coughed. "Where--?"

"Lady Desiray has been working with me on my stealth technique. Marvelous is it not? It seems it is you who must concede."

"That's telling her, Trammy," Desiray cheered.

Wren sighed. "This is ridiculous!"

"Welcome to our orgy, Sir Bertram," Dominique chuckled.

"Pardon?" the paladin let out in a startled voice.

****K-1,**** the moderator's voice rang in all their heads. There was a pause, then a deep rolling laugh. ****Team Tarrantil, team Ariok, and proxy Idun-daughter. Bonus for highlight worthy play. Scores for all teams updated. Clash time exceeded. All teams must disengage. Judges to clash observance, ten count to clear.****

"Ah, she is no fun," Dominique muttered, letting go of Wren.

Heart pounding, she launched upright, leaped out of the bushes and plunged down the street. She didn't even look back to see what the others were doing. She shouldered around several pedestrians and vaulted an over-turned fruit cart. Fear gave her feet wings and she ran at top speed. She'd come within a hair of being caught and giving up her one-and-only real bargaining piece to get assistance for her family. Cassandra had promised to help in return for the gem, but they'd been separated and she had no idea if they would be able to meet again before she reached the post.

Behind her, she heard metal clashing. A glance back revealed the silhouettes of figures moving fast.

People with double or triple her top foot speed. She pulled Vectra from its sheath on her side. She might be needing it soon to keep from getting caught. She angled south toward Ivaneth's east gate.

She skidded in a tight turn around an old brick building and jumped a stone fence. Dogs barked at her and piles of dead tree leaves swept from a nearby yard exploded under her boots. She turned and ran down a market avenue crowded with vendors and shoppers. She tried without success to push across to the opposite side, the people were simply packed too tight in the narrow confines. If she pried her way in, she'd get tangled up and be vulnerable.

Running up the tow spars of unhorsed cart, she hopped stepwise up unto the pinnacle of the crated produce stacked in back, then launched herself over the throng.

Startled cries went up as she hurtled over the heads of the patrons jammed shoulder-to-shoulder in the street. Heart beating fast and body tingling, she flipped herself to land on her feet in the clear spot between two stalls on the far side. She dodged into a nearby alley leaving the sound of impressed applause in her wake.

Wren reminded herself that she owed Vera another hug for the physical training and lessons. While she wasn't quite to the level of the immorts in the game, three seasons of intense workouts had still made an impressive difference.

Zigzagging through spaces between buildings, she kept her eyes on the city ramparts, looking to catch sight of the pennons that would mark the barbican and a way to exit the city.

The deep resonating tones of the moderator rang in her ears and mind. ****To all players: final play begins. Scores may now be posted. Players are reminded to observe clash rules and obey judge instructions. For the remainder of the game, teleport requests are now limited to two grid sectors.****

Finally, she could make a last dash to get out of this insanity.

Swinging around a fence post she leaned into a full stride down a shadowy alley between two tall tenement buildings. Wren stumbled three steps in and skidded to a stop as a figure seemed to melt out of the darkest patches of the building. The silhouette shimmered, ultra-white teeth bared in a grin that seemed to solidify before the rest of the willowy dark-haired woman dressed in smoke gray leather. She blinked gold eyes at Wren, the lines of her slender face were reminiscent of Gabriella, the edges more rounded and less severe than the Dragon Queen's.

She spoke in that dark syrupy voice. "Was this trip really necessary?"

Damn it. Wren didn't answer except with her daggers. She threw Vectra and after it Quicklick, yanking and throwing in one motion.

Dominique didn't even flinch. Her hand flashed out and plucked the first hissing blade out of the air. In a boneless sway like the writhing of a snake she twisted to evade the other knife which tinged and sparked off the cobbles behind her.

She straightened, rolled her shoulders, and canted her head to one side. The woman brought the blade up and sniffed the hilt. She raised an eyebrow at Wren. "Sure you don't want to join our team. Cassandra is too much of a prissy girl to shed the blood necessary to get to Mishaka. Me, I don't think I have to explain that a little spilled crimson isn't a problem."

Lords she was fast, at least as quick as Terra if not more so.

"I--"

Wren never got a chance to finish her thought as another much larger figure rose behind Dominique. With that same sinewy speed, the daughter of the Dragon Queen snaked out of the path of a glowing blade that exploded into the cobbles. She responded with a lightning fast elbow and back-knuckle, leaping up into a spinning round-kick the made the air snap with its speed.

The attacker blocked the initial strikes, but apparently wasn't ready to deal with the woman's amazing flexibility, and was knocked careening into the wall.

"Moderator!" Dominique yelled. "Kill-strike foul!" She yanked a glowing weapon from its sheath on her side with a peel of ringing metal. She dodged as the other person rallied and swung again, slashing through the bricks of the wall and lighting up the alley with sparks.

In the brief flash, Wren recognized the attacker was Drucilla. Instinct made her dive. She felt fingers scrape across her back as she lunged forward.

She hit her hands, cart-wheeled, and bounded toward the nearest wall. Savant power a fierce buzz in the back of her head, she went up the vertical surface at a run. Wren heard a snarl and flipped backward off the wall as she sensed Sindra leap at her.

The huge elder rebounded and came at Wren in an instant. As the woman came at her, she realized she'd run out of places to go. If she turned her back she was dead for sure. The further end of the alley was a meat grinder of flashing steel as Dominique and Drucilla fought with whirlwind speed.

Just as the Sindra's fingers were nearing her throat, Wren focused all of her will and rolled backward.

"Gaea!" she yelled.

The D'klace's powerful hands clamped around Wren's neck. She however was not nearly as off balance as Wren had counted on. Sindra went nowhere, and Wren lost any leverage she might have had.

"I don't think so," Sindra growled. "Now a reckoning."

Wren writhed as the woman's hands tightened.

Drawing all her energy into herself, Wren jabbed a full focus punch right into the spot beneath Sindra's ribs that Vera told her paralyzed opponents. Her fist smacked hard against cloth and skin with a meaty whack.

Sindra growled. Her silver eyes narrowed, and the lines of her angular face pulled into a scowl.

Wren swallowed, she would have had more effect on a scalebark tree.

As the elder squeezed, Wren wondered why her savant power didn't kick in. Despite, all her willing, it wasn't happening.

The world started shading brown and gray.

Something shimmered behind Sindra. Wren saw only a hand flash out and grab the woman's long black hair and yank. The attack obviously hurt because Sindra snarled and whirled a punch at the intruder.

The blow went true and whacked another, even bigger, lady in the face.

The attack rocked the newcomer back a step and she made a deep animalistic growl that made the bricks tremble. The woman shook her head, making thick silver-white bangs brush the smooth surface of her pale skin. She flipped back a cloak of feathers, cocked, and fired a punch that caught Sindra square. Wren side-stepped as the black-haired woman was smashed back against the wall so hard the bricks cracked and bowed inward.

The D'klace gasped, leaned forward to counter-attack and froze. Her fists dropped and her already pale skin turned the color of milk. Her silver eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"Ukk--" Sindra stammered. "Ma--ma--mother!"

The battle in the other half of the alley stopped instantly. Drucilla halted in mid-swing and dropped her weapon with clang. She gripped her chest as though her heart had stopped.

Wren had never imagined the D'klace twins looking scared, but they looked terrified right now.

Spike heeled white boots clacking on the cobbles, the woman in the feather-cloak stepped forward until she was almost nose-to-nose with Sindra. She tangled a jeweled hand in the elder's dark hair and pulled until the lady winced. "Is it my imagination, Sindra, or did you just *strike* me? I just know you can't be stupid enough to make such a mistake."

"Uh--uh," Sindra sputtered.

"Shut up. Rhetorical question." She drew a breath, raised an eyebrow, and looked toward the other twin. She pointed and made a hooked 'come-here' gesture with her finger.

The other D'klace scrambled to stand next to Sindra.

She leaned close to Drucilla. "Kill strike foul?" Putting her hands behind her back, she turned an icy stare on Sindra. "Attacking a player I personally gave amnesty to?" She made another low growl that made the bricks tremble. "I am grievously disappointed--and *very* annoyed."

Sindra swayed back looking almost ready to faint.

"You two!" Aarlen snapped. "You." She pointed at Wren, and hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "Go that way. Dominique--" her voice dropped, and her lip curled. "Shadow travel is not explicitly forbidden in the rules. It is however, *hairs* from cheating." She pointed out the opposite end of the alley. "Two sectors and a twenty count. Go."

Her silver eyes fixed on Wren. "Did you suddenly go deaf? **MOVE**. I don't wish to be disturbed while I discuss some game rules with my daughters."

Wren didn't hesitate, but took off running. The last sight she had was of Sindra on her knees.

Somehow, she didn't think she'd be bothered by the twins again for the rest of the game.

I first saw Aarlen in an alley at the same time I was in a life-threatening encounter with her daughters. She was by-far the scariest person I had ever encountered including the avatars...

--Wren

Chapter 11

Third and Long

Heart hammering and chest tight, Wren turned right and followed the tenement wall, keeping an eye toward the sky. She had heard the voice of Aarlen Frielos, the moderator, and from that alone, the lady seemed scary enough. Now, she had seen her in person. She was a terrifying specter. Some indecipherable quality about the woman made the skin prickle and the heart race. She had been in the presence of the legendary figure who defeated Damay in battle. If Aarlen continued to send Sen'Gen to capture her, she would have to fight back. Confronting Mishaka would seem like a stroll through the bazaar compared to prospect of combating that monster.

She shuddered.

The smells of burning wood, sizzling beef, and boiling vegetables grew strong as the narrow avenue opened into a secluded courtyard with a smaller number of vendors. Here the people appeared to be more affluent. She saw dresses and tunics of silk, and jewelry made of gold and silver. Hedging through the sparse crowd she kept alert.

Wren sniffed at the curls of fragrant steam rising from pots and her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since the evening before, and was spoiled from getting three full meals a day for more than ten score-days. The game's ferocious pace had drained her energy.

Still watching the sky and the three alleys that lead out, she stopped by a barrel of clean water and downed several ladles full of the cold mineral-heavy liquid. It felt good as it ran down her parched throat and cooled her insides. She scooped out some more and poured it over her head and scrubbed it over her face, getting the salty sting of perspiration out of her eyes.

That helped a lot. Her hands were still shaking. Seeing Aarlen had scared her more than she realized. When the woman fixed her with those frightening silver eyes it felt as if her blood turned to ice. If the woman could frighten Sindra and Drucilla, she possessed an insane amount of power. Mishaka had been able to do little, if anything, to the D'klace twins. She and Desiray, and later Tal and Algernon, had hit them with attacks that would have leveled castles and all it did was make them mad.

Wren took a breath. Why hadn't she heard any moves being announced? Was Aarlen too busy having a "discussion" with her daughters to moderate the game? Maybe everyone was still involved in those long running battles she saw earlier.

Steeling herself, she skipped to jog and took an alley that headed south. She cinched the straps on the backpack tighter. The cargo inside could buy a small kingdom and the freedom of her parents.

Ahead to the south, she caught sight of the pennons that marked the barbican and the gate out of the city. With her goal in sight it sparked her determination and she picked up her pace.

Having seen Aarlen reminded her. What was Damay doing now? Was she still unconscious? Was she sitting in Ziedra's flat waiting for Wren to come back, or wandering around the city? Damn it, everything was so scrambled up. She had to deal with Gabriella, Sindra and Drucilla, Mishaka, and now Aarlen. The thought made her knees weak. She would *need* Damay's help to fix all that.

She froze at a busy intersection and looked around. It was too quiet. After all that activity, she couldn't believe that everybody had just stopped fighting one another. She guessed now that they had entered the phase where scores could be posted, players were being more cautious. Anybody heading for the post now was guaranteed to be carrying points that a skilled enough poacher could steal.

Wren jumped as a tall blonde lady towing a young boy pushed past her.

She had to move. Standing in the open thinking about it just increased the chances of her getting caught. She leaned into a jog again, taking a path that would make her hard to see from above.

Wren got to within sight of the barbican and then realized why nobody was hunting for her. On top of a high roof, she saw the silhouette of someone looking down into the crowds leaving the gate.

Of course, why chance missing her when everyone knew she would have to post those points? All they had to do was watch the gates and nab her when she tried to leave.

Damn it. She flipped Vectra to a throwing position in her fingers. Who was that slender figure atop that roof? The sun glinted off hair--blonde? Probably Beia, she was deadly precise with that bow.

No doubt some of the teams would be guarding the gate. Only a few of the players knew that she didn't need to use the gate to get over the wall. Of course, on foot she'd get run down by the people who could fly. She needed a horse like Cassandra suggested. That would mean going through the gate and taking a serious risk. She had to hope that she could get a horse on the outside.

Wren found a place where a bastion jutted out from the wall and hid her from observation from the gateway market. Waiting until she wouldn't be seen, she started up the thirty pace high stone abutment. With her rejuvenated savant power, the climb was simple. She was at the top and on the battlement in the space of a couple long breaths. She looked northeast up the road toward Riverback village.

The road was a wide open track with no trees or cover for at least a thousand paces. She doubted that it was any accident the path selected was so free of obstruction. It was chosen so as to make it harder for someone to sneak points to the post.

Mindful of city guards who might object to her being on the wall, she made her way to the opposite side, climbed between the crenelations and prepared to clamber down. As she did so, her hand struck something invisible that crackled in the air.

Aarlen's resonant tones blasted into her mind, causing her to jerk and smack her head painfully against the stone. ****Rules reminder, players may only exit onto the post route *through* designated gates. Travel *over* the wall by flight or other means is prohibited.**** There was a pause. ****K-2, team Idun-daughter, rules verification. Transcript updated.****

Wren growled and rubbed her aching forehead. So, Aarlen *was* still paying attention and the witch had announced her location. Now, everyone would be alert! She had wondered why teams were only watching the gate. Anyone posting points *had* to go through it to get out.

She drew a breath and hopped down onto the battlement. The interior abutment completely hid her from view below. Only somebody on a rooftop or in the sky could see her as she walked at a measured pace toward the barbican. Those guards wouldn't be happy about a civilian up on *their* wall. She'd just have to deal with it as it came and hope she could keep the encounter from drawing attention.

A couple of men wearing chain armor and dressed in Ivaneth livery leaned against the outer battlement, pole-axes balanced in the crook of their arms. For guards, they looked very relaxed. She knew that could change fast. Usually, sentries weren't the

sharpest knives in the rack, they typically made up for it by being aggressive and belligerent.

She slid her daggers away and took the steps onto the main barbican platform like she owned the place. Without pausing, she strolled to the inner wall and looked over the edge. An easy climb with her new savant power, she could even do it head down if she got in a hurry.

The conversation between the two guards concerned something to do with someone's poor cooking skills. The description was half way through the second course when they noticed her climbing between the crenellations.

"...and then I said--Hey--Hey! You! What are you doing--?!" She heard the rattle of chain-mail moving fast.

Wren rolled her eyes. Damn it. That was sure to get Beia's attention, and whoever might be watching closely. Focusing her power, she scrambled over the edge as they dashed up. She was out of reach by the time hands were groping for her.

Going headfirst down the wall was not her first choice, but now speed was essential. She needed to see where she was going, and be able to dodge any attacks that came at her.

Even knowing she could do it, the experience still unnerved her. She clung to a wall thirty paces up, held there only by the power of her will and the tenuous contact of fingers and toes. Heart beating fast, head buzzing, and hands and feet sparking with her savant power she went down the wall as fast as she could scramble. The pull of the ground was strong and more than once she felt her feet trying to pitch out from the wall.

The crowd noise must have covered up the initial cries of the sentries because no attacks came at her. However, a person going spider-like down the wall of the main gate of a major city is bound to attract some attention eventually. After the first few gasps and fingers pointed, by the time she was within a few paces of the top of the tall double-portcullis opening, it seemed like the whole trade square was staring. The guards directing the flow of people, wagons, and horses finally noticed when wagons stopped and drivers gaped. The guards then started yelling orders to get down.

Get down? Cretins, didn't they know that's what she was trying to do?

Why her sticking to the wall was more amazing than people *flying*, Wren didn't know, but she had drawn far more attention than she wanted or planned for.

It was no surprise when she heard something hiss through the air toward her. She was lucky that Beia was at extreme range. The distance gave her time to judge the path of the arrow and bend out of the way. She hurried as best she could with arrows whacking and sparking off the stone around her. The Myrmigyne needed to be careful, if an arrow cut too deep, not only did she not get a defeat, she received a penalty instead.

The arrow attacks further confused and agitated the crowd, and the activity below became a frenzy of motion like a hive of digger bugs poked with a stick. Now the gate sentries were yelling at Beia.

Wren felt and sensed bodies coming through the air toward her. Her only chance now was to fall. Arranged above the arch of portcullis each separated by a little more than a pace, several polished wooden pennon staves jutted out, she aimed for one and pushed off toward it.

Something hard and metallic slammed into the stone behind her. Wren didn't have time to give it much mind, if she missed the grab on that pole it was going to be painful and messy as she fell into the square more than a dozen paces down.

She heard a male curse and felt something brush her foot as her palms struck the pennon post. She had hoped to swing around the wooden spar going forward but the nudge on her foot sent her arcing the other direction.

Wren had barely enough time to hug in her legs so that she swung backward between and underneath the pennons rather than sprawling across them.

The post next to the one she gripped shuddered as something heavy hit it. Wren already had the impetus of her swing carrying her backward. She pulled in her legs to pass by the bar then snapped them out and pushed out with her arms. The move sent her backward through the air. Below her there was a host of gasps. She was still over ten paces up doing dangerous acrobatic maneuvers.

Wren seized the bar, and blew out her air knowing what came next would hurt. She wasn't disappointed as her waist thudded down on the adjacent pole in a shock of impact. Gasping, she let her legs swing down. At the same time, she leaned forward, switching her hands to the new post and whipping around it. Knowing her pursuer hadn't given up, she brought her heels around to kick down between spars.

The movement all took place in a matter of heartbeats, and her attacker obviously was not expecting an attack to come at that instant. Her feet and the back of her legs drove down on the invisible foe, crashing them down across the pennon posts.

There was a masculine grunt, the cracking of wood, and a hurt gasp. She reversed herself and jungle swung to next bar. She concentrated her savant power and lunged to catch herself on the wall next to the portcullis opening.

Below she heard the crowd cheering, and the guards screaming.

She heard an angry snarl and scrambled around the corner into the barbican tunnel.

****K-2, team Idun-daughter, bonus for highlight worthy play. Scores updated. Transcript updated.****

A freight wagon piled high with crates was slowly trundling through the gateway. Wren didn't hesitate but leaped for the highest boxes. She came down hard to the sound of shattering wood, squishing fruit, and the startled yelps of the driver and his guard.

Heart still pounding with fear and exertion she leaped to the ground and sprinted for the light at the far side of the barbican. Horses shied and reared as she weaved through the train of carts, wagons, and people, leaving a trail of curses and shaking fists.

As she launched out of the barbican, she scanned frantically for a horse. The only one in sight was occupied. At that moment, the man was leaning out of the saddle to examine some flowers a young woman was holding up to sell him.

Wren leaped onto the back of the horse, snatched one rein and yanked. The surprise movement caused the horse to turn and buck. Her savant power kept her in place while the man was dumped off.

"Sorry," she yelled. "I'll leave it at Riverback!" She spurred forward and charged down the dirt track toward the village.

****L-2, team Idun-daughter, accosting of a bystander, penalties apply. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Penalties be damned, she was just trying to stay alive. Grisly images of being stretched between four quarreling players played through her mind.

Damn, this man had long legs, the stirrups were almost dragging on the ground and she was getting pounded to death. She pushed up and knelt in the saddle, barely managing to keep with the rhythm of the horse.

Hair whipping in the wind, heart slamming in her ribs she glanced back toward the city. She saw figures rising into the sky by the gate. Visible? Probably another rule--one that helped her tremendously. Still, seeing and defeating were different matters.

They were coming fast--faster than this less-than-speedy horse could run. The nearest cover still lay a considerable distance away.

She hugged the horse's russet mane and tried to urge him faster. The groves of trees that surrounded Riverback village grew closer. This might only be a farm horse, but he was trying hard.

Wren glanced back, she saw at least four figures in the sky now. They grew larger as she watched. She still had 500 paces to go and her nearest pursuers were only a hundred paces back. The jolting of the horse made it impossible to pick out who they were at this range. She yanked Vectra from its sheath, and put it in her teeth. This would be the worst rough and tumble yet.

Another hundred paces and the lead pursuer had closed half the gap. The one in the lead was Algernon. Likely he was the one who had been trying to get her outside the gate. Wren didn't doubt for a heartbeat the man could fight like a demon. On his terms she was doomed. Precariously perched on this galloping horse, there was no way to get off a decent shot.

Wren yanked the reins hard over, weaving the horse to make a harder target. She heard Algernon growl. Close. Little more than a dozen paces separated them. He had to be watching for her to leap from the horse. Her only chance was to be unpredictable.

The heart beats banged in her ears and temples. She scrunched her toes to get a good purchase. She felt his aura close in. Bang. Less than a pace away. Bang. Closer. Bang. Duck and lurch the horse sideways. The warrior cursed as his attack missed.

Three hundred paces to the trees, no chance to make it. Algernon accelerated toward her. Taking Vectra in her hand, she got ready. As he grabbed for her, she flipped up and backward.

The brawny man jerked and yelped as she came down on his back with both knees. "Hey! Augh--!" Algernon slammed down across the horse's haunches, causing the frightened animal to swerve and kick. Caught by a hoof and suddenly burdened by Wren's weight, he careened head first into the path.

The fighter hit with a sound like a dull plow-shear grating through dirt. Wren dove off as he toppled end for end in a cloud of dust. She hit hard, rolled, and came up running.

She slid to a stop and spun to face her pursuers.

Algernon had crashed to a stop upside down in a bush. "Ugggh," he waved a hand weakly. "Owww."

She didn't have any time to worry about him. The members of four other teams were bearing down on her.

Wren swallowed.

This was going to hurt.

I know I hurt some of the players of the great game pretty bad. I don't think any of them hold a grudge... well, too much of one anyway...

--Wren

Chapter 12

Blitz

With Algernon horse-kicked and groaning in the dirt, and four other teams bearing down on her, there wasn't time for anything fancy or delicate. Wren picked the only male out of the oncoming group, throwing first at him, and then at someone who at their current range looked like Damrosil.

Vectra left her hand in a shriek, and Quicklick after it an instant later. The players were coming three times as fast as a horse could gallop, and the daggers matched that going in the opposite direction. Nothing human could have evaded.

As Wren had experienced too many times already, these people were beyond mortal. T'Gor, the only man, swung out of the way. At the same time, the one she thought was Damrosil (because of the white hair) ended up being Desiray, who also veered with a cry. Their sudden evasions brought them into forceful contact with a third aerial player, turning a total failure into a crashing success. Three tangled bodies dropped out of the sky like stones.

Wren pulled Azimuth from her belt to take the last person a moment too late. With no range to throw, she leaped aside to dodge instead. She only caught a glimpse of red hair before the wind left her lungs in a stunning rush as a shoulder caught her in the midriff with a thud of pain.

"Don't hit me, Idiot," Arabella growled. "I'm on your team!"

Wren felt an arm clamp around her waist. The wind whistled in her hair and beneath her the ground raced by at a gut-churning speed. Gasping and trying to breathe, she couldn't respond.

"Damn, now everyone is going to be really hacked." The two of them rolled through the air and banked into a sharp turn. "Dammit, where's Cassandra? I can't take this mob alone!"

Wren knew the feeling. She was less equipped for fighting these people than Arabella. She heard and saw the branches and boles of trees hissing by. They'd made it to cover. She just wished she could breathe!

"Ugh!" she grunted.

"Stop squirming," Arabella growled. "You'll make me hit a tree."

Wren swallowed hard and managed to get a gulp of air. She caught a glimpse of something and raised her head. Something big darted toward them, resolving into an angry male face and grasping hands.

"Look--" she gasped.

She didn't finish her warning, as Arabella went from full flight to complete stop in a heartbeat.

"--Ouuu--*ahhh!*" The sudden halt broke the red-haired bard's grip on Wren sending her catapulting backward with a yell. She flipped to get her feet under her only to have the contact spin her like a top. She felt the hard buzz of her power shock through her body then felt the energy spike to scream as she slammed into a tree.

She collapsed to the ground, world spinning and body twitching.

Her vision flickered gray and brown, objects danced in a chaotic jumble. The clash of swords rang only a few paces away. She heard Arabella's gasps, and Algernon's snarl. She blinked to clear her vision but everything remained blurry and jumbled. Pain

rushed up and down her back. A normal person would be dead after hitting a tree that hard, her spine should have shattered. Instead, it just hurt--a *lot*. The spot in the back of her head where she felt her talent buzzed like an angry insect.

Still unable to focus, she clawed up the bole of the tree to her feet. She called Vectra, the weapon appeared in a rasp of magical energy and warm buzz in the palm of her hand. She summoned Azimuth to her other hand.

The fight was taking a long time or it just seemed that way. The two opponents looked like smears of color that whirled and leaped amid the more stable backdrop of trees.

She couldn't make a cut shot, not in this condition. Plant a dagger hilt deep in one of them, yes, but a scratch... she needed to see straight for that.

Wren oriented away from the sound and headed away as fast as she could, stumbling over tree roots, crashing through bushes and bouncing off tree boles. Strangely, even when she collided with objects she didn't feel any pain, but the sensation in the back of her head became a raw throbbing.

Pushing through some foliage, she staggered to a stop and leaned against a boulder. Her stomach churned and her chest felt tight. She took deep breaths, holding each in turn to get her wind back. Slowly, her vision was starting to clear. She held up one of the daggers, observing the way her hand shook. No way could she throw now. She needed to get herself under control or her chances of staying in the game were doomed. Maybe she *had* broken something in that fall. As she studied her trembling fingers, she realized that her skin was glowing.

Strange, it was like when Cassandra's grandmother had touched her power and caused her to glow. A thud in the trees behind her made Wren look up. A flurry of birds flew up through the branches.

****L-O, Team clash, Felspar versus Falor, clash time exceeded. Combatants have a ten count to break. Judges to clash observance. Transcript updated.****

Arabella managed to keep Algernon at bay--*amazing*. Wren surmised that his crash and that horse kick had a lot to do with the red-haired bard being able to hold her own against a fighter who could take on three of Aarlen's Sen-Gen.

Vision getting better, she oriented from the sun and headed north into the thickest trees. If she wanted to succeed in getting an ally from one of the game players she had to grit through it and keep her wits. That meant not getting caught unawares. At least four other players were nearby.

Taking deep breaths of needleleaf-scented air, the dizziness and shaking that she'd been struggling against cleared like a shroud being snatched from her eyes. It stopped so abruptly that she needed to catch herself against a tree. Blinking several times, she pinched the bridge of her nose. What in Ishtar's name was going on with her now? The tightness in her chest had relaxed and the churning in her stomach had turned to a sour taste in her mouth.

Growing more focused, Wren moved deeper into the wood, hearing the sound of gurgling water. Dry leaves crackled underfoot as they pressed into soft loam. Gusts of cool air stirred the branches making boughs creak overhead. The scent of flowers mingled with crisp untainted air filled her senses. She drew a few more deep breaths and felt the tightness in her muscles loosen and a tingling went through her body. Outdoors and forests might not be what she was accustomed to, but it sure seemed to be good for what ailed her.

Alert for the presence of players she headed toward the stream she could hear. It took only moments to reach the narrow rocky depression that cut through a grove of scalebark trees. A pace-wide stripe of clear water threaded through cascades of mossy rocks. She dropped down to the water's edge and scooped a few handfuls up

to her face and neck. The icy caress running down her torso made her back and arms prickle. That extra sensitivity seemed to bring everything into focus. She seemed to be able to sense every leaf, branch, and stem stirring nearby.

Her heart skipped a beat. People were out there just out of sight. Poised. Listening. Waiting. She sensed each outlet of breath, the twitch of hand or shake of a head.

Wren clenched her fists and looked up the watercourse. It was a fair gamble that she could trace the ravine back to Riverback village and the post.

A knife in either hand, she went up stream hopping from rock to rock, moving as swiftly as she could without risking a telltale slip and splash. The water camouflaged most of the sound of her movements.

A hundred paces up the stream she froze as she sensed several bodies move suddenly. With her sudden halt, the other presences she detected also stopped.

Damn it. She tightened her grip on the daggers, and selected the path she would run; lots of trees and bushes to tangle up and hinder any airborne pursuit.

Drawing a breath, she leaned forward, braced, and then charged. In the pastoral silence, her footsteps seemed to shake the whole forest. Her heart thudded faster as she stretched out for every step in a full sprint for the thickest cover.

Wren's flurry of movement seemed to make the surroundings explode. She was instantly aware of at least a half a dozen different presences converging on her. A woman cursed. A man yelled. Wood shattered and steel clanged. If anything, the volume and proximity of the noises pushed her even faster.

She leaped to the top of a three pace high tangle of deadfalls bounded down the far side and dove to duck under the sharp fronds of a slasher-weed patch. She rolled out the far side pursued by the sounds of ripping vegetation and fierce profanity.

The snaking course of the stream caused Wren to take flight as a ravine abruptly yawned in front of her. With no room to stop, she could only commit to the jump, pushing off with all her strength and plunging across. Arms wind-milling, legs churning the air, she arced toward the far side.

Wren was so energized by fear and desperation that she hit the far side with a pace to spare. The leap apparently startled Dominique who was crouched in the brush obviously intent on ambush. In the wide-eyed instant it took her to recover, Wren was already five long strides down the trail.

She rounded a bush, sensed a movement, and dove. Wren felt a sharp impact as fingers glanced off her back. Her low flight took her right between the legs of a towering white-haired Myrmigyne who tripped and yelled in frustration.

Rolling, she shot back to her feet and continued her flight. She felt people in pursuit, but was far too busy concentrating on the path ahead to glance back and see who. Head down, she speeded toward where Riverback village must be. That was the one big disadvantage. All of her pursuers knew where she must be headed. She was surprised more of them hadn't managed cut her off.

As if cued by a play-write, T'Gor chose that heartbeat to jump into the trail. The lanky warrior was hardly a wall, but hitting him would be scarcely less painful than colliding with a slab of granite. Wren didn't try to stop, but pushed off from the ground. She made a road of the bearded man's torso planting her heel square in the middle of his chest, and kicking off. The move flipped her up and backward so that she went over the heads of her two pursuers and came down just as they veered to avoid collision.

Heart drumming fast, she threw both Azimuth and Vectra, the weapons whirled out and struck her intended targets. On the left, it was blonde Beia who was nicked on the shoulder and on the right dark-haired Dorian flinched as a blade scratched across her hip.

Both women cried out, shaking their fists in frustration.

****Team clash, L-O, Idun-daughter defeats Targallae and Ariok. Beia neutralized. Dorian Neutralized. Multiple victory bonus applies. Scores updated.****

The fact that she managed to catch both Beia and Dorian off guard probably surprised her more than it did them. She unsheathed Quicklick but held on to it. T'Gor would just dodge the shot, any surprise she might have had was gone an eye blink ago.

A gleam in his eye, T'Gor glanced to the two other players. A smile on his impassive face, the bearded warrior shook his head. "Nice. That was sweeter than candy."

Turning to face Wren, Beia frowned and brushed back her blonde hair.

Dorian hit her forehead with a clenched fist. "Oh hush."

T'Gor whipped the sword off his back and advanced on Wren.

She retreated. Damn it, she'd have better chances fighting a whirlwind. If that wasn't bad enough, Damrosil and Dominique must be close by because their teammates had been called neutralized.

The brush behind her broke and the dust-covered figure of Algernon appeared, sword in hand. Wren saw an opening off to her right and took a step that way. The gap filled as a warrior dressed in silver mail stepped into it--Bertram.

Gripped by an icy fear she looked to the opposite side of the trail, only to see both Cassandra and Arabella landing there. She clenched her fists as Dominique, Tal, Damrosil, Terra and Desiray dropped in around her, completing an impassible ring of fighters and mages each of whom possessed nothing less than legendary skill.

"Oh spit," she muttered, heart thundering and body cold. There was literally nothing she could do. There was no place to go. She had one dagger and ten opponents. "There has *GOT* to be a frelling rule against ten on one! Damn it! Gaea herself couldn't take you all on at once!" She pulled off the backpack. "Which of you wants to take it from me, huh? That'll be interesting."

****Clash time exceeded. Teams Targallae and Ariok return to normal play. Transcript updated.****

"Oh sure, just frelling add two more."

"I'll take it," Cassandra said. "Toss it here."

"I value my arm Cassandra," she said in dark tone, knowing full well what might happen if she even flinched in the wrong way. "You want it--come get it."

The gold woman took a half step forward and the circle of people tensed. Arabella put a hand on the mage's arm.

"Might I point out," Bertram said in his rolling baritone. "That such an action might prove detrimental to your health."

"So, whadda we gonna do?" Tal asked, rubbing the back of his neck. "We going to flip a coin or somethin?"

Wren drew a breath and let it out slow. "I prefer any solution that doesn't involve me getting pulverized."

"It's simple," Dorian said, frowning. "Wren pick someone. We'll have the moderator call the carry neutral for a ten count."

"Frell that," Wren growled. "I play favorites and the rest of you will hold a grudge against me for the rest of my life. No chance. You folks take this game way too seriously. I have the bruises to prove it."

Bertram put his sword away and put his hands behind his back. "Let us clear something up, shall we? Moderator, what is the total points carried by proxy Idun-daughter."

Aarlen's booming mental voice rolled into her mind and no-doubt everyone else's as well. ****Proxy Idun-daughter has accumulated seven hundred and twenty-five points in hits, highlights, and bonuses. L-O, team Tarrantil, score standing requested. Transcript updated.****

The Justicar sighed and nodded. "There you have it. Wren isn't just a score anymore. Any team that posts her score will win by no less than two-hundred points."

Dorian's voice kept repeating in the back of her head. *I think someone lost an arm once.* "Hey, please, I don't want to die." She glanced around to Desiray. The woman wore a serious expression. With a group like this, she wouldn't fair any better alone.

"I don't understand," Algernon spoke up. "I mean, we all know she's the big score. Was there any doubt--that's why we're all chasing her."

"That's the point, Darling," Dominique said in her dark syrupy voice. "It's not supposed to be us against her. It's supposed to be everybody against everybody."

"Actually, I think her worries over being injured are also valid concern as well," Terra added, teasing her thick tresses. "She really isn't armored or equipped for playing."

"The matter can be resolved with a simple rules modification from now to the end of the game," Bertram said.

"How's that?" Desiray asked.

"Terra's concern is mine as well. Lady Wren has shown us a great game and it is miracle she has not been seriously injured thus far. I move that we agree that Wren will no longer play in the role of a proxy."

"If I'm not going to be a proxy," Wren asked. "What am I going to be?"

Terra laughed. "If I get what Bertram is saying. You're going to be the ball."

I don't know why they call it game. It's more like a war with a couple of rules thrown in.

--Wren

Chapter 13

Be the Ball

Standing in the trail surrounded by powerful warriors and mages, Wren stared at one of the biggest of them--Terra. She was a sky-scraping blade of a woman with a mane of deep brown hair that framed her face like a halo. She had gold cat-like eyes and a disturbing smile. More disturbing was what she'd said.

"I'm going to be the *what?*" Wren asked, her voice cracking.

Terra laughed. "The ball." She looked toward Bertram. "Unless I misunderstood you."

The justicar pulled at his blonde mustache. "She describes my intentions admirably."

Wren rubbed the back of her neck. Damn, she would be sore in the morning. That was *if* she lived to the morning. She had to live. She needed to get her parents free. She had to get out of this silly game and find Damay. Who knew what the elder savant might be doing now. She pushed that thought to the back of her mind and concentrated on the moment. "Don't balls get bounced? I'm really not interested in any more pounding."

"Well," Tal said, grinning. "The alternative is we each grab an arm or leg--whoever gets the biggest piece when we pull gets the gem."

Wren blinked at the big man. Her voice rose. "Frell. What did I ever do to you?"

He shrugged and laughed. "Hey, that's what it will come to even if they give you a ten count to run. Balls are neutral--they don't get attacked." He let out a breath and shook his head. "Besides, I think most of us are getting tired of giving away points to a green first-timer--it's *embarrassing*."

Wren growled. She looked around and found Desiray staring at her with emerald green eyes. When she met the guild mistress' gaze the woman raised her chin.

"Sorry about the dagger," she told her. "I saw white-hair and thought you were Damrosil." Someone laughed behind her. She straightened, trying to look strong in front of these obviously superior opponents. "You want me to be the ball. Sure, I'll play a ball--if there's no flying. I don't want to get dropped from a hundred paces up. Bad enough that balls get *tossed*--I'm not sure I'm ready for that either."

"I would agree to not flying," Beia said.

"We would as well," Dominique added, brushing back her long black hair.

****Moderation advisory, there is now less than a quarter bell left of game play. Points must be posted prior to the first strike of nine bells or that team receives a score of zero. All players have a 100 count to rejoin play, or judges will be called to resolve the contention over proxy Idun-daughter. This is your first warning. Transcript updated.****

Cassandra growled. "Well, her 'majesty' has spoken." Wren could tell the mage was upset. They had sealed a deal for possession of the gem, but just never managed to complete the transaction.

"All right," Dorian said. "We need a fair way to decide who gets first carry of the ball. Moderator, a telepathic block for sixty beats please--unless anyone contests it."

No one said anything.

****L-O, Team Ariok, sixty beat telepathic block requested. Request goes into effect in sixty beats. Transcript updated.****

"Everyone turn your backs, Wren think of a number between 1 and 100, write it on the ground and cover it with your foot. Each team will try to guess the number. Team with the closest guess will be first carry. Remember, you aren't playing for any team now, so you have to keep your daggers to yourself. No-one should attack you. This all sound fair to everyone?"

The group members nodded.

Dorian sighed. "Okay, turn our backs. Wren, make sure nobody can see what you write."

The group turned their backs. It was difficult to not just choose this opportunity to run. She simply didn't think she'd get all that far.

****Telepathic blocking goes in to effect at the termination of this message. Transcript updated.****

Wren felt the buzz of minds around her suddenly go quiet. It wasn't until the noise was silenced that she realized that it had been there. She shoved outside concerns away. She could consider all these things after she'd extricated herself from this predicament. What number should she pick? Did it do any good to try to pick a number that Cassandra might? No, there would be an all out fight and probably several changes of possession before the end. Shielding a spot on the ground with her hand, she bent and scratched the number 27 in the dirt, then shifted her foot to cover it. She stood and drew a breath. "Done."

Everyone turned back to face her.

"I'll guess for our team and we'll go last," Dorian said. "I know Wren rather well and wouldn't want to bias anyone. Let's just go left to right around the circle. Bertram?"

The blond warrior nodded. He glanced at Desiray his eyes narrowed. "Our team guesses forty-two."

"Tal?"

The big man scratched his head. He glanced at Algernon, eyed Bertram and frowned. "Seventy-one."

"Cassandra?"

The mage stared at Wren, her dark eyes glinting behind the lenses she wore. "Twenty..." Her brow furrowed. "Twenty-three."

"T'Gor?"

The man stroked his beard and looked at Wren with one eye closed. "Fifty even."

"Beia?"

The Myrmigyne turned to Damrosil and the bigger woman nodded. "Twenty-five," she said.

Dorian smiled. "I know Wren would never pick a number higher than thirty, so my guess is thirty."

Where had she gotten *that* from? How could she possibly come up with such an idea?

"Wren--your foot please."

Frowning, she stepped back.

"Damn it," Cassandra muttered.

"Yes!" Beia shook a fist. The Myrmigyne looked at Dorian with a raised eyebrow. "Guess dumb luck wins."

The dark-haired mage snorted. "The toss perhaps, but will it get you to the pole?" She drew a breath. "Moderator, we have an in game rules request. Proxy Idun-daughter is to become the neutral ball. Players have agreed that while a player is in possession of ball, flight is not allowed."

The deep mental voice of Aarlen resounded through their minds. ****Moderation advisory. Team Ariok requests in-game rules revision. The stipulated**

requests are not in contention. The Moderator has no objection. Rules to be enforce immediately. Judges are advised to monitor possession changeovers. A team remains in control of the ball as long as a member has physical contact. If the team is out of contact with the ball for more than sixty beats, the ball is neutral and the first team to make contact takes possession. Player inflicted injury to proxy Idun-daughter will now be considered a fifty point penalty. Flight while in possession will be a twenty-five point penalty. Successive flight penalties will result in a judge-imposed changeover. Moderation stipulations are now complete and enforce. Game play to resume immediately. Transcript updated. * *

Wren shook her head. "I can't believe I'm actually letting myself do this."

Damrosil made a coming motion. "Okay, Ball, over here please."

She growled. "My name isn't 'Ball'."

Laughing, the white-haired Myrmigyne stepped forward and slapped her on the shoulder. "It is until the end of the game. I'm certain everyone will pitch in to make the extra effort worth your while."

Wren turned slowly, eyes meeting those of the powerful people around her. "What I want is for someone to help me get my parents back from Mishaka."

"Hey," Tal rumbled. "Game now, rescue later. Ya come this far, a quarter bell ain't going to make that much more difference. If we have to stomp on an avatar's face afterward, I'm up for that. So, let's go."

Just like that--stomp on an avatar's face. He made it sound like he would be walking to the local pub to toss back a few stouts. Maybe to Tal it was. She shuddered.

Wren let herself be lead over to Beia. The woman's emerald eyes glittered with intensity. The woman put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "It's almost over."

She frowned up at the Myrmigyne. "For you maybe." She drew a breath. "Remember, I have a pack of Sen'Gen waiting for me at the pole."

"I'll take care of it," Beia said. Her eyes narrowed. "Better fix you up or you'll lag us."

She didn't resist as the Myrmigyne stepped behind her and pressed the heel of her hand against the base of Wren's spine. Instants later, she felt a hot rush of tingling spread up her back and down her legs. With the sensation, aches dispersed and strength returned.

Stepping beside Wren, Beia touched a silver band on her arm. The metal flowed like something alive, wrapping around her hand then elongating. In a flash, it solidified into a sword. She took Wren's hand. "We're ready," she said.

"Get set," Dorian said. "Three--two--one--go!"

By the count of two Wren had tensed, she knew how fast Beia was and knew she would be expected to keep up. When Dorian hollered go, she dug in and launched forward.

Expecting Beia to be incredibly quick, the Myrmigyne met expectations and beyond. The woman pulled her down the trail at a speed that had her gasping and fluttering in her wake like a kite yanked along on a string. By some indefinable magic that was a combination of balance, strength, and coordination Beia managed to keep Wren on her feet and moving. Trees and bushes whipped past. They sprang over rocks and vaulted across gullies.

She lost sight of Damrosil three steps down the trail, but sensed the big white-haired Myrmigyne was close. Throughout the grueling sprint, the blonde woman made no sound save the hiss of a breath and rapid pounding of her boots in the dirt. When she did make a sound it caused Wren's already pounding heart to freeze.

"Down!"

Beia let go of Wren's hand in mid-air, swinging an arm around her waist and pivoting them through a half turn. Beia's sword clanged against another weapon before they even hit the ground. A man grunted and the two of them tumbled backward as Beia threw herself and Wren out of reach. They both landed off balance and the Myrmigyne let go in order to right herself.

Wren was vaguely aware of a blur of two figures moving so fast the air seemed to sizzle around them. She had only started to look for cover when she was grabbed from behind and carried like a doll. "Dammit," she heard Damrosil's deep feminine growl. "How did they--ow!"

The woman stumbled, gripping the back of her head.

****L-O, Falor defeats Targallae. Damrosil neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

The huge Myrmigyne stomped her foot and pounded a fist into her thigh.

"You're too slow, that's how," Algernon rumbled, appearing in the brush. He made a coming gesture to Wren. "It's about time I laid a hand on you." He winced at a particularly loud clang of weapons that had to be Beia and Tal still fighting. "Sure as Hades got beat up enough times trying to get you before. You sure are one nimble little sprite." He put a hand over one ear as Tal and Beia smashed weapons again. "Hey, Friend, you want to get a move on?"

"Hey!" Tal cried, lunging away from one of Beia's attacks and countering with a series of hurricane strikes that shattered trees, sliced bushes, and crushed rocks. "She ain't exactly a mark! Just grab her and go!"

Algernon shrugged, grinned at the scowling Damrosil, and wrapped his thick fingers around Wren's hand. "You heard him. Off we go."

The ranger jogged down the trail towing her behind. By some magic she didn't really fathom he was able to plunge through the densest foliage barely seeming to disturb a leaf.

****L-O, Targalle defeats Falor. Tal neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"Damn, she's on her game today," Algernon mumbled. They ducked to go under some tree limbs and slid to a stop as the ground dropped away sharply. "Hades. Pardon me." Before she could protest, he grabbed her around the waist and jumped.

Actually, launched would have been a better description. With a heave of effort, he sprang across a ravine that couldn't have been less than ten paces across. Wind whistling in her face, Wren yelped and clenched her eyes shut for what she felt certain would hurt.

They landed with a jolt and no appreciable pain. Wren sighed and let out the breath she'd held in anticipation of the fall. Algernon lead her through the brush, threading around trees and knifing through thickets.

The ranger had already yanked his sword from the sheath before Wren realized there was any threat. With a quick half-step, he shoved her behind him and whipped his sword around in an arc to meet a blade seemingly swung by a--*bush*? Wren blinked and backed up as Algernon traded swings with the most aggressive piece of foliage she'd ever seen. Since when did kettle-leaf shrubs wield two-handed swords?

While the bush didn't look familiar, the sword and the fighting style did.

T'Gor.

As they broke apart and then charged again, the glamour disguising T'Gor shimmered away, revealing the thin warrior now dressed in forest green. The men fought with dramatically different styles, exchanging blows in a staccato clash of magically reinforced metal. T'Gor fought with speed and flexibility while Algernon was

a juggernaut of defense and focused strikes that shattered rocks and trees. The air around them grew hot with shriek of their blades and the impacts of their weapons.

This time T'Gor did not laugh, his face set in a fierce grin. Teeth gritted, a wild look in his eyes, Algernon met him swing for swing. If one man was better than the other, Wren could not have called it. They both moved with lightning quickness and attacked with scalpel-like precision. They whirled around one another dodging through the foliage, feinting, parrying, lunging and falling back in a blaze of flashing metal. The frightening thing was this was not a life or death fight--merely two master swordsmen testing each other in a public contest. She could only imagine what it was like when they were serious. She shuddered.

She didn't see the mistake. Perhaps a cut not pulled back quickly enough or step taken a hair off balance. T'Gor's two-handed sword flashed sparks off Algernon's broadsword, and the stocky ranger twisted and lunged. The tip of his sword clipped T'Gor's shoulder in a flare of sparks.

****L-O, Falor defeats D'Shar. T'Gor neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

Even as Algernon finished his swing, another motion struck out toward his undefended side.

"Wha...?" Algernon turned an instant too late as a tree swung a limb down and struck him across the back. With a gasp, the thick-bodied man staggered forward a step grabbing at the back of his neck. "Ow. Damn!"

Terra flickered into being as the moderator's words blared in their minds. ****L-O, D'Shar defeats Falor. Algernon neutralized. Scores updated. Move logged.****

"I knew you couldn't resist that sacrificial opening!" T'Gor laughed. His laugh stopped abruptly as something disrupted the brush a short distance away. He swung an arm around. "Terra, run!"

The cat-eyed woman hesitated for only a heartbeat. She snatched Wren around the waist and leaped into the air. Directly behind them the ground exploded as Tal's hammer blasted a crater where they had been standing.

The nimble woman's foot hit a tree-bough and she launched forward.

"Ahhh! No flying! Ahhh!" Wren yelled, as they ploughed through tree-top foliage chopped out of their path by Terra's sword.

"I'm--not--flying!" Terra gritted.

Behind them came Tal's unmistakable snarl. At least, two other figures raced along in their wake.

****Player advisory, 300 beats of game-time remain. All points must be posted before termination or your team receives a score of zero. Transcript updated.****

"Damn," Terra growled. "Got to really put on the speed!"

"Ack. Ugh. Oof!" Wren let out as they spun and gyrated through acrobatic motions that should have been impossible for one body much less two.

They dropped to the ground then bounded to the top of a rock outcrop and then high into the tree and far out into open air. Terra's rapid rise and drop obviously made it hard to target her because strikes hit all around them, and curses trailed in her wake. The lady possessed incredible foot speed.

The number of pursers grew to three and then four. Over the hiss of air and yelling Wren became aware of a booming sound that was totally unlike any noise she had heard before.

Terra's rapid flight was far too chaotic and jarring for Wren to see what was making the vibration, but whatever was making it seemed to be getting closer.

There was no hint of danger, no warning before the attack. Where empty air had been instants before, a huge gold body taller than the nearest trees completely filled the area in front of them. Caught in mid-leap, there was no way for Terra to turn or alter their trajectory. The both of them thudded into the cleavage between a pair of breasts each the size of church bell. Before either of them could move something hot and moist clamped around both of them with breath-stealing force and jerked them back. In that same instant, something cuffed Terra across the shoulders.

"Owww!" the woman yelled.

The surprises weren't over. As it began to dawn on Wren what they had run into, Tal, Beia, and Algernon appeared. With a sound like a sail snapping, a metal shod cylinder of wood larger than a lamp post batted Beia and Algernon like balls, sending them hissing into the trees. Tal who was on the ground disappeared in a single turf-shaking stomp.

****Team clash, L-O, Felspar defeats D'Shar, Targallae and Falor. Terra neutralized. Beia neutralized. Tal and Algernon neutralized. Multiple victory bonus applies. Highlight bonus. Scores updated.****

Faster than Wren would have thought possible she and Terra were peeled apart by a chuckling house-sized Cassandra, who roughly dropped her opponent and sprinted toward the pole holding Wren in a giant-sized hand.

"Is this fair?!" Wren called up.

"No rule against it!" Cassandra laughed, swatting aside Damrosil as the woman suddenly appeared in their path. "Ow! She's hard."

Wren could only shake her head in amazement. The things these people could and would do in the name of a game.

Behind them Wren heard an angry sound that made the trees shudder. That stomp in the ground had done little more than irritate Tal. While Cassandra's size-change had temporarily given her an advantage, Wren could see it was quickly becoming a liability as all the teams swarmed through the air after them.

"Hope you can run faster!" Wren called. "They look really annoyed."

"Only a little further," Cassandra puffed, her huge face set in a grimace of effort. Even the crystalline glasses that covered her eyes had been enlarged by her magic.

Despite all her efforts, the gold mage simply wasn't fast enough. A giant taller than the trees made for a massive target. With the end so close, every team was making an all-or-nothing effort. The mage's powerful magicks stopped the first few attacks, deflecting Bertram's hammer, Desiray's dagger, and arrows shot at them by Beia. It was finally brute power that foiled Cassandra's otherwise ingenious strategy.

Someone jumped up between Cassandra's shoulder-blades and grabbed a couple fists full of hair and leaned back. Yelling, in pain she clawed at her attacker. As the gold mage spun around to grab for her opponent, Beia and Damrosil launched themselves into her side forcing her to catch her balance. Desiray and Bertram threw themselves at the back of one knee, T'Gor and Terra the other. Dorian and Dominique flew in and grabbed her staff. Amidst this flurry of assaults, Tal appeared out of nowhere and went head first into her stomach.

Cassandra let out a hurt rush of air and pitched forward. At the same time, the four players on her legs heaved.

With a sound like a felled scalebark hitting the ground, the giant-mage toppled with a cry, crushing trees and bushes beneath her tremendous weight. Still clutched in the woman's hand Wren could only duck down for when all the players converged on her.

****Multi-team clash, L-O, all teams receive bonus points for highlight worthy play. Scores updated.****

Cassandra opened her hand. As she did, Wren saw a flash of red dart in from the north.

"Oh *no* you don't!" Tal lunged forward, grabbed up Wren and turned his broad back. For smallish Arabella, the big warrior might as well have erected a wall in front of her. Unable to stop or turn she crashed headlong into him. Tal rolled with the impact, shielding Wren with his body.

The red-haired bard fell on top of Cassandra, cussing and clutching her head.

"Mine," Tal growled. "This game is *mine*!" Laughing, he pulled out his hammer and started running. "Alg! Split stun pass on three!"

"Got it!" Tal's teammate called from by Cassandra's head, launching into the air.

Cursing, the other teams raced after him in pursuit.

"Ow!" Wren cried. "Not so tight!"

"It'll mend," he boomed.

****Player advisory, 100 beats to game termination. Transcript updated.****

"Oh yes--*perfect*!" The big warrior growled, and shook his hammer as they dodged through the trees and up the side of a small hill.

Wren didn't see what was so perfect, teams were converging on him on all sides as he slid to a stop at the top of the grassy knoll.

"Hang on, Missy, it's going to be a fast trip!" The big man hoisted her like he was readying to throw a spear.

"Hey! Hey! No. Oh no! No!" She wriggled in his grip but was simply unable to shake loose of the iron-hard fingers bunched around her belt, trousers, and tunic.

"Foe smiter!" Tal raised his hammer high and lightning struck down into the head from a clear blue sky. "I call thee--"

As he uttered the words, the men and women rushing at him with such conviction struggled valiantly to stop and reverse direction.

Bertram, the closest opponent had pulled up short, eyes huge in his handsome face. "Oh my--"

At that same instant, Algernon shot up out of the trees a short distance away.

In the same motion, Tal launched her like a javelin toward his partner and brought his hammer sizzling down toward the ground. "Draup--*nir*!"

The sky went white and a sense-shattering explosion rent the air behind Wren. Players yelled and dirt flew. Her savant power became a roar in her mind as the shock of the blast urged her forward like a bolt shot out of crossbow.

Undoubtedly, Algernon had planned to catch a flying girl. However, he hadn't counted on the sizzling meteor she had become. Wren had no intention of going head first into the man or the trees, she flipped to land feet first.

In the space of heartbeat, body glowing with savant energy she slammed heels first into Algernon's chest. The impact was like an explosion itself, sending the two of them careening in the trees with a painful crash.

For a moment, the world seemed to go black, then flicker back into solidity. She rubbed her face and groaned. Everything was so quiet. She blinked and looked around. Algernon lay against the tree in a groaning heap. Above her the crown of the hill had been swept clear of vegetation. Tal lay at the center of pile of stunned and groaning players who were struggling to right themselves.

****Player advisory, 30 beats to game termination. Transcript updated.****

She spun around. "Lords!" With a grunt she forced herself to her feet and staggered toward Riverback village leaving the collapsed bodies of all the players behind her.

She found the road that Tal had been making for and jog-limped along it toward the hunched collection of buildings she saw ahead. Every joint and muscle ached. Her body felt like a pounded steak.

****Player advisory, fifteen beats to game termination. Transcript updated.****

It was still a long way away. She saw a bright blue pavilion erected in the center of town. A red pennon fluttered in the wind from a tall black pole set at one corner of the tent.

Half running, half hobbling she charged weakly down the street toward the post. With thirty paces to go instinct made her look back down the road. A good three hundred paces back several figures were staggering up the dirt path.

****Ten--Nine--Eight--****

Wren leaned into the last twenty steps, each one making her skeleton resound with pain.

****Five--four--three--****

She lunged the last few steps, tripped and collapsed against the pole.

****Team Idun-daughter, points posted. Scores updated. Transcript updated. Game over.****

Behind her, still a hundred paces away, a half-dozen players staggered to a stop in the middle of the road panting for breath.

"How amusing," a deep female voice resonated behind her. "Nobody wins." She laughed, a dark and skinning chilling sound. "Nobody except the proxy that is. None of the teams posted points."

Clawing up the post to her feet Wren felt a cold sensation claw at her stomach. Nobody won? Hadn't she last been playing for Cassandra? She thumped her head against the wooden pole. No. Damn it. That wasn't the way it was supposed to work out.

She looked around the village. She had half expected an army of Sen'Gen to be waiting to capture her. There were a few people walking around, but they paid her little more mind than they might have any other stranger. Now, what?

****All teams failed to post items, points, or bonuses. Proxy Idun-daughter wins by a 725 point margin.****

"Oh, but that should put a knot in the odds makers tails," the deep female voice said. "Did anyone bet on the proxy win?"

"Only one that I have on tab, Magestrix," a thin sounding male voice answered. "Fortunately, it was a small bet, only five hundred local gold royals."

Someone had bet on her to *win*? Who would do that? For that matter who had five hundred royals to wager on risky gamble? This was all a huge mess. All this effort netted her nothing. Now, she had Aarlen, the twins, and who knew what other problems to resolve. She had to find Damay and make sure she was okay.

"A fair piece of winnings, at last odds the payoff will be at least a hundred thousand-that will be good for publicity." She heard a clunk like heavy glass being put down and the creak of wood. There were soft brushing sounds like hands stroking cloth. "Guess it's time I inform our lucky contestant what she's won."

Wren already knew the prize of this game.

Trouble.

A *lot* of it.

Chapter 14

Touchdown

Feeling trampled and weak, Wren hugged the points-post shaking her head. She had gone through all that abuse for nothing. Throat raw with exertion, she swallowed. Her mouth tasted leathery and rank. A small part of her was proud that she'd not only managed to survive, but took the game away from all those powerful mages and warriors. The rational part of her dreaded it. They'd all be incensed at losing. Cassandra and Desiray, just to name two, were anything but good losers.

Pushing herself up and locking her knees straight she turned to look down the road. A few of the players were straggling in to town now. Algernon was ahead of the first group. The release of her savant power combined with the shock of Tal's hammer strike had stunned him, but not for long, he'd still almost made it to the village. Terra, Dominique, Desiray, and Cassandra had apparently recovered first amongst those stunned by the shock created by Tal's war hammer Draupnir. Beia, Damrosil, and Dorian were in the middle group and Tal, T'Gor, Bertram, and Arabella brought up the back. All of them were dusted in black soot, streaks of grime on their faces and dirt covering their forest camouflage.

"Damn it, Tal," Arabella the bard was muttering. "If I've lost even a tenth quaver of tone sensitivity you'll get a visit from my litigation trickster. Frell, how am I supposed to play with my head ringing like this!?"

"Don't get yer tail in a bind," the big man rumbled. "It'll heal."

"It *better!*" the bard yelled pointing a finger at him. "Frelling underhanded trick anyway. Ugh. My head feels ready to explode."

"I wish it would explode," T'Gor muttered, covering his ears.

"What was that?" Arabella snapped, hands on hips.

"Milady," Bertram said with the slightest hint of irritation in his voice. "Would you mind lowering your voice? Some of us are trying to suffer in silence."

"In other words," Desiray growled back to them. "Shut up."

Arabella snorted and crossed her arms.

Caught up in watching the rest of the players, Wren didn't realize that willowy Jolandrin and Loric's quiet son Farveth were standing next to her. The young man was holding a large tankard of what appeared to be water.

When she noticed him, he held it up. "You must be thirsty. Drink slowly though," he advised.

"Thank you," she said, taking it from him. She wobbled a bit and Jolandrin put hand on her shoulder to keep her balanced. She took a sip of the liquid which had a metallic taste that sent shivers of cooling all through her body.

Darin'kel and his broad-shouldered younger brother Lorrik came around the tent flanked by the two young girls Siriena and Ralani. The four of them took up positions around Wren as if they would be shielding her from an attack.

"You played an amazing game," the Jolandrin lauded patting Wren on the arm.

"I was impressed as well," Farveth added.

"This has been the largest victory margin in the history of the game," Darin'kel added.

Wren nodded in response to their compliments. She still felt terrible. Her whole reason for going through with the game was ruined.

What happened now? She read anger in the faces of the Cassandra, Desiray and the others.

"You okay, Wren?" Desiray called to her, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

"I'm alive," she groaned. "Barely." She took another sip of cool water, feeling it trickle through her insides.

The ring of judges parted to let the white-haired guild mistress come put an arm around Wren. The powerful woman was shaking, which surprised Wren. Darin'kel put out a hand and steadied his mother.

"What's this about Wren winning?!" Cassandra demanded, stopping by the post and staring into the shadows of the pavilion. She pulled the goggles off her face and tossed them on the ground, revealing her space-black eyes. She gripped her staff as if to snap it in two. "She was last a proxy for my team! No other team got legal possession of her after that!"

"You released her," Aarlen's deep and menacing voice issued from the shade. "I would have granted her points to the team with the longest possession, but none of you even made it to the post. She was clearly the star of the game. She scored on practically everyone. Why shouldn't she win? There were more highlights in this game than the two exhibitions previous. So, I am imminently satisfied with the results. The audience will love the surprise winner."

"Speaking of surprises," Beia said in a flat voice. "I hear tell there were Sen'Gen chasing after her, and that you sent Sindra and Drucilla after her and Desiray."

"A trivial misunderstanding that has been resolved," the woman said in a dismissing tone.

"I thought proxies couldn't win the game," Tal said stopping by them and folding his arms.

"They can't," Aarlen answered. There was a movement in the shadows and a tall figure slid forward into the light. "Unless nobody else scores. It was well played Falor, your strategy almost worked. Next time, make sure not to knock out your own teammate."

The big man scowled.

Like a ghostly apparition, the pale woman glided forward a cloak of feathers trailing in the wind. Twirling a long bone scepter tipped with a green jewel she loomed over Cassandra. Her perfect angular face and silver eyes gave her a haunting appearance that was only emphasized by her echoing heavy voice. "If any one of you had simply left off chasing the girl. You'd be the winner right, now." She shook her head. "Irony isn't it? Still, in all, everyone played well. Aside from a few disruptions in play that were quickly resolved, it was fine production." She turned an icy smile on Wren.

"Liandra Idun-daughter, congratulations on a stunning victory."

She didn't know how to respond to this powerful woman, she had only expected to have to fight her. However, getting into a melee with this elder was the very *last* thing she wanted to do. She had heard one of the servants address her as Magestrix. That seemed like a safe form of address.

"Thank you, Magestrix," she replied, placing a hand at her waist and bowing to the white-haired woman.

"Ah," Aarlen said with a grin. "Someone with manners, will wonders never cease?" She stopped spinning the rod and placed it over her shoulder. "Would you like to hear what you've won, Miss Idun-daughter?"

Wren pursed her lips and looked around at the other faces around her. Everyone wore solemn expressions, bodies stiff and expectant. "If I may."

The tall woman sighed and fixed Wren with intense silver eyes. "Liandra Idun-daughter, as your winnings you may select any *one* of the following: The first option

is a complete set of Geldarin shape-shifting blades with sun-stone battle hilts and Talaturn stealth scabbards. If fine weapons are not to your liking, an alternative is the complete thaumaturgic works of Deltarrn which detail the workings psycho-energetic magic at all levels of mastery and mental acuity."

She paused and raised an eyebrow, her attention going to Cassandra.

Wren looked over and saw the mage's hands had shuddering around the staff she held, her knuckles pale with tension.

"Is there something you have to say, Cassandra?" Aarlen asked archly.

The gold mage frowned. Her voice was tight with restraint. "You shouldn't have those books, damn it."

Aarlen shook her head. "Cassandra is just jealous that I found them before she did," she said in an aside to Wren. "She had been tracking them for some twenty-odd cycles when I happened upon their whereabouts. They make for quite interesting night-time reading. I suppose for some *fledgling* mage like Cassandra, they would open a whole new order of spells to their abilities."

Cassandra's lip curled and her eyes narrowed.

The Magestrix went on. "Anyways, if lore is not to your liking, my third option is a practical one. You may choose *any* single debt you owe to the Frielos family or any other entity and it will be canceled and/or paid in full without conditions or delay."

Wren trembled inside. She now knew why these people played so hard to win. The prizes Aarlen offered were not some pittance. The Geldarin blades were weapons of legendary power. She could tell from Cassandra's reaction how powerful Deltarrn's lore was. As she considered she realized that she could still get Cassandra's help. All she needed to do was accept the books and then give them to the gold mage.

However, Aarlen had also provided a priceless out. She could ask to have the debt she owed the Frielos over the attack on Mishaka canceled. Not having to fight Aarlen would be worth not getting Cassandra's help.

The more she thought about it, the more she saw it as the best choice. She briefly entertained how the blades might be useful in fighting Mishaka, but she needed to be free to hunt the avatar down. If she was fighting Aarlen, she might never get the chance.

"Magestrix, may I ask a question?"

Aarlen narrowed her silver eyes. "Ask."

"Is whatever the Sen'Gen and the twins were after me for, a debt that can be canceled?"

Tapping the bone rod on her shoulder, Aarlen regarded Wren with blank look for a moment, then she unsheathed her teeth in a grin. "Ah, very clever."

"Wren, you don't have to do that," Cassandra said.

She looked over at the mage. "You mean *you* don't. You have a nice safe house and a family to watch your back. I can't be a guest there forever." She looked up at Aarlen. "These people have both long memories and long lives."

"Perceptive," the silver-eyed woman remarked. "Anything else?"

Wren narrowed her eyes. "Yes, I have something that belongs to you."

"Wren?" Desiray breathed.

She unshouldered her pack, undid the ties and reached inside. She pulled out the wrapped up gem and presented it to the tall woman with a nod.

Aarlen took it with a slight incline of her head.

She unwrapped the jewel and held it up. "In case there was any doubt, here is proof of her score."

"Magestrix," Wren said. "Please pardon, but you didn't really answer the question."

The tall woman sniffed. "No, I didn't." She folded her arms and glanced over at Beia. "The debacle with Mishaka was expensive. Things our family have taken for granted for millennia have been withdrawn." Her gaze panned across all the players. "However, in the last decade events have changed house Frielos. We don't need Hecate's support. It was merely a convenience that was soon to become a crutch that would have been kicked out from under us at some point anyway. I wanted you in custody to see what negotiating power it would give me. I wished to learn how badly Hecate wanted you." She raised her chin. "I have already seen that you are too valuable a commodity to let that power-hungry witch ruin you with succorunding. A terrible waste. Your predecessor, Damay, though often annoying, was an opponent worth challenging."

"She was a great woman," Wren said, straightening. The rest and the water were allowing her strength to come back, at least so that she could walk off the field with some amount of dignity. "Damay accepted defeat because winning meant both you and she dying. She told me that she had foreseen that you had great things left to do in your time."

Boots crunching in the dirt, the Ice Falcon swept forward and stopped within arm's reach of Wren. "She *told* you? What kind of game are you at, Child? That sounds exactly like her drivel, but Damay is dead."

Wren shrugged. "Ignore me then. I'm ranting. Does that mean you'll stop trying to capture me? It's not what I want, but it's the next best thing."

Aarlen put fists on hips. "And what is it you want, Child?"

Wren drew a breath. "My family." She raised her chin and hardened her voice. "My family *and* Mishaka."

Chapter 15

Prize

Despite the ring of people surrounding her, Wren still felt cornered. The casual sound of Aarlen's voice never for an instant lulled her into thinking the elder had withdrawn her desire to take her prisoner. Even when she told Beia it had been a misunderstanding, she didn't think that the woman had given up. The opportunity to inform all the players of what was going on was invaluable. To her surprise, Aarlen had obliged her easily. She had not however conceded to leaving her be. Only the mention of Damay had broken her composure.

Wren drew a breath, still feeling weak and needing the support of Desiray at her side. The white-haired guild mistress had been applying a steady warning pressure on Wren's arm throughout the discourse, silently advising her to be quiet. However, she would not be quiet, not when it meant recovering her roots and the family to which she belonged. *My family and Mishaka--that's what I want.*

She looked around Riverback village feeling the breeze against her face, hearing the snap of pennons, and smelling perspiration of warriors who fought hard. The huge woman Aarlen stood like a statue of pale marble, hair and cloak fluttering in the wind. She looked like ghost. Her silver eyes narrowed.

Beia stepped forward. "We should give it to her."

Aarlen looked over sharply. "Give it to her? You're the one that cost our family. You interfered."

Beia narrowed her eyes. "I interfered? I destroyed a murderous butcher that needed killing. I protected a girl who'd had enough taken from her."

Aarlen's voice turned icy cold. "Some of us are destined to be prey, Beia."

"Oh yeah, Whitey?" Tal rolled his shoulders forward and his dark eyes took on a dangerous glint. Through the game he had been gruff, but his voice never took on the scathing edge it had now. "And some predators need to *die* to maintain order. Beia did the right thing--the compassionate thing, but then what would you know about that?"

"Falor, speak not about right and wrong," Aarlen growled. "I have been wronged aplenty. Little compassion was ever showed *me*. Why should she receive what I was denied?"

Bertram removed the hammer from his belt and smacked the head into his palm. "The crimes against your childhood are not the fault of anyone here, and we cannot change the past." Blue eyes intense, he drew a breath. "I think you know that had any of us been aware of such circumstances, we would indeed have amended them. It is our duty as defenders to correct those wrongs we can. What has been done to Wren and her family is a wrong that should and can be righted. So, milady, will you grant Wren her request?"

"Yes, I am interested in that myself," T'Gor said, reaching back and loosening his sword. "I only know the girl from a couple exchanges, but she is stalwart soul little different from any of us when we were younger."

Dominique swayed forward, loosening the snap on her sword. "Dorian likes the young lady, as does my mother. I see no reason she deserves the likes of your hounds."

Terra shifted forward, feet worrying into the dirt.

Cassandra stabbed her staff into the ground, laced her fingers and cracked her knuckles. Her chin lowered and she dropped her hands to her sides, fingers spread and glowing.

Desiray pushed away from Wren and stepped up until she was only fingers from Aarlen. "Any reparations she owes you, my guild will pay. Just leave her alone."

Aarlen's silver eyes narrowed. "My, haven't we all gotten serious."

"You want to prey on someone, Aarlen?" Tal rumbled. "We're more your size, bring it on."

The Ice Falcon trained baleful silver eyes on the man. "Much as I'd like to break your fool head, Falor, you know I can't. That would cost me far more than it's worth."

A muscle in the man's cheek twitched. "Then back off."

As he finished his words, Sindra and Drucilla appeared behind the big woman. The twins looked drawn and pale, sweat and scratches covered their faces. Threads of smoke trailed from their hair and clothes. Blood dripped from their fingers.

Aarlen did not turn to look at them. "Done already?"

Sindra nodded.

The Ice Falcon stared at Wren. "Sindra."

The D'klace raised her chin.

The pale woman's voice deepened and took on a ringing echo that made Wren's bones shake. "I don't care if Wren has the keys to eternity himself, from now on, if either you or Drucilla takes the slightest provocative action against this girl in person or by proxy without my permission, the punishment will be *most* unpleasant."

Sindra's chin came up and her silver eyes went wide. "Mother?"

Aarlen's tone turned biting. "Was I in some way unclear, Sindra? Do I have to repeat myself?"

"No, Mother. But--"

The Ice Falcon wheeled on her daughter, whipping the sharp point of her scepter around to stop hairs from piercing the dark haired D'klace's throat. "But? There is no 'but', Sindra. You sought to conceal your discovery from me. You used *my* agents in your scheme and you failed."

She turned back to Wren. "You want your parents and Mishaka? I offer you what my daughters should have. I will give you that and more. You need only swear allegiance to me. Together, we will track Mishaka down and dispose of her. We can even smite Hecate from her throne if it pleases you." Her voice dropped. "I am no fool child. I know the extent of your capabilities. Your power multiplies the potency of those who join with you." She raised her chin. "I am strong indeed."

"She can't be trusted, Wren," Desiray said. "Not with that kind of power."

Aarlen raised an eyebrow. "And who here can?" She swung around and pointed at Dorian. "Her?" She flicked a hand at Cassandra. "Her?" She held a hand toward Bertram. "Even the Justicar of Ukko would be tempted to go too far." She glanced back toward Wren. "Don't any of you realize? Didn't this game teach you anything? She is a *weapon*. She is the personification of the weak forces that govern all matter and energy." The woman swung her silver-eyed gaze over everyone and her voice dropped. "The only difference between any of us, is who and what opposition we would use her to crush."

"I am nobody's tool," Wren growled.

Aarlen glanced over her shoulder. "Everyone of any value worth mentioning becomes a tool at some point, Child." She held out a hand to Desiray. "What else were you to her, or to Cassandra, or Dorian? You were a means to an end." She pursed her lips and turned to Sindra and ran a hand gently through the D'klace's black hair. "These two, Tal, Bertram, Dorian, all of those here--they have all become

the tools of another at some point. Even I have been put through my paces by masters greater than myself. There is no escaping it, and there is no shame in it. There is purpose in being a tool. When you are useful, you can become a component in something larger than yourself. When you have a function, there is meaning and direction in your life." She slid the rod into her belt and looked up into the sun. The woman drew a breath and focused on Wren. "Weren't you happiest when you knew your place in Desiray's guild? You knew your place, understood what was expected, and experienced satisfaction in that role even though it amounted to little."

Wren felt her heart beating fast. So much of what Aarlen said was true. This woman, this monster, was making sense. She wasn't trying to intimidate or belittle, she was simply making an offer. What was she truly offering? Her family and Mishaka must be just candy to lure her close.

"If I follow what you're saying, then I can serve anyone and be happy then."

Aarlen nodded. She put her arms behind her back. "True. Of course, is there anyone else here who has offered to get your family back, and help you get revenge on Mishaka? Trust me, Child, I am well versed in means and methods of revenge."

Of that, Wren had little doubt.

"It is true, Wren, I am a harsh task-mistress. I expect nothing but the best from my family." She stepped between Sindra and Drucilla and held up their bloody hands. "Then again, look at what they can do. What they've ultimately become."

"Killers," Tal muttered. "Bullies."

"Are you any different, Falor?" Aarlen snapped. "With all your rhetoric, you are nothing but a killer-for-hire, yourself."

Tal laughed and shook his head. He glanced at Algernon and then to T'Gor and Bertram, then fixed Aarlen with an expression that looked carved from stone. "Yeah, Whitey, I take out the trash. I do it to make the universe a safer place though. I do it for the sake of people weaker than me. That's the difference between your cutthroats and me. They kill to further their own selfish interests. I saw an apt demonstration of it today. A woman three times Wren's size, and a hundred times more powerful, ready to beat her down. What did she say, 'paybacks aren't fair, they just feel good.'"
He strode forward and glared up at Aarlen. "All that power, all that training, and what did it amount to? What you *created* was a pair of bullies; vain selfish vindictive witches who can't be called to heel." Sindra tensed as if she would attack Tal, but Aarlen restrained her. The warrior had reached for his sword but relaxed. "Great idea, that's exactly what we should make Wren into. Let's turn her into something worse than your daughters--something more powerful, more out of control. What a wonderful contribution to the universe that'd be."

He turned to Wren. "I understand you wanting your parents back. I know you want Mishaka ripped apart. Just don't lose your soul in doing it. Some *tools* are the wrong one for the task."

"A most eloquent display, Falor," Aarlen said. "How atypically maudlin of you. Still, since all of you seem so ready to go to blows for this girl I will grant her wish." She straightened. "You have already heard me order my daughters to leave Wren be. As Wren requests, house Frielos considers any and all loses due to the conflict between Liandra Idun-daughter and Mishaka a settled matter. All orders to coerce or take her into custody are now rescinded." The Ice Falcon pushed hand through her white hair. "Wren, despite Commander Falor's most moving and poignant oration, I do ask you to carefully consider my offer. I leave it open to you. You can of course, remain a sheep among wolves, or you can join a pack and gain the safety that the fangs of clan Frielos provides."

Wren's heart was beating fast, and it wasn't just because she'd avoided a conflict with Aarlen. Something else was wrong, the air felt tense, as if the very atmosphere around them had been stretched too thin.

Others around her seemed to sense it too, hands gripping weapons.

Aarlen and her daughters turned.

As they moved, a voice shook the ground. "You have made a grave error, Frielos. You will not abandon your promises to us. The pact is millennia old and it is not something so easily discarded." As the words echoed into silence figures began appearing in a circle around them.

As they shimmered into existence, Wren felt the prickling sensation that she had hoped never to feel again.

Two, four, eight, ten... the beings shimmered into existence eyes crackling with fire and translucent hair flying. The air filled with a charnel smell and winged and crawling things lumbered forward behind them.

Wren could imagine no more horrific a sight.

Avatars. Ten of them-- and they had an army with them.

A man is defined first by his actions, and second by his reasons for those acts. A good man fights to protect his family and friends, a better man fights to protect his nation and those weaker than himself.
--Tal Falor

Chapter 16

Hecate's Noose

As dozens of horrors slid forward following the glowing disciples of Hecate, Wren drew a breath and tried to disbelieve. Her heart ached in her chest, and she could barely breathe as she watched clouds darkening the sky and heard the wind pick up. This couldn't happen. Not here, not with all these powerful people around her. Just the same, Jolandrin, Darin'kel, Farveth, Ralani and Siriena were drawing weapons and taking stances. Tal, T'Gor, Bertram, and Algernon pulled swords from sheaths and raised them to the ready. In another rank, the mages poised with staves and glowing hands.

Throughout Riverback village, people were screaming and fleeing in a panic. The stench of burned flesh and decay swirled around them, and the roar of crackling fire grew loud.

A sword shimmered into Aarlen's hand and she oriented on the closest of the avatars. He was a thin scarecrow dressed in blood-colored robes. His black eyes burned with Hecate's fire and he bared filed teeth like a nightfang might. His hands glowed with magic ready to be released.

"Yolagg," Aarlen called. "This is a fool's play. Has Hecate become so desperate that she would sacrifice so much for one host body?"

"Sacrifice?" Yolagg laughed. "Arrogant woman. We came prepared to deal with you." He raised his hand, and something black glinted in his palm. At the same time, all around them the other avatars held out their fists. "You think to quit Hecate so easily? You are *dismissed*."

In a flash almost too quick to perceive, sparks flashed between all of Hecate's minions. Yolagg's upraised hand flared star-bright and a lance of crimson leaped forth and stabbed toward Aarlen's heart. All around the elder, globes illuminated and erupted, exploding in flashes like panes of stained-glass shattering. The intense power slammed home against the sword she raised in defense, sending flames shooting across her body and driving her sliding back several paces.

"Mother!" Sindra yelled, silver eyes wide.

The response from the players was instantaneous. Hauberks of mail, shields, and helmets appeared on their bodies. Halos of protective magic shimmered and sparkled on the surface of their skin and they leaped forward to take defensive positions. In three heartbeats, the group was ready to make war.

Aarlen Frielos straightened and a rumble escaped her throat that made the ground tremble. She snuffed the flames in her hair with a snap of her head then whipped off her smoldering cloak and threw it on the ground.

"Aarlen?" Beia called.

She raised a fist to signal Beia. A glow filled her eyes. "Big mistake."

Sindra and Drucilla stepped back to guard their mother. The blue-gray force armor that protected them so well shimmered into being on their bodies, sheathing arms, legs, and torso. They did not wear the contemptuous expressions they had worn

when they fought Mishaka. Their faces betrayed the steely look of someone confronting potential death.

"This is bad," Wren murmured. She could barely stand and her arms felt like lead.

"Indeed," Darin'kel murmured knuckles going white on his mace. He held up two fingers and began to chant.

"Frell," Jolandrin muttered. She whipped her sword in a circle then yanked a dagger off her belt.

The two blonde girls, Siriena and Ralani murmured some words and their swords burst into flames. A white glow surrounded their bodies and wings shimmered into being on their backs.

Farveth and Lorrik had also readied themselves for battle.

Yolagg's burning gaze swept over everyone. "Not so mouthy now, are we? The pain is just starting." He raised his arms in a sweeping gesture. As he did so, his feet left the ground. The other avatars mimicked his motions. Their hands started glowing and a curtain of shimmering blue light began to form behind their bodies.

Aarlen spun around. Her silver eyes went wide. "Don't let them complete that spell!"

Dorian, Cassandra, Dominique, Beia, Damrosil, Sindra and Drucilla all launched attacks. As fast as they were, the demon hordes of Hecate were already moving. The strikes hit a wall of scaly defenders, devastating clusters of monsters but leaving the avatars untouched.

"Damn, if they finish that spell we are done!" Aarlen cried. She added her own magic to the assaults trying to disrupt the casting of Hecate's avatars. Every spell was intercepted by writhing bodies that interposed themselves with magical accuracy. In the space of a breath, the entire central square of Riverback village became a carpet of demon bodies and blood.

As fast as the creatures were destroyed, a flood of new ones filled the gaps, their bodies stacking up like a wall that the mages needed to knock down simply to attack creatures further away.

Wren threw at the avatars, but no matter how she arced or angled the shot, the blade would be deflected or lodge in a scaly hide. After a dozen shots, she gave up and just aimed to disable the creatures nearest and lessen the pressure on the defenders.

Already spattered in ichor, Desiray jumped back from the ring of defense and slid to stop by Wren. She cringed as a blast ripped through a demon that tried to fly over the heads of the defenders. "We need Gaea's weapon."

She was right. As powerful as Aarlen and all the others were, they were drowning in a flood of creatures. "Let's do it."

The guild mistress dropped the cloak off her shoulders, pulled her son Darin'kel back from the combat and hooked the magical cloth around his neck. Ducking in and out of the melee, she started rapidly unhooking her weapons and handing them the other young fighters.

"Mother... What--" Jolandrin was forced to cut her words short as a demon jumped toward her. The big woman blocked it back and slashing it with her sword doing only superficial damage. She staggered out of the way as Drucilla splattered the beast with a close range blast of lightning.

"Use this damn it," Desiray growled, handing her the krillsword Khairhavkul. "You aren't doing enough damage with that toy of yours!"

Wren followed Desiray's example, snatching off her own weapons and handing them around. The guild mistress yanked off her boots, gloves, and bracers. She popped all the rings off her fingers except for one--Gaea's ring.

"Des, are you crazy?" Cassandra yelled. "Get back up here!"

"Hold on!" Desiray called back, dropping to her knees in front of Wren. "That all?" She yelled over the thunder of battle magic.

"Everything. Hope it works."

"Me too." Desiray gripped Wren's wrist and laced the fingers of their hands. They both staggered as another spell shredded a couple winged beasts that tried to leap over the line. Aarlen, Sindra, and Drucilla had become the hub of a wheel of magical destruction trying to carve a path to the avatars.

The vessels of Hecate hovered above the ground just out of reach of the blasts liquefying their minions by the dozens. From them, a greenish wall of energy had spread outward, conjoining, overlapping, and reaching upward to form an enclosing bubble. Wren knew that if that globe reached completion something very bad would happen.

The guild mistress held up her other hand, fingers spread.

Heart beating fast, Wren steeled herself. This would hurt. She stared into the bigger woman's emerald eyes. She gritted her teeth and gripped Desiray's hand.

Instantly, a glow surrounded them. A flash of heat shot through her body, then came a sharp sense of being trapped in box that was rapidly growing smaller. Her vision flickered white, crimson, and finally black. A painful sense of being unbearably heavy crushed down. She couldn't breathe. The pounding of her heart dwindled. All around her something pushed and shoved like a hand trying to wriggle into an over-tight glove.

For an indeterminate amount of time, she just seemed to float in an ocean of nothingness. Then came a rushing sound, and a pounding that began to slow. She had a heart again. A tingling shot through now-existent limbs, and light filled her vision.

She blinked. Wren found herself kneeling in the dirt while around her Hades had been unleashed on Sharikaar. A new wave of creatures, bigger and more heavily built, clambered and flew over the fallen bodies of the first onslaught. They rushed the defenders in a frenzy of wings, talons, weapons, and snapping jaws. The ring of warriors met them with battle cries. The withering barrage of magic, arrows, and swords that shattered the first wave took longer to repel this new threat. The youngsters needed to add their blades simply to keep the line from being overwhelmed. At the center, Aarlen, Sindra, and Drucilla laid about with ground-shaking blasts of battle-magic barely keeping the line of warriors reinforced.

Like islands in a sea of chaos, the avatars continued their spell shielded by hundreds of their minions.

Amidst all the chaos, Wren simply tried to orient and gather her resources. The yells, screams, and blasts made it difficult to focus. She clenched her hands into fists and filled her lungs with a glorious intake of stinking air, feeling their combined body come alive. Colors and lines threaded through her vision, an awareness of every creature, object, and source of energy. Spreading her arms, she felt the magic and the turmoil in the atmosphere like a hot wind on her face. It was like taking a breath of pure strength that galvanized every muscle and nerve.

Moaning, she rose to her feet.

"Mother!" Darin'kel called, drawing back from a slain creature. "What in Hades--?" The young man's dark eyes widened and the mace he held dropped to his side. "*Mother?*"

She looked at him, knowing him, loving him, her beautiful head-strong son. His essence, the streaks and eddies of magic that made him unique were a colorful pastel laced through his body. She reached out and touched his flawless face with gentle fingers.

The moment was short lived. She gasped. "Watch out!" She lunged forward, slapping aside the clawed hand streaking for the back of his head. She pushed Darin'kel behind her.

The reddish six-armed monstrosity that had slipped through the defensive line was bigger than an ogre and armored like a rhinotaur with chitinous plates thicker than a man's wrist. A pair of glowing blood-red eyes looked out of a spiny draconic head armed with serrated teeth.

The monster staggered back in surprise at having its attack so easily diverted. She stared up at the monster fascinated by its vicious and destructive simplicity--a creature with only one purpose; to devour and inflict pain. She felt the sonic impact as it roared, and smelled the fetid stench of its breath as it leaned forward.

"Mother!" her son cried.

"Des!" Dorian and Cassandra yelled.

Wren never saw it move, didn't even sense the claws until they were hairs away. She leaned aside.

Two hands the size of fishing baskets ripped through the space she vacated. The monster roared, balled its topmost hands into fists and brought them down as though to drive her into the ground.

Wren met the attack with an upraised hand, feeling all the creature's tremendous mass and strength slam through her. The force laid against her arm would have shattered the wall of a castle but she and Desiray had become a single expression of the Kel'Varan Nola. The monster's attack and the dozen others that rapidly followed were nothing but energy--power that could be diverted and utilized. She drew upon the creature's supernatural strength and magic, and added it to her own.

She picked out the energies that marked the avatar Aarlen called Yolagg. In her mind's-eye, she knew the forces and vectors to accomplish her desire. She reached out with her Nola, gathering in the flux of all the energies around her, making it into a white-hot ball of potential that gleamed like a captured star in her hand. Leaping up, Wren drove her fist straight into the chest-plate of the behemoth and released all the force in one focused burst.

The beast became a bellowing missile that fired across the already blood-soaked battlefield, thundering into the demons that tried to interpose themselves. The tremendous impetus overcame the resistance and hammered directly into Yolagg. Propelled by tons of rushing demon flesh, the lead avatar was smashed backward, shattering buildings and trees and leaving a paces deep gouge in the packed turf.

The globe of magic that had been growing to trap them burst in an eruption of fire and lightning that knocked the avatars spinning to the ground.

For ticks in time the whole melee went quiet. Even the demons paused in their frenzied assault. Icy gusts of wind made the only sound.

"Damn," Tal grunted, rocking back a step.

"Desiray?" Dorian held her staff up and glanced back.

"How did you--?" Cassandra breathed.

"Later," Wren said holding up a hand. Her voice echoed and the potent sound of it surprised her. "He's still alive."

Wren drew a breath, filling the emptiness inside her with energy. Her eyes fluttered as she reached out to that tantalizing fountain of energy that was Starholme Prime. She frowned, not quite able to grip that distant and bottomless supply of revitalization. She needed more power, while they'd staved off defeat they were still surrounded by an army of demons and avatars.

With their avatar masters down, the monsters drew back, milling with uncertainty around the teeth of a force that had already destroyed hundreds of their number.

Wren reached out to the lines of force suffusing the air and drew more to herself. Her fists glowed. She stared at the energy in her hand--enough power to shatter her normal body--but nowhere near enough for the task at hand. The demons would attack again as soon as their avatar masters picked themselves up.

"Yolagg," Wren determined. "We have to focus everything on him."

"It ain't like we haven't been tryin'," Tal muttered. "Little matter of two or three hundred demons that keep getting in the way."

"I can't punch through," Aarlen said. "They've damped the magical energy, so I can't reach my full power."

"Same problem for me," Cassandra said. "Somehow they're weakening our energy."

Wren banged her forehead with her fist. "Together we have enough power, we simply have to focus it tight enough to punch through that wall of demons."

"Let's just run," Dorian said. "Has anyone besides me tried teleporting?"

"Couldn't budge," Terra reported.

"Not even a fizzle," Arabella added.

"No success," Sindra growled.

"Sorry," Cassandra said shaking her head. "I can't even warp in this muck."

Arabella groaned. "We're in deep doo now."

"Dammit, we can *get* that guy," Wren insisted, watching the pile of creatures covering Yolagg start to shudder. As she watched, the avatar clawed his way out of the press and swayed to his feet. She snatched Khairhavhel out of Darin'kel's hand, summoned every bit of power she could muster from the flux around her, and used it to propel the weapon.

Aimed at Yolagg's head, Desiray's krill dagger became a lance of fire that shrieked across the square with a boom.

Even though confused, by whatever magic was impelling them, the demons leaped into the path of the weapon. The sheer destructive force of the throw splattered a half dozen of the armored creatures and split a score more in half. By the time the blade reached the avatar though, the momentum had been so defused it deflected harmlessly off the evil minion's magical defenses.

"*Spit!*" Wren snarled, shaking her fists.

"Whoa," T'Gor let out, a bloody hand clutching his ear. "Wizard try though!"

Dorian's eyes were wide. "Des, how are you... wait--where's Wren?"

"Don't worry," she snapped. "We're okay."

"We?" Cassandra breathed.

"More power, tighter scope," Wren growled, ignoring the concerned words and looks being shot at her. "How? *How?*"

She didn't get a chance to figure it out. One of the buildings toward the south erupted in a shower of stones, wood, and straw. Through that devastation a glowing object split through fifty ranks of demons like a fisherman's line yanked through a pond and flipped over the line of warriors before any of them could raise a weapon in defense.

Wren shielded herself against the massive energies that were rocketing straight toward her. The figure landed in front of her with a thump, the air sizzling and cracking like a hive of angry insects.

Like an animal shaking its pelt dry of moisture, the creature threw off the energy sounding it, revealing a small person.

Wren's breath caught and her stomach twisted.

"Drek," Aarlen murmured.

"Wow!" Dorian breathed. "So, that's what it was for!"

Wren didn't know where the woman had gotten the matching black guilder hauberk and breeches, the jewels, or the weapons, but smallish Damay with her dark hair and ancient gray eyes was unmistakable. Wearing the youthful flesh that Wren had transformed from a copy of her own body the elder savant had potent vibrancy that made Wren's skin hum.

"How did you find me, and how did you get through those demons?" Wren finally sputtered.

Damay smiled and held up a small space between her fingers. "The dark clouds, demons, and explosions might have been a small clue. As to how I did it--if you knew... you wouldn't need me then, would you?"

I saw her and almost swallowed my tongue. Mother was not going to be pleased with this...

--Sindra Frielos

Chapter 17

Damay's Alliance

Stunned as she was at the appearance of Damay, Wren didn't have much time for questions or surprise. They had only moments before Yolagg would renew the attack. She also didn't know how long her joining with Desiray would last. Fused into one person they gained the strength to disrupt the magic circle of the avatars. Despite her great exertions, she didn't feel tired. Instead, the more power she called on, the better it felt. She could revitalize herself with a thought, drawing upon the world's nearly endless supply of life magic to heal an injury or dispel fatigue. It was intoxicating. She now understood Gaea's warning that if they tried to use this ability more than three times, it would become a choice. Damay once told her to 'be', this was the ultimate being, and it was a thrill beyond words. It was also too good to last. They needed to utilize this strength while they had the chance.

Damay looked up at Wren, her dark eyes widened. "That's quite a lot of 'be' for your age, Child."

"It's Gaea's quick study program, I'd recommend it to anyone," she remarked, attention focused on Yolagg. He was definitely the puppet-master. As he recovered his strength so did all the other avatars. The strength of Hecate's new weapon was also its weakness. She pointed. "We have to get to him, and destroy that black thing in his hand. I'm pretty sure that's their vulnerability. All the other avatars have that same gem."

Damay narrowed her eyes, studying where Wren pointed. "It's just a flux stone. Nothing extraordinary."

"How do you know that?" Aarlen growled. "And when did you get powers like that *thing* you used to break in here? You never used that on me."

Damay laughed putting hands on hips. "I didn't have a teenager's body then. Someone forced me to take a very long vacation. There's been little else to do *but* practice."

"Clue us in," Dorian said. "Do we know your friend?"

"This is Damay," Wren said gesturing to the woman, who bowed with a flourish.

"*The* Damay?"

"Yes, yes, the great and powerful, oh so legendary Damay," Sindra said with a dismissing gesture. She leaned toward the elder savant and her tone dropped. "Can you get us out of this mess or not?"

Damay raised an eyebrow. She looked away from Sindra toward Yolagg. Her face twisted in distaste. The demons around them had started to move with purpose again, they would attack at any moment. Yolagg had righted himself and was moving back to the position he occupied before Wren attacked him.

"Probably," the elder savant determined. "It will take everyone's cooperation though."

"Look," T'Gor growled. "I don't care if we defeat these bastards or not. If it's a choice between running and dying, I'll run. Can you get us out the way you came in?"

Damay turned to the wiry fighter. "You must understand. What you see as a horde of demons is actually an extremely high order spell that uses demons as part of its manifestation. Didn't you wonder where all the beasts were coming from? Didn't it bother you that no matter how many you killed there were always more? There's no

gate. The spell is a noose, your head is in it. As I demonstrated, it's simple to get into a noose. It is, however, a different matter to get out." She looked toward Yolagg and her eyes widened. "Pardon, now a little haste is in order. Wren, if you please." She made a coming gesture with her finger and pointed next to her. "Quick now." She held out her hand. "Dagger. Best one we've got."

The warriors all looked around at each other.

Aarlen growled and pulled a gleaming blade of green metal from her boot. The big elder stepped forward and handed it to Wren with a scowl. Wren felt the magic throbbing through the weapon. It was indeed powerful, even stronger than Desiray's krill weapon. She passed it to the elder savant with a nod.

Damay looked at the weapon with a grave expression. "Aarlen?"

"Use it!" the tall woman snapped.

The elder savant reached down and took Wren's hand, meshing their fingers together. As they touched there was a warm and intimate buzzing that made her shiver. Damay's power had doubled or tripled in strength than when she when she had originally sensed her in the amulet seasons ago.

Damay shook her head. "Truly, your *being* rivals a First-one in strength." Wren felt the older savant draw on her power. Instinctively, she reached out to replenish it. As she drew in more strength, she felt Damay's demand increasing.

Where was that tiny woman putting all that power?

Damay had closed her eyes and held the dagger as though to stab with it rather than throw.

"Chi," Damay muttered, hand and dagger becoming a bright glow. "Iche." She touched the weapon's hilt to her forehead. "Ni!" Damay's shout came out like a blare of thunder. Tip pointed at Yolagg, she released the weapon as though to let it drop. Instead of falling, the dagger left her hand with a high pitched wail that made Wren stagger back clutching her ears. A single intense thread of light seemed to strike out from the elder savant's hand.

As before, the demons magically formed a defensive wall in the path of the attack. The dagger pierced a score of demon bodies like a needle stabbing through cloth. Yolagg was already part way into another spell. His magical defenses flared and then his head exploded in a grisly splash.

The avatars all howled as their leader's headless corpse pitched over backward. The demons that had started to advance recoiled and began to let out a hideous burbling.

"Nice!" Wren cheered. The excitement she felt was side-tracked when Bertram came over to her and put a warm, very *familiar* arm around her waist and pulled her close. Deep blue eyes, that chiseled nose, strong chin and straight white teeth. Damn, he was handsome. She felt herself blush. *Blush? She was supposed to kiss him.* This was her husband. No, it was Desiray's husband. She shook herself. There just wasn't time to be conflicted right now. She put an arm around him and tried not to think about it. No doubt, as far as he was concerned she looked like and *was* Desiray.

"Yes!" Sindra pumped a fist. Aarlen glared at her and the D'klace subsided with a sheepish grin.

Cassandra clapped. "Sweet!" The smile on her face faded quickly. "Poo, they still have teleporting blocked."

"Do we have to kill every fraggin one of those bastards?" T'Gor growled.

"He isn't dead," Dorian determined. "The spell didn't drop. She just bought us time. You're the demonologist Aarlen, how come you didn't tell us this was a spell?"

"Shut up, Dorian," Aarlen growled.

"Peace," Damay said holding up a hand. "These avatars are using flux stones to function as a superior coven. That is why they could cast such a powerful spell. In

fact, that is why killing one of them will not disrupt the spell. In such a configuration, any one of their number can be regenerated by the others if there is even a scrap of them remaining. They are feeding off our energy. The magic you call upon to fight them is only giving them more power to use against you."

Bertram being close made it hard to think. He certainly was easy on the eyes. It ached, he reminded her so much of Jharon. It took a moment, but then what Damay was describing dawned on her. "That's like what we do!" she let out.

"Yes. Fortunately, they are not as efficient in their energy reclamation as we are, or you would already be defeated. The demon ring serves to hem us in, weaken us, and shield the avatars from our attacks." She looked to Aarlen. "It is rather like that noose of blades spell I've seen you use on the battlefield."

Aarlen scowled and brushed the white hair out of her eyes. "No matter how strong the mages were, I could have broken that spell or one similar. The only magic I know this strong is a twelfth echelon bender spell. Such spells are alive and can live on even after the casters are dead."

"Spit," Algernon muttered. "Just pour on the good news."

"What do you expect?" Terra said running a hand through her thick mane of dark brown hair. Glowing sword clenched in her fist, she went and put an arm around Tal. The burly fighter dipped his head against hers. She let out a breath. "This isn't some cheap mage trick. It's a major spell woven by a pantheon lord."

Eyes narrowed, Damay stared at the demons milling around them. She focused on the avatars. "Wren was correct, the flux stone is the weak spot. If we can destroy that, then the coven's ring will be broken. Once that threat is abated, we'll have the leisure to deal with this spell if indeed it lives on."

"You don't just 'break' a flux stone," Sindra scoffed. "It's made of a folded inter-dimensional material dozens of times denser and harder than steel."

"It cannot be done with physical force," Dorian agreed.

"We probably don't want to disrupt one anyway," Dominique said putting her arms behind her back and eying the creatures around them. She stepped over and leaned against Dorian. "We're talking about the annihilation of dimensionally compressed mass."

Cassandra bit her lip and nodded. "Boom."

Wren looked over at her. "How big a boom?"

"Not predictable," the gold woman said, dark eyes narrow. "In some cases the force implodes."

"In the worst case," Aarlen said, folding her arms. "Ivaneth is blown off the map."

"Oh, that's just frellin wonderful!" Tal yelled.

"We better do something," Algernon called, his gaze fixed on Yolagg. "That bastard is starting to pull himself together."

"We're thinking about this wrong," Terra offered. "We don't have to *destroy* the flux stone--just prevent it from functioning."

"Okay, sure," T'Gor said. "But if these things are like our Shaladens, they share their power through some sort of dimensional trickery right? Can that be blocked?"

"Not in the conventional sense," Damay said. "The stones resemble storage chambers that all have doorways opening into a common space. They need only open the door to share with one another."

"Too bad we can't just lock the door!" Arabella said with a nervous laugh.

"Oh hush," Bertram growled from Wren's side. "We need serious ideas."

"No, wait," Sindra said. The D'klace glanced at her mother and then to Drucilla. "That's not as far fetched as it sounds. In flux stones and other devices, the 'door' that governs the passage of energy into and out of a common energetic volume is a

bubble of something called hermetic force. When the force is weak, all the stored energy pours through, when it's strong--nothing escapes. It's possible to externally excite the hermetic field and bottle up the energy, and thus 'lock' the door, so to speak."

"But how would you do that?" Dorian asked. "The field we're talking about is *inside* a stone a hundred paces away, and those insides are in another dimension! How do you *externally* affect that?"

Cassandra rubbed her fist against her forehead. "Phase variances," she said. "Dimensional and transitive skew."

"Can you translate that for the magically challenged?" Beia asked.

"We need another dimension to overlap the stone and cause a spatial disjunction," Dominique said. "It could be done with a magical holding bag, a gap cloth, or--" The dark woman's gold eyes widened. She jumped over by Darin'kel and grabbed his shoulder. She lifted the shadowy material hanging around his neck and gripped it in her fist. "Or Desiray's phase cloak! That's it! We can do it with this!"

"Now, wait," Wren found herself saying. "That's not going to damage my--I mean *her*--cloak is it?"

"Des, what does it matter if we're all dead?"

Wren heard herself growl.

Desiray had not been very vocal in her mind, but she was definitely still present, and her emotions and desires were quick to bubble to the surface. Wren wondered if that wasn't a sign that the fusion might be weakening. She didn't feel as if her strength were fading. She felt more powerful than ever. Of course, that could change with blinding speed. Most likely at the least convenient moment.

"Desiray," Bertram asked, touching her face. "Are you all right?"

"Bertram, I--" Wren started. She drew a breath. "I'm fine."

"Okay," Tal said. "Suppose we can use the cloak to do this 'skewing' thing. Who frags up that flux stone?"

"After I synchronize with that cloak," Sindra said. "Drucilla and I can do it from here. We still have to get the cloak out there to that stone."

"Wren's going with the cloak. Getting her there will be my and Aarlen's job," Damay said.

"Damn, you are a confident witch," Aarlen said. "What makes you think I won't just tell you to go to Hades?"

The elder savant snorted. "Because you love your children and your mate. I don't think you're all that fond of dying either." Damay looked around. "I know you people don't know me, but I'm asking you to trust me." She gestured to Cassandra and Dominique. "Next to Aarlen, you two have the greatest raw magical power. After Aarlen and I get Wren through, the four of us will coven--I will link with you and the three of you will use my Savant powers. Our job will be to break the ring. Sindra and Drucilla, as soon as Wren makes contact with Yolagg and you disrupt the coven, your task is to get all the warriors through the ring--Wren's going to be out there alone and she'll need help. Once she's outside, their attention will be on her and not us."

Wren swallowed. "You want me to fight all the avatars alone?"

"You're the only one who can get through the ring."

She gritted her teeth. "Okay, make it fast. Don't know how much longer I can maintain this power level."

"Don't worry," Damay said in a dark tone. "It will be."

"Give Sindra the cloak," Wren said to Darin'kel. She felt a sharp twinge in the back of her neck. "Ow. Des, we have to do it. Stop it."

Eyes fixed on her briefly as Darin'kel swung the phase cloak off his shoulders and handed it to Sindra. The big elder held it for perhaps a dozen heartbeats before giving it to Wren.

"Okay, Wren," Damay said. "It's time to *be* more than you've ever been. Aarlen and I are going to give you a push--a *big* one."

Lords. She wrapped the cloak around herself, the material feeling like filmy spider webs as it settled on her shoulders. She clenched her fists and imagined the lines of force all around her, bending around her body passing through her. She would have to become a part of the force driving her, she must become the needle that punched through the resistance the way Aarlen's dagger did.

The perfect reflection of the Kel'Varan Nola.

Pure force.

Unstoppable.

Invulnerable.

She remembered Gaea's parting words. Be strong, Liandra. My spirit is in you, and I am a powerful ally. You need only learn your own providence, and I will shield you from all harm.

Lost in her own preparations she hadn't noticed Aarlen and Damay joining forces. The pale haired elder stood behind Damay much the way Dorian had during the fight with Set's minions. A great elder joining forces with the greatest of the Kel'Varan's... Joined together they had potential beyond imagining.

Damay raised her hands. "Get ready."

Around them, the demons had started to swirl toward them and the avatars had reformed their circle. All the fighters and mages were braced each one ready to do their part to survive.

She stepped in front of Damay and crouched down. She called the name of Khairhavgul, and the krill weapon shimmered into her grasp. She gripped the hilt two-handed and oriented herself on Yolagg. This time they were going all the way.

"Set," Aarlen boomed in her deep voice.

A brilliant blue halo burned into being around Damay, flickering and snapping around the Ice Falcon in a nimbus of raw force. Wren felt it bending and warping the air and the very ether itself.

Aarlen raised her hands, now glowing like twin stars ready to explode.

"Gaea," Wren murmured. Her heart thundered fast and she took quick breaths.

"Protect me." One breath. Two. She brought all the power into herself at once.

"Go!"

Behind her, it seemed as if the universe itself erupted...

Damay, the woman is a fountain of pandering holistic drivel. Gaea this and Gaea that. I killed her just to shut her up...

--Aarlen Frielos

Chapter 18

Mon'istiaga, Blade of Shiva

Insanity. It was only the most crazy and blood-thirsty of warriors who allowed themselves to catapulted over the walls during a siege. Magnify that a dozen fold for someone desperate enough to allow themselves to be fired *through* a wall of demons at an avatar. In recent scoredays, she'd done some outrageous things and had taken part in some truly bizarre scenes. This bested them all.

The last instants blurred together. Yolagg had reformed and regained control of the avatar coven. The demon circle had roared to life and pressed toward them again. Overhead, the clouds darkened as though a giant bruise had formed on the dome of the sky. The warriors and mages of the great game, the judges, the moderator, herself and Damay had unified into a fighting unit with truly world-shaking power.

Wren had only a single heartbeat to reflect on how truly unhinged she had become. With the tip of Desiray's krill-dagger Khairhavlul held in front of her, she would become a living missile propelled by god-like power.

Being fired from a crossbow would have been a mild experience compared to the massive thrust that shoved her forward. Without her savant power and the durability given to herself and Desiray by Gaea's weapon, she would have been instantly pulverized. Instead, she was able to ride the blast, carried along just behind the forefront of the shockwave.

She hit the wall of on-rushing demons, the huge impetus driving a wedge into the resistance, the tip of her dagger and the incandescent ripples of her nola slicing through behind it.

The creatures in her path exploded into shreds, each impact another blow in a pounding barrage that occurred in fractions of an eye blink.

She struck the final target with a stunning crash, smashing into walls of magic dozens of layers thick. After reforming for the second time, Yolagg had taken no chances and had probably put up every defensive spell he could muster.

All but a few of those protections simply burst apart in roars of thunder, cascades of sparks, and flashes of fire. The last of his core defenses were like a wall of steel that Wren sprawled against while the gigantic fist of Aarlen and Damay's power mashed her against it.

From launch to destination there had been no time for pain. For instants while the remainder of the blast buffeted her, it felt like she had done a breath-stealing belly-flop onto a bed of needles, and a team of demons were flaying her back with scourges. The brightly lit world, threaded through with lines of force, went abruptly dim.

A pace from Yolagg, she dropped to the ground in a heap, bones feeling like soggy rags.

Agony shot through her body, pain caused by the collision, the blast, and the raw energy she absorbed simply to keep from getting squashed like a bug against Yolagg's magical barriers. The world spun around her and a shrieking echoed in her ears. She tasted blood, and smelled the charnel reek of death. Surrounding her limbs in a thick sheath of blue radiance, her nola crackled and snapped like a bonfire.

Too much power. It burned.

She had to move, but her body just refused. It was like she weighed thousands of stone. Clawing the ground she managed to pull herself forward and blink some of the dizziness away. The demolished village of Riverback, the buildings shattered and on fire shone in her vision as though viewed through a lens of blue glass that wavered like ripples in a pond.

She looked up to see the battered hulk of Yolagg. The avatar looked like a blood-spattered sparring dummy with glowing red eyes. The creature's red and black robes were burned and rent, and its skin a tattered patchwork that looked like blobs of clay pushed together.

Its jaw unhinged and split lips frothed. It wheezed words at her in deep gasps. "You may have escaped the trap, but you will not keep your life." It raised the hand with the jewel in it, and a darkness formed around its fist.

Wren realized then that people were screaming. Telepathic communications bombarded her mind.

<Look out!>

"Des!"

<Move!>

"Get up!"

Didn't they realize she was trying? Everything was all scrambled up. A glance behind her showed the demons and the defenders tangled in melee of flashing swords and blasting magic.

The darkness took the shape of a globe. The air hissed and shrieked being sucked into the black maw that Yolagg had created at his fingertips. The avatar drew back.

Her heart thrashed and her lungs seized.

Move. Move! *Move!*

Yolagg struck.

At the last instant, she rolled aside. The potent anti-magic slashed into the ground with a rumble, cutting into the dirt and loam like a carving knife through meat. Desiray screamed in the back of her mind.

Wren grabbed the edge of the phase cloak and whipped it around the avatar's arm and hand, and willed the item's magic to life.

There was so much going on in the battle with the demons, she couldn't be sure that Sindra and Drucilla would know to do their magic.

"Fool!" Yolagg rasped. "That won't--" His words turned to an ear numbing howl.

Wren rocked back as the avatar flashed crimson. The black sphere of anti-magic he'd been wielding bit down on his arm with sound of crushing bones and splitting flesh, then vanished. Clutching the stump of his wrist, Yolagg sank to his knees. With a sickening sigh of relaxing tissue, his body collapsed upon itself like a water bag with a leak in it. His wail trailed off like the echoes of sewage running down a drain.

Heart thumping, she shook a fist in victory. "Oh, shredding, yes." Blinking the dots out of her vision Wren fought to her feet. The battle wasn't over. True to Aarlen's prediction, the demon ring had not expired with Yolagg.

Sparks and flashes of magic flickered around the other avatars. Confused words, and yells of dismay rocked through their group. The immediate consensus was revenge--

On her.

Damay had already warned that would happen so she was prepared. Even on shaky feet, she didn't have much trouble dodging the first spell. She didn't have to kill the avatars, simply keep them occupied while everyone else extricated themselves from the spell imprisoning them.

The shock of being slammed through the demon ring was finally starting to wear off, giving her breath to deal with burning overcharge licking around her limbs. She snatched Khairhavgul off the ground, turned and threw at the nearest of the avatars, putting her considerable stored energy behind it.

The blade blazed out in a streak of fire. The balding, hook-nosed avatar dressed in black attempted to raise a defense, but it was too little and too late. His magic ruptured into incandescence. The shrieking weapon cleaved the head from his shoulders. The twitching corpse tumbled backward.

"Dammit," Wren yelled. "Why? Why couldn't Mishaka be here? She's the one I want to kill!" Fists clenched, she shook her head in frustration. If only she'd had this power when they encountered Mishaka in the temple of Ishtar. She would have had that black witch bleating for mercy.

A boom made the ground shake, followed by multiple smaller concussions. Aarlen, Dominique, Cassandra and Damay had formed a coven and had struck at the demon ring. Dozens of the huge beasts had been vaporized by the attack. Sindra, Drucilla, and the rest of the warriors dove into that gap, trying to punch through to the other side.

As strong as that thrust had been, it didn't look as if they would make it before the space collapsed and they drowned in a sea of armored bodies.

Wren summoned the remainder of the energy she had absorbed from penetrating the spell. Calling Khairhavgul to her hand, she kissed the hilt, and let fly with a yell. It left her hand with a hiss, ripping into the outer edge of the circle to help clear the path for the warriors.

Concentrating on helping the others, she didn't sense the spell coming until it burst into her in a peel of thunder. The power of the strike knocked her sprawling, body twitching and in pain.

Ow. Thank Gaea for Desiray's thick skin and her savant resistance to magic.

She managed to get her feet under her before the next attack came, jumping and rolling to avoid the fire-blast that incinerated the ground behind her. There were eight avatars left and they had no compunction about ganging up on her.

Wren gave up on fighting and just concentrated on staying alive, putting her energies into speed. She ran around the demon circle, ducking around posts and leaping over flaming debris.

Calling Khairhavgul back to her hand, she swerved through a maze of magic spells and ripped into the chest of one of the avatars that was too slow to get out of the way.

Why hadn't the warriors broken out of the circle? Surely, with three such powerful mages joined with Damay, they should have been able to shatter half the continent. She felt and saw the tops of the ground shaking explosions that were being directed against that living wall of evil, but couldn't see through the chaos to tell what was happening. Time was getting short. She sensed that the fusion of herself and Desiray couldn't last much longer. They had actually stayed merged longer than she expected. It was a good thing too. As tough and fast as she was, Desiray wouldn't last long out here by herself. Savant powers or not, Wren knew she would be dead in heartbeats. She simply wasn't quick enough to evade the constant barrage of magic that had already flattened every building in the little village. The ground all around the demon circle had become a blackened morass of craters, fused earth, and flaming debris.

She thought to simply run for it, but then the avatars would turn on the people in the circle. If she concentrated on killing one of the avatars, the others would rip her apart. She needed help--big help.

Loric.

The Desiray part of her needed no urging, Wren relaxed and let the guild mistress surge to foreground. There were instants of fumbling as their combined minds summed their resources. A blast of magic forced Wren to jerk away as their wills reached out across the gulf that separated them from the citadel. Despite two minds inhabiting their enhanced body, they couldn't function separately. If they didn't keep moving they would get killed.

Even though it was telepathy, it took time and concentration to send a thought over such a huge distance. Time the attacks of the avatars wasn't affording them. There was no hard cover get behind.

Or was there?

Wren grabbed the edges of the cloak and pulled them around herself. She dodged out away from the ring, weaving around attacks and getting them to a safe distance. She leaped over a low rock, called on Desiray's knowledge, and willed the cloak's magic to activate. The magic of the cloak was like jumping into a deep pit with perfectly smooth walls and floor. They seemed to float in the space as though suspended in water. Overhead, blasts of magic tore at the air. This was the same trick that Desiray used to trap Beia in the alley and what made Wren think of the tactic.

They immediately summed their resources and sent out a telepathic yell for help. She figured that the others had probably already tried to call assistance but were being blocked by the avatars. Wren and Desiray were further away and outside the demon ring.

Wren's heart sank when there was no response. What could have happened? She didn't feel any blockage as there had been during the game. Perhaps Loric was also involved in something.

Feeling the presence of the avatars getting closer she flashed up out of the space created by the cloak, hitting the blistered turf at a run. Even so, she was almost too slow as three fire blasts singed her back.

Damn, she couldn't hang out here forever. She had to split that ring, kill all the avatars, or run away. Running away just wasn't an option, Damay as well as the others were counting on her. They would certainly die if the avatars shifted their attention back to the ring.

She turned to face the avatars. The eight malicious creatures hesitated. Five females and three males, all of them extensions of Hecate's will, their eyes glowing with supernatural energy.

Wren reached down into the well of strength that had been keeping them going. It was getting hard to focus, and harder to manage the energy. How long had she and Desiray been joined? It didn't seem as though much time had passed.

Come on, Damay, get them out of there.

She summoned Khairhavlul. The weapon appeared in a flash, the blade gleaming and bright.

The nearest of the female avatars, one with dark hair and eyes, raised a hand and made a cutting gesture in front of herself. Eyes going wide, Wren recognized the spell and leaped into the air, spinning to get her legs and torso up and out of the way. A pace above the ground her back hit something hard and impossibly slick. It had been a force wall like Dorian had used to kill Set's minions!

Lightning flashed out from one of the males, and bolts of light from another. Sliding off the force wall, she dodged the thunder stroke, and intentionally caught the lesser powered lights to renew her strength.

Panting, she landed on her feet.

One of the other female avatars gestured as though to attack again, but the tallest of them yelled out. "No sister, we are wasting our time with this one. We need to get to Aarlen and her minions before they escape."

"Bad--" Wren yelled. "Bad idea!"

She hurled the dagger at the one who had spoken. A few paces away from the avatar, the weapon deflected off something invisible. As a group, the avatars turned away from her. She threw again at one of the males only to hit the same protective shielding. They'd made their protections too strong and she simply didn't have the strength anymore to punch through.

"Shreds," she gasped to herself. "Now what to do we do? Dammit, Damay, get out of there!"

"Are you having problems, Dear?" A gruff but familiar male voice asked behind her. "Looks like your playmates decided to have fun with someone else."

"Loric!" she let out in a voice that didn't sound like her at all. She leaped up and hugged him.

Face serious, the war master returned the hug one armed, his eyes fixed on the demon ring and the avatars. "Sorry, would have been here sooner but the spell they cast to isolate the area was a real nasty one." Holding onto her, he frowned.

"Desiray? What--?"

"No time to explain," she said. "The First-one sword, Mon'istiaga, give him to me. We have to break that ring before they're all killed!"

Loric's gray eyes widened, then a dawning comprehension. He reached over his shoulder and pulled out the rippling metal fang. The blade made a shrieking sound. The elder's hand shook as the weapon came alive, its glittering edges flaring with green fire.

Convulsively, he shoved Mon'istiaga into her hand as if it had burned him.

As Wren's hand closed around the weapon a shock went through her. She thought the power of the joining had been immense, this thing was like gripping a thunderstorm in her fist. All of her fatigue and pain vanished to be replaced with a desire to slay the enemy. Mon'istiaga was a battleblade and it had been eons since it had been wielded in a fight. Sparks whirled around her arms and legs in a riveting strength.

She took off at a run, urged by the weapon. She leaped on the nearest avatar, the blade cleaving through the creature's defenses as though they were made of paper. The blade deflected the magical strikes sent at her and in a heartbeat it had found the heart of the avatar and had slashed upward through its brain in a fountain of gore.

Then the remaining avatars fell on her. The powerful blade let out a roar drawing her into battle. Each of the avatars died as fast as the first, magic destroyed, bodies sundered, and minds rent apart. Blade shrieking and wailing like a storm gale, Wren staggered forward as the last avatar dropped in a shredded heap at her feet. She stared at the glowing fang, appalled at the blade's monstrous power.

Composing herself she went straight for the ring. Mon'istiaga's vocalizations grew in volume, the weapon ablaze like a pace long piece of the day-star.

Wren didn't know what Loric was doing, and didn't care. She was going to get her friends out of there.

Mon'istiaga bit into the massed demons of the ring like a spoon gouging out hunks of a holiday pie. Every swing demolished two or three of the writhing monstrosities.

Blade creating a wake of foul blood and split bodies, Wren became the heart of a hurricane designed to disperse the noisome creation of the avatars. People she loved and cared about were in that ring; children, wives, and friends. She would not let this

spell have them, not while she had breath left. She didn't care if Hecate herself cast it, she would shatter this thing.

As she fought toward the center of the circle, the howling masses of the underworld turned completely on her. Mon'istiaga was a roar in her hand, a snapping maw that voraciously ate all the anti-life that came within range. The potency of Starholme Prime shined behind her eyes, a cold fire that brought knowledge and sadness. Why had the First-ones needed such a weapon? What purpose except to destroy others of their kind? She had not understood Gaea's sadness--the disappointment she had felt from her until this moment. The split between alphas and betas went deeper than a desire to reclaim lost power. It was an attempt to reclaim innocence and purity, to restore spirits and intellects that had been corrupted by their own divinity. Even before the split of the alphas and betas, the First-ones had fought amongst themselves, splashing the heavens with the blood of their rage.

Tears streamed down her face as she let herself be, letting the ancient skills and knowledge of the First-ones flow out of Mon'istiaga to fill her mind and body. She was the tool of Shiva. The hand of the destroyer shining oblivion on everything that stood before her advance. Every demon that fell added its strength to hers, pushing her with more speed and desperation.

Scaly fists, claws, and teeth rained on her in a frenzied torrent. She spun through them, a savant turned First-one and destroyer. She felt the spell clenching around her, its living aspect trying to smash out the aberration worrying away at it from the inside. Some creature, some *thing* was continually reinforcing the spell. Destroy that, and the spell was done. Only one thing could resist the power of Aarlen and the others unified--and that was Hecate herself.

She willed Mon'istiaga to find that focal point, and slashed through the chaos toward it leaving a carpet of bodies in their wake. As she forged toward her target she heard their names being screamed--terrified lovers and friends yelling out their concern and fear.

A single glowing shaft, invisible to all eyes save those of a savant rose ahead of her. As she closed with it, the activity of the demons redoubled, the creatures that reformed became increasingly larger and more fearsome, throwing themselves at her in frantic abandon.

She realized suddenly that she had drawn the entire focus of the spell onto herself. The demon ring had broken from the warriors of the great game. No matter what happened from this instant forward. She had done what she set out to do. The weapon of the First-ones meant only to take life, had saved lives instead.

One step, two, the pillar of Hecate's power was so close. It took four swings to kill a single beast now. They howled at her, thorny creatures of pure force and malice. They tore at her flesh and whipped her with lashes of psychic pain.

The battlesword Mon'istiaga was raw determination and indomitable focus. She was the will of Shiva, living death, and nothing was more inevitable than death. Step by harrowing step she forged closer, destroying each obstacle in her path.

With a lurch, she was finally in range. "I want my family back you witch!" The symbols of a spell whipped through her mind. She focused it through the sword and plunged it into the column.

Like the flare of a star erupting, the conduit of Hecate's power shattered. The shockwave spun outward, blowing the demons apart like piles of autumn leaves.

In the blink of an eye, all was quiet except the thundering of Wren's heart, her gasps for breath and rumbling growl of a battle-sated weapon that no mortal should ever touch.

She fell to her knees, propping herself on the sword. She was soaked in burning demon blood and perspiration. She--they--had done it. The world was starting to spin when she felt the first hands on her shoulders and heard words of gratitude, amazement, and thanks. Clearly, she had lost her grip on the moment. Silly mortal, pretending to be a First-one. *Your reach will always far exceed your grasp.* Through the muddle of bodies and faces around her Wren found Damay smiling at her. Her face marred with scratches, burns, and bruises, the elder savant shook her head with a bemused expression.

Wren coughed, her body supported by the hands of her friends. She tried to speak and only managed a croak. She drew a breath and swallowed. "Not bad--" She gasped. "Not bad for an amateur, eh?"

Chapter 19

Awakening

It was a deep ache, a throbbing discomfort like a bone bruise gotten from slamming against something in the dark. Wren ached like that all over. She ached in places she didn't think people could feel pain. If she wasn't mistaken, even her *hair* hurt. She squirmed in the bed in a futile effort to find a position of the least agony. A hand gently touched her forehead.

"You're awake," a familiar sounding female voice enthused. "I was beginning to worry the healers didn't know what they were talking about."

"Ow," Wren moaned, forcing her eyes open. She saw Ziedra through a glaze of tears. "Zee?" her voice sounded muddled even to her. Damn, even talking hurt. What happened? Wasn't it Desiray's body that took the beating, not hers? Why did she feel like she'd been pounded flat with one of Vera's meat tenderizers?

"Try not to move," Ziedra said. "I'll get you some water, you must be horribly thirsty."

"Don't worry," she croaked. "I won't." Just *thinking* about moving was painful.

She heard her friend bustle out. She lay in silence and realized the air was thick with the pleasant aroma of flowers and something else sweet. Through the blariness of tears she gazed at her surroundings, trying not to move her head. These were her rooms in the citadel, the ones she had yet to stay a night in. All around the bedside and vanities were sprays of flowers. Many seemed to have notes hanging from them. Apparently, she had some appreciative visitors while asleep. Strange, she didn't remember falling unconscious. She didn't remember much beyond collapsing in the yard after destroying the Hecate's proxy.

If she was in such terrible shape, she wondered how Desiray was feeling. With that woman's luck, she was probably already out dancing and partying. If she could have, she would have danced some herself. They had beaten the avatars of Hecate soundly. It would be some time before the goddess' creatures bothered Titaan again. It was a good start to a proper revenge for what had been done to her family. Next, she had to find Mishaka and get her family back. Now, they had to hurry. She didn't know if the goddess knew that she had been responsible for destroying the demon ring, but if she did, there might be a reprisal against her family.

The thought sent a pang of urgency running through her and she tried to lever herself up to sit. Shrieking pain made her fall back. "Oh--ow!"

"I told you *not* to move," Ziedra said, swaying back into the room with a pitcher of water and what looked like some other food. She was dressed in a deep purple blouse and skirt, belted with a thick blue sash. Jewels glittered on her hands and around her neck, and her long dark hair was braided and looped. She even had her face rouged and eyes highlighted. She seemed awfully dressed up for just doing simple chores around the citadel. "Girl, when they brought you in, you were one big mess of scratches and bruises. I think your contusions had contusions."

Wren winced. "Ergh. Tell me something I can't already feel. Oh. Ow."

Ziedra set the tray down on a chair and came back to Wren's bedside and frowned at her, hands on hips. "I'd give you a hug except you'd probably scream. So, consider yourself hugged."

"Thanks," Wren said, forcing herself to smile despite the pain. "You're looking good. Life here agrees with you apparently."

"I love it here," Ziedra said with a nod. "I get along famously with everyone. Lady Dorian, and Princess Bronawyn have been good enough to show me the ins and outs. I already have a new wardrobe and--" She sighed and held up a hand festooned with rings, wiggling her fingers so the jewels winked in the light. "Some admirers."

Wren closed her eyes and let out her breath slowly. "I'm glad it hasn't been a hardship for you."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say it wasn't a hardship. That morning ritual of theirs is a terror, and the cook won't let me have seconds! Apparently, I'm to get back in dancing trim whether I desire it or not. Hmph."

She couldn't help but grin. "Oh, I think you'll survive."

Ziedra stuck her tongue out at Wren. She looked around, decided something and pulled out an odd looking blue glove that was folded in her sash and wiggled it onto her hand.

Wren eyed the operation suspiciously. "What are you getting ready to do with that?"

Ziedra smiled. "You'll see." She held her hand out over Wren palm up. She wiggled her fingers in a strange gesture.

Wren's body abruptly felt lighter and then rose off the mattress.

"Whoa!" she let out, catching hold of the bed post. She regretted the move as stressed tendons and ligaments in her shoulder and arm screamed in protest. "Ack! Damn. Urrrgh."

"I said, don't move," Ziedra growled. "You're not listening. I swear, you are so stubborn! You think I'm going to hurt you?"

"Sorry," Wren groaned. "Just wasn't expecting that. That's a new trick."

"Sweet little toy." The dancer smiled. "Cassandra gave it to me, for moving you around as painlessly as possible."

By moving her hand, she floated Wren out of the bed and turned her in the air. As smooth and gentle as it was, she still felt twinges as her weight shifted against joints. Even the caress of the green silk nightdress she wore made her skin protest. She could only imagine how much trying to stand and walk on her own would have hurt. Ziedra backed up, drawing Wren toward the bath.

"Why are we going in here?"

"So, Vera can change your bed linens and you can stop smelling. The water will also help with the wounds." The dark-haired lady shook her head. "I don't know what you said to Lady Cassandra, but she was afraid to do much more than some superficial healing on you."

"Oh, we had a disagreement some time ago." She moaned. "I'm glad you have the glove, I don't recall ever being such a mess."

"Your lady friend, Desiray, did some choice groaning. She heals amazingly fast though, she was only down a day." She paused and left Wren hovering a finger width from the floor while she turned on the spigots in the tub.

"Figures." Wren frowned. "How long has it been?" She glanced back to the dozen or so flower arrangements. "I see I've had a lot of visitors."

"A *lot* of visitors," Ziedra confirmed. "You've been out for five days."

"Oh." Damn, she needed to get moving and find out where her parents were. Who knew what Hecate might be doing now?

"No," the woman said. "You go no-where. I see that look in your eyes. You had a lot of visitors, and made a *lot* of friends. There are dozens of people out combing the known realms for that Mishaka creature, right now."

"Really?"

"Really," Ziedra responded. "You impressed a lot of people. People tend to be grateful and willing to do favors for you when you save their lives. The Damak Shalat ki Frio carried you here herself. She told Cassandra that if you died that 'there would be dire consequences'."

"Aarlen said that?" Wren gasped. "Why?"

Ziedra shrugged. "I don't know. I suspect it may have something to do with that strange new lady friend of yours. I don't know why, she seems really nice, but everyone walks on eggs around her."

"Is she still here?"

"I imagine so, they gave her quarters just up the hall from us." She turned back to Wren and carefully coaxed the night-dress off her. "Here we go." By stages she lowered her into sunken tub and the water.

"Oooh," Wren breathed, as the steaming liquid gathered around her limbs.

The dancer went back to the bed chambers and returned with the tray which she put by Wren's hand. She held the glass of juice for Wren and helped her drink. The sweet juice tasted great and soothed her dry throat. Ziedra then patiently fed her a small breakfast, squelching Wren's demurrals with a stern expression.

"Right now, it's your turn to be taken care of. So, let me do it, damn it."

Wren sighed and let her friend pamper her. She needed it too. Even lifting her arm to drink was torture.

She still didn't understand why she had gotten so beat up. Perhaps the mental abuse caused by the stretching the limits of her savant power had translated to a physical damage when Desiray uncombined them. Perhaps the joining was actually a merger of their bodies and so the injuries taken were distributed between them. Whatever the case, she wanted to be rid of this pain as soon as possible. She needed to find out what was going on with the search for Mishaka and her parents.

A calm and soothing female voice spoke from the doorway. "Ah, finally you bless us with your smiling, albeit battered, company."

Feeling the strong presence of another savant, she turned to see Damay. Wearing a high-neck indigo blouse and black ankle-length skirt, blonde hair pulled back from her face, Damay looked young and vibrant. She could even be considered gracefully pretty. Only her penetrating gray eyes suggested her age.

"Lady Damay," Wren greeted.

Ziedra nodded to the woman, obviously wary of her.

Jeweled fingers drumming on the stone, Damay leaned in the bath chamber doorway. "I want to congratulate you Wren, you succeeded beyond all my imaginings. Bringing me back to Gaea's light, the game, your allies, Loric, Aarlen... there aren't words. Taking up Mon'istiaga was pure foolhardiness and grit. Now that I've seen it with my own eyes, it's easy to understand why you've always been Gaea's favorite. I'm jealous."

Always? How could she be always? Strange. "I'm certainly feeling the foolhardiness, that's for sure. I don't think I've *ever* hurt this much."

"You went close quarters combat with hundreds of demons, and channeled enough energy to split the continent in two. That can be somewhat stressful on the body."

"Stressful on her, and terrifying for me," a gruff male voice said from behind Damay. "When she reached out for that sword and it became fully active, it took a millennia off my life." Dressed in a dark blue surcoat and leggings, his long hair tied back with a silver clasp, the lord of the manor came and draped an arm around Damay in very casual and familiar manner. The elder savant smiled up at him.

"Fortunately, you have several millennia left," Damay said. "I would like to have seen the blade from a better vantage."

"I was close enough for both of us," he said. "I thought she would split the planet in half."

Wren blew out a breath. "It would have been easier to do that, than what I did," she said, face serious. "He was more suited to shattering mountains than killing demons. Mon'istiaga was designed to tap directly into the power of Starholme Prime. There's nothing that he couldn't destroy given time. The problem was keeping him under control so that he didn't just obliterate everything in sight." She swallowed. "I hope you keep it safe, Loric. He'll only work for a First-one... but..."

"Don't worry," the war master replied, face dark and serious. "I understand." He leaned against the other side of the doorway opposite Damay, still keeping a gentlemanly distance. "Now that you're awake, with your permission I'd like to schedule you for some rejuvenation. Unless of course, you want to hurt like that for the rest of your life."

Wren's jaw dropped. "Rest of my life? What?"

"Most of the pain you're feeling is backlash trauma," Loric responded, folding his arms. "It's not uncommon among mages who push past their limits. You have about as severe a case as I have seen. If you hadn't been a savant and sharing a body with Desiray, I have no doubt you would have died straight away. Your heart would have stopped." He shook his head and blew out his cheeks. "You abraded practically every nerve in your body. That's not something that lends itself well to natural healing."

Ziedra frowned. "Just the description sounds painful."

"Aye," Damay said with a nod. "It is something that happens when *untrained* mages try to take on too much before they're ready."

"Hey, now, you told me to *be* and I did," Wren said frowning. "I needed *big* being to get everyone out of that mess."

"No one argues the necessity," Loric said. "There's just a few people who would rather you not kill yourself."

"Me for starts," Ziedra growled.

The four of them were quiet for a moment then Wren spoke up. "Is there any word about my parents or Mishaka?"

Loric nodded. "We have progress on that front. Aarlen put some agents on the task to aid ours. Tal's lead concerning the All World's Tournament was a solid one. Euriel and Vanidaar Kergatha are rather well known there as it turns out."

"Kergatha?" Wren repeated. The word made a chill run down her spine. It sounded familiar and right, something long forgotten.

"Your mother goes by both Idun-daughter and Kergatha. Your father is apparently a mage of some stature, at least from what we could glean. They hail from a city called Cosmodarus. Which turned out to be unfortunate."

Wren's heart started beating fast. Cosmodarus that word also sparked something deep in her. "Unfortunate? Why?"

"Cosmodarus has quite a history. It is the city that belonged to Isis. There are at least *two* of the great cities of magic. The one we *know* has since been combed extensively just in case. However, word at the All Worlds was that your parents held high rank in their Cosmodarus. That means it is likely the *lost* Cosmodarus."

Wren didn't like the word 'lost'. "Loric, you can't just *lose* a city--can you?"

"That's something we will discuss at length as the investigation progresses. Just know we're doing our best. The issue of your relatives was taken under advisement immediately after the battle. We knew that Hecate might discover your part in the fight and seek retribution against your family." He sniffed. "That's not something any of us were willing to allow."

Wren bowed her head. She felt a tear run down her cheek. Finally, she would be able to get back to her parents and brother. "Thank you."

"The best thing for you to do now is to get proper treatment," Loric said. "Then train as much as you can for when we figure out how to get to them. The information we have uncovered concerning the capture of your parents suggests it is only part of a much larger campaign. It's likely that Mishaka and her minions will be dug in by the time we locate them and it will be no easy task to root them out."

Wren groaned. "That's the story of my life. Nothing is ever simple *or* easy."

Shiva's blade Mon'istiaga was a blade meant to cleave worlds. That weapon has forever left its mark on me. I held a star in my hand, and it scared me more than anything I have ever imagined...

--Wren

Chapter 20

Encounter in Bronze Hall

Loric and Damay left Wren to clean up and get prepared to go to rejuvenation. The whole time Ziedra was sponging her down, her mind was churning with the new information Loric had given her. Her real surname was Kergatha. Her father was a mage. They lived in a lost city called Cosmodarus. All of it sounded right--sounded true. Even though she ached with the torment of a thousand cuts and scrapes, it didn't matter--she would find her family. It was no longer a matter of 'if' but 'when'. It was no longer her alone against the universe trying to hunt down that despicable Mishaka. She had inadvertently won the favor of a small army of professional adventurers and immorts. There was little that group couldn't accomplish given time.

As Damay said, she had succeeded far beyond her imagining. Right when it seemed she had messed it all up, it had turned out for the better. She even had Damay as an ally. Lord Loric already treated the powerful woman as a longtime friend. With all that was suddenly going right, it made her uneasy--there was bound to be some giant snag. She had to steel herself for it.

Ziedra levitated her carefully from the water. As she hovered there dripping and naked, the dancer paused and folded her arms.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, it took a moment for Wren to realize that Ziedra had paused and was simply staring at her.

"Zee?"

The dark haired woman smiled. "Yes, Dear?"

"What's the matter?"

Ziedra licked her lips. "Just savoring the moment."

"What moment?"

She laughed. "Having my little blonde defender totally at my mercy." She reached out with a long lacquered nail and tickled a drop of water off Wren's flat stomach. She brought the finger to her lips and sucked it. "Mmmm."

Wren frowned. "Stop that."

Ziedra blinked long lashes at her and smiled wickedly. "Or you'll do what, Darling? Thrash around helplessly and put yourself in horrible pain?" She sighed. "So tempting." She turned and pulled a couple towels from a rack started tenderly padding her dry.

"You're incorrigible, Zee."

"No, I love you--every obstinate bit of you." She shook her head. "Why couldn't you have been born a man, eh?"

"You're the one who likes girls, you're the one who should have been a man."

Ziedra giggled. "That's true, but I like men too..."

Wren rolled her eyes.

Ziedra opted not to dress Wren in anything more than an opaque silk robe and some light slippers. Slipping into short clothes and Wren's regular close fitting attire would have been entirely too painful.

"Now would have been a good time for that black sym-thing you were wearing," Ziedra told her as she walked into the hall, Wren drifting after her.

Wren winced as a chilly draft wafted down the stone hallway, making her exposed skin sizzle as if she'd been burned.

"Urgh. Not a chance," Wren muttered. "So, where do we go for this rejuvenation Loric talked about?"

"I assume the infirmary," Ziedra said, looking up and down the stone corridor. "We can ask in the kitchen though, someone will know. It will also give me a chance to snitch one of Vera's cookies."

"Bad girl. How will you ever get back in shape if you keep stealing sweets?"

"Hey," Ziedra was saying as they turned the corner in the main passage. "I distinctly heard a cookie begging me to eat it when I went through there last. It deserves to be eaten to get its justice for desserts."

Wren winced. "That is probably the worst pun I have ever heard."

"Hey," Ziedra laughed. "I'm a dancer, not a court jester!"

As they navigated down stairs to the dining area, Wren was glad of the magical glove that Cassandra had given Ziedra. She never realized just how far it was to go from the east wing down to the lower levels. In her condition it would have been like trying to scale a mountain.

She felt so odd to move without the use of her legs, her feet drifting hairs above the floor. Ziedra obviously thought it was funny, towing her around like a pet on a leash.

From the light streaming in through dining area windows, it was after mid-day and Vera was already flashing around the cooking area making preparations for the evening meal. Some pots over the fire were already starting to give off the potent mouthwatering aromas that were parts of young woman's special culinary magic.

"Wren friend," Vera clapped, her dark eyes wide and face happy. "You awake, good! Good!" She paused and frowned. "Not well, though--oohh."

"Exactly," Wren agreed. "Oohh."

"Master Loric wants me to take her for rejuvenation," Ziedra said. "But first things first. Mistress Vera," She bowed to the cook, and smiled. "May I please--*please* have a cookie?"

Wooden spoon in hand, fist on hip, Vera frowned at her. She did however pull open her confection drawer, and pull out a large pale cookie bristling with nuts and rich brown confections. She folded some wax-soaked parchment around it and handed it to Ziedra.

The dark-haired dancer took it and grinned. She took a quick bite and rocked her head back eyes fluttering. "M--*mmm*."

"Goodness, milady," a vibrant male voice said. "From the look on your face, you'd think you'd received a kiss from the goddess herself." A tall gold-skinned young man with space black hair and glowing blue eyes came and hugged Ziedra from behind and kissed her on the neck. He was wearing a light gray surcoat with brass buttons.

The dancer rose on tip-toes capturing him around the head without turning and pulling him down. "Oohh, more!" She burbled, pressing her shoulders against him.

The man laughed and kissed Ziedra on the neck again to her obvious delight. He stepped around her, bowing with trained grace and kissing her hand. "You're incorrigible, Lady Zee," he said.

"So, I've told her," Wren said, scowling.

Ziedra was bubbling and grinning now. "Wren, you know Cassandra's son, Radian, yes?"

She nodded as much as her aching neck would let her. "We've never been formally introduced, but we've seen each other coming and going."

Radian nodded to Wren. "You're quite the celebrity, Milady. My father is quite impressed with you, as am I." He bowed. "If ever I can be of service, please don't

hesitate to call." He turned to Ziedra. "Zee, pardon, my abruptness, I am on my way to complete another errand. I located those references you requested. I placed them in the reserved section in the main library. You may retrieve them at your leisure."

Ziedra blushed. "Thank you, Radian, I really appreciate it."

The golden boy dipped his head. "Your smile is all the thanks I need, Milady." He sighed. "Apologies, I must be off directly. Since I assume you are taking lady Wren for rejuvenation, I took the liberty of calling Lord Brin for you. He will meet you in the main lab in the north extension, the big door at the end of Bronze Hall. Knock three times for admittance." He bowed again and kissed Ziedra on the cheek. "Good day and be well." He straightened and vanished in a flash of colors and a puff of intrushing air.

Ziedra giggled, cheeks glowing. She sighed, cookie forgotten in her hand. She blinked a few times. "We best not keep Lord Brin waiting." She turned to Vera. "Thank you again."

Vera stopped stirring the pot she was at and nodded to Ziedra.

They headed for Bronze Hall. As they walked, Ziedra sighed again. "So what do you think?"

Wren frowned. "About what?"

"Radian," she said, eyes sparkling. "Isn't he adorable?"

She let out a breath in exasperation. "Zee, he's--he's--well, *gold!*"

"Yes," she sighed. "Just like a shiny piece of jewelry."

"He doesn't even have eyes, just those blue *glowing* things."

"Like sapphires," Ziedra breathed. "He's so different. His touch just sends tingles up my back." She shuddered. "His fingers on my shoulders--oooh, magic--and his kisses..." Her voice trailed off.

"Girl, you need your head examined--Cassandra for a mother in law? I'd rather stab myself with a rusty dagger!"

Ziedra skipped along just like a little girl, taking them around a few corners. Wren now understood why Ziedra had been so dressed up and primped. Obviously anticipating her next encounter with Radian.

"Wren, you are so coarse. You just don't know how to get along with people. Cassandra is a very nice person once you get to know her. Especially, once you know what she likes and what she wants."

"Oh yes?" Wren scoffed. "And what does she want?"

The dancer grinned. "Grandchildren--lots of them."

Wren closed her eyes. She prayed her friend wasn't getting herself in trouble. It had only been five days. She warned her and she still insisted on getting tangled up.

They stepped down into the gallery the northern end of which became Bronze Hall. The high arched ceiling had a single high skylight that let the sun filter in. Various paintings, carvings, and craft-work decorated the walls or lay in glass exhibits all of them done by various members of the family. Loric had two of his breath-taking crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There were several paintings done by Desiray. There were portraits of various children, scenes of dragons, and studies of nature. The piece that stood out most was a vivid depiction of story night with Gabriella standing before the fable hearth, hands sketching a glowing image in the air, entertaining an audience of family listeners. The way Desiray had captured the wild intensity in Gabriella's eyes made Wren shiver.

Ziedra had frozen upon seeing that picture as well. "Oooh," she murmured with a glance at Wren. "That's so good it's spooky."

Wren nodded. As Ziedra proceeded out, Wren noted most of Desiray's pictures had two signatures, Annawen or Everia's name credited beneath the sprawling Illkaren

scribble. Sebenreth's wife, Jolandrin, the tall dark haired woman who judged in the game, apparently was a rather accomplished wood-smith. Several wooden instruments and figurines with her mark were scattered through the room. Not to be left out, Dorian was apparently skilled with jewelry and had a few rather theft-worthy pieces locked away in crystal enclosures. As they left the room, Wren made a note to herself to come back and study it in more detail. In all her days in the citadel, she'd had little occasion to come here. She knew the people of the house were smart and creative, but never had a chance to see it in such a revealing and distinctive forms.

Bronze Hall was named for the metal reinforcing of the stone walls that were constructed of huge granite blocks well over a pace on a side. The hall itself slanted down steeply into the ground before leveling off in a corridor lit with glow globes.

The northern extension was the part of the citadel reserved for the research and experimenting areas for the mages. As Wren understood it, the sturdily built complex which resided some fifty paces underground was drilled out of the solid granite massif of the mountain on which the citadel stood. Though it was never said directly, the obvious reason the walls were so thick and reinforced with metal was that *accidents* occurred in these labs. Mishaps that might threaten the inhabitants of the citadel if not bottled up inside millions of tons of rock and metal.

Several smaller passages lined with doors intersected the main passage down which Ziedra walked, towing Wren behind her. The air became abruptly cooler. Further in, an odd smell became more and more prevalent. The odor, while not unpleasant, made Wren's nose itch. A charged feeling hung in the air much like the feeling she experienced inside the great machine in Starholme Prime.

The hall ended into a passage that ran west to east. On the opposite side of where the corridor opened out sat a pair of monolithic gray metal valves twice the height of a man. The huge vault-like doors loomed in front of them, supported on heavy steel hinges that looked strong enough to support a mountain.

For several moments, both of them just stared at the mammoth portal.

Finally, hands on hips, Ziedra spoke up. "That is one *serious* pair of doors. What do they do in there? Practice flattening mountains?"

"Close enough," a silky female voice said behind them.

Wren couldn't turn to see who it was, but she recognized those throaty tones and it made her frown.

She wasn't surprised when she saw a pair of long arms, the red D'klace tattoo prominent on the wrist, wrap around Ziedra from behind. "Mi Domsa," Sindra said. "We've missed you."

Ziedra smacked Sindra's hand. "Don't touch me. I'm mad at you."

Surprisingly, the elder backed up and put hands on hips. "And why would that be?"

"I watched the game crystal and saw what you tried to do to Wren," Ziedra growled. "It was uncalled for and--" She sputtered, obviously searching for the right word. "And *mean*."

Wordless as always, Drucilla came around Wren and leaned against the huge doors. She folded her arms and fixed them with a pale-eyed gaze.

"But Zee," Sindra said. "We *are* mean." She held up her wrist with the tattoo. "Remember, assassins--kill people for a living--any of that sound familiar? That part of us hasn't changed since we've known you."

Ziedra scowled. "You never tried to kill one of my friends before."

The huge elder nodded. "Yes, I guess I did get a bit overzealous. We're here to make amends for that."

Wren snorted. "Amends?"

Sindra nodded. "Yes. First off, we'd like to apologize."

Wren blinked, heart seeming to freeze in her chest. "What?"

"Apologize." The elder repeated. "After all, we need to get along. We made a deal. Since we now have the Magestrix's support we've been moving forward with it since the battle."

"You mean finding Mishaka?"

"'Head on a pole', was the words you used, I believe," Sindra remarked. "Since the game, a number of things have changed. Mother was rather *annoyed* by the attempt on her life. Hecate has essentially declared war on our clan. The Magestrix is now offering a sizable reward for proof of the slaying of any major servant of Hecate. You'll be happy to know that Mother credits you with the destruction of the ten avatars. So, you have a considerable bounty that will be paid to you soon."

Wren swallowed. A bounty? She couldn't help but ask. "How much is 'considerable'?"

Sindra looked back to her sister. "I think the number mentioned was a hundred thousand gold talons per head."

Her jaw dropped. "A hundred--"

"--Thousand? *Each*?" Ziedra finished in dismay. "Are you jesting?"

"Of course not," Sindra said. "It's not like avatars are easy to destroy. Mother isn't worried about paying it out very often."

"A million gold talons?" Wren murmured.

"Not bad for a day's work," Sindra said with a smile. "Trust me, mother made a hundred times that off the recording of your fight with Yolagg and the others. So, it's hardly onerous for her to pay it out."

"A *million* gold talons," she breathed. It was mind-boggling. She could live out the rest of her life in luxury anywhere in Sharikaar with only a fraction of that amount.

"Aside from mother's settlement with you, we're here to make our own peace offering. You see, we've reflected on our actions during the game, and *other* actions we've taken in the past. As I said, in the game, we really did over react. After seeing what you did to the avatars, we realized that in our skirmish in the warehouse you could have put a dagger through us at any time--but you didn't."

"I told you on the street," Wren said seriously. "That face is too beautiful to disfigure."

Sindra rubbed her face with a jeweled hand. "We appreciate that sentiment." The big D'klace drew herself up. "Without your help it's likely we would have died in the demon ring. So, at the very least we owe you a promise of peace between us. No ill will or malice for anything that happened in the past." She held out her hands. "In fact, we would like to offer you our hands in friendship and all that entails."

Wren stared at the big woman. They were so hard to read, and lies came to them so easily. However, in the past Sindra had never lied--only mislead. The meaning here seemed rather clear.

"Really?" Ziedra said, clasping her hands in front of her lips.

"Really, mi Domsa," the D'klace answered.

"Friends?" Wren said. "Do D'klace really have friends?"

Sindra glanced at Ziedra. "Certainly. Not many, but a few."

"Pardon me, Sindra, but there's something I just don't get. Zee, don't be offended by this. What makes her so special? She's a baby compared to you. Granted, she's a pretty and a talented dancer, but you two could have *anybody*. I know it's not that court intrigue she's witnessed and naively thinks keeps you two honest. There's nothing anybody could do to you."

The D'klace woman smiled at Wren. She drew a breath and glanced back at her sister. She turned her head and gazed at Ziedra.

The dancer fidgeted and her cheeks colored.

"You're right, Wren, we *could* have anybody--could marry anyone. Instead we joined with Cassin and Annawen--two rather amazing girls from an obscure family on a backwater world. Right now, as you say, they're just babies. Given time, they'll become something unique and untouchable." She twisted a long strand of dark hair around her finger surveying Ziedra. "When you've been around as long as we have. You learn to recognize truly unique and valuable jewels. Ziedra has qualities like that--she has potential. She's rough around the edges now--but with a little polish she could become something rather special."

"Polish?" Wren said. "I suppose you two have offered."

"Of course. She turned us down, and has been living on her own these last few summers."

"I've done *fine* for myself," Ziedra said proudly, eyes flashing. "I didn't need your help. I took care of myself."

"Actually," Sindra growled. "What you did was resign a beautiful mind and body to waste away in squalor." She gave Wren a hard look. "I sincerely hope you talk her out of this nonsense, and let her realize her true potential. She refuses to listen to us or accept our help."

"I don't want things done for me," Ziedra said, arms folded. "I want to do things for myself. Wren always protected me, but she let me be myself." She raised her chin. "I love you Sindra, but I don't want to be some copy of you."

"Gah!" Sindra let out in exasperation. "Protected you, she's the one that left you to the headsman. What did she do to protect you then, hmmm? We were the ones that kept that pretty little head on your shoulders--*not* her."

Wren felt her ears redden, and angry words formed in her throat. It was Ziedra who spoke first.

"Wren left me to my own devices after I insisted on having my way. She loved me enough to let me be myself, however *stupid* that might have been." The dancer sniffed. "You two could learn something from that. I don't want to be your pet, Sindra. You like to control--to own things. I have my own mind--and from time-to-time my own foolish ideas."

"See how she is?" Sindra complained. "Time-to-time is every moment we were turning around."

Wren did a feeble imitation of a shrug because it hurt too much to move. "Yes, it's annoying. Give her some sound advice and she ignores it at the first opportunity."

"Hey!" Ziedra snapped, hands on hips. "Just because you two give advice, doesn't automatically make it 'sound' or 'wise'."

Sindra rolled her eyes. "There you have it."

She drew a breath. The D'klace twins really did care about Ziedra. It was so amazing. How could that be? It just seemed so far fetched. Friends? Could she really accept the friendship of these two giants knowing what she knew about them? Then again, how could she *not*? Slapping away a hand offered in peace would be an insult; not only to the twins, but to Aarlen herself.

"Sindra," she said. "I hope you'll pardon me not taking your hand, but for at the very least for Ziedra's sake, I accept your friendship."

"My sake!?" Ziedra stamped her foot. "Why *my* sake?"

She tried to laugh and it ended in a groan instead. "Because--it'll take all three of us just to keep you out of trouble."

The silver-eyed D'klace woman smiled. "Aye. Friends it is then." She looked at Wren sideways. "We'll seal our agreement when you're less--disadvantaged."

One of the huge doors across the hall opened and a tall handsome man with dark hair and deep brown eyes stepped in the opening. A loose blue tunic hung from broad

shoulders, and several loops of gold chain hung around his neck. "Why are you just standing around out here?" he asked in an irritated tone. "Wren needs treatment, and I don't have all day to stand around while you two compare notes about poor Ziedra. Let that sweet girl be. Now, get in here."

Ziedra gave Wren and Sindra an arch vindicated look before starting to the door. Wren had no choice but to follow along in the power of the glove. What awaited her inside, she didn't know.

Are Sindra and Drucilla my friends? We have a non-aggressive relationship based on limited trust and conditional respect. I don't know that with our age difference we could really *be* friends. I sure don't know how Cassin and Annawen relate to them...

--Wren

Chapter 21

Recovery

The main laboratory of Bronze Hall was gigantic. Rather than being a single area of research and experimentation like Dorian's hidden alcove in the citadel proper, this was a facility designed to serve many people at once. A broad chamber some hundred paces wide and more deep stretched out in front of them. Made into several railed-off tiers with ramps and stairs between them, the area appeared to be broken into functional sections. There were work areas for crafting different materials, forges for metal, kilns for ceramics, racks of tools for carving wood, engraving leather, and tinning jewelry. Tables filled with alchemical apparatus were visible in many spots. Other places were simply collections of books and scrolls. Black slates hung on the walls throughout the place covered in masses of indecipherable chalk scribbling. At the very heart of the chamber was a glowing red sphere some two paces across that gave off deep thrumming sound. Cylinders of deep blue material arched up out of the device in a network that zigzagged to points throughout the room.

Wren blinked. She had expected something impressive, but this went beyond her expectations.

It was literally a playground for mages.

As they paused at the opening she felt a familiar humming in the air, and sensed an odd smell that she had only encountered one time before.

While Ziedra goggled, she wracked her brain. Where had she felt that strange sensation?

Brin pulled the door shut behind them with hollow boom. There was a heavy clunk of metal as he threw a latch.

The handsome man turned to them, his dark eyes wide and expressive. As Wren looked at him, it seemed as if she recognized him from somewhere else. Something about the intensity of his eyes sparked a memory. It was recently too. She shook her head, probably just her imagination.

"Lady Wren, Lady Ziedra," Brin said in his rich voice. "Welcome to our entertainment center. Our little chamber of miracles." He laughed and shook his head. "Pardon the mess. Mages don't know how to clean up." He leaned close to Sindra. "Since you're here, could I trouble you for a little assistance?"

Sindra nodded with a grin. "Certainly, Brin dear, you have only to ask."

"Good."

Brin looked to Ziedra. "Zee, are you all right?"

"Fine," she said, pulling her gaze away from marveling at all the various wonders.

"Follow me, please," he said, leading the way down toward the heart of the chamber. They headed down ramps and stairs, stepping past dozens of project areas whose function Wren couldn't even guess at. She even saw maps of continents, charts of the stars in the heavens, and pinned up parchments depicting designs for ships, carriages, weapons, and dozens of other kinds of equipment. This place truly was a chamber of miracles. The real miracle was that there were minds that could grasp all of this--intellects that found *entertainment* and release in such bewildering complexity.

Ziedra walked along in a daze, obviously fascinated by all the paraphernalia. As they came closer to the red device in the center of the chamber something occurred to Wren. "Lord Brin, might I ask a question?"

"Of course," he said, looking back as they turned at the bottom of a ramp.

"Those big blue tubes--they're for cooling aren't they?"

He met Wren's gaze with a raised eyebrow, angular face showing surprise. "Yes, most of them. Why?"

"So, that red apparatus is something that manufactures magical energy, is it not?"

He stopped with hands on hips. "How would you know that? Have you seen another one?"

"Not exactly," Wren answered. "I was inside of a shaft that served the same function as those blue tubes there."

"*Inside?*" Brin's eyes widened. "That must have been one *huge* energy facility."

"It was," Wren agreed.

"How very interesting, Wren," Sindra said. "Could it be that's where you took off to when you vanished for a while?"

Wren didn't answer. She'd already said too much. "Where I vanished to, scared the life out of me. I hope I never end up there again."

"Maybe some day you'll tell us about it," Brin said. "Sounds fascinating."

"Probably not."

The dark tone of her voice seemed to echo in the vast chamber. The throbbing of the magic manufacturing machine made the back of her head ache in the place where she felt her savant power.

"So," Brin said, apparently to break the silence. "Sindra, tell me, I imagine Aarlen must be wearing a smile. I hear that her recording magicks managed to capture the images of the battle with avatars."

"Indeed," Sindra agreed. "I was just telling Wren about the bounty mother is now offering."

Brin shook his head. "Any excuse to start a fight. Your mother never seems happy unless she's fighting a war some place."

"Hecate tried to kill us, Brin," Sindra growled. "That's a *good* excuse."

The man shrugged. "Whatever you say. Seems to me that your family has more to lose if the conflict escalates. Then again--what do I know?"

To that, Sindra had no retort. When they were on the bottom-most layer of the chamber, within arm's reach of the magic creating device, Brin swung open a pair of doors made into the wall of the tier. The opening revealed a short set of steps that lead down into the chamber about twenty paces on a side. An acrid, sterile, scent pervaded the air inside and all through the room. Boxes of different shapes and sizes, studded with jewels glowed in a rainbow of colors. Across the ceiling a latticework of fine crystal filaments flickered and pulsed with a reddish light that reminded Wren of blood pulsing through veins. The thing that most startled Wren were the similarities between this room and ones she saw in Starholme prime. Against one wall were two large green cylinders in which light and shadow swirled. Metal tables jutted out from an adjacent wall. On a marble pedestal was a clear, crystal cylinder identical to the one she had woken up inside of in Cassandra's lab in the main house.

"Here we are," Brin said. "This is our rejuvenation lab. Ziedra, if you please, I'll take Wren from here." He turned to Wren. "Before we do anything we're going to ascertain the extent of the damage and then I'll give you some options for treatment. Is that all right with you?"

She swallowed. She didn't know this man, but if Loric recommended him, she could be fairly certain he knew what he was doing. "Fine, thank you," she answered.

"Okay, I'm going to flip you up here on the examination table." He looked to the twins. "Drucilla, if you would, put the levitators on slab two please."

The silent giantess moved to a cabinet in the back of the chamber and pulled out a half dozen black spheres and started fitting them into the spots on one of the tables made to receive them.

"Sindra," he said. "I'd appreciate a little assistance on the examination and calibration. I know you're better at it than I."

"Certainly," the elder said with a grin, wiggling her eyebrows at Wren.

She gritted her teeth.

"Relax," Brin said. "She's good at this." He snapped his fingers and Wren rose higher into the air. "I'll make sure nothing *awkward* occurs."

He floated her across the room and lowered her onto the table that Drucilla had been preparing. She seemed to touch something and all sensation of weight vanished. By reaching down carefully with her hand, she realized she was floating a short distance above the surface of the table.

Brin went to a cabinet, opened it, then searched through a few drawers. He finally pulled out what looked like a large square of cloth.

Meanwhile, Sindra and Drucilla had removed their various rings and were meticulously washing their hands in a small basin hidden in the back corner of the room.

Brin pulled a large black jar off a shelf and uncapped it. He dipped the cloth into something liquid inside and squeezed out the extra. After replacing the jar he came back to Wren's side and stretched the cloth out across her forehead.

"What's that for?" she asked.

Brin raised an eyebrow. "That should be apparent momentarily." He reached over to the wall and swung metal arm out over Wren. He pulled small yellow globes from a nearby drawer, shaking each in turn and hanging them from the bar. The spheres gave off strong pale light.

"Apparent, how--?" A handful of heartbeats later the room went in and out of focus. Everything had become blurry around the edges. The aching all through her body slowly diminished to a distant tingling. "Oh. Whoa."

Ziedra stepped quickly to her side. "Are you okay?"

Wren blinked. Her lips and eyes felt heavy, and her arms and legs feeling ready to float away. "Uh." She murmured, trying to focus. "That's--strong--stuff."

Brin took her wrist and tapped it with his finger. "Can you feel that?" he asked.

"Barely. Mostly just a tingling," she said with effort. "You didn't say anything about aneth--aneth--uh pain killer."

Brin grinned. "It would be rather disruptive if you were screaming every time we tried to move you." He stroked the side of her neck. "Not pleasant at all." He pulled items from other cabinets, attaching a disk-shaped apparatus to the end of the metal arm extended over the table, and then a thin metal rod with a flattened lens of crystal on the end.

Ziedra took Wren's hand. "So it doesn't hurt?"

She shook her head. "Feels good not to hurt."

Ziedra leaned close. "You'll be okay."

Sindra pulled a tall stool from under a desk and set it next to where Wren lay. Sitting down, she pulled the blue lens down to her, and looked through it briefly. She snapped her fingers to Drucilla, and the twin handed her something that looked like a hand mirror. She passed the device over Wren's torso a few times, examined something in it, then handed it back.

"Ziedra," she said in a level voice. "I need you to relinquish that hand for a bit."

Face serious, Ziedra reluctantly let go of Wren's hand. The D'klace woman laid Wren's fingers delicately across her palm and pulled it slightly to her. She lowered the crystal down and seemed to examine Wren's fingers through it.

"Aie," she breathed after a moment. The woman winced in empathy, a rather alien expression on her perfect face. "Ow, that has *got* to be hurting." She turned to Brin. "Did Loric check her out?"

Brin nodded. "He said he didn't think localized regeneration or any kind of matrix purging would work in this case. He felt the helix decay was too advanced."

"Hmmm," Sindra muttered, looking through the crystal again and turning Wren's hand slowly.

"What are you doing down there?" Wren asked, voice sounding slurred.

"Right now," she shoved the crystal up out of her way. She rubbed the bridge of her nose looking pained. "Looking at a crippling ailment if we don't treat it properly." She focused on Brin. "The damage to the mitochondria is extensive. Her helix replication is--" She drew a breath. "Less than optimal. Do we have a template to reconstruct from?"

"What are you saying, Sindra?" Wren asked.

"It's a kind of poisoning, Wren. Your body was flooded with so much energy, that the parts you that remember how to heal and grow are shutting down. The pain you're feeling is caused by toxins created by your own body. Essentially, your blood is being turned to acid and that acid is eating away at you from the inside."

Ziedra put a hand to her mouth. "That sounds terrible!"

"It's definitely not good," Sindra said. "We can, of course, prevent the advancement of the condition. However, you've already taken some extensive damage."

"I don't understand," Wren murmured. "Desiray was exposed to the same energy--more than me for certain--how come she isn't on her back in need of a healer?"

"While immorts and mundanes look alike, they really are dramatically different when it comes to precisely this kind of thing," Brin said. "It is the very reason that many elder mages get heterotrophic enhancements. Loric for instance, you've seen that white gem on his chest, right?"

"Yes," Wren said. "I was always afraid to ask what it was for."

"Lord Brin," Ziedra said. "Speaking of master Loric, he didn't lead us to believe Wren's condition was this serious."

"No sense in panicking Wren," Brin said with a shrug. "As bad as this is, we have the facilities here to deal with it."

Wren gritted her teeth. "And how much will this treatment cost?"

"Family Frielos will be picking up the bill," Sindra said. "Mother directed us to pay any healer's fees incurred in restoring you to full health."

She drew a breath and stared at the big D'klace. "Aarlen knows about me opening the phoenixes, doesn't she?"

Sindra scowled. "Let's just say the information was extracted from us under duress--but, yes, she knows."

"Wonderful."

"What phoenixes?" Brin asked.

That pain killer had addled her brain, why did she say that in front of him? Why not tell the whole world?

"Please forget I said that," she mumbled. "Damn, this stuff has me woozy."

Brin growled. "Gabriella is holding out on me again. That witch." He glanced up at Sindra, who just looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Well, anyways, the kind of treatment you get is up to you. Apparently, you gave Cassandra a tongue-lashing for doing a reconstructive regeneration without your authorization. That is the most

efficient means of repairing damage this extensive. There are other options but most of them will have long term side-effects."

"What kind of side effects?"

"Well, you could lose refined control in your body, loss of sensitivity, sterility..."

"Sterility?"

"Bye bye babies."

Wren frowned.

"Sorry, but this is why young mages are told over and over not to overdo. You must be able to periodically purge residual energies, and guard against positive negative counter flux because not only can you wind up dead... you can wind up *worse*."

"I have no idea what you just said, but I get the idea. What you don't know can kill you, that goes especially for magic. I don't know about that complete regeneration thing... I simply don't like the idea."

"All right," Brin said. "Let's just do mitochondric purge and get you stabilized. That will give you more leisure to weigh your options."

"What does that entail?"

"Essentially," Sindra said. "We suck out all the bad energy that's collected inside of your body."

"Does it hurt?" Ziedra asked.

Brin shook his head. "No, not that she could feel anything right now anyway."

"Ummm," Ziedra murmured. "It still doesn't sound very pleasant. I wish there was something I could do." She reached out and put a hand on Wren's stomach.

As her fingers touched the surface of Wren's robe there was crackling sound and a flickering of green and blue sparks.

The sound made the three elders flinch. Wren jerked and sat up clutching her belly. Ziedra snatched her hand back with a gasp.

"Aie!" Ziedra let out, wiggling her fingers and blowing on them. "That stung! What did you do that for?"

"I didn't do anything," Wren said, frowning. "That felt--*weird*."

"That was odd," Brin said, stepping over and examining Ziedra's hand. "Hmmm?" He reached up and pulled the blue crystal down and held Ziedra's hand underneath it. His eyes narrowed. "What in Isis' name?" He stepped back around the table to Wren. With his finger he described a circle over Wren's abdomen. The fabric of her robe vanished.

"Hey!"

"Be still," Brin ordered in a serious voice.

Sindra and Drucilla stepped around behind him as he pulled the crystal down close to the revealed skin. "Look, the pigment has changed all around the affected area."

"Is there something wrong?" Ziedra asked in a concerned voice.

"Hush for a moment," Brin ordered.

He stared through the crystal for a couple long breaths. He fetched the hand-mirror shaped device, passed it over Wren a couple times and looked at something in the crystal.

The man shook his head. "How in the world did you do that?"

"Do what?" Ziedra said.

"She has no clue," Sindra said.

"What did she do?" Wren asked.

"Well," Brin said. "We were just saying you needed a mitochondric purge to get you stabilized. That's what was done right here where she touched."

"I did that?" Ziedra said, aghast. "I don't even know what that *is*!"

"Seems I recently mentioned that you had a lot of talent going to waste," Sindra said, arms folded. "There's your proof."

"*How* did she do it, though?" Brin wondered. "There isn't a spell to do that. Someone skilled enough in energy control could do it--but not at her age."

Wren stared at Ziedra in surprise. Their relationship was starting to make more sense. They had more in common than she realized. Gaea had hinted that Ziedra had something she needed. Perhaps she had been mistaken in thinking it was just her support and affection. She narrowed her eyes and focused on Sindra. Suddenly, the twin's interest in Ziedra made more sense--especially the comments about polish. The dancer had an ability she didn't even know about.

As she thought about it, she began to get an idea what it was...

Wren will always be my dearest friend and I would do anything in my power for her...

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 22

Ziedra's Contribution

Wren lay on the table in the rejuvenation lab, the beginnings of a suspicion dawning on her. She still tingled all over from whatever painkiller Brin had used on her, which was a vast improvement over the agony she had been enduring since she awoke this morning. Everything in the room with its complex network of crystal filaments overhead and the numerous unknown devices were fuzzy in her vision. In fact, *everything* was hazy because of the power of the medicine the mage had used. The strange smell and odd humming that she remembered from Starholme Prime were also present. Wren still wondered what the connection might be.

Brin, Sindra, and Drucilla eyed Ziedra for a moment, the ex-dancer fidgeted under their scrutiny. "Honest," she answered. "I don't know how I did it. I was just thinking I wanted to help Wren and suddenly--zap!"

The dark-eyed elder hummed for a moment. "Fascinating, but I don't have time to pursue this mystery at the moment. There's some very interesting ramifications from being able to control latent energy like that." He turned to Wren. "Now, as to your healing. I can set up a simple purge, or I can do the regeneration and be done with it." He drew a breath and put a hand on her arm. "I honestly don't think you're going to be satisfied with the results from other methods of curing. However, it's your decision."

"Consider another thing, Wren," Sindra said. "When we do the regeneration we can alter the helixes of your body so that you have less permeability to this kind of harm. I think the reason you have such extensive damage now is because of some substandard tolerances that Cassandra setup in your previous restoration."

"Substandard?" Wren stared at the big woman. "Why would she do that?"

"I didn't say she did it intentionally," Sindra said. "I'm thinking it's because she doesn't know much about savants. She probably didn't know that she had chosen poor samples. She should be forgiven in any event--there was some rush because of your critical condition."

"It's a poor time to bring it up now," Brin said. "Now, she only has the poorly reproduced helixes to use as a template and most of those are damaged from the backlash. Unless you know someplace she can get donor samples, or can code the enhancements yourself."

"Certainly," Sindra said. "You can get samples from Ziedra."

"What?" Ziedra said. "Me? I'm not a savant, how could any part of me help Wren?"

"Check her out, Brin. I think you'll find she has an excellent mitochondric adaptation that when spliced will to help Wren out."

Brin frowned. He made a coming gesture to Ziedra.

Ziedra looked up at Sindra, then to Brin. "You don't believe that do you? That's just silly."

"You absorbed that energy from Wren," Brin said. "Something allowed you to do that without causing yourself harm. Please." He held out his hand.

Ziedra hesitated for a moment then stepped forward and held her hand out to him. Brin took the dancer's hand gently. He picked up the mirror-shaped device and passed it over her hand a few times and looked at the crystals imbedded in it. He

narrowed his eyes. He pulled the arm down with blue crystal and examined her hand underneath it for a couple long breaths.

Wren watched her friend's face. It was obviously all very strange to her. She could tell it was also exciting too. She knew Ziedra loved attention. Especially, attention from a man as handsome as Brin.

"Sindra is correct, not only would this be a good splice, her helixes are extremely compatible. Almost no skew mapping will be necessary at all, which I find incredible." He frowned at Sindra. "You knew."

"Of course I did." The silver-eyed woman shrugged.

"What did you know?" Ziedra snapped, scowling at Sindra.

"I told you, Zee, when you were ready to stop playing and learn some new tricks. Come to me, I'd show you a whole new world."

"Why not just tell me!?"

Sindra shrugged. "Because that would be no fun."

Ziedra growled. She looked at Brin. "If there's something from me that will help Wren." She shot Sindra a withering glance. "It's hers." Her steely expression melted a little. "Uh, will it hurt?"

The man laughed. "No. It doesn't hurt." He gestured to the crystal cylinder sitting on the pedestal. "I just need you to lay in there for about a quarter bell is all."

"That's it?"

He nodded. "That's all." He paused. "Well, one other thing..."

"What's that?"

"I need you to disrobe."

"Oh." She paused. "Okay." She started to pull off her blouse.

Brin threw out a hand. "Not right now."

Ziedra stopped with one arm out of a sleeve and a full breast showing. "Oh."

Shaking her head, Sindra opened a cabinet and handed Ziedra a towel.

"I'll wait outside," Brin said abruptly. "You undress and get in." He went up the steps and out of view.

"He's such a gentleman," Ziedra breathed, watching him go.

"Domsa, some things never change," Sindra said. "Disrobe please, so we can get this operation complete."

She looked to the D'klace and frowned. "I don't appreciate you keeping secrets from me."

The dark woman raised an eyebrow. "The only one keeping secrets is you, and you're keeping it from yourself. You'll learn the truth for yourself once you just let yourself be."

"What?" Wren said, perhaps louder than she meant to.

"Pardon?"

Wren shook her head. "Never mind. It's the painkillers..."

She watched in silence as Ziedra removed her clothing and the twins coaxed her into the cylinder. They closed the lid and drew a towel over the majority of the crystal for modesty sake before calling Brin back in.

"Are you okay in there?" Wren asked her.

Ziedra nodded. "I'm a little bit scared," she said, her voice muffled by the thick casing.

"Don't worry," she said. "They won't hurt you."

Ziedra nodded.

Brin returned. He conferred with Sindra, speaking in another language. They seemed to disagree on some point, Brin finally seeming to concede as they touched sequences of gems on a panel at one end of the crystal chamber.

"All right," Brin said in soothing voice. "It's going to light up in there and feel a bit odd, but there shouldn't be any pain. Okay?"

The dancer swallowed. "And you're sure this will help Wren?"

"Yes."

She nodded, seeming to draw strength from that. "I'm ready."

"Good. Okay, on a count of three."

The device lit up as described, letting out a low vibration. Something made a low hissing sound. Ziedra shuddered in the tight confines. "Oooh!" she murmured, voice hollow and strained. "It feels like bugs crawling on me!"

"Hold on for a bit. Just close your eyes and try to think of something else."

Ziedra didn't say anything. She only nodded. Meanwhile, stripes and bands of light seemed to play back and forth inside the case.

Hands behind their backs, Sindra and Drucilla watched the process with apparent interest, the bright light reflecting in their silver eyes and highlighting their dark hair.

Wren stared at the chamber. She never realized how brave Ziedra was, or how much she really cared. It was easy to say a word like love. It was another to show it. She had barely blinked at Sindra's strange proposition. Her stomach tightened and her face felt hot. She wiped at a tear on her cheek.

"What's wrong?" Brin asked.

She sniffed. "She's a good friend."

"She's a good girl," Brin said. He stepped over and examined something. "Only a little bit longer, Ziedra and you'll be done."

The dancer made no acknowledgement, she had her eyes clenched tight, hands clutched together across her chest.

It seemed to last forever. Wren knew it was probably longer for Ziedra than for her. She was frightened of this strange magic and holding it in.

The lights and noise abruptly subsided, and Ziedra relaxed in the case.

"Okay, you're done," Brin said, unlatching the lid. He stepped away and turned his back.

"Zee, you all right?" Wren asked, concerned.

"O-o-kay, I think," Ziedra said after a moment. "Feel dizzy."

"That'll pass," Sindra said. "Out you go." The giant woman scooped Ziedra out of the cylinder like she was a baby and carried her to the other examination table. She wrapped a towel around the dancer and returned her clothes to her. "When you're feeling better, you can put them back on."

"Wren," Brin said without turning. "Same thing. Clothes off. In the case, please."

She frowned and glanced at Ziedra, who was still shaking. "Zee?"

"I'm okay, really," the woman answered. "It just felt weird."

With an effort that made pain sear even through the pain killer, she reached out toward Ziedra. "I love you, Zee." The dancer smiled and reached back, their fingers briefly tangling.

The pain made her pull her hand back with an intake of breath and grimace. She could only imagine how much it would have hurt without the injunctive. Wincing, she sighed. "Okay, I'm ready I guess."

Her heart beat faster, and her chest tightened. She steeled herself as Sindra lifted her off the table and Drucilla pulled off her robes. She really disliked the idea of the twins seeing her naked, or even being around them unclothed. Unfortunately, she needed help to simply move, much less undressing and getting in the case.

The twins didn't do anything untoward, they worked with coordinated precision and in moments Wren was laying naked in the padded bottom of the cylinder. She gritted

her teeth, fighting an urge to panic as the lid was closed and a cloth was pulled across the lid for modesty.

Brin worked at the panel at the end of the cylinder, stopping to confer with Sindra from time to time.

Wren looked from the preparations going on to Ziedra who lay on the table staring at her with glistening eyes. What had she gotten herself into?

"All right," Brin said, his voice sounding thin and distorted through the enclosure. "It's set. Wren, there will be a brief discomfort as the purging commences. We need to make sure there's no harmful energy left in you before we do the regeneration."

Staring up into his intense eyes through the crystal, she realized something that just jumped out at her. Why at this moment she didn't know. She flashed on Desiray's exceptional painting in the gallery. "Brin, I hope you don't take this the wrong way," she told him, the sound resounding in the case. "For some reason, your eyes remind me of Gabriella."

The man paused, his brow furrowed for a moment, then he smiled. "Not at all-- Gabriella has beautiful eyes." He shook his head and looked to the twins. Sindra chuckled. His voice took a soothing tone. "You just lay quiet in there. It'll be over soon. Just take deep breaths and close your eyes."

She nodded and tried to breathe evenly. Why did she feel compelled to say that? That medicine had her thinking sideways.

The chamber around her vibrated, the resonance making her back itch. The inside of the cylinder lit up, tiny threads imbedded in the crystal giving off a light that made her skin prickle. She flinched as she felt a burning sensation slash down on her feet and start up her body. By looking down she saw a bright red band of illumination making a stripe across her legs, where it touched her skin became hot to the point of pain. A wave of dizziness made her vision dance. Her stomach twisted. She swallowed, willing her rushing heart to calm.

Wren shuddered and closed her eyes as the band of heat stroked up over her breasts, neck and face, then panned back toward her feet.

"Stay strong," Brin said. "I'm making sure we purge all of the poison."

She saw Ziedra appear in her view. Dark eyes concerned she pressed a hand to the crystal. "You okay?"

Wren couldn't answer. It felt like everything she'd eaten would come spewing out if she tried to speak. Even a nod was difficult to manage. It felt like that light was sucking her insides out.

Her whole body was twitching by the time the red light winked out. The illumination in the chamber shifted from blue to green, and dots spiraled on her skin. Where the red light had sought to remove, the green seemed to press inward. A floating sensation replaced the pain and her body stopped jerking. She groaned, feeling the pleasantly remembered caress of biophase as it surfed through her limbs.

Ziedra leaned close. "Wren?"

The sick sensation receded. Still unable to speak, she managed to wave to her.

"Okay, you're past the hard part," Brin told her, coming into view. "I have to put you to sleep for the next part. So, just relax and don't fight it."

He stepped back out of sight again.

The patterns of illumination shifted again becoming a deep violet in color. The whole chamber heated up, the warmth suffusing her arms and legs. Her vision went in and out of focus and her eyelids became heavy. She relaxed and let them close...

* * *

A cool cloth was being daubed on her forehead. She felt fuzzy as though she'd been asleep a long time. She swallowed, mouth and throat dry. Her body seemed light.

She realized hands were massaging her legs, and fingers were pressing and kneading the flesh of one arm.

"I think you did a good job on the tone," she heard Sindra saying. "I don't think she lost any of that training."

"It went better than I imagined it would," Brin said. "The combining of the helixes helped out a lot."

"I still don't understand how I helped," Ziedra mumbled, voice sounding close to Wren's ear.

"You happened to have a strong trait that Wren lacked," Brin said. "The chamber can analyze how that trait is derived, and then fit it against another person's traits."

"Whoa," Ziedra breathed. "So, for instance, if someone was strong natural mage, you could give that talent to someone else?"

Wren felt the cloth stroke her face carefully.

"It can be done, yes," Brin answered. "If we know how to isolate the trait. Fortunately, we have had some experience with doing that very thing."

Wren opened her eyes. The room was fuzzy and indistinct and she blinked to get some clarity.

"There you are," Ziedra murmured. "Looks like you'll be okay."

"Feel better," she managed to say.

"You look better," Ziedra said. "You were pretty pale when we came in, you've got some color now."

"She should be able to walk out under her own power," Brin determined. "She just needs a bit for her body to warm up."

"Thank you, Brin," Wren said.

"You're welcome," Brin said. "Being a healer is a welcome diversion from time to time. You presented a thorny problem worth solving. Fortunately, we were up to the task." He sighed. "In the future, young lady, I suggest you get some proper training so that there is not a repeat of this incident."

"Yes, Sir," she answered.

"Sindra, Drucilla, and I all have places to be now. I've sent for Desiray, she will be here directly to escort you out and lock up. Please stay here until she arrives."

She nodded.

"Good day, Lady Ziedra," Brin said.

"To you as well, Milord," Ziedra answered with a bow.

"We'll speak later," Sindra said. "Take care, Zee."

The three elders vanished in a flash colors and a snap of rushing air.

Ziedra blinked as the two of them were suddenly surrounded in silence. "I can't believe they just left us in here alone to get in trouble."

"Don't fool yourself," Wren said, still lying on the table but feeling some of her strength coming back. "Someone is watching us, and half the stuff in here probably bites."

"Bites?"

"Oh, you don't know yet."

Ziedra shook her head.

"Lots of doors, objects, and especially books have security on them. If you're not authorized to use or touch the thing--you get a nasty crack on the fingers. I call it a 'bite' because that's what it feels like. A lot of other people call it that too."

"Oh." Ziedra touched her arm. "You feeling better now?"

"Yes," Wren said. "Much better. Thank you, Zee. You were brave getting in that thing."

Ziedra's face was serious. "You know I'd do anything for you, Wren."

"I do now." She swallowed. "While I'm thinking about it, I have an experiment I'd like to try, will you help me?"

"What do I have to do?"

"It's easy, walk slowly out of here and across to that big glowing globe and come back."

"What kind of experiment is that?"

"Please."

"Okay, but it sounds silly." Ziedra turned and headed out of the room.

Wren closed her eyes. She had a feeling in her stomach what she'd learn. Already she'd found that Gaea's words had more meanings than they seemed to.

Head relaxed back, eyes closed she heard Ziedra's steps recede. As she stepped out of hearing, Wren pressed her fingers into her ears and waited. Mind open and receptive.

After a few moments, she felt a distant tingle that grew stronger. The tingle was warm and friendly, a familiar feeling she had always taken for granted. She'd always seemed particularly close to the dancer. For all the summers she'd never understood nature of that kinship until now.

She gritted her teeth. Those two old witches were trying to take advantage of Ziedra too. It made her face grow hot and her stomach churn. Friends. Damn them.

She felt a touch on her arm. Ziedra pulled Wren's hand back from her ear. "What are you doing? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she murmured, sitting up. She put her arms around Ziedra, and hugged her. "Nothing at all..."

I consider myself truly blessed and smiled upon by Gaea to get a second chance at life, and to start that new existence among a family of such brilliant, resourceful, and passionate people.

--*Damay Alostara*

Chapter 23

Damay's Task and Desiray's Hero

Ziedra and Wren were still hugging when Desiray walked into the rejuvenation lab. The white-haired mistress stopped at the top of the steps, the strange lights of the room making multicolored shadows across her face and hair. Dressed in a light pink silk leggings and sleeves, with a dark purple satin weskit she looked like the paintings of the desert djinnis who danced around the forbidden oasis. The mistress put hands on hips and frowned.

"Hey, you two," she said. "Keep that stuff in the bedroom."

Normally, Ziedra would have been unphased by such a statement, but this time the dancer's cheeks flushed. She pushed back from Wren.

Perhaps it was the way Desiray said it because she felt embarrassed too, even though they really hadn't been doing anything. Ziedra might have been more embarrassed because of what she was thinking. As Wren looked at the guild mistress, she wondered if what prompted her to say that hadn't been what Ziedra was thinking as opposed to what the two of them were doing.

"Looks like they cured you," Desiray said. "I was really concerned."

"That makes both of us." Wren folded her arms, and glanced at Ziedra who still looked uncomfortable. What *had* she been thinking? She had only hugged her because of the feelings of anger she felt toward Sindra and Drucilla's manipulations. She pushed her mind away from that and concentrated on Desiray. "I was concerned too," she said. "When we were combined I thought I had lost you--you never spoke."

"The sensations were so strong that second time, I couldn't focus much," Desiray answered. Her face hardened and she pointed her finger. "Next time, remember there are *two* of us. You almost got us both killed."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know what else to do. You kept leaking over into me. The thought of Cassandra, Dorian, and the others dying made me crazy."

The white-haired woman pursed her lips and sighed. "Yes, it would. By that time, I think we had been combined too long."

"That's something else I don't understand," Wren said. "I kept expecting us to be forced apart. It never happened."

"It won't either," Desiray said, shaking her head. "It just gets harder and harder for us to come apart. See, even as powerful as we were, we still hadn't fully synchronized. The longer we're together, the more of you leaks into me, and more of me gets into you--and..."

"Eventually a point of no return," Wren said.

"That's what Gaea warned us about," Desiray confirmed. She looked to Ziedra. "What's the matter with you? You don't have to look so chastened. I don't blame you for loving Wren. I kinda like her myself--in a motherly sort of way. Only one of my kids could possibly irritate me the way she can."

If anything Ziedra's cheeks reddened further. What was she so embarrassed about?

"Come on you two," Desiray said, taking their hands. "Ziedra you can be jealous of me later."

Jealous?

Wren still wasn't strong yet, so she needed to lean on Ziedra to walk. However, simply not being in pain anymore was bliss. Desiray led them out of the room and locked the door panel with a key she took from a pouch. She then took them back out the way Brin had led them in.

"I've been working on finding Mishaka and Cosmodarus while you've been down," Desiray told them as they went up the ramps and stairs, going slow to accommodate Wren's slower pace. "I even spoke with Isis herself on the subject."

"You went to see--Isis?" Wren breathed.

"Sure," Desiray said. "Not all goddesses are complete witches like Hecate. When I explained the situation and the battle with Yolagg and all the avatars, she gladly provided me with the information I requested."

"What did you find out?"

"Well," Desiray frowned. "That Cosmodarus, the old one that we think you came from is going to be hard to find."

"Why?"

Desiray drew a breath. They reached the main doors and she unlatched the huge valve and let them out. After they were in the hall, she stepped out pulling the door shut behind her with a boom. She placed her hand against the metal of the giant valve and spoke a word.

A clanking and groaning came from on the other side and a sheen of light flickered across the surface of the metal.

The guild mistress put her hands behind her back, and glanced at Wren and Ziedra. "It helps to understand something. In their early history, the gods and goddesses were more at war with one another than they are now. They had to have strongholds that weren't easily found or laid siege to." Desiray started walking up the hall, gesturing them to follow her. The woman's steps seemed louder than usual as if the information she carried weighed heavily on her. "Isis' first city, Cosmodarus, was her solution to that problem. In a way, her solution is similar to the technique of the phoenixes used by the First-ones for their keys."

Wren's stomach twisted and she came to a halt in the corridor, forcing Ziedra to stop as well. "The city moves around?" she gasped.

Desiray frowned and made a weary nod. "In essence. The city is in a remote location to begin with. It is essentially in an area of the universe that drifts. The only way people can come and go from such a place is through what are called anchor points."

She gritted her teeth. "Don't tell me, the anchors are something that can be pulled up or hidden, cutting the city off from the outside."

"Just like a drawbridge," Desiray confirmed. "In this case, the moat around the city is a dimensional rift filled with ethereal chaos."

"That's terrible," Ziedra said, putting her arm around Wren. "Is there no way to find them then?"

"There's ways," Desiray said. "Just no quick ones. So, essentially, I just wanted Wren to know that we aren't dragging our feet--we're working on it. It's just not easy."

"Unless Mishaka has the whole city under wraps, people may still be coming and going," Wren determined.

"Right," Desiray said. "It's just a matter of finding that way in and out."

Wren closed her eyes, fists clenching and unclenching. She felt Ziedra's hand tighten on her shoulder. It wasn't good news, but it was news. She had survived the scrape with Hecate's avatars. She had even succeeded in bringing Damay back to life. She

was thinking of Desiray's information the wrong way. They knew what they were after now, the nature of the obstacle to overcome. That was much more than before.

"Thank you, Desiray," she finally said. "At least it's something."

Desiray gave Wren's shoulder a squeeze. "I wish I could have brought wind of happier circumstances, but that is what I learned."

Still on shaky legs Wren stepped over and gave Desiray a hug. "It means a lot to me." She felt her eyes start to mist over and twist in her stomach. "Everything you and your family has done."

The white-haired woman gave her a squeeze. "Oh now, don't start dripping on me again. We're sure to get in trouble if you do." She patted Wren on the back.

Wren felt the twinge in the back of her head where she felt her savant power. "On the mend already," a penetrating female voice said in serene tones. "Healing certainly has come a long way since I was your age."

Wren looked up from Desiray's shoulder to see Damay walking toward her. The woman had changed clothes and now wore a high-necked violet blouse decorated with brilliant yellow starbursts. Her fingers sparkled with jewels, and long loops of platinum braid hung around her neck. She now wore her dark brown hair loose and to the side rather than pulled back. The change made her seem much younger. She moved with a confident stride that suggested her strength.

Damay stopped and bowed to Desiray. "Lady Illkaren, I trust your journey was a safe one."

The guild mistress eyed Damay. Apparently, she still didn't know what to make of her. "My journey was fine, thank you, Lady Damay."

"Tell me, Mistress, I would ask this of Wren, but I think your experience might be more in keeping with an answer. Can the Foldrin Magnum Cipher be picked?"

Desiray's eyes widened. She wet her lips. "The Magnum Cipher?" Her voice cracked. "On an enclosure, a door, a chest? What is it?" The woman's whole body shook.

"It is a door," Damay replied. "And a sturdy one at that. Master Loric and I could not force it, and the lock itself resists all magic."

"No--no--" Desiray shook her head. "You can't fool a lock like that with magic. How do you know it is a Foldrin lock?"

"The smithing mark," Damay answered simply. "The mark is well concealed but we found it and looked it up."

Wren had heard of the master locksmith Foldrin, but had never run into any of his work. Desiray was practically bouncing at the prospect of the challenge. "Where is this thing? Do you want me to try and open it?"

"It is in the previous holdings of Mishaka," Damay answered. "There is a mountain vault shielded by the highest order of magicks. Even lady Cassandra's special traveling skills could not breach the shielding."

"Cassandra couldn't?" Desiray repeated, raising an eyebrow. "That's a serious vault then. What about traps, surely--?"

"There were magical traps aplenty, I assure you," Damay said. "Loric brought me along to deal with them. There were, however, many mechanical snares that require a master," she looked to Wren. "Or perhaps two--to circumvent."

The mistress nudged Wren. "That sounds like fun."

"It sounds dangerous," Ziedra said frowning.

Desiray looked back to the dancer. "Same thing."

"I'm not sure I understand," Wren said. "You don't think Mishaka would leave something behind in that place that would lead us to her? That would be silly."

"Tell me, Wren," Damay said in a level voice. "Was she a very *stable* person when you encountered her last?"

"Crazy as a cat with its tail on fire," Wren answered.

The elder savant nodded. "Most avatars are creatures of excesses. Even if we don't find some clue to her current whereabouts, we should at least locate some cherished possession that might provide a material link to her."

"Come on, Wren," Desiray enthused. "Robbing the witch blind must appeal to you."

She drew a breath. She glanced at Ziedra. The woman's dark eyes showed her concern. Still, the guildier in her was tickled by what the mistress said. This time it was different. They'd be looting Mishaka with the intention of getting a clue to Cosmodarus. Taking her every last copper didn't seem like such a bad prospect either. It would be the first step to taking the hag's life and getting back her family.

"Yes," Wren admitted. "As a matter of fact it does."

The three of them walked back into the main house together each one of them keeping their own counsel. Wren could feel Ziedra seething at her side. The woman was definitely unhappy with the prospect of her heading out on another adventure. The last time she left her alone they brought her back half dead.

As they stepped into the kitchen, Vera met Damay with a mug with something white in it. The elder savant grinned and bowed to her. "My gratitude, Vera-lah, you have gotten good at knowing my wants indeed."

Vera returned the bow to Damay.

Damay took a drink from the mug and smiled. Her whole body shuddered as if she needed to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. It seemed to Wren, that for Damay, life was indeed good. No doubt after millennia of being confined in the amulet she reveled in the sensations of the real world. Knowing the super-reserved calm that she initially felt from the woman, these open displays of pleasure showed just how profoundly moved she was at being among the living again.

Vera came over and gave Wren a hug. "Master Brin fix good, yes?"

"Yes," she answered, returning the little woman's hug. "I'm not at full strength yet but I don't think it will be long."

"Good," Vera nodded. She put a hand to her chest. "See Wren-friend in game crystal--do well." The young woman's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "Need more dance."

She took Vera's hand in hers. "No question of that, Vera," she answered. "I gave thanks to you on more than one occasion."

"Ah," Damay said. "She was the one training you?"

Wren nodded.

Sipping at her drink, the elder peered at Vera from the corner of her eye. "Then she is a talented instructor indeed to teach you so much in such a short amount of time."

Vera colored at the praise, but did not demur as she had in the past. "Wren is good learner."

"Wren gets something in her head and she's obsessed," Desiray said with a nod. She walked over to the cabinets and pulled out a mug. "Ziedra? Wren? You want something? Damay shouldn't have to drink alone. She seems to be enjoying it so much."

The elder savant reddened somewhat, and hid behind her mug. "I didn't realize it was so evident."

"I don't know where they had you cooped up," Desiray said, pouring something dark red from a decanter into her cup. At Wren and Ziedra's nod she poured for them as well. "But you're sure glad to be out of there. The first couple of days you were here you used to light up the room when you came into it." She smiled and handed a cup to Wren and then Ziedra. "You've got it down to dim glow now."

"You have been gracious, Lady Desiray, in allowing me in your home," Damay answered, the slightest hint of chagrin in her voice. "The hospitality of your family has only added to the joy I've felt at my freedom."

"My husband spoke nothing but praises of you," Desiray said, brushing at her white hair and moving to sit down at the table. She gestured everyone to follow her. She settled in a seat with a vantage of the sun now low in the sky heading toward evening. Vera quickly zipped through the kitchen placed mats at their elbows, and snacks from her confection drawer for Desiray, Wren, and Damay. For Ziedra, she brought a piece fruit. A detail the dancer didn't fail to miss. She shot a cheated look at Vera's back as she continued her preparations for dinner.

Desiray continued. "And my daughter is full of the stories of your exploits. Besides without your help we'd all be lying in shallow graves some place, so you've more than earned our consideration."

"I shall endeavor to remain worthy of the generosity shown me," Damay answered in a formal fashion.

Wren took a sip of the brew that Desiray poured. The elixir was mellow-sweet but eye-wateringly powerful. She drew a breath, feeling the heat spread down her throat and into her stomach.

She noticed Ziedra sipping hers, eyes fluttering and a grin on her face.

"What I'm curious about," Desiray was saying. "Is what will the legend do? My talented accomplice here," she nodded to Wren. "Brought you out of retirement through some means that I cannot guess. What's next?"

"That is a fair question," Damay answered. She sipped her drink, eyes unfocused as she considered her answer. "Though the future may prove me wrong, I should think I will hang about helping Wren find her family. If events permit, I should think some proper training for her is in order. Beyond that, I have very little entanglements of my past life to return to." She smiled. "I guess I shall then be about making some new entanglements, and finding the odd bit of trouble to get into." She sniffed. "Perhaps I shall finish my business with Aarlen."

"I think you should stay away from her," Wren said. "She's too powerful for her own good."

"You noticed that did you?" Damay said putting chin on fist. "It did not escape my notice. Her daughters, the ones who devil you and Ziedra, are more powerful than the Aarlen I fought some millennia ago." She sighed, and took another sip of her drink. "So much has changed in the time I have been imprisoned. So much hasn't." She leaned back. "I guess we shall all have a fine roustabout in the coming days. Let us make the best of it."

"I'm not real fond of this rousting," Ziedra said with a frown, taking a deep hit on her drink. The woman's full cheeks flushed. "It's going to get Wren killed."

"What would you have her do instead?" Damay asked.

Wren felt the prickling sensation of someone of elder power enter the room. "I know what I would have her do," a rolling female voice said. "I'd have her pay her debts before she disappears." Hands behind her back, Gabriella stepped into the dining area. She'd come dressed in white shift trimmed in silver, and her long black hair was held with gold combs. The earrings, necklaces, and jewels that she wore suggested that she'd recently been at a formal party of some sort. "Imagine my disappointment when I learned of Wren's severe ailment. I worked rather diligently to make certain events *possible* and she goes and tries to die on me. Rather rude I should say."

Damay rose, face turning serious. "I do not believe we've been introduced."

"No, we haven't," the Dragon Queen answered, stopping at the end of the table. She nodded to Vera as the cook brought her a glass with something gold in it. She

swirled the glass, sniffed, and took a delicate taste. She smiled with bright white teeth. "Around here, most call me Gabriella."

The elder savant bowed. "I am Damay--pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I know who you are," Gabriella replied. "Thank you for rescuing my daughter from Hecate's trap."

"I think Wren and I contributed heavily to that rescue," Desiray said with a frown.

Gabriella swirled the liquid in her glass, sniffing it with obvious relish. "Ah well, there are the rescuers and the one who facilitated the rescue. If Damay had not gone into to the ring, neither of you would have gotten out to do anything."

"What is this about a debt owed you, Lady Gabriella?" Damay asked. "For the nonce, I shall be taking Wren on as my protégé."

Gabriella raised an eyebrow. "Will you now? She's quite a handful you must realize."

"I do indeed," she glanced back at Wren and Desiray. "She has a perchance for trouble that is rivaled by few. What does she owe?"

Gabriella licked her lips and this time her fangs showed. "A phoenix, good woman. All ashes and flames and good things inside..."

Wren's brilliance amazes me at times and I find it delightful. She does however let the spirit of the moment get to her, which is convenient to capitalize on. She keeps her promises which is all the better... Such a sweet child...

--*Gabriella Sarn Ariok*

Chapter 24

Debts

Wren's jaw dropped. In the middle of the dining room, Gabriella had spoken about the phoenixes. The light from the semi-circle of windows cast hues of pale orange in the woman's obsidian dark hair. A draft from the open window stirred her clothing, making it ripple as though alive. What was the matter with her!? Did she want everyone to know? Wren drew a breath, and took a big gulp of the powerful liquor Desiray had given her. The concoction did a good job at making everything slow down. She stared at the Dragon Queen. Next to her, Desiray had stiffened. Ziedra was staring at the table apparently trying not to be noticed.

Damay turned to Wren. "Is this true, Wren? Did you make such a bargain with Gabriella?"

She paused and took another gulp of liquor. "Well..." She dropped her voice. "Yes."

Damay looked to Gabriella. "A phoenix? What can one of Wren's talents do in regards to that?"

Gabriella sniffed her drink. She settled at the far end of the table and crossed her legs. "She can open one, that's for certain." She ran her finger around the edge of her glass. "She spoke sooth when she made certain promises concerning the lock that this goes to." She produced a First-one key out of the air and held it up. "Considerable research after recent events revealed to me that she has indeed discovered a reliable means of getting into these." She set the device on the table with a clunk.

"I see," Damay said. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and glanced at Wren. "Seems I was just remarking on Liandra's talent for finding trouble. Perhaps you will let me examine the key?"

"Of course," Gabriella nodded, and gestured. The key drifted off the table to Damay's waiting hand.

The elder made no recognition of the levitation magic, acting as though the device had just been placed in her palm. She slipped her fingers in the tubes and concentrated on the jewel. The back of Wren's head where she felt her savant power began to tingle.

"*Misagog*," Damay determined. "I shan't think you will find much in this."

"You can tell what it goes to?" Wren breathed.

"Of course," the elder answered. "It's encoded in the jewel. Now, the trick of opening the portal, that's something I'd like to learn."

"But it's so sim--" Wren caught herself too late. She was so startled at being able to do something this far wiser savant couldn't.

"Simple is it?" Gabriella said. "Well, you shan't have a hard time with it then. As to what we'll find--it's my time to waste if I chose."

"I said it's *simple*," Wren murmured. She took a drink. Damn, her stupid mouth. "I didn't say it was easy."

"I can testify to that," Desiray growled. "Shredded thing bout sucked the life out of both of us."

"So, you've been in one of these," Damay asked. "You remarked to the affect that Gaea had trained you to 'be'. I did not imagine you meant in the literal sense."

"Big warm *green* hug," Wren answered. "Something I'll keep with me the rest of my life."

Damay's eyes widened.

"Right, she told me Gabriella's real name was Drakka'Tah even. She told us quite a bit actually."

"Drakka'Tah?" Damay scowled. "That name I know. The Dragon Queen?" She turned narrowed eyes on Gabriella. "I wondered about the fangs, but smelled no *rathsteen* upon her."

Gabriella smiled, crossed her legs the other way, and took another sip of her drink.

"Rathsteen?" Desiray repeated.

"It's an old word," Gabriella said. "It's the specific magical *taint* associated with vampirism. You cannot smell it because I have put the darkness behind me."

Damay laughed. It was a harsh sound. Gabriella stiffened, her glass halting part way to her lips.

"You smell far too much of blood, and cast too long a shadow to stand in the light Lady Gabriella," the elder savant said with a firm voice. "However, since Loric gives you free reign in his house, I can only imagine that you are somehow doing penance for your past."

Gabriella gritted her teeth. "Every *day*."

Damay nodded. "Obviously, old habits die hard." She removed the First-one key and flung it.

The Dragon Queen's hand caught the object with a smack of metal on flesh.

"Indeed," the woman snarled. It was a dangerous sound, a dragon ready to pounce.

"Growl not at me, woman," Damay said. She pulled a small pendant from her sash. The necklace Gabriella gave Wren to cast the T'a'fugit. "I now know what this was for and why it was made. I know how blood pendants are created and the ritual that surrounds them." She turned to Wren. "Give her what she wants. It was a bargain. I trust you did not make this agreement with anyone else?"

"Well..." her voice trailed off.

Damay scowled at her. "Say not."

Gabriella sighed. "Her deal with me came after she made a small tactical error with Sindra and Drucilla."

"Aarlen's D'klace children?" Damay narrowed her eyes. She raised her voice.

"Wren... what were you thinking?"

"Not clearly at the time," she said. "I was angry at them and... well, it was dumb I admit."

"This I do not like," Damay said. "Gabriella at least is partially in the light, and her key is not of high quality. I would not relish opening a high quality key to them--they do not need any more favors cast their way."

"I have their key," Gabriella said with a sniff. "Would you like to examine it?" She took a sip of her drink. "Wren is not the only one who makes tactical errors."

Damay raised an eyebrow. "That can't have been any simple feat."

"Oh, I had to trespass a bit on Wren to be able to catch them in the act, but I believe the results were worthwhile."

Wren snorted.

Damay looked at her. "Don't make noises, it seems like you mostly got yourself into this mess."

"Yeah," Wren admitted. "I didn't ask to get bitten though. I'd still be on her leash if Gaea hadn't fixed it."

"Bargain with vampires, expect to get bitten, it's not like she hides her fangs."

"I have teeth too!" Wren growled. "And I keep them to myself, thank you very much."

"I have to *agree* with her there," Desiray said with a frown. "No blood-sucking allowed on the premises, dammit!"

"It was only a little taste, I assure you," Gabriella said. "It did save her from capture after all."

The guild mistress growled. "I wonder if Loric would agree with your assessment."

"Agree with what assessment?" a gruff male voice asked from across the kitchen.

Loric came in from the south hall dressed for battle. He wore a full suit of chain armor that sparkled and winked in the fire light. A large kite shield was slung over his back, swords, and daggers in his belt. His gray hair hung loose around his face, and his cheeks were flushed and he had a sheen of perspiration on his skin.

Wren couldn't imagine what kind of fight would make a war-master of his skill exert himself that much. Maybe she didn't want to know.

"Loric," Damay greeted. "We were discussing having a bite--" She glanced at Gabriella. "To eat. Dinner is so soon."

He put hands on hips. "It sounded like business to me, and as you say, dinner is close at hand."

Desiray rose from behind the dinner table and went to him, putting her arms around his neck and giving him a kiss. Loric returned the kiss and hugged her.

Her brow furrowed. She gestured and handkerchief appeared in her hand. She daubed the wetness from his face. "My old bear never sweats. What have you been doing?"

Loric pulled her around to his side and put an arm around her waist. "Hecate has some rather formidable guardians. I was fighting my way into a couple more of Mishaka's strongholds. It appears they were only seasonal dwellings though. She had nothing of significance in them. It appears her main residences lay between Cosmodarus, and the keep we located." He rubbed his face on Desiray's shoulder. "Did Damay ask you about the lock?"

"She sure did," Desiray answered with a grin. "Anytime you want me. I'm there."

He put a hand on the back of her neck, fingers riffling up through her white hair. "I figured you'd enjoy the challenge."

Desiray grinned, leaning her head back against his hand. "My husband knows me well."

Loric glanced over at Gabriella. "I still get the feeling I walked in on something."

"We were discussing how you might respond if I had bitten someone in the house," Gabriella offered. She held up her empty glass and in her typical fashion Vera was able to speed across the room and fill it within heartbeats.

Loric raised an eyebrow. "I would be very disappointed," he said seriously. "I extend my hospitality to you because you are a lady of distinction and manners. If you attacked someone without provocation or warrant I would consider it an insult."

"I was thinking you'd kick her out of the house," Desiray said face turning dark.

"Depends on whether she apologized or not..." Loric said.

The lord's words were not finished because another figure staggered into the dining area from west hall.

Ziedra's new friend Radian, his gold skin turned pale, moved stiffly into the room clutching his side. He wore a thin blue carapace that was probably armor of some type, the metal had been shredded away in places and something pasty white leaked from his wounds. Most of his clothing had been burned, and he had large blackened

crater in the front of one thigh. That the young man could move at all was testimony to his sturdiness, and the determination of the mind that moved his body.

Ziedra rose from her seat with a gasp. "Radian!"

Radian reached Loric before anyone could intercept or assist him. The lord of the manor let go of Desiray and caught his son to keep him on his feet.

"Father," Radian coughed. "If you would be so kind as to call a healer." He groaned and brushed the dark hair from his face. The glow of his blue eyes was dim, like the flickering light of a candle running out of wick. "I believe I shall be in need of one."

Loric gestured and one of the chairs from around the dining table slid over behind the gold boy and he and Desiray lowered him carefully into it.

Ziedra was at Radian's shoulder in heartbeats with a mug of water she had quickly scooped from the water basin.

"Ah, my thanks, Lady Zee," he said taking the water from her and gulping some of it down.

Could it be her imagination? Wren thought she saw steam rise from him.

Desiray moved swiftly, loosening hidden catches in the armor and getting it off him.

Gabriella rose from her chair and set down her drink. She stepped over and knelt in front of him. She examined his leg and the wounds on one side. She placed a glowing hand on one wound. The woman frowned at the small changes in the damage. "Damn Kriar physiology. He needs a tree surgeon, not a healer." She looked to Loric and Desiray who were also was having minimal success with magical healing. "You may need to cool him off in the pool until you can get a Kriar healer."

"Ow," Ziedra gasped. "His skin is getting hot."

"He's lost a lot of blood," Desiray said.

"Sorry, to be so much trouble," Radian said. "Father, you said to be careful. I was quite thorough, but as you see, I underestimated the opposition."

"Ziedra," Loric directed. "Soak some towels in cold water, we're going to have to wrap him up in them." He looked over his shoulder. "Vera get the towels for her."

The cook was gone in a flash, the spoon she'd been stirring in a pot still spinning around the edge.

"What happened, Son?" Loric asked, concern in his voice.

"I--" Radian coughed. "I followed up on the leads you gave me, trying to trace back the Kergatha and Idun-daughter names to possible anchor points for Cosmodarus." Ziedra took the empty cup from him filled it quickly and returned. He took a deep gulp before continuing. "I started my research at the All Worlds Tournament. Master Falor was good enough to introduce me around. It appears that mother Dorian's surmise that the title Idun-daughter is literal and not a surname is correct. Apparently, Wren is the granddaughter of a high ranking pantheon lord named Idun. Odin is the leader of their pantheon."

Wren blinked. Her *grandmother*? A pantheon lord. He had to have gotten that wrong.

"The Aesir and Vanir?" Loric asked.

"Yes, Father."

Vera returned with the towels and she and Ziedra soaked them in the basin and brought them to Radian. Desiray, Ziedra, and the two elders worked together to wrap the gold boy in the cloth which hissed and sizzled as they placed damp material around him. Wren hadn't imagined. Steam *was* coming off him.

The young man shuddered. Drawing a breath and gritting his teeth. He seemed to compose himself. "Father, this--" He winced. "This is a much larger collusion than anyone imagined. I was lucky I didn't get hurt worse."

"Stay strong, Son." Loric said. "Cassin just telepathed that she's on her way back with healing." At the boy's nod, he continued. "What kind of collusion?"

Radian's eyelids fluttered and he licked his lips. Ziedra immediately rushed over and got him more water which he gratefully took more gulps of. "Higher ups in Odin's court apparently have been falsifying communications between Idun and her daughter Euriel. I can only imagine to keep the lady out of this affair."

"Master Loric," Ziedra said in a small voice. "How can he have done all this? It can't be more than two bells ago that I saw him leave to do this errand."

"Here, where I have built the castle, time moves a bit slower than in many regions of the universe. In the outer planes, such as Gladshiem where he was, time can be greatly accelerated." He knelt down in front of his son. "Do you know why this was happening? Are members of Odin's court collaborating with Hecate?"

"Much of the court did not wish to admit Euriel Idun-daughter even existed," Radian said. He groaned and swallowed. "Apparently, she is in much disfavor with Odin over some incident that I was unable to get information on."

"That doesn't explain how you got all banged up, Rad," Desiray said. "Who jumped you? Who do we unload some hurt on?"

A single brilliant line made a slice in the air a few paces away. The line thickened with a humming sound and a moan of intruding air. The glow split apart forming a yawning circle out of which two gold women stepped.

Dressed in the skintight red, Cassin looked the same as she did on the morning Dorian introduced Wren to the First-one keys. Her twin, Annawen, was a robust mirror image of her sister. They both wore their dark auburn hair in a formal braid, tightly pinned with combs that had some sort of crest on it. Wren realized that the outfit was actually a uniform, as their belts and boots were identical with strange insignias striped across the shoulders, and emblems embroidered into the cloth over their left breast.

The opening snapped shut behind them.

Cassin rushed over, nudging past Gabriella to kneel next to Radian. She pulled a black box off her belt. "Oh owwww, Rad." She shook her head. "You need to find yourself playmates who aren't so rough."

He groaned but smiled. "You think this is bad, Sister? You should see what *they* look like."

Annawen circled around him pulling a black glove onto her hand. She pulled a rod of red crystal from a pouch and fitted it into a handle of some sort. She lifted the wrap of steaming wet cloth to expose his wounds.

She patted him on the shoulder.

Cassin nodded. "Okay, Rad, take a deep breath and let it out slow." He did so. She pulled a circular disk from a pouch and placed it on his forehead. "A few more breaths now." He complied. "All right, relax and grit your teeth." She nodded to Annawen.

The sister touched the rod to his flesh.

Radian gasped and writhed, forcing Cassin and Loric to hold him still.

"Arrrgh," he grunted through gritted teeth. "That hurts more than the bloody wound!"

"Take it easy," Cassin said. "We need to get the worst of these open punctures closed so you don't burn yourself up."

He nodded, face strained. "You'd think they could make it so it doesn't hurt."

"We're almost done," Cassin said.

For strained moments, Cassin and Annawen worked over him. Three times more they used the device on him to a chorus of groans. They slapped patches on the more superficial wounds.

Annawen placed her hand on the leg burn. She closed her space-black eyes. Her brow furrowed and her fingers glowed. By stages, most of the blackened tissue flaked away and filaments of gold flesh crawled from the edges of the wound to fill the gaps.

Cassin rose and put a hand on Loric's shoulder. "He'll be okay, but we need to get him in the pool until he replaces the lost blood. They roughed him up good. His matrixes are drained, so whoever did it was powerful enough to counter his warping powers."

Loric leaned down by his son. "Who did this to you?"

Radian drew a breath. "I think they were valkyries," he said, in a shaky voice. "Ugh. I need to get in the water. I thought--I always thought valkyries had *white* wings though." He winced. "They had an immortal with them though. He was keeping me from teleporting. I pounded him good, that's how I got away."

"Father," Cassin said. "We really need to get him in that water."

Loric nodded.

Cassin and Annawen helped their brother to his feet.

"Can I come with you?" Ziedra asked.

"Of course," Cassin said. "He'll want someone to talk to down there."

The dancer waved to Wren as the four of them headed out. Wren waved back. Ziedra looked really concerned. Was she that stuck on him already? She felt bad because he had been on an errand to help her. She should have said something to him. She would have to do something for him soon. A *grandmother*? *Idun*? How could that be?

Desiray put hands on hips. "This is a real mess."

"It would appear that Wren's family are the victims of some kind of vendetta," Damay said. "Or at least some collusion between members of the Aesir nobility and Hecate."

Gabriella retrieved her glass from the table. She sipped from it as she turned to Loric. "There's more to this. Radian was attacked to silence him, obviously to keep word from Idun's ear. Hecate has something bigger going on. I don't doubt that Odin's Bloodguard were working as mercenaries. He hires them out as a source of extra funds and to keep them *entertained*."

"Bloodguard," Loric repeated.

"Yes," Gabriella said. "Valkyries with *black* wings. They are Odin's henchwomen, that do his dirty work for him. There are the true-born valkyries who are risen warriors and Odin's recently created 'new' generation the Bloodguard who are entirely creations. The valkyries resent the Bloodguard being favored over them for obvious reasons."

Wren looked around. "You're so calm. Do you three really believe what Radian said? Could I really be the granddaughter of a goddess?"

"I believe it," Damay answered. "It makes perfect sense."

Loric nodded. "It does."

She looked to Gabriella, the woman smiled.

"What?"

Damay chuckled. "People with mythic blood are always getting in trouble. Their lives are non-stop trouble. Why do you think there are so many myths?"

Wren was dumbfounded. Mythic blood. Destined for trouble.

She had to admit.

It sure sounded like her.

Wren has mythic blood, if ever there was someone so afflicted it would be that child. Fortunately, with the blood comes an abundance of love and respect to offset the trials and tribulations...

--*Damay Alostara*

Chapter 25

Business At Dinner

Dinner was served late that night. Radian wasn't the only person out on errands that returned with injuries. Far older, more experienced, and more powerful adventurers also received their share of pounding. The normally jovial array of faces down the table had a tight cast to them, jaws tight, bodies stiff, and tones clipped. Damay sat at Loric's end of the table opposite Cassandra and Desiray. Brin, Dorian, and Gabriella who did not usually join the family for dinner sat midpoint of the table near Cassin, Annawen, Sindra, and Drucilla. Ziedra sat with a mostly healed Radian next to her. All of the older children were there that Wren knew. Since she had been at Loric's hold, this was the biggest gathering she'd seen around the dinner table.

"Normally," Loric said after all the food was served. "I strongly discourage the discussion of business at the dinner table. However, in light of recent events, I thought it best if we compared some notes. Sindra, I understand you and Drucilla ran into something disturbing. Would you like to share?"

Sindra thumbed some fruit into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. She daubed her painted mouth with a napkin. "Well, we know that Hecate definitely does not want house Frielos sniffing around this issue with Wren's family." She shook her head and took a sip of wine from her glass. "We went to the old Numinorian archives where we learned that some lore of Cosmodarus' original builders might be located. Mother surmised that while Cosmodarus was originally being built, that they must have had some way of getting workers and building materials to the location."

"That is actually a very clever route of investigation," Loric remarked, rubbing his chin. "So, what happened?"

Sindra drew a breath. "Dark knows we welcome a little pitched skirmish but Hecate had the place fortified like it was her bedchamber or something. We didn't even detect the defenders until there were a couple of hundred on us. It was a mess." She took another drink. "By the time we cleared away the garbage, they'd stripped the place bare. We didn't even get a glimpse of what they were trying to protect, whatever it was, Hecate sure as Hades wanted to keep us away from it."

"I had a similar experience," Brin reported, rubbing the back of his neck. "Overkill defenses--she's expecting elders to come at her and is sacrificing underlings like there's no tomorrow. She probably just wants to scare us off."

"The scaring part worked for me," Dorian added. "The little pittance of information I was after just wasn't worth wading through fifty demons. It's ridiculous, it's like she's dedicated her entire resources to keeping this operation a secret."

"I had some good success at the Kriar archives," Cassandra told everyone. "The chrono portals had a decent track of Cosmodarus and I was able to trace its movements over time. However, I've found no pattern yet that will assist in predicting its location." She paused and sampled her drink. "It's when I went in search of the anchor foundries that I caught my share of fruitless drubbing." She let out a breath. "From now on, nobody investigates anything concerning the Kergatha family alone. Minimum groups of two, I'd prefer three or four if you're younger."

"Mother," Cassin asked. "Considering recent events, shouldn't we lock the house down? Mightn't Hecate mount some kind of reprisal to keep us from organizing a better search."

"If what I saw was any indication," Sindra said. "I don't know if she has enough people *left*. I honestly think she has practically every resource at her disposal mobilized."

"Come now," Damay offered. "How could one small family be that important to her? Even if one them is a half-blood pantheon lord and another is a savant. What does she have to gain from it?"

"That is exactly what she's trying to keep us from finding out," Loric said. "That's what makes the puzzle all the more intriguing."

"So, you're not planning on giving up because it's dangerous?" Desiray asked.

"Well, you know I'm not big on interfering," Loric said in his growling voice, face serious. "But the witch tried to kill my wives and several of my friends. Now, her forces have attacked other family members. I don't particularly want her to have anything that she would be this desperate to keep." He sniffed. "She's hacked me off and now she just has to pay."

"Here here," Gabriella raised a glass.

"Cheers to that," Dorian lifted her goblet.

"Down with evil goddesses," Brin added his cup to those being held aloft.

"Shred the witch," Desiray said raising her mug to join the others.

As each person down the table added their rejoinders to the toast Wren felt her chest grow tight and her face get hot. It was a fight that belonged to no-one else but her and these people were willing to put themselves at risk. People had already been injured for her sake.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore and called out. "Loric, you can't do this!"

Everyone at the table froze, the smiles on their faces diminishing. Gazes turned to her. At her side, Ziedra put her hand on top of hers.

"Can't do what?" the lord of the manor asked.

"Fight with Hecate," she said. "Not for my sake, not even for my whole family's sake--it's too much to ask. I can't--I would never--I--I--" Her voice broke up and she tried again. "I mean I appreciate..."

Desiray raised her voice loud enough to shake the windows. "Wren."

She stopped, somewhat startled by the volume of the guild mistress' voice. "Uh, yes?"

"Shut up, smile, and accept the help--*please*." She sniffed and looked at her husband. Her green eyes flashed and she squeezed Loric's shoulder. "It's not often my grouchy bear feels outraged enough to take up a cause. I'm certain, he, like others here, needs little enough excuse to stick a pole in the spokes of Hecate's plans. So, please, let everyone be a hero by letting them save you and your family."

Wren swallowed. "But--"

"Wren," Cassandra said in a firm and rumbling voice. "Please. These bastards almost killed my son to protect their secret. Your family should not be allowed to languish in Hecate's control. You prevented the avatars from taking our lives and the lives of our friends. In order to repay the favor, we tried to help you and Hecate slapped us hard for it. Championing you is a really good excuse--" Her space black eyes narrowed and her voice turned to an snarl. "*To kick her smoking black moon-loving arse!*" She paused, drew a breath, and pressed a hand to her breast. She blinked, star-flecked eyes and golden face taking on a cheery expression. Her voice lowered and she smiled sardonically. "Pardon me," she leaned forward. "I mean engage in some *armed tactical negotiations*."

Down the table from her. Dorian clapped. "Bravo. Well said."

"Armed tactical negotiations," Gabriella smiled. "I rather like that bit of elocution."

"House Frielos supports any and all forceful posterior admonishment on Hecate's minions and their assigns," Sindra added with a smile. "Bounties have been issued on a number of heads within Hecate's organization. You may wish to check the list." She leaned over the table and looked toward Wren. "The Magestrix has communicated to me that she will be personally presenting you with a scrip for the heads you and Desiray took." She looked back to Desiray. "Aarlen was clear that since it was both of you, that the million talons in bounty should be split."

A couple of people whistled.

Desiray raised an eyebrow. "Million talons? Whoa."

"We told Wren earlier, one hundred thousand per head," Sindra said gesturing with her glass. "That was indeed the amount promised."

"Now," Wren said. "All I have to do is live long enough to spend some of it."

"Why so negative?" Dorian asked, leaning against her husband Brin.

Wren sat back in her chair. "I'm rescuing my family because I have to do it for my own sanity. Even if I succeed, should I be foolish enough to think it ends there? Hecate has my family for a reason, and that reason is important enough that she's willing to fight a war over it. Why would she give up? What do we do then? Hide for the rest of our lives? It will be like being in prison anyway."

"Wren, cross that sword when it comes at you," Loric said. "Trust us, we will be examining exit options as this operation proceeds forward. There are secure places where Hecate will not be able to bother your family. This house is one of them. I labored long and hard to make it safe from the pantheon lords."

"The Frielos also have many locations of safe refuge, should you decide to work for us," Sindra added. "Whatever protection we afford you would be granted to your family as well."

Wren sighed. "Well, that gives me some hope. I know there are far wiser heads here than my own." She paused. "I thank everyone for being willing to help me, and I apologize for all the trouble I've caused. I truly cherish some of the times I've had here. Even though I've resisted pretty hard, you all have tried to be the family that I don't remember. You have my gratitude."

"Barring incidents that dictate otherwise," Loric said. "You will always be welcome in our home."

"Thank you," Wren said.

"Since we're doing business at the table," Sindra said. "I have one bit that was delayed due to recent events. The betting pool on the game."

"Why bring that up?" Cassandra said with a frown. "Nobody won the spread or picked the winner."

"Ah ah," Sindra said waving a finger. "Someone did pick the winner." She pointed down the table to Ziedra. "Five hundred on Wren to win."

"I can vouch," Radian said, grinning. "I loaned her the money for the bet."

"The odds makers, bless their souls, had her on the outside at two-hundred to one, to win." She gestured and a piece of gold filigreed parchment appeared in her hand. "This is your scrip for one hundred thousand talons, Zee." She handed it down the table. The piece of parchment was placed on the table next to the dancer's plate.

Ziedra just stared at it. It was more wealth than she had probably seen in her whole life, and more riches than she could make in a couple lifetimes even as the best dancer in Corwin. "Lords and ladies," Ziedra finally gasped, hands pressed to her face. "I had no idea--oh my--" she swallowed. "Oh my."

"Five hundred talons, Zee?" Wren frowned. "Everything you own isn't worth that much! What were you thinking? What if you lost?"

Ziedra blinked at Wren. "I would have had to pay him back--" She glanced at Radian and rolled her eyes. "Somehow."

Wren shook her head. Did her friend think about anything else? Of course, maybe Wren's problem was she didn't think about it enough. Then again, she'd had other concerns occupying her mind. She didn't even know if she could get close to another man after what had happened to Grahm and Jharon.

"Let's hope you use that wisely," Sindra continued. "You have too much talent and potential to waste."

"Actually, with the right investments," Dorian said. "That money can be made to grow considerably. In fact, you'll find no lack of honest investment counsel around this table," she glanced up at her husband. "Though some are not as good as others."

"Thank you, everybody," Ziedra said. "Especially you, Radian, for loaning me the money for a silly bet." She patted his shoulder. "Still, I had a strong premonition and had to act on it." She looked around the table. "Master Loric, Milady Desiray and Milady Cassandra my heartfelt thanks for the gracious hospitality of your home. After a few days I can honestly say it is the most wondrous of places, and it is made that way by the truly wonderful people that live here."

Loric nodded to her. "You're welcome, Ziedra. You've been a model house guest and unfailing in your courtesy and your willingness to abide by our edicts. As Wren is welcome, so are you."

"Probably more welcome," Desiray laughed. "You don't get in as much trouble."

Ziedra colored a little. "My thanks again."

"Well," Loric said. "That's enough business, our food is getting cold. We will be having tactical and strategy sessions tomorrow after breakfast. There will be new security measures, so be sure to check the house bulletins for the new protocols."

Dinner continued. The conversation focused away from the dire happenings of the day toward lighter topics, speculations, catching up on events and other such mealtime discussion. Wren noticed that Damay asked a great number of questions of her hosts, and was especially polite toward Cassandra and Desiray. The elder savant was obviously very interested in the happenings since she had been imprisoned in the amulet. At Wren's elbow, Ziedra joked and teased with Radian. The gold man with his glowing sapphire eyes had a keen ear for wit, and a seemingly endless list of dry and sardonic observations about people and the nature of the universe in general.

"Have you ever noticed," Radian was saying. "How we're only clumsy when it's the least convenient?" He shook his head. "I'm wearing a *white* satin shirt, it's less than a quarter bell to an extremely critical interview, and I'm drinking a sweet sugary blood wine. I haven't spilled anything in... *forever*. Someone calls my name, I turn to look, someone bumps me, and down my front it goes." He sighs. "Not just a splash mind you, the whole goblet. I look like a war casualty. That same day, Isis decides to lock the city down so that there is no teleportation. I can't go home for another shirt, and naturally, my frantic searching turns up no tailor shops open. I try to call and can't delay the meeting."

Despite the mundane nature of the boy's tale, Ziedra seemed raptly involved. Of course, it was more the man than the story. Radian had a mesmerizing voice, and pleasant breathy accent that made words just sound more pleasing. It didn't hurt, that if you ignored the gold skin and strange eyes, he was handsome man with impeccable manners. "So, what did you do?" the dancer breathed.

Radian grinned. "There was a man walking down the street in a white shirt. I yelled at him. 'You! I'll give you a 100 talons for that shirt!'" He laughed. "He took it. Just

craziness." He looked to Wren. "I see you shaking your head milady. I take it you've had days like that."

She winced and nodded. "I've had whole *weeks* like that. Guild work is hard labor, with things hinging on the smallest margin for error. There can be some pretty comical happenstances when you're in some pretty compromising situations. The problem is... it doesn't seem funny at the time it happens..."

Wren let herself be drawn into the conversation as Radian obviously wanted. He wanted her to like him, obviously because of her ties to Ziedra. He wasn't overt about it, but she could see it for what it was. He didn't have to try very hard. Like most of the children in the citadel, they were either easy to like or easy to hate. Compared to the baron that had left Ziedra to the headsman he was a dozen times better in every regard. He was proud of his abilities, but balanced it with humility and courtesy. He was brilliant without being condescending, handsome yet not vain. All Wren could think was that Loric had taught the boy exceedingly well, he knew what women liked, and put on a face that could melt the heart of the most cynical of spinsters. She could see Ziedra periodically looking back at her gauging her reactions as if to say 'what do you think of this one, hmmm?'.

She was happy that her friend had found somebody to be interested in. He seemed to be returning her interest, which still surprised Wren a little. Ziedra had a pretty face, but she was no longer the nubile youth that she had been. The last few summers had not been kind, and she had been worked hard. Perhaps those glowing blue eyes saw the soft heart hidden within, in that way she was beautiful indeed.

Radian was not the only one to speaking to her. Both Dorian and Sindra made it a point to be chatty. She would have ignored both of them if she could have. Dorian used her husband Brin, who she owed more than a little thanks, as a way of opening up a conversation. When things would lapse or she tried to focus entirely on Ziedra and Radian, Brin would hook her. Sindra used a similar tactic by having Cassin do the initial talking. Wren had nothing against the auburn-haired gold-skinned woman, in the temple of Ishtar she and her sister had tried hard to protect Jharon and herself-- and probably would have if Sindra and Drucilla hadn't stopped them.

As dinner progressed, and the gathering retired to the living room, she felt like a piece of stretch candy pulled three ways at once and twisted. She didn't want to insult Sindra and Drucilla, but she also wanted to keep them at a safe distance. The same went for Dorian and her more-than-handsome husband. The problem with keeping these people at arm's length was that they could put on such charming faces that it was hard to imagine the schemers hidden underneath. Dorian in particular could tell stories that would have the most stoic individual grinning. More than once she had Wren, Ziedra, and Radian all laughing with some twisted tales of the court of Isis and the many sycophants all vying for her majesty's favors.

Not to be outdone, Sindra had some ripping jests so funny that people were wiping the tears from their eyes. Despite the serious beginning to dinner, it ended with people smiling. Tired as she was, Wren still felt a circle of warmth in her middle from the good food and the entertaining company. When the people in the Loric's family got in a jovial mood, those brilliant minds could be devastating in their ability to spin a comical yarn or tell a joke.

Damay surprised her by joining in the wordplay with some jocular remarks that had everyone chuckling. Wren guessed, even someone as serious the elder savant needed a keen sense of humor simply to live as long as she had.

Lounging near the fireplace in the story chamber, a mug of Vera's dark sweet brew in her hand, she simply couldn't be tense. It felt too good to be alive. Despite everything that had happened to her, she still had all her limbs in good working

order. Her old friend Ziedra was at her shoulder, a few summers wiser and a couple stone heavier. Perhaps to ameliorate Sindra and Dorian's tug of war for her attention, Desiray had pulled up a cushion on Wren's other side. The guild mistress seemed more than up to the task of keeping the Dorian and her husband conversationally occupied.

Wren watched Damay as she spoke with Loric. Since she had brought the elder savant back into the world there had been no idle moments to speak. Damay had not been in any hurry to renew their relationship. She found it disappointing. Somewhere in the back of her head, she had been thinking that Damay would be able to solve all her problems. In reality, Damay was a newcomer to the world. All of her ties and connections to the past were gone. She still had tremendous wisdom and ability, but that could and would only help Wren if there were a foe to defeat. Damay had already shown that she felt Wren was a protégé of sorts. She guessed she needed to give the woman time to establish herself after having been out of contact for so long.

It was late when people started retiring to their bedchambers. Radian parted from Ziedra with a hug and kiss that lingered far too long to be considered innocent.

Standing next to Wren in the dimly lit hall, Ziedra sighed as the young man walked off into the shadows.

She folded her arms and nudged the dancer with her shoulder. "I can't believe with everything you saw today you're still stuck on him. Didn't that scare you?"

"What?" the woman frowned.

"He doesn't even *bleed* right, Zee."

"Oh, but he sure kisses well."

Wren rolled her eyes. "You're not listening to me."

Ziedra put hands on hips. "Would I be getting this concern if he was an Elf?"

"I--" Wren stopped. She nodded to the stairs and started back to their rooms. "I don't know. At least Elves and humans can have children though."

Ziedra stopped at the landing. "What makes you think the gold skins can't have children? Cassandra has *several* children."

Wren sighed and patted her friend on the shoulder and pulled her into motion again. "I suspect there's magic involved in that. I mean, look at Radian, how much of Loric do you see in him--besides his manners I mean."

"He has Loric's nose," Ziedra determined. Their steps echoed in the hall as she thought. "Well, sort of."

"They have about as much in common as any two handsome men might," Wren said as they turned a corner. "You know, I just want you to be happy."

"You are so protective, Wren. Which are you, my friend or my mother?"

She sighed. "Well, a little of both if keeps you from repeating any painful mistakes."

"Just tell me straight, Wren. Do you like him? Is he nice?"

"Yes, he's nice. He's beautiful, strong, stoic, and all those good 'man' traits. I just have a little problem with the gold thing."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I mean visually, I think it's appealing--at least what we can see."

She stopped at the door to their suite and unlocked it with a pass of her hand. She turned up the entrance lamp, gestured Ziedra in, closed the door behind her and locked it. Ziedra was turning up the room lamps as she stepped into the bedchamber. All the flowers from the morning were still arrayed around the large canopy bed, and the air lightly perfumed with a pleasant floral scent. Wren stepped to the wardrobe, opened it, and checked inside. She went to the veranda, unlocked the doors and swung them open, revealing a brilliant starry night with a waning moon shining

brilliantly down on a still lake. She walked out onto the balcony and leaned against the rail feeling the icy mountain air on her face and skin, inhaling the sharp odor of needleleaf. It was so beautiful here that sometimes it made her skin prickle. She glanced out either side of the balcony and up to the roof, before retreating from the cold, and locking the veranda doors.

"What are you doing?" Ziedra asked, hands on hips.

"Being safe," Wren answered.

"So," Ziedra said. "Finish what you were saying."

"Oh," Wren thought back to what she had been musing. "Well, what about--I mean if there's more than what we see. What if there's *other* things that aren't apparent."

Ziedra went to the wardrobe and pulled out a blue nightdress and laid it on the bed. She kicked off her shoes and placed them on their pegs. Loosening the strings on her shift, she pulled it off over her head, then did the same with the silk slip underneath. Wriggling into her nightdress, she smoothed it on her body with a sigh, obviously enjoying the clean smooth feel of silk and satin against her skin. She folded the shift and slip and placed them on the shelf by the entry. She settled at the vanity and pulled the ties and pins from her long black hair, removed her earrings, and rubbed some cream on her cheeks and forehead to soften the powder on her face. Lifting a large brush from the vanity, she started combing the strands out to glossy smoothness. She worked at the task, eying her reflection in the mirror for a few moments before speaking. "Things that aren't apparent," she said thoughtfully. "Like what?"

Ziedra had seemed so focused on getting ready for bed that her return to the question startled Wren a bit. She didn't really have an answer. By way of delaying she stripped out of her clothing, pulled on a night dress, and put her clothing aside as Ziedra had done. She sat on the bed, and pulled her fingers through her hair. Being so much shorter than Ziedra's long tresses, it was a simple matter to smooth them before bed.

"I don't know," Wren said. "That white stuff has to be some indication. That and water boiling on his skin. That's not exactly normal."

Ziedra's tone turned dry. "Neither is a girl who sticks to walls."

Wren blinked. She should have seen that one coming. "Okay, you caught me there. I mean, I know we should love people for how they are on the inside, but..."

"Are you jealous, Wren? Or is it because it happened so fast."

Jealous? Maybe she was. Why should she be jealous? She just wanted what was best for her friend. Perhaps it had happened too fast for her liking. She wasn't even conscious for the few days while it was happening.

"Okay, maybe I am jealous. I just got you back in my life."

Ziedra rose from the vanity and walked into the bathing area, rinsing and scrubbing her face at the basin. She walked back into the bedroom patting her face dry with a towel. "I'm not going anywhere you know," she said, voice muffled by the cloth. "He's not like the baron dragging me off to live in a place you'd never be allowed to visit." She plunked down on bed. "Do the people here scare you that much?"

Wren lay back on the bed and put her hands behind her head. "Let's just say that when I'm around them, I don't feel very much in control."

Ziedra tossed the towel onto back of the vanity chair and lay back so her head was close to Wren's. "I kind of like the fact that you're jealous, that you want me all to yourself, and that you want to be my mother."

Wren growled. "Why do you have to put it that way?"

"All right, tell me another way to put it?"

Wren thumped her head against the softness of the bed. She didn't really have an answer. It sounded exactly like that. She *did* feel possessive. Now, even more strongly with what she'd learned about Ziedra's true nature.

"I'm glad you love me, Wren," Ziedra said. "I'm sorry that it scrambles up all your feelings. I know you hurt because of Jharon and Grahm. I can't take either of their places. I'm not a man, and I wouldn't try to be one. If I can't be more, I will at least be your best friend. Always. Okay?" She craned her neck to look at Wren.

Wren leaned her head back and smiled at the dancer. Ziedra could always make her feel good inside. She forgave and was always understanding. "Okay. Friends forever. No matter what."

"No matter what." Ziedra repeated.

They were both silent for a little while, both of them lying on their backs in the bed staring up into the blue canopy. "Wren?"

"Yes?"

"What will happen to us when you get your parents free?"

"What do you mean?" Wren rolled over onto her stomach. "That wouldn't make us stop being friends."

Ziedra rolled onto her side. "Wren, they live in this horrible inaccessible place that no-one can get to. How am I supposed to visit?"

"You get your gold boyfriend to bring you," Wren said with a laugh.

The dancer's face stiffened. "I'm serious."

Seeing the earnest concern in her friend's expression, she reached out and took Ziedra's hand. "Look, I made a promise, remember. I won't leave you behind. Well, not in any way that would keep us apart when we didn't want to be."

"Wren I have this terrible dream of you going away," Ziedra said, her dark eyes wide. "Creatures drag you down into darkness and I never see you again."

"Zee, they can drag me away, but nothing will ever keep me from coming back." She drew a breath. "I'll always come back. I promise." She took Ziedra's chin in her fingers. "Ten avatars couldn't stop me. Nothing else will."

"You almost died."

"I got better."

"But can you keep getting better?" Ziedra breathed. "Such terrible things have been happening to you."

"My luck is due for a change. With you here, and Damay, and other things happening. It may all just come together."

"For your sake, I hope so."

"Me too, Zee. Me too."

Imagine waking up after seven millennia of imprisonment, you have a body physically thirty years younger than your last, your spiritual powers have been increased, and on top of it all you're in better trim than you ever were in your life before. That's a lot to be thankful for. I don't know how I'll ever pay the child back...

--*Damay Alostara*

Chapter 26

Morning Regimen

Wren awoke before dawn, eyes staring up into darkness. Beside her, she heard Ziedra's deep heavy breathing. Having someone else in the bed had not disturbed her as much as she thought it might. In fact, it made that alone feeling that haunted the dark corners of her mind seem a little less fearful. She wiped the sleep from her eyes and rolled quietly out of bed. She stared at the dark silhouette of Ziedra lying with two thirds of bed linens wrapped around her.

There had been so much to talk about, so many scoredays to catch up on and so little time to themselves to get reacquainted. Standing there in the darkness she smiled. It had been just like old times, the two of them sharing their thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. It brought back memories of a pair of girls in their late teens sitting on her sand-filled canvas-sack bed in that old broken down apartment on high-street. They both had all the ambitions in the world and not a clue of how to achieve them. They'd both learned some hard lessons since then, some harder than others.

Vera probably wasn't expecting to teach today so soon after her recovery. However, the rejuvenation had not only taken the crippling pain from her limbs but had healed the cuts, bruises, and strained muscles caused by the pitched battles of the game and afterward with the avatars. No doubt, without such powerful renewal she would be recovering for days. Instead, a little rest had her itching with pent up energy.

She found her work-out togs and started pulling them on. As she dressed, the anticipation of finally finding her family was a buzz in back of her mind and in the pit of her stomach. The granddaughter of a pantheon lord? That seemed so amazing. She certainly didn't seem to have inherited any of the resilience of such a creature. What would her mother and father be like? Tal had met them at the all-world's tournament, and her mother was well known there. So her mother must be a warrior of some kind. Her father was a mage--and a good one from the information. She also had a brother. A brother. What would having a brother be like?

The questions were still pinging around in her mind as she unlocked the room door, let her herself out, and locked it behind her. She slipped downstairs and into the kitchen. She splashed some water on her face and poured herself some juice from a pitcher set aside for the early morning people. Emptying her mug she rinsed it and put it aside before heading down to the training area.

She needed to train hard for the coming days and learn everything she could before she confronted Mishaka again. Much as the witch scared her, there could be no avoiding it. That frost-colored bitch would pay for what she had done to her family, and especially for killing Jharon and the people of his church. The thought made a cold shiver of anger rush through her chest. The sensation made her hands ball into fists. She shuddered, remembering the feel of Mon'istiaga's terrible power rushing through her, crushing demons like bugs and shattering avatars like wooden dolls. If only Mishaka had been there.

The First-one weapon had been overkill to the ultimate degree, and only after using it had she known. It frightened her to think what might have happened had she not been so focused on her objective.

As Wren put foot to the stairs heading down in the training area she heard an unfamiliar crackling, the sound muted and echoing within the stone walled chamber. She also detected the sound of water churning.

Cautious now, she crept down to where she could see the pool. The eerie flickering light filtering up through the water cast scintillating reflections on the dark ceiling. Partially blocked by the dark silhouettes of all the training apparatus Wren saw something dark that shimmered with blue colors hovering over the surface of the pool.

Skin tingling, the hair on the back of her neck stiffening, she snuck closer. After several steps she felt a buzz at the back of her skull. It felt different now than any time she had experienced it before.

Picking her way around the exercise apparatus she drew close enough to see what was making the noise and light. She stopped by a climbing rope. The entire fifty pace length of the underground pool was illuminated with a dim radiance shimmering on the surface of the water. The lights that normally shone up from the bottom flickered, rather than giving off a steady light, and the water itself bubbled and frothed in a large circle underneath a figure that floated in a sitting position a short distance above the surface. Tiny bolts of energy licked and crackled around the person like tongues of flame. Because of the flickering shadows it was difficult to make out who it was.

Still keeping her distance, Wren circled around to get a better look. As she moved, the ache in the back of her head changed in timber, becoming a thrumming that while not painful still made her dizzy.

When she stood midpoint of the lines where she and Vera usually practiced the identity of the person was obvious. Dressed in a light gray blouse and leggings, head bowed and brown hair wreathing her face was Damay. The elder savant held her hands in front of her, fingers spread and tips pressing together.

Raw nola energy flashed and flickered around her in a steady dance. With the pure force of her will and her control of the Kel'Varan nola she was floating! It was an amazing demonstration of her mastery of savant powers.

It would probably not be wise to disturb the woman's concentration. Just to be safe, Wren retreated a safe distance to the back part of her practice area and sat down to stretch. Limbering up her legs and arms she kept a wary eye on the elder savant as she hovered over the water, the power of Eternity flashing and burning on the surface of her skin.

Hands gripping her feet, legs straight, she pushed her forehead down to her knees feeling the burn all down the back of her thighs and up her back. After a score of heartbeats she moved to the next position still glancing up at Damay periodically.

Perhaps, that's what an elder savant did to work out. Whatever Damay was doing, it seemed as if she would be at it for a while longer. She would wake up in her own good time.

Wren figured the best use of her time was to practice the last couple forms that she had been struggling to learn from Vera. The little woman made those spinning kicks look so easy. She could get enough height do the spin part now. She could keep her balance. The landings were the part kept tripping her up. In the *Dochi Manus Tengu* (form of the jumping demon), she had to split kick to the center, guard, retreating front kick, dive roll to the northern cusp with a finishing punch. The next move was a side roll east to go under an attacker, then bounding up with a spinning heel kick to

drive them off balance. The balance of the moves were a sequence of flips and kicks to confuse and intimidate the opponent to set them up for the finishing *bath maggi*, elbow strike to the throat. To do the form properly she had to land exactly on the line after each jump and spin. To accomplish that with one jump was easy. To keep centered through a rapid succession of 'flying' moves took excruciating control and balance--which was exactly why Vera was teaching it to her.

Properly prepared for her workout Wren stood up. A glance showed no change in Damay. Taking a position at the 'south' cusp Wren did her formal salute, and lunged into her first move and counter. After a while, she was simply too focused on the universe of the lines and the moves she needed to remember and execute to be aware of anything else. Everything was the beating of her heart, the intake of breath, the tensing of muscles, the thrust of her hands, and the scuff of her feet on the carpet.

Imaginary swordsmen lashed towards her, chopping at her head, legs, arms, and torso as she danced on narrow pylons of wood; one step off the wood meant a plunge into doom. She countered their attacks with blocks, kicks, and punches driving them back in ones and twos, diving and flipping to evade a maze of whirling sharpened steel.

Wren whirled, kicked, landed, flipped and lunged bringing home the devastating *bath maggi* into the opponent at northeast corner. Heart pounding hard she drew back, turned to face the south cusp, and saluted.

A clapping sound behind her made her jerk and turn to the sound.

She turned to see Damay had stopped glowing and was now standing politely applauding with smile on her face. The elder savant was still over the middle of the pool, her feet balanced on the surface of the water as though it were something solid.

Wren put a hand to her chest. "Oh, you startled me." She rubbed at the perspiration on her forehead.

"Apologies," Damay said. "I felt a small applause necessary for such an excellent display. I'm impressed."

Praise from this ancient and conservative woman felt good indeed, it made Wren's already hot face grow a shade warmer. "Thank you."

"G'yaki discipline training," Damay shook her head. She put her hands behind her back and walked a few steps across the water, leaving little ripples in the surface. How was she doing that? "I don't know why you thought you needed my teaching."

She knew about the G'yaki too? Damay knew so much. "Well, I didn't have it until recently."

"You have a good teacher," the elder remarked stepping off the surface of the water and up to the edge of the pool. "You've learned a lot about controlling your body. I saw that out on the battlefield. I'd wondered where you learned it."

"How is it you know about the G'yaki?"

Damay raised an eyebrow. "How could I not? They are one of a small number of creatures who may touch Gaea without being born with her special blessing."

"You mean their awareness of tao?"

"Aye," Damay nodded. She reached into the pocket of her shift and began pushing rings back onto her fingers. "It is not just their awareness though, but their ability to create a tao-like spirit from a mundane one. Their grand masters are little different than savants in their command of Her gifts, they simply don't have our privileged access to the underpinnings of Eternity's power."

Wren had no idea that the G'yaki were such amazing devotees. Of course, she should have realized after seeing the Vera fight. Gabriella had remarked about G'yaki warriors putting their fists through thousand-fold steel. Once she knew what she was

dealing with, even powerful Sindra had been cautious. It made Vera's decision to become nothing but a simple cook all the more amazing.

She sighed. Where did she start? This was her first opportunity to really talk with the woman. "So," she started. "I haven't had much chance to speak with you. I mean are you feeling all right--did I do it, right? I--I mean it's obvious that you have your powers and everything. I--is it okay?"

Damay looked down at herself. She drew a breath and grinned. "Well, it's obvious you had a much more heroic image of me than I actually was at this age."

Wren's brow furrowed.

The woman flicked at her long hair and pinched her arm. "My hair would never grow, and I was an underfed twig that would break in a strong wind. In fact, I did not have a whole lot going for me where appearance was concerned." She pursed her lips. "I guess I might have looked like this if I took care of myself, and got a few physical--enhancements." She laughed. It was a warm sound with no hint of displeasure in it.

"So, you like what I did then?"

"It is a marvelous body, Child," Damay said. "Aside from a few unintentional inadequacies, it is far more than I could have hoped for."

"Inadequacies?"

Damay nodded and strolled up to lines where Wren was standing. "Yes. I assume that you used yourself as template to create this shape. Well, as you learned rather painfully from the battle, your ability to pass energy harmlessly through your flesh was considerably degraded. I inherited that defect. I have since been repairing it."

"You can fix something like that without devices and such?"

"Of a certainty," Damay said. "In my first life, as most do, I did not discover the immortalizing secrets until my later years. So, when I learned to make myself resistant to time's sting, my body remained the age it was when I performed the ritual--" She chuckled. "Oft were the cold winter mornings and the battering rough and tumble that I wished I had learned the techniques a few decades earlier."

"So, does that mean you're going to start over and begin again?"

Damay frowned. "No. You, Wren, are the Kel'Varan Nola. I am an old woman in a young body with a second chance at life. I may have the power and providence of a savant, but that title belongs to you now. What happens in this era is your responsibility."

"You aren't going to teach me?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't teach you. I said the responsibilities of the Kel'Varan are yours."

"Responsibilities? What responsibilities?"

"That's what each of us must learn."

Wren rolled her eyes. She loved those kind of answers. She drew a breath, something occurring to her. "Damay, speaking of titles, I do have a question."

"Which is?"

"Can you tell what power a savant has?" She paused. "I mean assuming that the savant doesn't know they are one?"

"You're referring to what kind of savant Ziedra is?"

"You knew?"

"You didn't?" Damay frowned. "Surely not, there is a very distinct sensation--"

Wren held up her hand. "I'm an idiot. I just didn't put it together. When I saw her in Ivaneth I immediately recognized her even though she'd changed a lot. We spent so much time together when we were younger I guess I was used to it always feeling that way."

"Savants have an affinity with each other. We're all brothers and sisters," Damay said. "As to what kind of savant she is, my guess is she is an Ishtar Nola, a savant of magic."

Wren rubbed the back of her head. "What can they do?"

Damay rubbed her hands together and came over to stand by Wren. The woman looked up at her with those intense dark eyes. "Well," she said. "As the name implies they are naturally good with manipulation of magicks. Mental disciplines and techniques like simultaneous tasking come easily to them. Physical regimens, like dancing for instance, are also absorbed with little difficulty." She glanced around the darkened workout area as if she sensed something. "Tactically their strongest ability is their resistance to magic, especially spells that affect the mind."

Wren shook her head. "Sindra wasn't joking when she said that Ziedra's talent was going to waste. She could be one of the best mages alive if she wanted to!"

"Exactly," Damay said with a nod. "Of course, she has to want to. Your friend is rather--*indulgent*."

"Yes, but she's nice."

The elder savant sighed. "I think you know she can't afford to be 'nice'. Not in a universe where savants are hunted. She's just lucky that Sindra and Drucilla have protected her."

Wren put hands on hips. "How do you know that?"

Damay shrugged. "I can't think of another reason two like them would be so deferential to, pardon my saying it, such a baby. They obviously know she's a savant, and know she can't be mentally coerced with magic."

"Well, you're right on that count. I can't help but think that there's something else about Ziedra that makes them so nice to her. They'll take guff from her that *no-one* else would get away with." She paused. "What does *mi Domsa* mean?"

"*Mi Domsa*?" Damay repeated. "Domsa is ancient Silissian, for 'young mother'. There are a lot of social contexts. It's usually used to address an older sister."

"Well, that can't be it," Wren said. "Those two are older than the hills."

"That I can attest to," Damay agreed. "They were elders when I first met Aarlen, and that was over seven millennia ago."

"Strange," Wren said. "Could she be related to them somehow?"

"The Frielos is a huge family," Damay said. "If she were, most likely she'd be a step-sister or a cousin. I seriously doubt she could be a child of Aarlen's."

"Well, I guess it's not critical to know. If it keeps them from picking on her, all the better."

"True," Damay said. She put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "I do want you to know that I truly appreciate the lengths to which you went to free me from that prison. Using your own body as a template was inspired--it had not occurred to me. I know you owe Gabriella on my account, and took some abuse in the meantime in gaining her favor. It is a debt I will make good."

Wren smiled. "It'll be worth it if you do just one thing."

"What's that?"

She laughed and pointed to the pool. "Teach me to walk on water."

If a woman walks on water, if she talks--you better listen...

--Wren

Chapter 27

Proof of the Ishtar Nola

Wren and Damay ended up doing more talking than training. It was evident that while the elder savant had managed to survive her millenniums long isolation, she was definitely starved for contact and news of the outside world. She had that same reserve that Wren had become familiar with when dealing with elders, that stoic demeanor of calm confidence. Damay would never let on she felt vulnerable and six millennia out of place. Wren guessed once you got over five centuries old you just weren't allowed to show fear.

She guessed that it was a testimony to exactly how truly lost Damay felt that she could sense the elder savant's discomfort. Damay was a proud woman, she was too old and too powerful to feel comfortable asking for help.

It never occurred to Wren when she brought Damay back to life that the elder would be so out of sorts. Perhaps Loric had known or sensed the woman's need for something familiar to hold on to while she adjusted. Having someone she knew from the past was probably a big help for her.

The talk put things in perspective for Wren. As strong as these elders got, they were still as vulnerable as anyone else at their core. They just cloaked themselves in knowledge and power to shore up and hide their weaknesses.

When Desiray walked in on them, they were sitting on the edge of the pool cooling their feet in the water. The white-haired woman was dressed in a brilliant red body stocking today, her white hair tied back with a black kerchief.

"Good morn, Wren--Lady Damay." She put hands on hips. "You aren't trying to work out so soon are you, Wren? We just got you better!"

"Not hard," Wren admitted, still feeling a little guilty. "I was just practicing my moves."

"She's become very good," Damay said leaning back and smiling at Wren. "You must be proud of your vassal."

The guild mistress pursed her lips. Her emerald eyes lost focus and there was a moment of sadness in her expression. "Wish I'd trained her. I didn't gain a full appreciation for her abilities until rather *late* in our relationship."

"It's never too late for learning," Damay said. "You both have a lot of summers ahead of you."

"She's certainly made my life interesting of late," Desiray said, rubbing the back of her neck. "Not just my life, but everyone's actually."

Wren sighed. "Believe me, I would have preferred to be a quiet little mouse noticed by no-one." She paused. "Ummm, do you know what Loric is going to do now that this matter with Hecate has gotten so serious?"

The lady pressed her lips to a line and brushed her white hair to one side. "It may take a day or two, but he'll have a plan soon. We're not talking weeks, a matter of a few days, so be patient."

"Oh, I wasn't asking to rush," Wren said. "I was just curious. Making plans of my own."

"You just play smart," Desiray said. "Don't do anything crazy, or make anymore *deals*, okay?"

Wren put a hand over her heart. "I promise."

"Good," Desiray smiled. "That saves me from having to tie you up."

All three of them laughed.

Wren stopped after a moment. Her face turned serious. "You wouldn't really do that, would you? Tie me up, I mean."

The guild mistress put hands on hips. "Yes, I would. No doubt, Zee would help me. So, you just behave."

She frowned, but didn't say anything.

"Well, I have to get my exercises done, so pardon me," Desiray said. She bowed to Damay, and nodded to Wren. She turned and went to the exercise apparatus and began limbering up.

"She's a little too direct and a bit coarse," Damay said. "But I like her."

"She grows on you," Wren admitted, watching the white-haired woman bow and stretch, arms extended. "For a while, I hated her something fierce. We almost killed one another."

The elder savant nodded. "That's because you're so much alike."

Wren frowned at her. Damay wasn't the first person to tell her that she and Desiray shared a lot in common. Maybe after twenty years, five children, and a lot of wealth she'd be just like her. She glanced over at Desiray at the lifting bench slowly pumping the weights up and down.

She blinked and looked back again. Her jaw dropped. She'd never really watched the guild mistress exercise. With her back on the reinforced and padded bench she had a heavy steel bar in her hands. On either end were cylinders of solid iron almost a pace across and thicker than her fist.

Apparently unaware of Wren's goggling, grunting with the strain, Desiray gritted out another repetition and guided the bar onto the massive rack with a clang that made the floor shake.

Damay looked where Wren was staring. "You gave me a nice body. Given a choice, I would have preferred hers though." She grinned. "She appears rather sturdy."

"That's no jest," Wren breathed. "When we were combined, I felt like a goddess."

"You were a goddess," Damay said. "Your power was that of Gaea's first children. I envy your opportunity to experience that oneness with Her."

"All savants can do that, Damay," Wren said. "Each of us has a complement out there in the universe that will make us complete." She shook her head. "We just have to talk them into letting us possess their bodies." She rolled her eyes. "Like that is ever going to happen."

Damay frowned. "If what you say is true, then it is not as far fetched as you imagine. It is not a matter of 'if' but 'when' one of the pantheon lords grows weary of their static existence, and decides to transcend it."

"Somehow, I doubt I'll ever see it."

"It is the goal that Gaea wishes for us. To be rejoined with our lost brothers and sisters and be as we were eons ago."

"What we were was power hungry and stupid. You haven't seen Starholme Prime, I have. We're the legacy of creatures whose grasp was beyond anything I can even describe. The fools doomed themselves because too much wasn't enough."

"You judge without knowing their reasons..."

"Damay, no reason was good enough for what they were trying to do. They made something powerful enough to reshape the universe to their will. They weren't satisfied to be Gaea's first and best, they wanted to change everything to suit

themselves. The only thing that stopped them was their egos. They never finished their grand design because of in-fighting. How could beings so old and smart be so blind and foolish? It's so *obvious*."

Damay's brow furrowed and she put hands on hips. "How do you know this? Did Gaea tell you this?"

Wren shook her head. "No, they're like memories I shared with Mon'istiaga in the fight. He was designed to destroy whole worlds--can you imagine that? It looks like a sword, but the First-one who made it, Shiva, fancied carving planets in half. It makes my stomach curdle to think it. One stray thought and I could have wiped us all out."

"That is a rather daunting prospect," Damay admitted, brow furrowed. She drew a breath after a moment, dark eyes unfocused. Her gaze finally found Wren. "As much as I know of Her, there is still so much I have not learned--so much she simply has not told me. In that regard, I feel you have already surpassed me."

Wren put a hand on the older woman's shoulder. "Just don't lose faith in what you--what *we*--are. One thing I know for certain is that we don't want to go back to being the creatures they were. The gods, the betas, have simply perpetuated their petulant rule of terror. Gaea wants me to bring all savants together, teach them their heritage and protect them somehow. I just don't see how I can make that happen even if I had all of Loric's family helping. They're struggling right now with just getting my family free of that witch Hecate. How in the name of all that's sane am I going to save all the savants?"

Damay smiled. She pressed her warm dry palm against Wren's cheek. "The same way you saved me and Ziedra--one life at a time..."

* * *

Wren spent the rest of the morning reflecting on Damay's words and other things. She met Ziedra at breakfast. The dancer expressing concern like Desiray over her trying to exercise so soon after being healed. Wren deflected it by scolding the dancer for being lazy and missing her morning workout.

After breakfast, they attended a pair of strategy meetings. The bulk of the discussion was at such a high level that Wren frequently found herself lost in the minutiae that everyone took for granted. Cassandra, Dame Techstar, Loric, Desiray, Dorian, Brin, Gabriella, Sindra, Drucilla, Cassin, Annawen, Darin'kel and Everia formed the core planning cabal. Seeing those minds focused to accomplish a single goal, Wren saw in them a fearsome power indeed. Dorian alone was dangerous, add to her Cassandra, Desiray, the gold twins, Darin'kel and Everia and you had a frighteningly resourceful and devious planning group. When balanced by their elder counterparts under Loric's steady council, they combined creative genius with awesome experience and practical knowledge. Wren didn't doubt for a second they could put together a plot that would ensure the downfall of Hecate herself had they desired it.

Wren and Ziedra left the meeting, minds swimming in details, locations, resources and factors. Those people knew what they were doing without a doubt. Wren just wished *she* did!

They had trickled into the hall toward the kitchen. Ahead of them Dorian and Brin said some words of parting and the handsome man strode off down a side corridor on some unknown errand. Dorian captured Cassandra's elbow as the woman came past and whispered something in her ear. The gold mage nodded and headed toward the kitchen.

Dorian was standing alone in the hall when the idea hit Wren, an experiment to find out something she'd been wanting to broach since her talk with Damay.

She took Ziedra by the arm and walked up to Dorian. She nodded to the dark-haired mage and smiled. "Dorian, might I have a few moments of your time for an unusual request?"

The woman leaned back against her staff and raised an eyebrow. "Talking to me again, I see. Hello again, Ziedra." She nodded to the dancer. Ziedra nodded back. "What favor is it you seek, Wren?"

Wren studied the marble ceiling for a moment. It had to be something simple but demonstrative.

"I have a small experiment I would like to conduct with your assistance."

"An experiment?" Dorian repeated. "All right, now you've piqued my interest. Will it take long? I have somewhere to be in about a bell."

"Shouldn't take but a fraction of that," Wren determined.

"What experiment are we talking about?" Ziedra asked. "I don't remember any discussion about this."

"That's because I just decided to do it. All the same because you're the test subject."

Ziedra put a hand to her chest. "Me? What?"

"Don't worry, it doesn't involve any kind of pain or anything. All you have to do-- Lady Dorian willing--is mimic something that she demonstrates for us."

Dorian's green eyes narrowed. "What are you after now, Wren?"

"Nothing difficult. All I'd like you to do is cast some simple innocuous spell so Ziedra can watch you."

"What would that accomplish?" Dorian asked, brow furrowing. "She can't learn a spell that way. If people could do that--everyone would be a mage."

"I'm in the dark too," Ziedra admitted. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I'm conducting an experiment, and that both of you have to play your parts for there to be any results."

Dorian chuckled. "All right, this sounds interesting."

Ziedra frowned. "Okay, Wren, what do you want me to do?"

"All you need to do Ziedra is--ummm," She paused. What would the catalyst be? She took a wild guess. "Touch Dorian's shoulder and study how she performs the spell."

"Dorian, don't tell us what the spell will be. Just execute it as you normally would." She nodded to Ziedra. "If you'll permit Ziedra's touch."

Dorian nodded. A curious expression on her face Ziedra stepped over and placed a hand on Dorian's shoulder. "You know this is all very strange, Wren."

"I sure do, but I think the results will be worthwhile. Now, Zee, watch her carefully--her movements, the sound of her voice, and what she speaks."

"Okay," Ziedra shook her head in bemusement.

The mage narrowed her eyes and leaned her staff against the corridor wall. "A spell, eh?" She flicked her hand out to right, fingers snaking out to form an odd shape, she snapped the hand up above her forehead then seemed to claw downward as though ripping a slice in the air in front of her. Wren didn't hear the words that Dorian uttered so much as feel them. As Dorian's hand came down, a bright illumination flared in her palm, she then gestured as though brushing away an insect. The illumination fluttered out of her hand to rest in the air as a constant ball of flickering gold light that cast rays and shadows on the confines of the corridor.

"A light spell," Wren marveled, looking at it.

"Nicely performed," Ziedra said. "You have good dramatic flare."

"Thank you," Dorian said with a smile. "So, Wren, what next?"

"Only a few more moments to conclude this. Now, go through the motions again slowly, and Ziedra you do the spell with her."

Dorian frowned. "Wren, you have to know, that magic just isn't taught this way. There are so many fundamentals that must be learned before even the simplest of spells can be performed."

"I'm not contesting that. This is an *experiment*, remember?"

Dorian rolled her eyes. "Ah yes, right," She looked to Ziedra. "You willing to humor her, Zee?"

The dancer shrugged. "I have to admit I'm as perplexed as you are as to what she's after."

"Okay," Dorian said. "Step here by my shoulder so you can see. You start in *son-gon-ri* position." She placed her hand a certain way.

Ziedra stepped next to her, examined her position and placed her hand in an exact replica of Dorian's.

"Good," Dorian commended. "*Re-ech-ta* focus gesture to the east of your energy center." She swung her hand out to the right as she had first done.

"*Re-ech-ta*," Ziedra repeated. Wren could see that the whole process interested her. The woman was really focusing. She'd been trained since she was small to be a mage. She'd just never really gotten the chance to realize her potential.

Ziedra swung her hand out to the side, fingers twined in a twin of Dorian's display.

"*Mos-ech-ta*," Dorian murmured. "Focus gesture to the north of your energy center. Exhale the phonemes for the negative countering forces. *Erak-tap-es-cha!*" She made the move and utterance.

Ziedra followed suit, her movements and voice a perfect mimicry of Dorian's.

Wren saw the Dorian's eyes narrowing. The mage knew something was up now. Ziedra was good at just this sort of thing. Wren had watched her learn dances. She had always thought that the black-tressed dancer had an almost magical knack for remembering dance steps and gestures. When Damay told her what talents a magic savant would have, she knew it fit. Still, she had a slight doubt and didn't want to scare Ziedra if it turned out that her suspicions were wrong. She would now dismiss or confirm her suspicions. At least, she *hoped* she would.

"*Ech-ta-fini*," Dorian directed. "Focus gesture, gathering into your energy center. Split phonemes, and chest harmonics. *Taban-yu-hummmmm--valif!*" She brought her hand down and then gestured as though to toss the magic.

Again Ziedra followed suit with a copy so precise she seemed to *be* Dorian.

The mage eyed Ziedra suspiciously. "That's--ummm--very good, Zee. Have you had any formal training?"

"Only when I was little," the woman said coloring a little. "So, Wren, what did we learn?"

"We haven't learned it yet," Wren admitted. "Now, do it full speed without Dorian."

"I can't," Ziedra protested. "It's too complicated."

"Try. It's just an experiment."

The dancer sighed. "Okay." She composed herself. "*Son-gon-ri* position." She placed herself. "*Re-ech-ta--mos-ech-ta--erak-tap-es-cha! Ech-ta-fini! Taban-yu-hummmmm--valif!*" Ziedra gasped, staggering backwards as a globe of light fluttered out of her hand.

Dorian caught the younger woman, her emerald eyes wide. "Isis' eyes!" she muttered. The mage glared at Wren. "She can't do that." She righted Ziedra who was still staring at the light she had created that was hovering just below Dorian's.

"Experiment concluded," Wren determined. She felt a hot twist in her stomach. She drew a breath. Damay was right. Ziedra was a savant too!

"I did it," Ziedra finally concluded.

"Wren," Dorian said in cool voice. "She, can *not* do that. *Nobody* can do that."

"I guess you have to reevaluate that statement."

"Wren, there's too much *missing*. You can't learn the disciplines of shifting and splicing your energy center just by looking at somebody."

Wren shrugged. "This isn't like you, Dorian. Is magic so sacred that you can't think about it objectively? You say it can't be done. Does that mean you doubt what you just saw? It was clear enough to me. It's simple enough to verify. Try another spell."

"Wren," Ziedra said mystified. "I've tried to learn magic before, I never got a spark--*nothing*. What did you--?"

"I didn't do anything, Zee. The reason you didn't get results is probably because you had a poor teacher. Dorian is, in Gabriella's words, a model student of magic. I figured you learned a different way from normal mages. I *guessed* from what I know about you that it would be--ummm," she smiled. "Something more *hands-on*..."

Ziedra put fists on hips. "Oh, very funny."

"It worked didn't it?"

Dorian had her arms folded. "I think you're trying to trick me now."

"Try it," Wren said. "Just let her touch you when you do the first casting."

"Damn it," Dorian grumbled. "Even if she mimics everything perfectly, she shouldn't be able to free cast spells I had to *memorize*."

"Gripe, gripe," Wren said. "Try something harder this time."

"Okay," Dorian said, eyes narrowing. "I will." She pushed the sleeves of her tunic up and brushed back her hair and took a more solid stance in the vaulted hallway. She drew a breath and brought her hands together, fingers spread, the tips pressed together. She made a growling sound low in her throat then snapped her hands straight out in front of her with a snarl. Her fingertips described shining arcs that made glowing patterns while she made low utterances that might have been words, but felt like reverberations in the marble slates underfoot. The incantation went on until Wren was forced to let out her breath. The spell ended in a shout and a clawing outward of both hands that made the hallway flash blue with something that filled the space from floor to ceiling and then winked out.

"What did it do?" Wren asked. "I don't see anything."

"Walk forward," Dorian said. "Keep a hand out."

Wren took a few steps and her hand came up against something solid that vibrated and hummed--an invisible wall of magic.

Ziedra's brow was furrowed. She too, reached forward and touched the solid barrier that now occupied the space in front of them. She let out a shuddering breath. "That was a *lot* more complicated!"

"Actually, Ziedra, it shouldn't matter how complicated it is," Wren said. "When your ability is matured you probably won't even need a second demonstration."

"Ability?" Dorian asked.

"Step through it first, to see if she can do it."

Ziedra's eyes had a frightened look. "That was also a lot of power."

Wren turned and looked at her friend. The woman's dark eyes found hers. "How do you know?"

"I felt it when she did the spell. This time I felt *something* when she was casting. A tingling in my arm and middle."

"Don't be afraid," Wren said. "I don't think normal magic can even hurt you anyway."

"Huh?"

"Nevermind, just follow Dorian through it once."

"If she can cast this one just by following me, I need to rethink everything I know about magic. Spells of this magnitude cannot be freecast--at least not that I know of." She drew a breath. "In this spell there are displaced foci in all directions from your energy center. All the five permutations of body conduction are utilized in the casting--energy is directed, gathered, chained, tunneled and phased." Dorian looked to Ziedra.

The younger woman was a study in concentration. She only nodded.

"All right," Dorian said. "Echelon five stance, *latri-gon-ta* position." She took a position and Ziedra copied her. "Now, gathering energy at your center..." Dorian placed her hands and Ziedra followed. Together Dorian and Ziedra swayed through the complicated cadences, movements, and intonations of the spell. It was a great deal to remember, and far more if one took into the account the training that Dorian mentioned. Only an extremely experienced mage could even hope to cast a spell of such complexity.

Still with all of the myriad motions, intonations, and stances, Ziedra stayed lock-step with Dorian, her motions a steady mirror of the sorceress'. When they had worked all the way through, Ziedra let out a gasp.

"That is far harder than my hardest choreography!" she breathed. "It is so *precise*."

Dorian shook her head. "She has the touch--a natural touch."

"She sure does," Wren agreed. "Might as well try it on your own."

Ziedra drew a breath. "I don't know if I should. If I mess up... it could...ummm, *sting*."

"Actually," Dorian said. "The backlash can be strong enough to take off your head." She frowned. "I'll catch you if it starts to get out of control and keep that from happening."

"T-t-take off my head!?" Ziedra gasped.

Wren frowned at Dorian, then turned to Ziedra. "She's just exaggerating to scare you. You'll be fine." She shot another look at Dorian who only smiled back. "Go ahead Zee, if you can't do it, it's okay. I think you can though. All you need to do is focus."

Ziedra nodded. She stood there for a moment seemingly lost. She closed her eyes took the stance, started then stopped. She went back to the beginning and tried again.

"There's just so many things happening at the start! There's so much more than you can see!"

"Tasking," Dorian said. "Yes, tasking is necessary for this spell... though how you *know* that..."

"Compose yourself Ziedra," Wren said putting a hand on her shoulder. "Dorian was just being mean, scaring you and picking such a hard spell on top of it." She looked to Dorian. "Is this tasking something inherent in magical spell casting?"

Dorian nodded. "It's something that you train to do."

"Okay, Zee, just relax. I think you'll find you already know how to do it. You just don't realize you know it yet. Take your position--ready--now relax and think about the spell and what you saw Dorian do--more importantly the feel you got when Dorian performed the spell the first time. Feel the tingling in the back of your head, concentrate on bringing back that tingle, making it spread through your whole body."

"The tingle--how did you--?"

"Shhh," Wren hushed. "Don't worry about what I know. Focus on what you need to do."

"Make that tingle into a hum. Make it vibrate through you. Then start slowly."

Ziedra started taking sharp breaths and her eyes lost focus. She tilted her head back, then abruptly snapped into the ready stance, and brought her fingers together. She paused, body trembling. A flickering glow spread across the surface of her skin. She snapped her hands apart, fingers trailing sparks. One after another she repeated Dorian's cadences.

"By Isis' eyes," Dorian muttered. "That's incredible; even my nuances and ticks."

Ziedra finished the incantation with a shout, hands clawing the air and causing the hall to illuminate with a blue radiance that quickly winked out.

"Ooof!" the dancer gasped, and staggered. "I--*knew*--that was a--lot--of energy."

They both helped her to chair in the chamber where the planning session had been held.

"That was amazing," Dorian marveled. She looked sideways at Wren. "Some kind of magic savant?"

Wren nodded. "I'm not exactly sure how it works. You can see that it does work though."

"I do indeed," Dorian said. She bent down to Ziedra. "You okay?" At the dancer's nod she looked up to Wren. "Does anyone else know?"

"Sindra and Drucilla," Wren growled. "The rats. I wondered why they treated Ziedra as so valuable."

"Well, she's nothing special," Dorian remarked. "Just the best natural mage on the face of the planet. Able to cast fifth order spells before she even learns a cantrip."

Ziedra rubbed her face. "Am I hearing right? I'm some kind of savant like you?"

"Well," Wren said. "Not like me. All savants have their own special abilities. Yours has to do with magic, and the physical and mental patterns that surround it. By touching Dorian while she was casting, you can pick up those internal organizations of energy that she goes through to cast the spell. By watching her cast you can quickly learn the external. Your savant talent provides the rest."

"What a team you two will make when Ziedra learns to be all the mage she can be."

"Scary," Wren murmured. "However, I think she has a lot of learning ahead of her before she even begins to touch her potential. She's gotten a rather late start."

"I'm a fast learner," Ziedra said, pushing herself out of the chair. "Whew. You know, after you get over the fear it's really kind of exciting, gets the heart really pumping!"

Dorian stared at her and placed a finger against Ziedra's neck. "My lord you bounce back from backlash fast. Does your head hurt?"

Ziedra winced. "A little."

The mage shook her head. "The girl is a magic machine. She shook off a full fifth order backlash with no training." She drew a breath. "Damn, the kind of magic I could work with talent like that...!" Her voice trailed off and her eyes became starry. After a moment, she looked toward Ziedra and smiled. "Need a teacher?"

"Teacher?!" Ziedra let out. "I just found out I have this ability." She turned on Wren. "How long have you known?!"

"I found out for sure, just now," Wren admitted. "I had growing suspicions." She turned to Dorian. "You know that Sindra and Drucilla call her, *mi domsa* 'big sister'. What kind of sense does that make?"

"It doesn't mean big sister," Dorian said. "It means 'little mother'."

"I could have told you that," Ziedra said. "They've always called me that."

"Yes, but what do they mean by it?" Wren asked. "The way they treat you and the way they act, it's as if you're a relative of theirs somehow. Why else would they be so nice."

"I think I can shed some light on that for you," Dorian said. "Aarlen's paramour, her prime minister, Caladar, had two younger brothers. Ziedra's father, General

Skyedoom is the youngest of those brothers. Caladar is the closest thing the Frielos family has to a father."

"That would make you--" Wren paused. "Aarlen's... niece?"

"So, actually, that makes them cousins." Dorian filled in. "In the south of Silissia, *mi domsa* is a teasing way to refer to a younger female cousin."

"You mean I have living relatives?" Ziedra wondered. "All this time I've suffered in squalor and I had living aunts and uncles! Why wouldn't they have told me?!"

"Well actually," Dorian said in a matter-of-fact tone. "If you didn't know about the relationship, you couldn't spread it around. Aarlen has a lot of enemies. That would just make you a target, even if you're not really a distant Frielos relation. They may have only recently learned who you were. It's obvious now why they've been watching you so closely."

Ziedra folded her arms. "Those cold witches. That's why Aarlen paid on the bet to me!"

"I think Aarlen paid off because you bet on the winner," Dorian said. "Good for publicity to show someone winning." Dorian rubbed her forehead with her fist and looked back to the hallway where Ziedra had put the invisible force barrier. The mage's brow furrowed. "Do you realize this girl's potential?"

Wren pressed her lips to a line. "I have some idea. She doesn't need some mage to provide her with power either. She has her own. Well, once she knows what she's doing she will."

"You've got to protect her," Dorian said seriously.

"Why?" Ziedra wanted to know. "Nothing has changed."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "Oh yes it has. You're now aware of what you can do. There isn't an apprentice alive who didn't experiment and get their fingers burned. You just proved you aren't any ordinary apprentice. What if that had been a ninth order spell I cast. Without a knowledgeable master to guide you, your head just very well *might* have exploded!" The mage put her hands on Ziedra's shoulders. "Let me stress this to you. You have an awesome gift. In time, you will know things about magic that..." She shuddered. "Right now, though you have to know that in magic there are more pitfalls than safe paths. If you decide to expand your abilities, train with a master--the best you can find. I would like it to be me, but it could be anyone--there will be no shortage of willing takers once they see you do a trick like that. Simply make sure they know what they're doing. Your talent would be a crime to waste."

Ziedra fixed wide eyes on Dorian. "Thank you for being honest with me. This is all so fantastic."

The mage put a hand on Ziedra's shoulder. "Wren wouldn't let me be any other way, she's become as mistrustful of me as everyone else."

Wren shook her head. "Dorian, I don't mistrust you. I said before, I was just very disappointed that you ruined our friendship. We could have been great friends and done--" She drew a breath. "I can't even imagine the kinds of things we could have done. After what you did for me, I could have forgiven just about anything--except you put some short term gain ahead of the honesty between us. The fact that you didn't give it more thought is what really hurt. All you had to do was *ask*."

"You would have said 'no'," Dorian replied, raising her chin. "Gabriella told you not to share your blood."

"Don't put words in my mouth Dorian," Wren said with a frown. "That's the worst part of what happened. I trusted *you* at the time, not Gabriella. You were being lazy. You could have persuaded me into acquiescing. It was simply easier to be sneaky, figuring nobody was being hurt. Well--except you."

"I don't understand," Ziedra said. "What happened?"

"Well, you might as well hear this," Wren said. "My blood, your blood, any savant's blood is powerful stuff. It can be used to do all sorts of things. Anyways, it was stressed to me by Gabriella that I *never* let anyone have even a drop of my blood. However, a situation came up where I needed something that could only be created from my blood. I gave some to Dorian to do that thing for me."

Dorian shook her head. "Because Wren was not explicit in our arrangement, instead of disposing of the extra blood in an honest fashion, I kept it."

"Because of another situation," Wren added. "I had to tell Gabriella about my deal with Dorian."

"What business is it of Gabriella's that you did that?" Ziedra asked. "I mean you were sneaky, but that was between you and Wren."

Dorian looked to Wren. "Gabriella had an agenda. She could have kept that knowledge to herself, and the friendship between Wren and myself would have been fine. Wren never would have suspected. No, she wanted to look honest and noble in Wren's eyes and at the same time force some space between Wren and myself." She pressed her lips together. "See, if I had Wren's assistance, I really wouldn't need Gabriella." She grinned. "I'm a bit beyond the apprentice stage. Gabriella and I are research partners, I benefit from her experience and she benefits from my creativity. With Wren's help, I could have learned things about magic that would take centuries to learn otherwise." A pained expression came over her face. A look of regret that Wren felt was truly sincere. "Gabriella's aim was to make sure we never became partners."

Wren stared at Dorian. That was so plausible that it was scary. "Well, you may have lost me, but you have a second chance of Ziedra. Of course, you'd have to behave yourself."

"Have I really lost you, Wren?" Dorian asked, running a hand through her auburn hair. The woman's deep green eyes were wide and her face more open than Wren had seen it. Dorian was always so guarded.

"Dorian, you know I'll always be vulnerable to your charms. I've always liked you, even when you were verbally tying me in knots." She shrugged. "I just don't think I'll ever have the trust that I had. That's a big part of friendship."

The mage nodded. "You're right." She dipped her head. In a surprise move, she put her arms around Wren and hugged her. She pushed back and held Wren's shoulders. "Thank you. Some day I hope we'll have that trust back. We've come through a lot." She turned to Ziedra. "Think about training with me. Also, I would consider a more rigorous physical regimen."

Ziedra was perplexed. "What does exercise have to do with magic?"

"Nothing," Dorian admitted. "Magic is in your head." She tapped her temple.

"However, while you control the magic with your brain, you channel it with your body. The somatic components of the higher orders of magic require physical endurance. The healthier you are, the faster you will recover from a draining spell and be able to cast again." Dorian shrugged. "Fat magicians make rotten battle mages. I've had my share of duels, and being fit made up for a deficit in skills more than once." She leaned forward. "There's one other advantage to being fit."

The dancer leaned forward. "What's that?"

"When your magic doesn't work--you can *run* a lot faster."

Wren laughed and so did Ziedra. Dorian hadn't lost her talent for being entertaining.

Ziedra rubbed her face. "This is all so much, so fast. I don't know what to think. Perhaps we talk about this again after dinner?"

Dorian smiled. "Certainly." Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial tone. "Honestly, you don't have to settle for me. I bet even Loric would be willing to take you on as a student."

"Mmmm," Ziedra said. She turned her head sideways. "Loric's nice, but if I had my pick--what about Brin, that dashing husband of yours?"

Dorian raised an eyebrow and pointed a finger. "Hey now. Mine." She laughed. "He wouldn't be a bad choice. He's every bit as good as Gabriella."

Wren frowned. "If he's that good, why aren't you his apprentice instead of her?"

Dorian put a hand to her chest. "The master / apprentice relationship is one of authority and subservience. At their best, husbands and wives are partners-- peers-- one may follow the other's lead but neither is considered superior over the other--at least you hope not. So marriage and formal magic tutelage aren't really compatible. Masters have to teach some pretty harsh lessons to their students--things that wouldn't be countenanced from a mate. Besides, if I dumped Gabriella for Brin it would get--*messy*."

"So, you're saying don't learn magic from someone you're romantically involved with?" Ziedra said.

"Do *not* do it," Dorian said firmly. "If they're doing their job they are going to discipline you. Those lessons are hard and cannot be tip-toed around. It would stress the most understanding of relationships. Radian would make an excellent tutor, but putting him in the position of a master would hurt both of you."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "You don't miss much."

Dorian laughed. "I'd have to be blind to miss Zee making moon eyes at him. He loves it too, the womanizer."

"He is not a womanizer," Ziedra said defensively. "He's a perfect gentleman."

Dorian winked at Wren. "How soon before you fix that, Zee?"

Ziedra snorted and folded her arms. "Very funny."

"So--" Dorian's words were cut off by a thump that was felt through the floor.

The three of them oriented on the sound. Cassandra was sitting in the passage clutching her nose and face, the sounds of her curses of pain and surprise muted and faint as though coming from a long distance away.

They had forgotten the two force walls that Dorian and Ziedra had cast in the hallway.

"Oops," Dorian said with giggle. "*This* is going to be fun to explain..."

And I thought things were interesting with just *one* savant around the house...

--Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku

Chapter 28

Premonitions

After dispelling the force walls, Dorian apologized to Cassandra, and made some excuses for them about spell demonstrations. She didn't mention anything about Ziedra being a savant, which didn't surprise Wren. They spoke to Cassandra for a little bit, apparently she had just wondered where the three of them had abruptly disappeared to. Afterward, Wren and Ziedra were free to go on their way. It was still the middle of the day and several bells before dinner.

The two of them climbed the steps up through the different sections of the citadel until they reached the roof of the east wing and could look out over the lake. A warm breeze in their hair, the air smelling of flowers and needle-leaf, they listened to hum of the wind through the trees and watched the sparkle of the sun on the water. Wren lay on top of the crenelation chin cupped in the palms of her hands. On the next fortification over, Ziedra lay on her back fingers laced across her stomach, soaking up the sun and the quiet.

"Damn it's beautiful here," Ziedra said. "I wish we could stay forever."

"There's nothing stopping you," Wren said. "You have your golden beau downstairs, remember?"

She sighed and rubbed her face. "I can dream," she said. "I have to face facts though. How long could some over-willing over-weight ex-dancer hope to hold his attention? These people are sooo smart! At court, I used to talk circles around the gentry. Here, it's like my brain is stuck in tree sap!"

"Don't slight yourself, Zee," Wren said. "Over-weight you can fix. Over-willing? When has that ever turned a man off? As to smarts, there's some awfully sharp knives in the rack here--but that doesn't make you stupid. You're a savant now. Dorian was ready to worship you on the spot. With all the mages here, a savant of magic is a big deal."

"I suppose," Ziedra murmured, voice trailing off.

"Zee, what's the matter?"

The dancer didn't answer.

"Zee?"

"Wren, I don't want to lose you."

She drew a breath and turned on her side to look at her friend. Ziedra had sat up and was hugging her knees.

"Zee, I told you, we'll always be friends, nothing will change that."

The dancer bumped her forehead against her knees. "Wren, I have this terrible premonition. It just makes me cold inside that you are going away and not coming back."

"I won't be alone this time," she said. "Everyone is helping me."

The dancer let out a breath. "I just have this sense, that when it comes down to it-- I don't know how--but you will be alone."

"What is this? Some sort of gypsy soothsaying? Come on, this is Loric, Damay and the others. They are not so easily brushed aside. I've seen what they can do!"

"Didn't you have to rescue them from that trap?"

Wren rubbed the bridge of her nose. "That was a special circumstance! It couldn't happen again!"

Ziedra straightened up and locked gazes with Wren. The woman's face was the most serious she had ever seen it. Her dark eyes were intense and deep. When she spoke, her voice sounded hard and flinty. "No?"

"No!" Wren burst out.

Ziedra's voice dropped. "Now, I wonder which of us is the fool." She drew a breath. "Fractions of a bell ago, Dorian swore I couldn't cast that spell. A tenday ago, people would have sworn there was no way to defeat the *Damak Shalat ki Frio* and her daughters, her judges, and all the players of the great game. It came *this* close to happening." The woman's brow furrowed and she raised up a narrow space between her fingers. "You *sacrificed* yourself to save them. That's the noble kind of person you are. Hecate is going to force you to choose. You or your family." Ziedra looked away, Wren heard the catch in the dancer's voice. "We both know what you'll choose."

The grim finality in the woman's voice made an icy tremble shoot up Wren's spine. She swallowed. Ziedra was so *certain*. Wren dropped off the rock and padded over behind the dancer. She put her arms around her neck. Ziedra moaned and tilted her head back to rest on Wren's shoulder, her long silky hair spilled down Wren's front in a black cascade.

"Now, you listen to me, Ziedra," Wren said in a low growl. "I am *not* going to give that bitch the satisfaction of killing me or my family. You hear me?"

Ziedra nodded in silence.

Wren let her face press against Ziedra's. Was it her friend she was really trying to convince? She would do anything to get her family back--and was justifying any effort toward that end. She even brought Damay back as a weapon to help her. Were Ziedra's fears founded, would she kill herself out of guilt? She had spent so long hating her mother and father--thinking they had abandoned her to the streets. The truth was the ones abandoned were her parents--she had left them victims of that witch Mishaka and her hated patron Hecate.

Still, in the final analysis they were only ciphers to her--names without faces. Mother, father, brother--no matter how hard she tried she couldn't remember anything about them. They were her blood and ties to an unfathomable heritage--the Aesir, and the pantheon lord Idun. More names, more unknowns, more uncertainty--why was her need so great? Was it a yearning for acceptance? Was she seeking validation, or simply trying to satisfy a morbid desire to know what her life might have been?

Blood these people might be, but they were fixtures of a past almost two decades gone. Even if they were recovered, it was silly to think they would simply go back to being a family. Yet, in the back of her head, she had always held fast to some faerie-tale fantasy reunion with her parents. Was it that delusion that made her willing to die for people she didn't know and couldn't remember? Was it misguided nobility or simple revenge--to steal back everything Hecate had denied her?

Freeing her mother and father had consumed her since she learned they were alive and captives of Hecate. What happened if she succeeded? She already had a family. Desiray, Ziedra, Vera, they were family to her--until their falling out, she thought of Dorian as a world-wise big sister. Since her first day in the citadel, Loric had been a kindly grandfather figure, and Cassandra the well-meaning but meddling matriarch. She was just now starting to find some kind of equilibrium, some comfort in the confusion. Was she really so eager to cast that off to embrace some fantasy?

One thing was certain. If she went and got herself killed she wouldn't have to confront that painful choice. Perhaps that's what made her so reckless. Do the right thing, but be absolved from choosing one family over the other by the simple fact that she wasn't alive to do so. What stupidity. Did some part of her really want to get

killed in the process? Since the Dagger cult attacked, she had lost so much. The makeshift family of the Brethren had been ruthlessly slaughtered. Grahm and Jharon now dead. Everything she ever cared about had been methodically destroyed. That deserved a reckoning. For that alone, she would pursue Mishaka and do everything she could to repay the pain. As for her beast patron, Hecate--somehow, some way, she would get even with her as well. The destruction of the avatars in Riverback village was just a start. She would find a way.

Ziedra was right, if Hecate and Mishaka got their way, she *would* be forced to choose between her own life and those of her family. Truth was, if she wasn't committed enough to the enterprise to face that possibility, she had no chance at success. As meek Vera had told her during many a workout--there was merely trying and then there was *doing*. She needed to be certain. She must stay focused. The reasons for her efforts against Hecate were irrelevant now. There was nothing but the goal and its accomplishment. The moon goddess would not be allowed to keep her family.

"You're crying," Ziedra said the words as if they hurt her. "Don't cry."

Wren put a hand to her face, surprised to find tears. She hadn't even noticed the heat in her face. How she longed to have things back the way they were, when life was simple.

Ziedra pulled Wren's arms from around her neck, turned around on the rock and pulled Wren close in a hug. Her friend trembled against her, arms shuddering as they pulled tight. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm so selfish--I know this isn't easy for you."

She put her chin on Ziedra's shoulder and patted her on the back. "It's not selfish to want to keep the people we love close to us. Nearly everyone wants that." She swallowed. "We just have to have the courage to challenge anyone who tries to take our loved ones away."

"Wren I'd do anything for you, you know that. I'm not afraid."

"Zee, I've never discounted your bravery--just your readiness. I don't even know if I'm ready myself. You're all I have left--it would kill me if you got hurt."

"You think it's any different for me? How do you think I felt watching that game, those people hurting you, and knowing there was absolutely nothing I could do even if I had been there. I *hate* feeling helpless. I *want* to help you."

Wren thumped Ziedra on the back. "Then help me by not getting hurt or killed. I don't think you realize how much it meant to me so see you alive again, to get you out of that dive, and see you happy and safe. Of all the things that have happened to me in the last season, you are the *very best thing*."

Ziedra growled. "I want to do more than--than just sit around!"

"Then do that," a familiar feminine voice said from behind them. "Get up off your lazy butt in the mornings and learn to fight."

Wren turned and saw Desiray dressed in her blue guild leathers, her white hair bound with a red headband. She wore a traveling pack, and had all of her swords and knives sheathed and battle ready. She walked across the rooftop and stopped a short distance away.

"Wren puts you on a pedestal because there's no place else to put you," Desiray continued. "You can resent it, but that's the sorry fact. You're the daughter of two very capable warriors. Maybe it's time you acted the part."

Ziedra pushed back from Wren. "Fighting did nothing but get my parents killed."

Desiray shook her head. "So what are you going to do when Hecate's minions come after Wren--*dance them to death*? Fighting didn't kill your parents, it was the untrustworthy people they chose to have dealings with."

"Des, don't tell her that. She doesn't have to fight," Wren said.

"Doesn't she?" the guild mistress said. "Are you always going to be around to fight her fights for her? What happens when Sindra and Drucilla decide to stop taking care of her? What then?"

"Nobody fights my fights for me," Ziedra growled.

"No?" Desiray brushed back her hair and folded her arms.

Ziedra put hands on hips. "No!"

Desiray raised an eyebrow. "Ziedra, I think you're a really nice girl, but you're too complacent. I'm no great judge of ability, but even I can tell you've never really touched your potential. You danced in Corwin because it was easy--it came natural." She nodded to Wren. "Your friend here. She has natural ability too, but she's sweated blood her whole life to make herself even better. I have triple her experience and she rivals me in many disciplines. You want to help Wren--*try*. Until you really make an effort, all that talk is just making excuses for a lack of resolve. You say you love her--well, Girl, I say *prove* it."

Wren saw Ziedra's hands balling into fists and her cheeks reddening. She felt her own face grow hot. "Desiray, you have no right to say things like that to her! That is so unkind!"

The mistress made a dismissing gesture. "Wren, I have every right. I care about you, I care what happens to you. Ziedra--" she pointed to the dark-haired dancer. "Is nothing but a victim. She's been victimized her whole life--in fact, she's made herself the victim on purpose. You don't need that. You don't need to solve her problems, you need to solve your own. If Ziedra wants to help you, she first has to resolve those personal issues, and not be afraid to make something *real* of herself."

Wren growled. She couldn't believe that Desiray would just suddenly attack Ziedra like this. What was the matter with her? "Desiray--you are so wrong--" Wren stopped when Ziedra grabbed her shoulder.

The woman's face was red but her expression was hard. "No, she's right. I might not like it--but there's plenty of truth to what she says. I haven't been able to do anything because I haven't made myself able to."

"Zee," Desiray said. "I know I sound like a witch saying this to you. But, I know how much Wren cares for you. You'll always be a target--the least you can do is not be an easy one. She doesn't need anymore grief in her life. Understand?"

Silent, the dancer nodded. Her fists were still clenched though.

Desiray drew a breath. "For Wren's sake I'd teach you myself if it would help. We both know that there are better, more *patient* teachers around. I just encourage you to make use of them... soon."

"Des, she can't catch up to me! Not in the short time before things are going to start happening. I've been in training my whole life."

Desiray's green eyes flashed. "You'd be surprised what you can make happen around here." She nodded to Ziedra. "You just have to want it bad enough." The woman focused on Wren. "On the subject, of wants... I want you to help me with that lock-picking expedition Damay told us about."

Wren's eyes widened and she felt a tremor in her stomach. "You want my help? What for?"

"The same reason Loric wanted Damay--wards. You can see them and foil them. I know I'm a joke compared to you when it comes to that. I know Mishaka will have left some nasty ones, there won't be any room for mistakes."

"Then why don't you take a real mage along? Take Dorian or Cassandra."

"Dorian is busy, and Cassandra--bless her boots--is a trap tripping nightmare."

"I can't believe that. She's a lore mage, how could--"

"A lore mage with three left feet," Desiray insisted. "The gods blessed her with the ability to make traps go off just by breathing. I don't know where she got her karma, but after a while it got so bad I started making her stay in the back of the party. That kind of luck we don't need. Now, you going to help or not?"

"This is about that Magnum Cipher lock Damay mentioned, isn't it?"

"Damn right," Desiray grinned. "I've never seen a full scale vault done by the master locksmith Foldrin!" She rubbed her hands together, grinning like a child. "This is going to be so *sweet!*"

"It's going to be *dangerous!*" Ziedra finally chimed in, hands on hips.

"Yeah, that too," Desiray admitted, still enthusiastic.

"Do you really think there will be anything in that vault worth the risk?" Wren asked. The white-haired woman shrugged. "There's usually something valuable in a vault. Should be enough to pay for the trouble. Loric and Damay cleared most of it for us. We just have to crack the wards and break into that juicy vault."

"You want to go into some avatar's vault, and you don't even know if there's anything worthwhile inside?" Ziedra asked. Her voice rang with a hard incredulous edge.

"Zee," Desiray said. "It's a little concept called *risk*. You ought to try it sometime."

The dancer growled. "I'm thinking about it right *now!*"

Wren held up placating hands. "Listen, I don't want you two fighting anymore than you have. Zee, I should go help Desiray, there just *might* be something valuable in Mishaka's vault. Who knows what that witch might have put in there." She glanced at Desiray. "What about guards?"

"Loric assured me that he and Damay had cleaned the place out. He did advise that it wouldn't stay clear long. Which is why I'm ready to go now, it's already been over night."

Wren looked at the mistress with one eye closed. "I think I'm getting the translated version. I've been around your husband long enough now to know that's just not how he does things. He probably said that 'we should go back soon', meaning he would escort you."

Desiray blew a strand of white hair out of her eyes. She looked up to the sun high in the sky, and then back to Wren. "So." She shrugged. "You and I are big girls, we were doing this kind of job solo a long time ago."

"Are you sure?" Ziedra said, her expression showing she was annoyed at being left out of the conversation. "This is the home of an avatar."

The mistress made a dismissing gesture. "The traps will be tougher. Loric said they cleaned out the worst--I believe him." She winked at Wren. "What's left will be a challenge enough I'm sure."

"I don't like the sound of it," Ziedra said. "It's so soon after Wren's recovery." She looked to Wren. "Are you feeling strong enough?"

"The workout this morning wasn't too bad," she replied. "With all the training I've been getting, I bounce back a lot faster than I did. Those special treatments down in the lab aren't like regular healing--when it's done you don't even have a scratch left."

"I saw," the dancer stated with a nod. Her dark eyes shifted toward Desiray. "You're going to take care of Wren?"

The woman sighed. She put a hand on Ziedra's shoulder. Her voice became more soothing and persuasive. "Yes. It'll be okay. You ought to use the time while we're gone to see if you can find a tutor to help you with training. I'm serious. This fight against Hecate is not going to end overnight, and Wren will need help... we'll *all* need help."

Eyes wide, the dancer nodded. "Okay, I'll get Radian to help me find some training right away," she agreed. She paused, voice tentative. "You *sure* you two will be okay?"

Desiray smiled and nodded. "I *promise*."

Wren knew then that they would be anything but okay.

To be the best, you must constantly challenge yourself. Life without a challenge is just boring anyway...

--Desiray Illkaren Felspar

Chapter 29

Mishaka's Stronghold

Wren drew a breath of frosty air and let it out slowly, watching as curls of vapor wafted from her nose and mouth. Damn it was cold. Hints of some kind of spice-based incense hung heavy and cloying in the chilly air. The dressed stone halls of the ancient temple stretching out around them were as still and dead as a tomb. Occasionally, a draft would eddy through the array of colonnades, stairwells, and galleries making a disturbing sound not unlike a moan of pain. Already, Wren disliked this place intensely, just the *feel* of the place made her skin crawl.

Studying a small hand-drawn map, Desiray stood near her at the head of a stairwell that lead deeper into the bowels of the giant structure. A draft moaned through the hall stirring the night-black edges of the woman's shadow cloak. Frowning, she looked up at the sound and ran a hand through her white hair. "I swear I've been in kingdoms smaller than this place."

"It needed to be this big," Wren grumbled. "Just to fit that witch Mishaka's ego inside."

Desiray smiled. She poked the map with her finger. "It looks like we've bypassed the worst of the traps on this level. It's a good thing that Loric and Damay made a sweep through here before we did. The mechanical traps were bad enough."

"You need to talk to him about that," Wren said with a frown. "Loric made it sound like they'd cleaned everything out."

"Oh, don't be such a grouch," Desiray responded. "He just left some presents behind to keep us entertained."

"Sharp, poisonous, *pointy* presents I can live without!" Wren looked down at her own dark cloak which now sported a half-dozen perforations from a rather nasty crossbow trap.

Desiray raised an eyebrow. "Now, you were the one who insisted you could disarm it. I was going to fly us over it."

Wren snorted. "I don't think I like this Foldrin character much. *Three* sets of tamper detection mechanisms? Did the guy have any life at all? Who has that much time?!"

"We're dealing with the best," Desiray said with a nod. "Okay down this way, right side of the stairs, don't touch the banister after the fifteenth step."

Wren followed Desiray down into the gloom. The mistress was in her element and obviously enjoying every moment of it. As they neared the bottom, the eerie moaning of the air above them guttered out as though shut behind a door. Wren's breath caught and she glanced back up the steps. Nothing looked out of place, the light filtering in from above appeared unchanged. Below her, she heard the ring of Desiray's sword being unsheathed. The woman muttered a word and the long blade gave off a faint bluish light that illuminated the steps below them.

Desiray paused at the landing at the base of the steps, sniffing the air. Wren stepped down next to her. Together they peered down another short series of steps into carved-stone corridor that led off into darkness beyond the radius of the mistress' light. She smelled the air and wrinkled her nose. It was nothing at all like odor of incense from above--a sour scent like over-ripe citrus.

The guild mistress frowned. She slid the map into a pouch on her side and pulled a dagger. She descended the steps, skipping every fourth tread. Feeling a tremor of nervousness, Wren pulled her own sword and followed, making sure to emulate the mistress' actions.

Desiray stopped at the bottom, obviously waiting for Wren.

"Why did we just do that?" Wren asked her. "Did you see a trap?"

"No," Desiray admitted. "A number of great trap makers put triggers on the prime numbered treads one, three, five, seven, and eleven. Foldrin hated odd numbers--so I figure he'd trap on the even treads above perfect threes--four, eight, and twelve."

"You were just guessing?"

Desiray per her fists on her hips. "Did we set off a trap?"

Wren scratched her head and looked at the bare marble steps. There really didn't look to be anyplace one could even *put* a trap mechanism in that solid rock wall. There was nary a seam or even a place to disguise a pore in that polished granite. "Well--*no*..." Her voice trailed off. That was hardly proof that they'd actually avoided a trap.

The white-haired woman raised an eyebrow. "Go jump on those steps if you want, just wait until I get down the hall a bit. I can smell the acid in the wall."

"Is that what that sour odor is?"

Desiray didn't answer, she just moved ahead watching the walls and the tiles underfoot. Wren sighed and followed in the woman's footsteps. She had to remind herself, even though they were friends now, Desiray was still the mistress. Though the woman looked young, she actually had a couple decades more of practical mission experience.

They turned a corner, and proceeded down more steps. Desiray took these without particular care. She did rap the wall with her sword as they went down though. The metal rang like a chime, each impact hard enough to make small divots in the stone.

At the bottom, the mistress looked around with a frown. The corridor just continued straight into the darkness. Wren didn't see a reason for the woman's hesitation.

"What's wrong?"

"Should be another landing," Desiray responded. "Damn, these are powerful illusions. I can't see through them."

"Illusions?" Wren looked around. To her, she just seemed to be standing at the beginning of a corridor. She reached out and touched the wall. It *felt* solid. "How do you know it's an illusion?"

"Instinct," she murmured, brow furrowing.

"Well, how did Loric and Damay get through here then?"

"They're elders."

"What does being a living fossil have to do with anything?"

Desiray tapped her temple. "Brain power for one thing." She turned and swung her sword at the right wall it made ringing peel as it struck sparks off the surface. She repeated the process on the left wall. "Damn it." She growled. "I am *not* going to ask for help." She sat down in the middle of the corridor and covered her face with her hands. After a moment, she straightened up and reached into pouch on her side. She pulled out a handful of silver coins. "Here take these."

Wren took them. "What am I going to do with them?"

"Flick one down that corridor there," she indicated ahead. "Then one at each wall here." She pointed right and left. She bowed her head, hands gripping her knees. "Go."

With a shrug, Wren flipped a coin to the right, which hit the wall with clink, bounced off and hit the floor, teetering around in odd circles before revolving to a stop. She

flipped the next coin down the corridor, where it rolled for several paces and finally came to a stop next to a wall. Last, she flipped a coin off to the left. This one rebounded as well, staggering a bit, before shimmying to a stop.

Desiray drew a breath. "The right wall is the illusion. I heard the coin bounce down the steps. This is the most damnable spell. The only flaw is that the sound of the coins spinning to a stop is the same each time. It even accounts for distance down the hall."

Wren stared at the right wall. Frowning, she pressed against it. It still felt solid. Before this, she had trusted the mistress' instincts, but this just made no sense.

Desiray rose and glared at the wall as if it were an opponent. "One of us could fall through the illusion, but I know there will be a trap on the other side. Damn it." She scrubbed her forehead. "Loric didn't mention this, I have to talk to him about that."

"Traps are okay, but illusions aren't, huh?" Wren asked with a smile.

"Oh hush, you aren't helping," Desiray said fingering a strand of hair. "See, the nasty part of these spells is that you perceive what you *expect* to experience..." Her voice trailed off as she studied the wall.

A woman cleared her throat behind them. "Oh Desiray, don't tell me you're stumped by one little illusion?"

Heart beating fast, Wren whirled, dagger readied to throw. She stopped abruptly as she noticed the intruder was *gold* and hovering above the steps. Ebony-colored eyes glinting in the dim light, Cassandra grinned at them and waved. She wore a deep indigo shift and black breeches that made her practically invisible in the poor light. The only thing that set her off from the background was a faint reddish glow that glistened on the surface of her skin.

Desiray growled. "You about scared the life out of me!"

"Don't tell me," Cassandra put a jeweled hand to her chest. "That *I*--the mage with three left feet--snuck up on you. You *can't* be saying that can you?" She drifted down to their level. Boots still not touching the floor she glanced around.

The guild mistress frowned. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you had errands to do."

"I'm happy to see you too, Darling." Smiling, Cassandra floated closer and kissed Desiray on the cheek.

"You're not supposed to follow me," the woman grumbled.

"You're not supposed to leave me behind." Putting a long fingernail between her teeth, Cassandra nibbled it as she examined the area with narrowed eyes. "You're right. It's a pretty good illusion. There are some imperfections in the projection however."

"Oh yeah?"

The gold mage smiled. "Yes, Dear." She drifted toward the left wall and floated up until she could almost touch the ceiling. She reached out a fingertip and touched the wall. Where her finger met the stone, ripples radiated outward in a series of widening circles like a stone dropped on the surface of water. "See?"

Desiray snorted. "Show off."

Wren chuckled. "Guess there's no substitute for brain power."

"Exactly my thought," Cassandra agreed. "Besides, I wanted to see Desiray match up against her hero Foldrin."

"He's not my hero."

"Then why there are three books about him on your night table?"

"I was doing--*research*."

"Yes, right, whatever," the gold mage said making a dismissing gesture. She turned toward the right wall, and drifting at a constant speed went right through it.

Wren blinked.

"It looks safe enough," Cassandra said, her voice issuing from a very real looking, very solid feeling wall. The woman's arm suddenly protruded from the surface of the stone. She made a 'follow me' gesture with her finger. "Coming?"

Desiray stepped up to the wall and simply banged against it. She made a snarling sound.

Wren heard Cassandra sigh on the far side. "Just step back and close your eyes."

Desiray did so. After a moment Wren saw Desiray float gently off the floor.

"Hey," the mistress let out.

"Just hold still and keep your eyes shut."

Taking a breath, Desiray closed her eyes. A moment more passed and Desiray drifted forward and through the wall.

Apparently, one had to know with absolute certainty that the wall didn't exist or you simply couldn't make yourself violate something you knew to be solid. Wren focused her nola power until she felt energies buzzing in the back of her head. She doubted the creator of the illusion knew about savant powers. Placing her hand on the surface, she took hold with her climbing power and pulled.

The result was a jumble of sensory information, one part of her brain felt her hand slipping on the surface. The nola part of her found nothing to grip. She followed that sensation, closing her eyes and leaning into the area her under-senses told her must be empty air.

A warm hand took hers and gently pulled her forward a few steps.

"Very good," Cassandra told her.

Wren opened her eyes. The three of them now stood at the topmost landing of a staircase that spiraled down a square shaft into darkness.

Cassandra rubbed her hands together, sparks whirled around her fingers then spread out to form an elongated shape. Green lines of light crisscrossed within the two pace long perimeter, describing fist-sized bulges at either end. The light flared and a wooden construct took its place--studded with jewels and precious metal an ornate battle-staff now glowed in the mage's palm.

The gold woman thumped the weapon on the floor. The jewel in the headpiece sent forth a swath of white light that illuminated the steps ahead as though in daylight. She swung the staff around, a brilliant circle of radiance played along the walls that were frescoed in various images of fire-eyed wolves baying at a bloody moon.

Wren nodded. "Nice, I could get used to having a mage around."

Desiray cast a fractious glance at Cassandra. "She has her uses every once in while."

The gold woman made a face at Desiray, sticking her tongue out in a very unladylike fashion.

Desiray crouched and went down to hands and knees, approaching the edge of the landing with care. She felt down the wall and part way across the tread.

"Skip the first step," she said back to Wren. "Stay close to the wall." She rose and glanced at Cassandra, her gaze settled on the mage's booted feet which still hadn't touched the floor. "You just keep doing that. Maybe we won't set off any traps."

The gold woman sighed. "Lords...trigger a few tricks, and I'm marked for life."

The guild mistress led the way down the steps. "Your ass wasn't the one that got singed."

Cassandra glanced to Wren, smiled and made a helpless shrug. She gestured her forward, keeping the shaft of light trained on the steps where they were walking. The mage drifted silently behind her as they negotiated the steps.

"Do you think there will be anything worthwhile in this vault?" Wren asked.

"You never know," Cassandra said, lowering her voice. "Every possibility, even slim ones, are worth checking. We really need a break on finding those anchor gates-- otherwise getting into Cosmodarus is going to be a long and arduous task."

Desiray moved as though walking on eggshells. Apparently, something about this winding stairwell made her nervous. Wren followed with exceptional care, making sure to place her feet exactly as the mistress did. Expression intent and alert, but otherwise totally relaxed Cassandra wafted along in her wake like a kite on a string.

The stairs wound their way down the square vertical shaft, landings at each corner. Cassandra's bright illumination showed that there was still a quite a ways to descend.

"Why don't we just forget the steps?" Wren asked. "With you here we can just go down the well and not risk it."

Cassandra shrugged.

"There's filaments in the well," Desiray mumbled, eyes fixed on the stone steps ahead of her. "We'd get cut to pieces."

Wren didn't see anything in the gap that looked dangerous. Of course, she'd heard of hidden and invisible wires, but there was usually some trace evidence.

She glanced back at Cassandra who simply shrugged. The mage reached into a pouch and pulled out a handful of what looked like silver dust. Still floating, she hovered close to the rail and blew across her palm sending a cloud of silver sparkles raining into the open space of the shaft. She shined the bright light of the staff on the gently falling cloud.

Mirrored reflections lined up in a winking metallic rain revealing a narrow lattice of threads laced all through the inside of the stairwell.

"She knows her business," Cassandra commended.

"I still have some things to learn I guess," Wren admitted.

"Damn right," Desiray muttered. Just as the woman uttered the words, there was a hollow sounding click as her weight settled on the next stair tread. "Oh shreds..." Desiray let out, teetering on one foot and freezing in the spot where she'd stepped.

Wren felt her heart leap to a gallop. "Don't move!" Swallowing, she quickly knelt by Desiray's leg.

"No jest!" The mistress said in a shrill voice. "Damn it, damn it, do you see the mechanism!?"

"I see a pitch pin," Wren said, finding the trigger. "It's a reflex activator." She touched the metal rod fitted into a notch in the wall ever so gently. "Damn, Des, it's got a lot of tension on it. It probably takes two people to normally set this thing off. No way I can lock it down for you to move."

"Back up," Cassandra said, reaching down and pulling on her shoulder. "Get behind me."

Desiray turned her head toward the mage. "What are you going to do?"

The gold woman pushed Wren past her up the steps. "Don't ask silly questions. Just hold still." The woman drew a breath and the soft red glow on her skin became a shimmering nimbus of colors. She took Desiray by the shoulder.

"Cassaaandra..." Desiray's voice shook. "What..."

"Don't move, damn it," the gold mage growled. "Just take my hand." Desiray grabbed hold of the woman's wrist.

Cassandra spun the staff so the butt end was down against the step, and starting mumbling a series of odd sounding words.

Wren's heart speeded. She couldn't be thinking to... She backed up another step. Lords, no way she could run far enough!

With a sudden heave, Cassandra jerked Desiray up and back. The stair reset with a clunk. Desiray had enough time to scream a curse. Wren was forced to shield her face

as blinding traces of fire and lightning exploded down into the spot with tremendous force, sending scalding air hissing up the shaft and shaking the whole structure.

Desiray's yell continued long after both she and Cassandra should have been turned to ash. Wren uncovered her face to find the two women hovering two steps up from where the white-haired woman had been standing. A pale sphere of illumination surrounding them flickered out. Desiray had one arm wrapped around the gold woman's neck and her face buried in her chest. Neither woman looked harmed. Desiray swallowed her yell and looked up in sheepish surprise. Everywhere close, the stone was charred black, except for a spherical area immediately around their hovering bodies.

The gold mage huffed and gasped like she had run a long distance. "Damn--" She swallowed and wiggled a finger in her ear. "That--*that*," she emphasized the word. "Was a powerful detonation."

Desiray let go of Cassandra and dropped to the steps with a gasp. Breathing hard, she sheathed her sword and sat down. She looked around at the circular radius of burn marks. She wiped at her face with a shaky hand. Her voice shook. "Shreds that was close. I have thick skin, but there would have been nothing left of me!"

"Yes," Cassandra mused aloud. "Just think, if I hadn't been here, poor little Wren would have been forced to pick up little--" She held up a small space between her fingers. "*tiny--minute* pieces of you. I shan't think that--"

"All right! All right!" Desiray growled gripping her white hair in both hands. "Thank you for saving my life! Yes, it's a good thing you followed me! Satisfied now?!"

Cassandra grinned, a smug expression on her face. "Eminently so. Shall we proceed?" She held a hand out to Desiray.

The white-haired woman stared at the hand for a moment before finally standing. She looked back to Wren. "You okay?"

She nodded. That was probably the most powerful trap she had ever had the misfortune of witnessing. The thickest armor plating would have been liquefied in instants.

As they resumed their trek down, she tried out her voice. "That--" She cleared her throat. "That was really impressive."

"Thank you," Cassandra beamed. Her dark eyes glittered in the uneven light. "Bit more exciting than I would prefer, but better than having to collect my sister-wife's remains with a sponge."

Desiray shot Cassandra a withering glance. "Far be it from you to rub it in..."

"Far be it for you to be showing off," Cassandra said in a firm voice. "We're supposed to be helping Wren. Not getting her killed. You should have waited for Loric--you knew this place was dangerous but decided to try to solo it anyway."

"I was doing *fine* until someone distracted me!" Desiray snapped.

Cassandra sighed and rolled her eyes.

They proceeded the rest of the way to the bottom without further incident. Desiray was hesitant in a few instances, but with the additional help of Cassandra's amazing eyesight they circumvented the rest of the triggers. With each landing, the atmosphere grew steadily warmer and the humidity made beads of perspiration collect on Wren's face.

The bottom opened into a marble-floored chamber with a high arched ceiling. The humid air had an indescribable acrid reek to it, forcing Wren to take shallow breaths to keep her eyes from watering. As Cassandra panned the light of the staff around in the chamber, Wren's stomach tightened. Everywhere the granite and marble was cratered and blackened by what must have been a titanic struggle. The remains of

more than a dozen giant humanoids made of some kind of metal lay scattered throughout the battle zone.

Desiray whistled. "Whoa, no wonder Loric looked a bit winded."

"Adamantium golems," Cassandra murmured, hovering over the remains of one of the creatures.

Wren stepped closer to get a look. Looking vaguely like a blunt-faced giant cast from metal, the monster lay in a large blackened circle on the marble slab. A huge gash had been ripped in the thing's chest. When standing and intact the creature would have easily been three times the height of a man, its disproportionate hands large enough to crush a human torso with little difficulty. Cracks and divots in the stone around the disabled creature showed the obvious power with which it could strike.

"They look *tough*," Wren murmured.

"They are," Desiray said stepping up beside her. "We tangled with one last winter. Took me and half dozen others to kill the damn thing."

Wren looked around and shuddered. "And Loric and Damay did all this by themselves...?"

"Scary isn't it?" Cassandra remarked, floating away.

Wren glanced around again before following the gold woman.

It was scary indeed.

At the far end of the chamber the three of them slowed. A huge mural covered the rear wall depicting a cloud-shrouded range of mountains over which hung a blue-white moon gleaming in a starry night. Wren would have thought the image beautiful if she had not known the significance of what it represented. In the center of the wall was an alcove surrounded by a carved marble offset and guarded by tall caryatids carved to resemble priestesses with their hands outstretched to the moon. Even from their distant vantage Wren could see what looked like a huge metal valve built into the back.

With their goal in sight, strangely Cassandra's attention was captured by something else. She glided over to examine something on the floor in one corner.

"What is it?" Desiray asked. "A teleport circle?"

"Yes," Cassandra reported.

Wren walked over to see what she was looking at. It appeared as nothing more than a slightly raised disk of black material about five paces across. Runes that gave off a faint blue light were etched around its radius. "Teleport circle?" she repeated.

Cassandra looked over to Wren. "The easy way in. You don't think someone like Mishaka actually takes all those stairs do you?" She pointed to the stairwell. "Those are only for peons and overconfident thieves."

"Ha ha," Desiray muttered, studying the marble carving around the alcove. "It's a good sign we might find something of value. Convenient access means she probably used this place."

Wren looked back to what Desiray was doing. The white-haired woman was starting to reach toward the marble flashing around the alcove. Wren frowned, there was a disturbing angry red skein of ward lines laced all around the opening. "Des, don't touch that! There's a ward on that entry."

"Ack!" Desiray jerked her hand back, and took a hasty step backward. She put fists on hips and glared at her. "Why didn't you say something!?"

Wren glanced at Cassandra who was grinning. She rubbed the back of her neck. "I just did." She walked over to stand by Desiray. Folding her arms she studied the structure of the pulsing lines of magical force. She didn't see a single weak spot to exploit. There was a massive amount of energy in the spell too, she could hear it

humming in her mind like a hive of angry insects. "Damn, this is the nastiest ward I've ever seen. It'd make that stairwell explosion seem like some holiday flash powder." She shrugged. "This is way over my head. There's all kinds of balanced energies here. The slightest bend would touch it off."

"Good call," Cassandra said, dark eyes glittering. Staff over her shoulder she rose higher in the air and seemed to be examining the surface of the ward. "This is a tenth order ward. It's self-contained and has what appears to be tamper detection. And as Wren said, you don't want to get bitten by this thing--it *might* bring the whole mountain down on us."

Desiray rolled her eyes. "Dammit. The door is right there--I can see the Magnum Cypher."

"Well," Cassandra called down, drifting to another section of the ward. "I suggest you keep your distance until we figure this out. Wren, can you tell, does it go back into the rock?"

Her brow furrowed as she concentrated on the ward. Lips pursed she walked to the wall well clear of the ward and pressed her palm to the painted stone. The stone vibrated with alien energies.

"I think if you break the surface of this wall, you'll set it off. There's threads all through this area to keep you from going around it."

Cassandra touched the wall with the tip of her finger and rubbed it against her thumb. Her eyes narrowed. "I concur. Guess we should expect this sort of thing from a goddess of *magic*. I wonder if Loric and Damay slipped this one already and it came back or they just didn't bother."

"They must have slipped it," Desiray said. "Damay read the smithing mark off the door mechanism. She couldn't do that from out here."

The gold mage shook her head and landed by Wren. "Gads, the things my husband can do. How did he bring it down? That ward is rock solid."

"Damay is a lot more experienced than I am," Wren remarked. "She might have seen a weakness to exploit."

"I don't think so," Cassandra mused tapping the staff on her shoulder. Her brow furrowed. "If they found a weakness, he would have eliminated the ward altogether like he did the others. No--either he broke it and it regenerated or they found a way around it."

"He's smarter than me then," Wren said. "I don't see a way under, over, or around it. Unless, they knew the pass phrase or the counter spell somehow."

Desiray smacked her forehead. "Of course! He sooth-spoke the damn thing. He told it what it wanted to hear and they just strolled through it."

Cassandra pressed her lips to a line and nodded. "Ah, yes, Desiray, I believe you have the answer."

"Can you do that?" Wren asked.

Cassandra frowned. "No." She sniffed and smacked the butt of her staff on the floor. Her voice turned to a growl. "It's something I've been trying to get him to teach me for a *long* time." She looked to Desiray. "I know you want to do this on your own, but I'd just call him. I *might* be able to crack this thing--but if I mess up--at best--we'd have no vault."

Desiray made a rumbling sound in her throat. "I don't want to do that."

The gold woman sighed. "Remember this isn't for you, it's for Wren."

The guild mistress looked over. Her emerald eyes searched Wren's face for a moment. Her shoulders slumped a bit. She sighed. "Call him."

It was barely a few long breaths later, using Mishaka's own teleport circle, Lord Loric Felspar flashed into being in a shimmering of colors and a rasp of displaced air. Gray

streaked hair pulled back into a tail, broad face open and smiling, the man nodded to them. The elder came dressed in mirror polished chain-mail over which he wore a blue and white tabard decorated with a red starburst. He carried a massive two-handed sword in his fist around which a green aura flickered and played like reflections on stormy water.

"Ladies," he bowed.

"Should you be doing that?" Cassandra asked. "Using Mishaka's teleport circle. It might be monitored."

"Indeed," he answered, his expression turning stern. "More than monitored, my dear wife, phase displaced, blocked, *and* trapped. I may have already mentioned how annoyed I am with these people." His voice took on a seething tone that made Wren's skin prickle. "The minions of that bitch Hecate nearly killed my son--I will see that paid back. First, they will know that their petty tricks cannot stop me. Then they will know *pain*." He glanced around the room which ably demonstrated the kind of carnage this man was capable of. "A great *deal* of pain..."

Wren drew a breath. She never ever wanted this man mad at her. The look in his deep gray eyes was pure danger.

Loric swung the sword onto his shoulder and strode toward the alcove. He raised his hand and spoke a guttural phrase that made Wren's throat hurt just thinking about it. There was a distant echo of the sound, as if the rock all around them were acknowledging the command. The chamber shuddered, air gusted and swirled, growing cooler and less tense. Wren watched as the lines of the ward dimmed and finally winked out.

Not stepping across the threshold Loric reached inside the alcove and pressed on a stone that recessed at his touch. A rumbling sound filled the chamber as thick slabs ground into place over the alcove floor.

Loric stepped to Desiray, put a hand on her shoulder and gestured inside with his sword. "Your cipher awaits milady."

Desiray's green eyes were wide as she glanced around the chamber and back to the alcove. Truly, there had been more to this place than anyone had even begun to sense. When she had mentioned about the 'brain power' of elders, she had not been overstating.

The mistress stepped up onto the low platform that now covered the alcove floor and probably prevented some sort of floor trap from going off.

Feeling a bit uneasy, but confident of Loric's power, Wren stepped toward the opening. She paused and glanced at him. The powerful man nodded. She stepped up and followed. She noticed that Cassandra hung back and put an arm around her husband. Wren felt the buzz of telepathic exchanges. No doubt she was telling Loric about the adventure of getting down to this chamber.

She shook her head. If Desiray had simply asked Loric, all of that could have been avoided.

The vault door was made of a golden metal that Wren guessed was some alloy of adamantine, it had a sparkle to it not normally associated with that rare mystical element. She guessed it was probably some material that had magic absorptive qualities. The cipher itself was nothing more than a turn wheel, bolt toggle, pull handle, and eight small slides that each had ten horizontal positions. The slides were arranged in a vertical row obviously to indicate hierarchy.

As she considered the possibilities Wren's stomach twisted. "Lords--this'll be a snap--only a *billion* possible combinations."

The mistress held up her hand for quiet. Her brow furrowed as she studied the thing with folded arms. She looked back to the chamber and her husband. "Loric, what have you tried on this?"

Loric straightened, and he and Cassandra entered the alcove. "I tried lore speaking, all of the major and minor opening and unsealing magicks, and several 'significant' number patterns--Hecate's birth date, key victory dates, ages and such."

"Maybe it's not Hecate's mind we're trying to decode, but Foldrin's," Wren suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing," Desiray said. "However, the vault was constructed for her. It had his smithing mark--but that doesn't mean he built it willingly."

"What difference would that make?" Loric asked.

"If I'm a vindictive master lock smith, and I'm being coerced into creating a masterpiece..."

Loric rubbed his chin. "He might have deliberately built in a weakness."

"Exactly."

"Then the question is whether he was forced to do it," Cassandra said. "His workmanship is all over this temple."

"Yes it is," Desiray said. "I've never seen more than a few of his works in one place. To have all of those traps, *and* the magnum cipher is--*unlikely*--at least not without coercion." The woman rubbed the back of her neck.

Desiray turned and faced the side wall. With slow methodical pacing, she removed her backpack and gloves, then brushed back her hair. Eyes closed, lids fluttering, she took deep breaths like she was preparing to dive underwater.

Taking a breath, she pivoted to face the door. Rubbing her hands together, she stepped forward and laid her fingers delicately on the surface. She placed her thumb on the slide lever, and with great care cycled it through each of its ten positions several times. After a few moments of apparent indecision, she left the first cipher set to three, then started with the next one down.

She repeated the process, and after some time left the slide on six. The third she pushed to nine. The fourth slide seemed to pose a problem, she kept cycling through the first, second and third positions. She finally settled on two, and went on to the fifth slide. The fifth she positioned at four after only a short pause. The sixth she set to four as well. The seventh and eight slides she set to eight and one respectively.

She stepped back with an intake of breath. "One part feel, one part surmise, and one part guess." She looked back to Wren. "Want to try the bolt?"

Wren was stunned. "Me? This is your dream, I don't want to take away from it."

"You do it," Desiray said. "My hands are shaking too much."

Wren glanced back at Loric. The elder nodded. "Should be safe, even if the combination is wrong."

She drew a breath and stepped up to the toggle lever. Her own hand started shaking as she realized that this door might guard the piece of information that led them to her family. One at a time she wrapped her fingers around the metal bar, then pulled down.

It didn't move. She pulled harder--the metal wouldn't budge.

"Wait," Desiray said, hand's on hips. After a second's thought, she stepped forward, and moved the fourth slide to the number one position. "Try it now."

Wren pulled, not expecting it to move. This was the magnum cipher and there were hundreds of millions of combinations. The handle clunked into the down position.

Wren staggered back from it. "Lords, Des, you did it!"

The mistress had her hands pressed together in front of her lips, emerald eyes misty. "Yes, I did... on the second try."

"Oh come now, Desiray!" Cassandra cheered. "That was an *amazing* performance. If it had been the hundredth try, I'd still be floored. Very--very--good, Dear."

The mistress frowned. "Wasn't a fair test. Mishaka forced him. He deliberately left a hole in the puzzle..." Her voice trailed off.

Wren studied the woman. She looked sad rather than happy. She had done something that few people in entire world might have been able to do, and was disappointed with her performance.

"Fair or not," Loric said with approval in his voice. "It was a marvelous job. Leave us open it." He stepped forward and spun the turn wheel to disengage the bolts in the door.

"I doubt another magnum cipher like this exists," Desiray murmured. "I'll never know if I could beat him or not."

"For what it's worth, I think you won," Wren put in, rubbing Desiray's shoulder and trying to cheer her up. "You defeated plenty of his traps."

The woman's voice stayed flat. "Foldrin was a master *lock* smith. He just happened to be a very talented craftsman where traps were concerned."

"Oh stop it," Loric ordered. "Foldrin wasn't the only master lock smith in existence. I know plenty of Numinorian craftsman who have existing works you can try and beat. I doubt they'll be as easy to defeat as this baby, Foldrin."

Desiray snorted and folded her arms. However, she did seem mollified.

Loric leaned back and pulled the door open.

The massive portal swung outward with a groan and hiss of stale dusty air that stank of spice preservatives and wax cloth sealant. The interior was dark, but Wren sensed it was huge.

Cassandra activated the light on her staff and shone it inside. "Lords," she breathed. "I think we hit the big pay off..."

For summers I told myself, some day I'll hit it big and retire. Odd how many times I hit it big, and didn't seem any closer to retiring-- funny how when you do the math 1 percent of something just isn't all that much...

--Wren

Chapter 30

The Colossal Score

The awe in Cassandra's voice made Wren's chest tighten, and she felt a chill down her spine. "...pay off..." The words continued to echo in the vast chamber beyond as Loric continued to pull the vault door all the way open. The brilliant cone of light cast by Cassandra's staff did not reach the ceiling and the back wall was only a dim vanishing point where the illumination attenuated. Reflections from polished metal and faceted jewels created a luminous display like the winking of thousands of tiny mirrors. Beyond the vault threshold, the floor became a sea of wealth. Coins minted in dozens of unknown kingdoms had been raked into heaps. Jewels, jewelry, weapons, armor, furniture, plate ware and art had similarly been gathered together into hillocks of incredible value. Wren had read myths about the hoards kept by super-ancient dragons, how they consisted of veritable mountains of coins and jewels--she had never fancied ever seeing such a thing.

Yet, here it was--a hoard that rivaled anything described in a storybook she could bring to mind--not that her brain was working well at the moment. She swallowed and reminded herself to take a breath. How many kingdoms had been looted to create this display? Fifty? A *hundred*?

"Oh--my--lord..." Cassandra's voice trailed off. She caught herself against the door frame.

Desiray made an incoherent sound and clutched her hair with both hands. "Uhhh," She swallowed. "Uhhh." She wiped absently at her lips. "Whoa..."

Loric muttered a word and his sword cast a circle of radiance much like Cassandra's staff. He panned the light around, revealing a landscape of riches that could only have come from some adventurer's fantasy--or five millennia of pillage.

"Well," he said, glancing back at the three of them. "This should cover tomorrow's lunch don't you think?"

"For a couple of eons," Wren murmured shaking her head.

Desiray let out a laugh that was part hysteria and part amazement. "It's--it's--Hecate's *main* treasury."

Cassandra turned and went to Desiray. She put an arm around the guild mistress. "Breathe, Des--*breathe*."

The mistress put a hand to her chest and gasped. "Good--good idea."

Rubbing his chin and glancing around Loric nodded. "This seems like a good place to make Hecate sting a bit. Don't you think?"

"Sure," Wren said, still awed. "If you could move it."

"No problem," he murmured. "I have gate spells and items that can manage it all. The problem is where to put it."

That snapped Desiray out of her daze. "You mean we're going to take it *all*?!" She stared at him like she didn't know her own husband. "But--"

"Every last copper," Loric answered with a growl. "Bertram had the right idea on how to deal with the cartels. Hecate is no different. *Starve* them out. Armies need weapons--they need *food*--and while the priests can create some food they can't

consistently feed an army. No--that takes money--and a lot of it." He shook his head. "And here's enough to make a statement."

"Darling, it will be a declaration of war," Cassandra said in cool voice.

"It was already a war when they tried to kill my son," he growled. "This will be the way I pick up the gauntlet." He frowned. "If we move all the equipment, the counsel labs in the bronze hall sub-basement should be big enough to hold it all."

"You want to put this at the citadel!?" Cassandra gasped. "What if Hecate sends her minions for it?"

Loric's face turned grim. His expression so intense it made Wren quiver inside. The elder's tone dropped. "Then we kill them..."

Loric called back to the citadel telepathically. In moments, Wren felt and sensed the flurry of communications focused on Cassandra and Desiray. The two women closed their eyes and focused their entire attention on the incoming flood of requests for direction and information. With an intake of breath and a crack of his knuckles, Lord Felspar bent himself to the task of moving the treasury. The white gem on his sternum gave off a pulsing light as he gathered energy into himself, and sent waves of force cascading through the vault chamber. As the magic streaked out, dark things hidden in the shadows of the treasure ignited into flame, shrieked and went silent. A swing of his arm sent ward energies writhing through the area, and a clenched fist sealed off the alcove where they stood.

Hands glowing like stars, the man chanted his way into more complicated spells that spun outward like spider webs. Deep vocalizations from him sent dim tendrils of energy burrowing into the ground like giant ephemeral worms. Wren didn't know what any of it did, but she felt the power of it making the walls and ceiling shake.

In the span of a few long breaths, Loric had the whole chamber lit up in all of its glittering majesty as he summoned glowing spheres of crystal and levitated them to locations throughout the area. A clap of his hands made the crystals pulse. At the same time, Wren winced feeling a pressure behind her eyes. She noticed that Cassandra and Desiray seemed to flinch as well.

"Dorian reports that the lab is clear," Cassandra said. "She says the front lawn looks like a laboratory clearance sale, but you said to do it at best speed."

"That's fine," Loric rumbled. Beads of sweat trickled down the man's broad face. "Just have her tarp over the fragile materials and collect up anything dangerous--"

The last of Loric's words were drowned out by a boom. The very air quivered with a single powerful pulse that seemed squeeze Wren's head. Everyone staggered.

"Get everyone clear of the drop zone immediately," Loric ordered. "It appears that our intent has been discovered." He stepped into the chamber and made a circular slash with his sword.

The tip of the elder's weapon seemed to slice open the very air, the sides of the cut peeled back to reveal a portal that opened into the main corridor of Bronze Hall.

"Go," Loric gritted. "Make sure the area is clear, I don't have time to be careful now."

Another impact vibrated the marrow of Wren's bones. Wren didn't know which was more amazing. The strength of the shields the Loric had erected in such a short time, or the devastating power now being laid against them. She didn't have any more time to ponder as Desiray grabbed her hand and pulled her through the portal.

Wren lay panting on her back in the grass of the citadel north lawn. Her head ached and her ears rang. Perspiration still ran like chilly fingers across her scalp. Her heart was finally beginning to slow. The last quarter bell had been pure chaos. After passing through the gate, it became a frenzied race to make sure everyone was clear of the landing zone. A couple frantic screams from Desiray and Cassandra sent people of all ages sprinting up the passages toward the surface. The 'ransom', as Hecate's treasury was later dubbed, arrived in a roar of magic and displaced air that shattered windows, blew people down, and sent clouds of dust hundreds of paces into the air.

The aftermath became a hastily conducted head check and injury triage. The gigantic volume of air exploded from the tightly sealed bowels of bronze hall created hurricane force winds that blasted throughout the solid granite construction of the citadel. Wounds ranged from scraped knees and elbows, to several fractured bones when an inadequately moored bookcase overturned and nearly crushed one child.

The north lawn became a gathering point and treatment center as everyone checked in and received wound attention.

A short time after the blast, Loric, his garments a shredded and bloody mess, his face blackened and bruised, staggered up to the grassy knoll toward where Everia and Darin were still treating wounds. Wren felt her just calming heart pick up tempo as she saw the powerful elder pause and blink as though dazed.

"Isis eyes, Father!" Everia gasped, rushing to his side and helping him the rest of the way to the top of the hill. Obviously, the girl had never seen Loric so badly injured. Wren doubted anyone had. Lord Felspar had always been the definition of 'high invulnerable'. Obviously to be untouchable required having all of his power, something he most definitely could not have had after the magic she'd seen him cast.

The powerful elder thumped down on his heels and haunches, as Damay, and several others gathered around him. "Never--" He grimaced and drew a breath. "Never try and cast a dozen tenth order spells, a mass gating, and then try to take on a couple of fully powered avatars--it can--" He gulped. "It can be rather... *painful*."

Dressed in a dark red dress, night black hair wreathing in the wind, Gabriella strolled up the rise to stand by Loric. "So, I take it that Hecate knows you are the author of this rather ill-advised confiscation of her funds?"

"Since I got close enough to break all of avatar Dulgoron's teeth," Loric responded in a dark tone. "I think it's a safe assumption."

"Quaint," the Dragon Queen remarked hands on hips. "How atypically violent and irresponsible of you. Had you given mind to the security before you brought the entirety of the abyss down upon our heads?"

"That--" he gasped for air. "That's what friends are for. You will see to it while I-- while I take a moment to recuperate...won't you?"

Gabriella rolled her blue eyes, she gritted her teeth and rocked her head back. Drawing a breath, she stared at him. "Yes, I better do that--damn it." She looked off the back side of the hill, she gestured to the citadel. "Sindra, Drucilla, Brin--with me... quickly now." She turned and headed for the citadel.

"Thanks," Loric called after Gabriella.

The dragon queen looked over her shoulder with pursed her lips. "Think nothing of it."

"You're going to trust house security to those four?" Cassandra demanded. She seemed to get a sight of how bad his injuries were for the first time. "Loric--you're a mess!"

"Yes, Dear, I'm rather a sight." He groaned as Everia cut away his tunic with a knife and started swabbing medicine on the worst of his wounds. "Thank you for pointing that out."

Wren's gaze went from Loric to Gabriella, Brin and the D'klace twins now headed toward the building. Her fight to recover her family had evolved into something much larger than she ever imagined possible.

It was now a war. This wasn't a simple skirmish between mortal armies, this was a vendetta against a pantheon lord powered by the will of a great elder. With Loric injured and one of Hecate's great treasures here at the citadel, where would the conflict lead next?

"I think I better call some reinforcements," Desiray was remarking as she knelt next to her husband. "They probably won't be able to find this place immediately, but when they do they're going to come in force."

Loric made a weak raised hand gesture and nodded to her.

Desiray kissed him on the cheek and headed for the house at a sprint.

Wren lay back on the grass. When did things get so out of control? All she wanted was to get her parents back. When had it become a war? Someone *else's* war. It simply didn't track.

"There you are!" Ziedra said from behind her, dropping down on her knees next to Wren. The woman brushed back her dark hair and studied Wren with a concerned expression. She put a hand on Wren's shoulder, her fingers trembling. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "With all the commotion I didn't know what was going on and nobody knew anything. I thought something had gone wrong!"

"It did," Wren said. "Did you see Loric?"

Ziedra's head came up, her brow furrowing. "I couldn't see. That's who everyone is hovering around?"

"Where were you when the house blew up?"

The woman frowned. "Blew up?" She looked toward the citadel. "It doesn't look blown up to me."

Wren sighed. "Turn of phrase. Loric blew up one of the labs."

"Radian and I were wondering why we were suddenly ordered back."

"I thought you were going to start training."

"I was. Radian took me to get some supplies."

Wren rolled her eyes. "Zee, the only things you need to start training are your brain and your body! There's no shopping involved."

"Well..." Ziedra's voice trailed off. "I *realize* that but..."

She snorted, thumped back in the grass and folded her arms. Well, it wasn't as if one speech from Desiray would change Ziedra overnight. "Priorities, right?"

The woman drew a breath. "Now, don't be like that. I'm still going to train. Radian promised to help." She leaned forward. "Are you hurt?"

She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Tired. I've been scared all afternoon."

"Was it that bad?"

"Place was a frelling chamber of horrors. I can't imagine what it would have been like if Loric and Damay hadn't cleaned it out ahead of us. If we had to fight our way through, we would have died for sure." She sniffed. "Ruined my brand new cloak."

Ziedra laid a cool hand across Wren's brow. "I think you'll live."

Wren swallowed. "Train hard--train fast."

"Huh?"

She drew her knees up and felt a cold chill in her middle. Now, even the citadel couldn't be considered safe for her friend. Where could they go now? "All that noise and fretting over there around Loric. That's because he started a war."

Ziedra's eyes widened. "Pardon."

"That big blast that injured so many people..."

The dancer nodded.

"That was a massive spell going off. That place where we went. It was Hecate's main treasury on Titaan. There was enough gold and jewels there to buy half the kingdoms on the planet."

"No way, you must be exaggerating."

"Trust me, there's *billions*. This was no carpet-store heist, it's a significant chunk of Hecate's entire operating capital. The goddess herself is going to be seriously miffed. It's not like we hadn't already pissed her off. I axed ten of her avatars just days ago. Now, this. Look at him!" She gestured to Loric. "If that can happen to him... Lords..."

"You mean you think Hecate's creatures will come here?"

"Think?" Wren let out a breath. "Get yourself some armor and a blade. Always stick close to someone. They're on their bleedin way, there's no question." She groaned.

"It's going to be like the Brethren guild all over again..."

I was at a party and one of the women there saw the dagger I had in my belt. She wanted to know why I would want to wear a weapon. That, and it was her opinion that fighting was not very lady-like. "Sister," I told her. "You can wait for the knight to rescue you, or you can rescue yourself. Some of us never had the luxury of having that kind of time to waste..."

--Wren

Chapter 31

Preparations For War

The heavy shadows in the chamber made it tough to see. Wren's chest and arms ached and perspiration dripped down her face. She sensed other people around her but stayed focused on the elusive wraith flitting just outside the range of her sword and dagger. She seized an opportunity, angling in and lunging to sink her sword into the torso of her fast moving enemy. Quick as she moved, her opponent sidestepped. Before Wren could act to defend, she felt a sharp crack across her shoulder-blades that knocked her to the padded floor with a thud that knocked a gasp from her.

"Ow." She grunted, feeling the pain and embarrassment work through her. She slammed a fist against the mats. "I would have sworn I had you." She shook her head and looked up to the blonde Myrmigyne who stood over her, the point of a wooden sword pointed at Wren's nose. She felt gazes on her and it only made the flush in her face hotter. She had heard breaths taken as the strike came down across her back.

Wren had taken her own advice to Ziedra. With the increased threat of Hecate's minions, she increased her training regimen--not only with Vera, but with any sword master who would teach. She needed to improve her sword skills. She still remembered the painful hammering she'd taken in the Brethren guild by the mercenary warriors. She was safe as long as she had a weapon to throw and a little range. Unfortunately, she'd already learned that distance was a luxury that could be taken away at any time.

Loric's theft of the vault had added a new urgency to the search for Wren's family. Further probing uncovered more evidence indicating that her family had been specifically targeted by Hecate. The exact reasons for the moon goddess' attack still remained a mystery. Everyone felt certain that it revolved around Wren and her brother both being savants. At one meeting, Damay reported that she had searched the archives and found no other instances of two savants ever being born to the same parents.

Apparently, even in the rare instances when two savants coupled, having even *one* savant child had only happened once or twice in all of the recorded histories. The natural implication, Damay told them, was that Hecate wanted to breed savants--or at the very least study the heredity that resulted in savant births. This likely explained why Wren's parents had been kept alive. This revelation had troubling ramifications. Images of her family being taken apart and experimented on had tortured her sleep since. It only made the anger in her stomach burn hotter. She had passed the point of fearing for her own life. Now, her only fear was of failing to get her family back from that evil witch.

That worst part of all this was there had been very little she could do. The only thing anyone could do was sift for clues until there was a break. Hecate had been ominously secretive about this project. The deities that the family tapped for information expressed concern over the nature of this plan. For past transgressions

and growing instability, even the other pantheon lords shunned Hecate. Few would deal with the goddess.

More unsettling was the discovery that lord Set, Hethanon's patron deity, was actively collaborating with Hecate in some way. Wren couldn't help but wonder if Vulcindra's staged attack on the guild had been for different reasons than she and Desiray surmised. Wren originally thought she and Grahm had been sent on a mission against Cinnabar to make the guild more vulnerable. The fact that Mishaka tracked down and killed Vulcindra before she could be questioned was just another coincidence in a growing conspiracy theory.

"Are you all right?" Beia asked, leaning down next to her. The words startled Wren from the dark thoughts that had suddenly invaded her mind. "I didn't think I hit you that hard."

Wren shook her head, and looked into the woman's emerald eyes. "No, you didn't hit me that hard." She sighed. "Seems like if I'm not constantly focused, my mind just wanders..." Her voice trailed off.

The Myrmigyne pressed her lips together and put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Training hard and keeping yourself busy is good. There will be a break soon. I like Loric's strategy, bring them to us and fight on our terms. One of these servants of Hecate is bound to know something."

Wren frowned. "Well, some of us are going to fight. Damn, I reek at swordplay. Just when I think I have you--I get whacked." Wren rolled her shoulders to ease the sting of the bruise she would no doubt sport.

"You did have me," Beia told her, a smile warming her usually tight features. The woman's emerald eyes gleamed. Despite more than a bell of practice she had only a few dots of perspiration along her hairline. The woman swung her sword onto her shoulder, held out a hand and the two of them rose together. "You were doing good right up to moment your feet gave you away."

"Now, I have treacherous feet?" She looked down and wiggled her toes. "Vera complains about my stances too. I *feel* balanced and stable."

She glanced over and noticed Ziedra and Desiray watching them. Cassandra and Dorian were further across the room chatting about something. She noticed several other family members in the further corners of the training area drilling. She wasn't the only person concerned that a battle was on the way. While the citadel might get attacked en-masse like the Brethren guild had, they would not catch these precincts unprepared to receive an assault. Most of the players from the great game now stalked the halls, powerful guardians more than ready to join arms against Hecate's minions. This was more than a vendetta to those people; it was *revenge*.

She glanced back to Ziedra. Her dark-haired friend was frowning, no doubt upset at seeing Beia hit her. The girl needed to realize it was *fighting* practice. Hits happened. She wished she could hit back more. Beia just moved *wrong*, whenever Wren thought the Myrmigyne would be in one spot, she'd end up in another--usually swinging that damn sword. It took everything she had learned simply to keep from getting thumped every swing.

As she looked at Ziedra's outline in the muted light, she noticed from the woman's silhouette that she'd become noticeably slimmer in the last ten days. Following the house's extensive diet and exercise plan was showing results.

Beia waved a hand. "Wren, your footwork is fine. You have solid stances. It's that off hand. You're *aware* of it. You look for openings for both weapons. You shift your weight when you've chosen. When I see that front leg tense, I know what side you're coming from. Then it's easy to get around and counter." She shrugged. "Right now, the best way for you to improve your weapon work is to get away from Danee style

sword and dagger. Go for a single blade technique instead. Just because you're coordinated enough to use two weapons doesn't mean that's what works best for you."

Wren rubbed her forehead. "What do you use?"

"The *Dan Sadad*," Beia answered. "When fighting two weapons I use *Jacdaw* or *Danee*."

"How come you can use three styles and I can't even use one?"

Beia raised an eyebrow. "Half my life was spent as a pit fighter in the Death Spectacles. You learn different styles or you die." She leaned close. "I've also fought a bit more than you. By the time I was your age I'd already fought more than 600 matches, and had close to fifteen thousand bells of training and probably double that of practice. Coming from your background, if you master one formal style, you will be doing well."

"So what about this *Dan Sadad*?" Wren asked. "Can I learn that?"

The Myrmigyne looked down at her and shook her head. "It's not for you, you're not tall enough and you're too light. You need height and leverage to really use the *Dan Sadad*. It's a first circle fighting regime, the idea is to get in close so your opponent can't use their weapon." She shook her head. "With a reach and strength disadvantage, the last thing you want to do is let your enemy get a hold on you." She pursed her lips, tapping the sword on her shoulder. "You need a solid fourth circle regime that takes advantage of your speed and flexibility. I'm thinking that *Caan Lajaar* would work best." She sniffed. "I only know the fundamentals of the style though, I'm not a master in it."

"*Caan Lajaar*?" Wren repeated. "Can you show me what it looks like?"

Beia drew a breath. Eyes studying the ceiling, she thought for a moment. She stepped back, brought the sword around and flipped it upside down so that the blade lay along the back of her arm and shoulder. She turned slightly and slid into an unfamiliar stance, rising up on the balls of her feet.

Beia's head turned sharply, her free arm snapped out and in sudden blur of motion she leaped forward, her body pirouetting in the air. At the same time, the sword hissed around in a lethal arc. She landed with yell as the sword cleaved down through an invisible opponent. She pulled the blade free with a sliding back step, her head turned as though she had heard an opponent behind her. In a sinuous motion of feet snaking across the mat, she pivoted hands up high and sword blade guarding along her arms and torso. She made a hissing sound and exploded forward in a flurry of cuts, and finishing with a thrust and yell. Knee down and blade impaling an invisible opponent she paused for a moment before drawing back and doing a formal spin of the blade and salute. "*Caan Lajaar*," she said.

Clapping came from several people in the room.

"Whoa," Wren murmured. It sure looked powerful. *At least when Beia was doing it.* "I thought you said you weren't a master!"

"I'm not," Beia said with a shrug. "It's just a sword form. I've seen you do harder G'Yaki forms."

"I guess you just have a more frightening presence when you do it. So, who is a master of this style?"

"T'Gor and Algernon are masters," Beia said. "Dominique is grand master of it. Bertram works a variant called the *Madad Lajaar* which specializes in heavier weapons."

"T'Gor?" Wren asked. "Is all that bending, twisting, and blocking that made me crazy in the game part of that style?"

Beia shook her head. "That is Dan Sadad work, T'Gor is also a master of the Sadad like myself and Tal. However, that defensive technique is T'Gor's signature mastery, it's something he's refined to a high level."

"You're not jesting there," Wren murmured. "I still ache just thinking about that fight. He didn't have to hurt me. I hurt myself just trying to get through that maze of elbows, knees, shoulders and fists."

The Myrmigyne smiled and leaned close. "Don't feel bad, I've heard Loric and some of the elders say he has the best defensive technique of any swordsman in the last millennia."

"Whoa," Wren breathed.

Desiray and Ziedra walked over to them together.

"Are you two done now?" Ziedra asked.

Wren looked sideways at her friend. "Do you need me for something?"

Ziedra frowned. "Well, no..."

"Zee, it's okay, I'll heal... really. Beia didn't hit me that hard--" She glanced up at the bigger woman. "Just hard enough to remind me of my mistakes."

The dark-haired woman snorted.

"Instead of frowning at me," Wren said. "You should be practicing too."

"I have been."

"Oh? When?" Wren put hands on hips. "I've yet to see you practice. The only time I ever see you doing anything. You've been with Radian--and that's *not* practice."

"Honestly, Wren," Ziedra said. "I've been training every day. I've gotten rather good."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "You're 'rather good'--in just a handful of days?" She sighed. "This I have to see. Show me." She reversed her sword and held it out to Ziedra.

"I'd rather not," the dark-haired woman said looking at the weapon with a dubious expression.

"So, then you aren't practicing," Wren said.

"I am," Ziedra insisted, expression serious. "I wouldn't lead you on."

Wren shook the sword in her hand. "Well, then humor me."

The dancer sighed and took the weapon. "Okay, if you insist."

Beia glanced to Ziedra and handed her sword to Wren. She folded her arms. "This should be interesting."

Wren dropped the shorter weapon on the mats and kicked it away. She took a stance opposite Ziedra who just stood there with the sword at her side.

Desiray who had been silent the whole time came over to stand by Beia.

"Aren't you going to take a stance?" Wren asked.

Ziedra rubbed the back of her head and looked down to the sword at her side and wiggled her fingers. She studied her feet, and moved her left foot a fraction, but that was all. She looked like a passenger standing at roadside waiting for a carriage.

"Okay."

"That's a stance?" Wren wondered. "You look like a sparring target."

The dark-haired woman frowned at her. "Hey, you fight your way, I'll fight mine. Come whenever you're ready."

Wren noticed the way Beia was looking at Ziedra with narrowed eyes. No doubt she was waiting for the big wallop that was coming. She'd teach her friend how important it was to take practicing seriously.

She decided to go for her sword hand.

Wren launched herself forward feinting to one side then chopping at Ziedra's wrist.

The dancer stared right into Wren's eyes, and didn't even respond to the feint. She flicked the sword tip up as Wren swung her true attack, wood cracked together and slid as the dark-haired woman rotated her sword, fending Wren's weapon aside and jabbing in the same motion. The tip struck Wren between the breasts with a thud.

"Punta," Beia said with a nod. "Heart stroke."

Wren staggered back rubbing her sternum. Ziedra hadn't even moved her feet. She dropped the sword back to her side.

"What in Hades was that?!" Wren demanded.

"That was you getting killed, Silly," Desiray said grinning.

Ziedra stared at Wren, the woman's face was serious, and the corner of her mouth quirked up.

Wren growled. That had to be an accident. She drew a breath and took a stance. Ziedra nodded to indicate she was ready.

She lunged in, this time against the opposite side. Ziedra's sword flashed left, struck Wren's weapon aside, then sliced up and right and smacked against the side of her neck.

"Ow!"

"Punta," Beia said, shaking her head. "Throat sever."

Ziedra dropped her sword to her side. She looked at Wren and shrugged.

"Damn it. How did you--?"

The dancer looked at the sword. She flicked it up through the same precise crosswise cut and reverse. "Like that."

She rubbed the side of her neck. "All right, one more time."

Ziedra blinked. "Okay."

Wren took a stance again. Ziedra nodded.

Rather than come straight forward, Wren moved around Ziedra in circle. At least she would make the woman move her feet.

Ziedra didn't move. She did turn her head to follow where Wren was at though. Her loss if she was too silly to turn around. When she was directly behind the dancer she jabbed at the small of her back.

The woman swayed left out of the path of the strike, twisting and hooking Wren's sword away with her blade, then bringing the weapon down on Wren's wrist guard with a crack.

"Punta!" Beia cried. "Disarm."

Wren rolled her eyes. "I cannot believe it!"

"That's a pretty good trick," Desiray said.

"Grand master level, *Mikiran Sadad*," Beia said. "The relaxed sword. A very rare style."

"Grand *master*?" Wren echoed eyes wide.

"She cheated," Desiray determined, brushing back her white hair.

"I did not!" Ziedra let out. "Well...*much*."

"Magic," Desiray said. "Or quick teach."

Wren glared at Ziedra with hands on hips.

"Hey, now," the dancer said. "You were the one who insisted on testing me!"

"It's fine to have that technique, Ziedra," Beia said. "You still need the conditioning. While you might be able to make Wren look clumsy, I guarantee you wouldn't do that to someone with more experience. That 'sucker stance' is a classic sword master illusion to impress the students."

"I didn't do it to cheat," Ziedra said. "I did it to catch up with Wren. This whole thing with Hecate has me scared. I can't learn anything fast enough to make a difference. So, Radian suggested I get a *treatment*."

"A bunch of sword technique poured in your ear," Desiray said. "That must have given you a headache."

Ziedra winced. It must have hurt a lot if just thinking about it made her grimace. "However I did it, I know enough now that I won't cut off my foot accidentally, or just get slain out of hand like a prissy." She looked at Wren. "You approve, right?"

Wren rubbed her wrist. "You know I want you to be safe."

"Good," Ziedra said. "I'll add some practical practice to my cheater skills as I can. I'm also trying to learn magic, and that's not easy."

"Did you decide to learn with Dorian?" Wren asked. "You've been keeping to yourself so I don't know half of what you've been doing lately."

"You've been preoccupied," the woman answered. "As to who is teaching me--I'd rather not--"

A boom made the air shudder and the whole structure vibrated overhead. A rising and falling shriek emanated from the walls.

"Oh my lord..." Desiray gasped. "Get your weapons... that's not a drill..."

From orphaned genteel to gypsy coin-dancer, from banging a tambourine to doing pirouettes before the prince, from noble dalliances to being a bar-wench. Now, I'm a savant of magic--a mage and hero in training. They say variety is the spice of life...

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 32

Demon-strations

The nightmare of the attack on the Brethren guild flashed through Wren's mind as she sprinted up the stairs out of the training area. Heart pounding, she heard yelling as she hit the top of the steps and turned the corner toward the kitchen. Deeper in the bowels of the citadel she heard the clash of weapons, and the roar of something inhuman.

"Move! Move!" She saw Cassin dressed in red armor waving at everybody rushing down the hall. Even in the sparse moments that had passed since the alarm sounded, the gold woman was already completely armed. "Here! Weapons and armor!"

A boom rocked the citadel, knocking everyone back a step gripping their ears.

Dorian who was running ahead of Wren staggered forward and caught the sheathed sword and breast-plate thrown to her by her daughter, and was tossing off robes and clipping on the protection with expert hands. Cassandra slid to a stop doing the same.

Cassin tossed Wren a weapon, and a chest protector. The armor was lighter than it looked and fastened in place with only a few straps.

The rest of the people drilling in the training area gathered in the kitchen, throwing on the piecemeal armor and taking up weapons. Everyone staggered again as another blast rocked the front hall. Creatures screamed.

Dressed in deep russet leather armor, Brin sprinted into the kitchen from the south story-room entrance. The man's long dark hair was pulled back into a tail, and he gripped a black glowing orb in his hand. "Dorian you're with me," he shouted. "We support section one! Cassandra, you and Beia divvy up the kids into squads and cover sections three and four. Loric, Damay, and Gabriella are on two. Reinforcements mobilizing!" He grabbed Dorian by the arm and towed her back the way he came. "Go. *Go! Go!*"

"Cassandra," Beia called. "Desiray, Cal, Seb, Jolandrin, Bronawyn, and Darin'kel are on your team. I'll take Cassin, Wren, Zee, Everia, Vera, and Ralani."

"Agreed!" the gold mage acknowledged. She raised her hand and her staff appeared in her hand in flare of green light.

Wren looked around, surprised to hear Vera's name. The cook had appeared out of nowhere, she wore the loose dark robes that Wren saw her wear on the night of the kidnap attempt. The startling thing was the cook did not have on her hood and mask. The little woman's face looked carved from stone, her dark eyes flinty and jaw tight. She held a sword in either fist. How had she gotten dressed and armed so fast?

Wren felt Ziedra clutch her arm. "Wren, are we really going to fight?"

She looked to her friend. "If you don't want to get killed you will." Another boom punctuated her words.

The dark-haired woman swallowed. "Damn."

She patted the woman on the shoulder. "Just stay close."

There was a flash of light and the quiet girl Ralani, who had been a judge in the great game glowed and changed. White feathered wings sprouted from her back and unfurled. A flaming sword appeared in her hand. She traced a star pattern in the air with the tip of the weapon and nodded to Beia.

Vera brought her swords together, tip down and bowed to the Myrmigyne. Everia who had just finished strapping on her armor, looked to Beia and placed a hand over her heart and dipped her head. Cassin put her hand edgewise to her brow and bent her wrist in Beia's direction.

Wren raised her sword and nodded to Beia. Glancing at Wren, Ziedra made a stiff bow.

The six of them were now counting on the Myrmigyne's leadership, Wren didn't doubt for a heartbeat that Beia knew how to handle a combat situation.

"Pair up," Beia ordered. "Cassin and Everia, Wren and Vera, Ralani and Zee you're with me. Our zone is the north wing. We clear and secure."

"Pairs are Des and Darin," Cassandra told her team. "Seb and Jol, Cal and Bronawyn you watch my back. We are assigned to east wing."

"We clear the stairwell and upper hall, then our teams will split up into the wings," Beia said. "Let's go."

The Myrmigyne raised her hand and a gleaming sword flickered into her fingers. A reddish glow flowed around her body. She trotted forward down the west corridor adjoining the kitchen. Wren looked at Vera, then followed Beia. Glancing back, she saw the others trailing behind her. She saw Ziedra's wide eyes and sensed her tension. She would have felt better if someone older than Ralani had been chosen for Ziedra's partner.

Behind them, Cassandra led her group out the south exit, no doubt to approach the main hall from the library.

Another boom rocked the building. Wren couldn't be certain, but some of the explosions were probably allied magic being sent at the enemy.

Wren heard a hum behind her and saw a bright blue light sprout from Cassin's hand. The weapon rasped and thrummed as it moved in the air. The woman's black eyes narrowed. Wren knew how sharp the senses of the gold-skins were--Cassin detected enemies. She raised her own weapon as did the others.

"Stay behind me," Beia directed as they turned a corner.

Beia moved into the adjoining chamber and it was as if the doors of Hades had been thrown wide open. More than a dozen massive creatures hunched in the main entry, scaly beasts twice the size of a man, with six clawed arms, draconic heads, and bat-like wings.

They roared at seeing Beia and rushed forward. The Myrmigyne moved toward them with a cry, her sword a silver blur that tore into the bodies of the first two to reach her. Vera sprang forward from her place at Wren's side, and she rushed to keep up with the G'Yaki.

Vera's double blades ripped into scaly hides with impressive force, rocking two creatures before they could react. Wren stepped in with her sword, hacking down on one creature's arm as it reached for the G'Yaki. She scored hard, but the damage was minimal.

She wanted her daggers! This sword did almost nothing!

Beia's blade sent demon blood flying, ripping howls from the creatures on every swing, but it was Cassin that wrought the real destruction. The gold woman carved through the creatures as though they were figures of wax. Her gleaming light blade severed everything it hit, shearing away arms, wings, legs and torso in flaring impacts and sizzles of inhuman flesh.

Five demons had fallen before Wren took a third swing. Cassin waded into the fight behind Beia, narrowed black eyes reflecting the brilliant glow of the weapon in her fist. "Bring them to me," Cassin growled.

Wren blinked and another creature hit the floor, its severed upper torso leaving a grisly red smear on the marble.

By the time they reached the steps leading upstairs four more creatures were down and several more had joined in from above. Beia and Vera funneled the monsters toward the devastating maw of Cassin's blade.

Engage, draw blood, and retreat. The creatures that pursued died in heartbeats.

Cassandra's group entered the main hall as they reached the top of the stairwell. The area had become a graveyard of smoking, blood-splashed demon bodies that stank of sulfur and rot.

"Lords." Cassandra waved a hand in front of her face. "What a stink. Everyone okay up there? We had to fight a few in the library."

"No injuries," Beia reported.

Wren glanced at Ziedra. The dark-haired woman had a decidedly green cast to her skin, but she stood her ground next to Ralani, watching the hallway.

"Okay," Beia said. "We advance. Cassin, you okay with staying the designated killer?"

The gold girl nodded. "I can keep my blade going a bit longer. I'll warn you if the charge starts running low."

"Cassandra, we're moving up."

"On your tail. Be careful." The gold mage floated up the steps, with the members of her team trailing.

Green eyes narrowed, Desiray stalked up the steps behind Cassandra, her sword Khairhavlul still dripping with demon blood. She brushed back her white hair and nodded to Wren.

Wren nodded back. Even though the anger smoldering in the woman's emerald eyes wasn't directed at her, it still sent a shiver up her spine.

Willowy Jolandrin loomed behind Desiray, moving with a seasoned warrior's alert poise and intensity. Her dark eyes looked like chips of coal as she scanned the surroundings with gritted teeth.

"Wren?" Cassandra called to her as Beia turned down the hall.

She looked back.

"Here," the mage said. "Azimuth." A glowing blade flared into the gold woman's hand in a whirl of sparking magic. She lobbed the weapon to Wren.

Wren caught the worn hilt. Just feeling the precisely balanced weight of the gold-hilted dagger in her palm made her feel more at ease. There was no eye she couldn't put out with a beautifully made weapon like this. "Azimuth," she said, feeling a tingle rush up her arm as the weapon synchronized its magic with her. "Thanks, Cassandra--a *lot*."

The mage waved at her with a grin. "No thanks needed, better than you embarrassing yourself with that sword."

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks."

Wren turned to catch up with the others, noting that Vera had hung back to stay with her. The dusky skinned woman remained silent, her face still an unreadable mask. Wren saw no fear, no anger, nor any hint of anything except danger in the girl's dark glinting eyes.

Vera nodded to her and they raced to catch up with the others as they headed into the north wing.

"No more explosions," Wren murmured. "I wonder if that means the attack is over."

Vera shook her head.

Wren had only been in the north wing a few times. This was section of the citadel where Cassin and Annawen shared a suite with Sindra and Drucilla. She tried to keep

as much space as possible between herself and the D'klace twins. Darin'kel and Everia also quartered here, as well as Desiray's two married sons and their wives.

Beia moved ahead of the group checking doors, looking in unlocked rooms and securing the doors.

"Does it make any sense for enemies to be up here?" Everia asked.

"It does if you want to kill or kidnap family members to put pressure on Loric," Cassin said in a dark tone.

Wren swallowed. She tightened her grip on the sword and dagger she was holding. She couldn't help but feel partly responsible for these creatures invading Loric's home. It all started with her quest to find her family and escalated from there.

The night lighting cast the hall an eerie green illumination. The whole castle had gone suspiciously quiet except for the sound of footsteps and the occasional murmur of their voices. Wren's heart seemed loud in the silence. By the tension in the other bodies around her, they had taken notice of it too.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked over at Ziedra. The woman's dusky face was pale. She leaned close.

"There's something strange," Ziedra whispered in her ear.

"What?"

"I--" Ziedra started. "I just have this tingle in the back of my head..."

Wren stiffened, feeling an icy fist hit her in the chest. She was starting to feel it too. "Beia... *stop!*"

The Myrmigyne halted mid-step and looked back.

Wren's voice shook. "Back up--*everyone*--back to the stairs..."

The Myrmigyne tensed, glancing around. Her voice dropped. "Wha--?" She cut off in mid-word, straightening up. She turned and looked up the corridor.

The skin on the back of Wren's neck prickled.

"Dark," Cassin murmured. "Do it--*damn*--do what she says."

Everia and Ralani started backing up.

"Damn, I need my *bow*, but I can't summon it." Beia backed up a few steps.

"What is it? What's that feeling?" Ziedra asked.

Wren took a breath. "Avatar..."

I adore attention, I thrive on it-- or at least I *did* until Wren's secret admirers started paying us visits...

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 33

Mishaka's House-call

The pale illumination of the hall cast the faces around Wren in sickly shades of luminescent green, eyes shone in the dim light, eyes now wide at the mere sound of the word--*avatars*. A humming tension ran through the corridor, a dry charged feeling that made the skin prickle. A scent reminiscent of dying flowers wafted through the still air overpowering the stench of slain demons. Wren swallowed, her saliva suddenly dry in her mouth. Her heart, already beating fast, seemed to skip beats, making an ache throb in her temples. She felt a tingle in the back of her head where she felt her savant power. Something was wrong, she usually only felt that in the presence of other savants or when the powers of Gaea were being used.

The flowery redolence made Wren's stomach tighten. Could it be Mishaka? It wasn't like Hecate would have many avatars left--she herself helped kill ten of them.

"Back up," Beia said, pushing the others back. "We need some elders up here."

Wren didn't move. An icy chill ran through her. "Get Desiray. We'll kill the bitch."

"Bitch?" Ziedra said from several steps back. "Do you know who it is?"

Her voice burned in her throat. A red haze had filmed over everything in her sight. She tightened her grip on her weapons. "Mishaka."

"Wren, no," Beia said, stepping in front of her. "If it is Mishaka, it's a trap."

The fact didn't bother her. She would wring the location out of the white witch if she had to grind all her immortal bones to powder. "So?"

"Wren," Beia growled. "Get back to the stairs. That's an order."

A bolt of heat shot through her insides. She glared at Beia. "You don't--"

Before she could finish her words the Myrmigyne had launched forward and grabbed her. Her power activated with a snarl in the back of her head. The woman had already shoved her down the hall toward the stairwell and planted herself in the corridor. She raised her sword tip to the fighting position. "You will not give them a captive to use against Loric."

Sword and dagger gripped white knuckled, Wren stood with her savant power crackling around her arms and legs. She stared at Beia. She was not some piece of meat to be shoved around. She jerked around with a snarl as a hand touched her shoulder.

Ziedra snatched her hand back. "Wren?"

"That witch has my family," she growled. "I want to know where they are, and I want her permanently *dead*."

Beia stepped forward with the sword tip ahead of her. "Move Wren, we are not engaging this creature without backup."

Cassin stepped forward, placing her humming weapon in Wren's path. The woman's gold face was set in a frown, her dark eyes like fragments of the night sky. "Please. I know how angry you are, but this isn't the right moment."

"When the *frell* will be the right moment?"

Cassin put a hand against Wren's chest. "Not *now*."

A gust of air blew out of the corridor. A silhouette outlined in red light appeared at a turn in the corridor and took a few steps forward. "My my," a female voice said in echoing tones that made Wren's skin prickle. "Is all this argument over me?"

The hatred that Wren suddenly felt was the most powerful force she had ever experienced. The savant energy churning through her became a scream. She jumped back from Cassin and launched Azimuth in a curving arc over Beia's shoulder that would bring the blade home between the two eyes glowing in the darkness.

The weapon shrieked to target. Charged with savant magic it lit up the hall, igniting tapestries and wooden picture frames as it blasted past. The avatar swatted the weapon aside with a jeweled staff in her hand, causing the hate-energized weapon to explode through the stone wall.

The figure raised its head, she pushed back the hood of a black cloak and flipped out her flowing white hair. "Still upset over that tasty little boy, eh, Liandra?" she said in a sugary tone. Mishaka stepped forward, black high-heeled boots clacking on the floor. She twirled the gleaming staff in her hand, dark smoke seemed to whirl around the weapon.

Beia's attention seemed to focus on that staff. She did a fast side-step to get back next to Cassin, keeping her weapon trained on the intruder. She made thrusting with her palm to everyone behind her. "Back off. Back off."

Wren snarled. Back off? She would not back away. That was Mishaka. She started to move and was grabbed from behind by at least two strong people.

Cassin pulled something black off her side and pointed it at the avatar. "That's close enough."

Mishaka's glowing eyes narrowed. "Indeed." She leaned on the glittering black staff, and tilted her head to one side. She smiled with crimson lips, teeth pearlescent and even. "I trust we have made our point. The Felspar cannot hide from us behind their magicks. We make you this simple offer." The avatar's glowing eyes narrowed. "Give us Liandra Kergatha, and all transgressions against us will be forgotten. Otherwise, our visits will become a daily occurrence until we have the girl, or all of you are dead--whichever comes last."

"Witch," Wren growled, struggling with the people holding her. The heat rushing through her was a scalding haze, making her body shake and her teeth grind.

"Little girl," Mishaka crooned. "How I hunger for a taste of your flesh."

Tears of rage left burning trails on Wren's cheeks. "Mishaka, I *will* come for you--" She choked. "I swear I will."

"How sweet of you," the avatar dipped her head and placed a hand between her breasts. "That will save me the trouble of coming to get you." Her lips pursed and her voice became a dark boom that resounded throughout the halls of the citadel. "You have ten days to give up Liandra Kergatha. Otherwise, we shall be back, and next time we will not be so pleasant." She tapped the staff on the floor twice and a light flared around her body and she vanished.

"Mishaka!" Wren screamed. The witch had been right there, close enough to touch, close enough to *strangle*. She shuddered with loathing and the naked desire to destroy. She had been so close! "Let go of me!" She shook off the hands that had been restraining her.

"Calm down," Beia told her. "Fighting with us doesn't solve anything."

"Damn you!" Wren cried. "She was right *there*. We should have knocked that bitch down, and wrung the information out of her!"

"You think she didn't come prepared for a fight, Wren?" Beia growled. "Girl, you know *nothing*. That wasn't Mishaka, that was Hecate herself working through her."

That was the staff of shadows in her hand. She could have razed the citadel to the ground."

Cassin let out a breath. "Damn, if Hecate is taking a personal hand..."

"She wants Wren bad..." Everia said.

"But why?" Ziedra demanded. "Why would a goddess want..?"

Ziedra's words were cut short as Loric's deep growling voice boomed in Wren's head, and in everyone else's from the way they stiffened. <All household members and citadel guests report immediately to the kitchen area for debriefing.>

She's such a little slip of a girl, but fast as lightning and so unpredictable. As the players in the great game learned, she's like a snake, pay her respect and handle her right--otherwise you get *bit*...

--Jolandrin Steelwood

Chapter 34

Regroup

Face burning, body still trembling with anger, Wren stood at the western end of the citadel dining table. Desiray and Ziedra flanked her on either side, each with a hand on her shoulder. Even little Vera, eyes narrowed and darkened in her cowl stood in front of her like a guard expecting her to attack. It was no secret she was angry and frustrated. Mishaka had been so *close*. Loric, Damay, Gabriella and Brin stood at eastern end with the balance of the citadel's inhabitants standing in a rough semi-circle two ranks deep. Hard eyes, stern faces, and taut bodies filled the kitchen and dining hall with a dangerous tension. A number of people had minor cuts and scrapes, their clothing torn and burned. The foul sulfurous smell of slain demons that lingered in the air no doubt did little to help temperaments.

Loric raised his fist for silence. "The expected reprisal against us has taken place," Loric said in a tone rougher than Wren had ever heard it. "My apologies to all, especially our guests. We had prepared a fast response to any violation of these precincts, and the quick reaction of everyone prevented any significant penetration of our defenses by their forces. I commend all of you. Now--"

"Loric," Desiray interrupted. "Doesn't it bother you that they didn't even ask for the treasury? They wanted *Wren*. That was *not* part of our contingency arrangements."

When Desiray said 'Wren', she felt Ziedra clamp down on her shoulder.

Loric motioned for a halt, his stern face not changing expression. "It's not outside of our plan, Des. You and she *did* just kill ten avatars. I'm surprised they didn't ask for you too."

"How did they know it was Wren?" someone else asked. "*We* weren't even sure it was Wren until we all saw them come apart."

"You have to respect the divining powers of a pantheon lord," Gabriella said.

"Besides that, our avenues of inquiry make it fairly obvious who the originator of our search is."

"Actually, the bigger concern is how easily the perimeter was breached," Brin said. "This location must have been under surveillance longer than we anticipated."

"No," Dorian said, shaking her head. "We've totally underestimated Wren's significance to Hecate's plan. Initially, we thought Wren was just another name in a long list of succorunding victims. It appears there was a more specific agenda in regards to Wren and her family--"

As the conversation bounced around, the white-hot frustration Wren had barely been holding in check came exploding to the surface. "Talk, talk, talk...!!!" she growled, feeling herself restrained as she leaned forward. "What are we going to *do*? Mishaka was right--" She stomped her foot, her voice bursting out in a yell. "*Here! Damn!*"

"Shhh," Ziedra hushed at her side, gripping her arm. "Wren..."

"Wren," Loric said. "I understand your frustration..."

"No, you *don't* understand my frustration!" Wren cried. "You have been at this for more than a score-day! Nobody knows anything! Now, that bitch is going to order everyone killed unless I turn myself over to them. Frustration doesn't even *touch* what I'm feeling right now--okay?"

"Wren," Damay said. "This outburst is pointless. Focus. They can't help you if you don't let them."

"Pointless!" she railed. "Pointless has been this whole search! We had a chance to gang up on Mishaka." She pounded a fist into the table, and shot a glare at Beia. "We pissed the chance away! Gahhh!" She smacked a palm against her forehead.

"Wren," Loric said. "Beia was simply following procedure; *my* procedure."

"Well--*Sir*--" she seethed. "That procedure just *frelled* us."

"Wren." Loric growled. "Calm yourself, I assure you we are far from done or defeated. I admit our defenses were breached more easily than I anticipated, but that doesn't change the character of this conflict. We will simply move the battlefield to a safer vantage. What you don't understand is that this attack has actually presented us with an opportunity."

"An opportunity?" Desiray chimed in. "Now, I don't get it."

"If people will restrain themselves," Loric looked around with a frown. "I will explain."

"Now, if we were to dig in as Hecate no-doubt expects we will, we would indeed be as Wren says--*frelled*."

Cassandra's eyes widened. "We're going--" Her voice cracked. "We're going to let them have the citadel?"

"What choice is there?" Loric said with shrug. "Until the defenses are shored up, this location is of little value. Until we know exactly what weakness they exploited we can't count on being able to tighten things down before they attack again. I'd never be foolish enough to think they'll actually wait ten days."

"At least that makes sense," Wren growled.

"But we can't move everything!" Cassandra gasped. "What about my *library*!"

"I assume if you want to keep your lore safe you're going to have to get creative. If we aren't moved in forty-eight hours I'd say there's no point in trying to move."

"Lords Loric," Gabriella breathed. "Move the main lab in bronze hall?"

Loric looked around. "Don't misunderstand, I'm prepared to accept that we may very well have to scuttle some of the labs. I don't want that research to fall into the wrong hands."

"Isis eyes," Dorian breathed. "Where though? I've got secure locations in Elysium but nothing big enough..."

"Hold onto planning for just a moment," Loric said. "We have others that may be able to help us. Cassandra--I know your dam has resources that can hold everything in this citadel including the sub-basements."

Cassandra gripped her face. "But Nonna is one of the people we're trying to keep out of that lore!"

"Yes," Loric agreed. "If it comes to that, who would you rather have it--Hecate or the Kriar?"

Cassandra's jaw dropped. "I--"

"Get back to me on that..." Loric said, motioning her to silence. "We have other resources. Aarlen has generously offered to put us up--thanks to Beia of course. I'm thinking of partially taking her offer, the great tree at Jhandris'Kul would make an excellent location for a temporary base of operations for four reasons. One, it is in an *extremely* inaccessible location. Two, it is under the protection of Nethra and the Shael Dal, and it has the latest tweaked versions of the Council shielding. Three, there is a rather large and formidable army in residence there. The fourth reason, is certainly not a leastwise consideration, time runs very differently there. As much as a fifty to one ratio with common space. Of course, the biggest consideration is whether Beia wants such bothersome guests in her city."

"You know you're welcome, Loric," Beia said from where she leaned against the kitchen counter. "We can easily accommodate everyone. The sisters would rejoice at the opportunity to get a change of scenery where male visitors are concerned."

"I like the choice for other reasons," Loric looked around. "The regimen in Nethra's precincts is little different than what we follow here. We all need to be sharp to meet this challenge."

"Damn it," Cassandra said. "I still don't know how we'll secure and move everything."

"We're going to have to call in some markers," Loric said. "We have to figure that Hecate may anticipate this exodus, so we can't take half measures with security. Our attempt to move is likely to trigger an attack..."

It was all too much for Wren. The war was completely out of control. While the people of Loric's clan had not been defeated, they had lost their citadel. Without magical security, it was as effectively destroyed as if it had been razed to the ground.

She hugged herself, feeling angry, frustrated, and afraid, feeling the tears roll down her cheeks. She hadn't meant for this to happen. She couldn't stop it from happening. It was all so beyond her. There was nothing she could do, and certainly nothing she could say that would make up for what she had brought down on these people. Hecate wanted *her*--no-one else.

"Wren," a deep voice said, suddenly and startlingly close. Loric's deep soothing baritone. She looked up as he gently put his hand against her cheek. "It's not your fault. I chose to let you live here. You have actually done us a service. We had become complacent thinking ourselves safe. It's an expensive mistake that we'll learn from and grow stronger." He leaned forward. "It's an expense that Hecate will be financing from her own coffers. So, don't feel bad--it's not like there was any peace between us to begin with. If Hecate didn't want us involved, she shouldn't have attacked people in our family." He patted her shoulder. "It's okay, it will all work out. This is just a test for all of us. Let's rise to the challenge--*together*--okay?"

Still feeling lost and helpless, Wren nodded. What choice did she have? It wasn't like she could light out on her own. She had nowhere to go. In her heart she knew giving herself to Hecate wouldn't solve anything. She had to trust in Loric and the resourcefulness of his clan.

Together they would somehow find a way fight a goddess.

A tree? We're going to live in a tree? For some reason I suspect it won't have bathing facilities...
--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 35

Exodus

Wren stared up. She drew a breath of the loamy rich jungle air, feeling the breeze cool and wet against her cheeks. What she saw still didn't make sense. Then again, little in the last forty-odd sleepless bells made sense. The seething anger she felt after the confrontation with Mishaka had cooled, there simply hadn't been room in her thoughts in the ensuing chaos. So much happened after that brief meeting that the events piled over themselves in her mind. She'd seen so many amazing feats in the last two days that she'd almost lost her ability to be impressed.

Looking up, she found she still had some dregs of awe left to summon up. *Big*. That was the simple word. This went beyond that... the shaft in Starholme Prime had been titanic, but it had been something constructed. This was a living thing. The tree casting its monstrous shadow over the Jhandris valley stretched more than a thousand paces into the sky. With a bole as big around as the citadel had been across, the great tree called Duran'Gravar was simply gargantuan in its scale. She'd seen smaller mountains. The people standing around the roots looked like bugs. That such a thing could exist was impossible, yet, there it was flying in the face of all that was reasonable and logical. If that wasn't startling enough, the sky framing it was a bizarre color--purple with streaks of azure, pink, and white.

"Incredible," Ziedra breathed next to her. "It's gigantic." She shook her head. "And the sky..." her voice trailed off.

"Yeah," Wren glanced to her friend. The dark-haired Silissian dancer looked pale and drawn, dark eyes wide as she gazed at the place that would be their next home for an unknown period of time. The woman brushed at the trickles of perspiration already running down her face. On top of looking unusual, this place felt odd, a tingling felt in the bones that was separate and distinct from the heat and humidity that made it hard to breathe.

Wren eyed the brush around them, she felt very out of place in this unfamiliar landscape. The thick foliage could conceal a person standing only a few paces away. The sound of bugs, birds, and animals created a din comparable to the racket in market square during noon-time.

"Now that I look around, *everything* here is big," Wren remarked. She wiggled a finger in her ear as a squawking brightly plumed bird flew overhead. "And *loud*."

"Big, loud, and your *home* until Loric figures out how Hecate's people got into the citadel," Dorian said, stepping out of the brush behind them. The dark-haired mage looked a wreck, hair mussed, buttons undone and heavy staff dragging in the soil behind her.

"You won't be staying here, Lady Dorian?" Ziedra asked.

"I have a home of my own, safely in the shadow of Lady Isis," the mage replied. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, and blinked her green eyes. "A home and bed that I desperately need to get to. Lords, I'm tired."

"Everyone is," Desiray said, walking in from the path. The mistress looked a little fatigued, but not stomped the way Dorian obviously was. The white-haired woman looked up to the sky and drew a breath and let it out slow. "Whew. Forgot how hot it gets here." She started undoing buttons on her blouse. "I didn't think we could do it... but Loric pulled it off."

"We *all* pulled it off," Dorian corrected. "Everyone working together. Quite a show." She put a hand to her forehead body wavering.

Desiray put out a hand to steady her. "I think you overdid, Dori."

The brush behind them stirred, and Wren saw Cassin and Annawen pressing through the undergrowth. The two gold girls wore what, in Wren's mind, barely classified as short-clothes; red and silver bits of cloth tied with strings that covered their breasts and loins. Of course, with their gleaming skin and voluptuous bodies they had little that anyone wouldn't appreciate seeing. Despite the perilously slight clothing, they seemed completely at ease moving through the thick foliage.

"You need a lift home, Mom?" Cassin said. "Ann and I can tuck you in."

The dark-haired woman smiled. "Child, what I wouldn't give to have your kind of stamina. Yes, I would much appreciate the ride--I am flat spelled out. My head aches *sooo* bad."

"You going to be okay?" Desiray asked, looking concerned.

Dorian patted the guild mistress' shoulder. "Just fatigue and backlash. I can't remember the last time I spent this much energy." She put an arm around Cassin and then Annawen as they stepped close. "I just need to sleep it off. I already called ahead to court and told them I wouldn't be in for a few days."

"Des," Cassin said. "If we're not back right away, can you tell Beia we want the sun-lodge up in the spire?"

"Sure," Desiray answered. "Won't it be hot up there?"

Cassin nodded. "Oh yes, lovely sun. I can feel it now." She looked up to the brilliant pastel pink and purple sky. "Yum." She shivered in obvious delight. "Come on, Mom, let's get you home. See you all in a bit."

The three of them vanished in a flash of colors.

Wren stared at the empty space, no longer startled by their popping in and out. She'd seen so much of it in the last two days that she could actually feel them summon the energy to do it. She envied the twin's virtually limitless freedom; the ability to go practically anywhere in the universe simply by concentrating.

"I hope she'll be okay," Ziedra said. "She looked sick."

"Dorian is a lot tougher than she looks, just magician's sickness," the mistress said.

"So, what now?" Wren asked.

"Well, we'll wait a bit while Beia makes some last moment arrangements, then we'll get escorted in."

"How long will that take?"

Desiray shrugged. "A while," she sat down. "Right now, one place is as good as any to sit down."

Wren followed the mistress' lead and settled down. Ziedra sat down with her and put her head on her shoulder.

Wren stared up at the painted sky. "So, what's with the weird sky?"

Desiray chuckled. "A weird sky for weird place, girl, brace yourself there's a lot stranger stuff yet to come..."

Desiray promised strange, and strange it was. Led by Beia and Cassandra, and a phalanx of huge women armed with bows and spears, Wren, Ziedra, and a line of forty-odd family members trudged across the jungle floor toward the base of Duran'Gravar. With a few notable exceptions, everyone looked haggard, feet dragging and shoulders rounded. A chorus of groans and moans rippled through the group, murmurs about heat, clothing, and perspiration. They had worked hard, from child to

elder. The accumulation of material goods in the citadel had been truly staggering. While not every item needed to be moved, much needed to be catalogued. Items of critical value were boxed up and carted off to secure storage. Desiray's closet alone probably could have clothed a small kingdom, most of the items valued in the thousands and beyond. Of all the materials, the libraries were the worst part... metal and leather bound books were *heavy*.

The big thrust had been to collect up all the sensitive materials and transport them to secure locations. The accomplishment of that task had been a tremendous feat that was a combination of ingenuity, organization, brute strength, and raw magical power. After being such an intimate part of Loric's migration plan, Wren's definition of "impossible" had been forever redefined. Her own part and Damay's had not been small, their savant powers had played heavily in the magic used. She had been sustained on charges throughout the taxing and stressful endeavor. Even now her insides were still abuzz with biophase, it was probably the only thing keeping her moving.

As they walked across the clearing toward the denser shadows beneath the great tree, Wren's brow furrowed at something else that seemed out of place but she couldn't immediately determine what it was. They passed dozens of curious briefly-attired valley dwellers who paused to lean on a spear or implement to watch them pass, whispering amongst each other in an unusual clicking tongue. For the most part, they were dusky-skinned and dark-haired, with features similar to the natives of Silissia like her friend Ziedra. The nose tended to be a bit broader, and the lips slightly thicker. The hair was worn long, wrapped in cords, often decorated with feathers or burnished wood combs. Shells, raw crystal, and polished hardwood appeared to be common decorations. The most common apparel was a sleeveless shirt, cut short that left the midriff bare, and thick breeches that fit tight and covered less than half the thigh.

Wren was nearing the base of the tree when she realized what she'd been seeing. Hundreds of faces and not a single male among them! Wren knew about Myrmigynes, of course, but she'd never heard of clans much bigger than a few score. There were hundreds, if not *thousands* in view.

"They're all women," Ziedra observed next to her.

"Noticed that did you?" Desiray said, following along behind Beia and Cassandra. "It *is* a Myrmigyne clan." The mistress dropped back and leaned close to Wren. "Just watch yourself," she whispered in her ear. "Blondes are kind of a novelty around here."

Wren frowned. "What?" she whispered back.

"Pretend they're all *men*."

"No..."

"Yes..."

"They're all...???"

"Right."

"Frell."

"What are you whispering back there, Desiray?" Beia asked over her shoulder.

"Just pointing out some of the local color, that's all..."

* * *

Fortunately, it didn't appear any of the "local color" was going to bother her. Despite having been recharged several times, she felt exhaustion creeping up and wouldn't have had the energy to deal with it. At the foot of the tree they all paused and gazed

up at the vertical expanse of wood towering over them. Myrmigynes swarmed back and forth around them, going about chores and errands amongst the many enterprises cast about beneath the roots of the monstrous tree which were like massive archways arcing overhead.

The more Wren looked around, the more it began to resemble a city. There were various crafts people and vendors all doing brisk business. She saw no money being exchanged. It appeared the Myrmigynes bartered for services and goods. That explained the heavy amount of jewelry and decoration in what seemed to be an otherwise very utilitarian society. The people of Gravar wore their wealth.

Here where the population was denser, the group drew more attention. Many of the Myrmigynes called out in recognition of some of the members. Darin'kel and some of the pretty male clan-members drew a chorus of appreciative murmuring. As the line wended its way around the vending stalls and workplaces, it grew in length as interested spectators trailed along to get a better look at the newcomers.

Beia led the long line of Felspar clans-people up a wooden stairway and then along the top of one of the tree's giant curving roots toward the vertical shaft of the main tree bole. Around the girth of the tree, platforms were laid out in a series of terraces lined with permanent enclosures. Water gurgled and churned overhead through a maze of raised sluiceways that poured over waterwheels into channels that ran in zigzag patterns all across the concourse. As they passed Wren saw the wheels powering a host of endeavors like grinding mills, flax spinners, and pottery spindles. It was a remarkable feat of engineering, especially considering that there was no visible or audible pump mechanism lifting the huge cascade of water to the top-level terraces.

"Whoa," Ziedra murmured. "I always thought of the Myrmigynes as barbarians. This is an astounding piece of work. Even the sorcerer cities in Silissia didn't have anything this sophisticated for the common folk."

"It's well thought out too," Wren remarked. She smiled. "Maybe it's because there were no men involved in the planning."

Ziedra laughed. "Maybe."

The group made their way onto the main terrace and to the back where it was moored to the main shaft of the tree itself. There several enclosures surrounded a heavily reinforced framework that sprawled all along the side of the vertical face in a series of ramps. The various walkways led to shafts of latticework that described several vertical lines up the side of the tree. Through those shafts Wren saw platforms rising and falling drawn by ropes and pulleys. Some two hundred or more paces up the side of the tree there was another set of terraces built into a cleft in the tree bole.

"Lords," Ziedra breathed craning her neck up. "What made them build way up there? We aren't going..."

"Looks like."

The dancer made a sputtering sound.

Nervous moments passed as they filed five and six at a time into onto the railed wooden platforms. As they got closer, Wren saw that the lifts were also powered by the water system, the energy distributed through a complex web of cabling and some other machinery that Wren didn't recognize. When it was her turn to go up, she realized that the platforms were more sturdy than they looked. The rails were made of cured hardwood scarcely any softer than metal. Steel flanges and clamping anchored the posts, the rope bindings were just for supplemental reinforcement.

Ziedra clutched her arm. "I don't like this thing."

"Well, it's not like we can get up the tree any other way," Wren said, craning her neck to look at the vast canopy that blotted out the sky overhead.

The platform shuddered, then started upward with a lurch. The stoic looking Myrmigyne standing behind Wren steadied her when she stumbled backward. The woman's olive skin and dark eyes gleamed in the purplish light that filtered down from above making her look like a statue of polished jade. Damn, all of these ladies were big and strong looking. What did Beia feed them? Even the small ones were a head taller than herself, with thick bodies and powerful legs.

"Wish Desiray could have come with us," Ziedra said.

"If the woman wasn't so damn heavy she wouldn't need a lift to herself." Wren murmured. "We'll be okay without her, we're Beia's guests. We can wait for her up top."

As they rose, she looked out over the landscape. The higher they got the more beautiful and exotic the area became.

"It is beautiful," Ziedra breathed. "I love the look of the rivers, they sparkle like jewels in this light. Just wish we didn't have to be up so *high* to see it."

"I thought your mother was a cloud walker," Wren said. "You're not going to tell me you're afraid of heights are you?"

The Silissian woman scrubbed a hand through her hair. "Welllll..."

Wren rolled her eyes.

Ziedra leaned close and whispered. "Have you noticed all these women? They looked carved from stone!"

Wren nodded. "They're warriors."

"All of them?"

"At least the ones that work for Beia it seems."

After a few long breaths, the lift clunked to a stop in the high terrace. Their escorts opened the railing and gestured them down the ramp toward the main terrace.

Though nervous about how high up they were, the view of the valley of Jhandris'Kul was truly breathtaking. Here the air was noticeably cooler than the jungle floor and sweet with Gravar's unusual buttery scent. The smell didn't resemble any tree that Wren knew, not as sharp as needleleaf, or as pungent as pepperwood, but a unique odor that was genuinely enjoyable to experience.

As they meandered onto the terrace, still admiring the panorama Wren noticed a Myrmigyne making her way toward them. She was tall and sleek like most of the women here, arms and neck festooned with feathers and jewels. She was dressed in a close-fitting black jerkin and leggings. The thing that really made her stand out from her sisters though was her bright red hair, that and the fact that all the Myrmigynes she passed dipped their heads in deference.

The woman stopped in front of them and put hands on hips. "Hello, Wren," she said in a lilting Malanian twang. "Nice to see you again."

The woman did look very familiar, she obviously knew her. "Hello--" Where did she see her before? Red hair? The fatigue had gotten to her. She realized the woman looked an awful lot like Beia. "Ess!" She let out, glad she was saved the embarrassment of forgetting the woman's name. "Sorry, I'm so tired I can barely remember my own name."

The red-haired woman chuckled. "That's okay, seems like everyone is half dead."

Wren nodded. "Maybe even three-quarters dead." She put a hand on Ziedra's shoulder. "Ess, I'd like you to meet my best friend, Ziedra. Zee, this is Ess, Beia's sister." The two exchanged nods. "So..." Wren drew the sound out looking around. "What next?"

"Quarters," Ess replied. "Unless you'd like to eat first."

"Sleep," Ziedra moaned.

"Agreed," Wren said. "I'm too tired to eat."

"Good enough," Ess said. "Follow me."

They followed the red-haired Myrmigyne across the terrace and into the cleft in the tree that was akin to walking into a huge cave. Wren had wondered what they would find this high up the tree, but never imagined there would be tunnels. The Myrmigynes had carved passages into the body of the tree.

"Beia mentioned that you might be looking for trainer to teach you Caan Lajaar," Ess said over her shoulder, her voice echoing in the wooden corridor. All around them, the wood was polished to a mirror finish. Elaborate scenes of forest creatures, hunting, and camp-fire rituals dotted the walls, graven in intricate detail into the living material. The sweet pleasant odor of Gravar permeated the air, making a buzz in Wren's senses. "Though the Lajaar is not my primary style," Ess was saying. "I do teach it. It was the first one I learned in the Arena."

"You were a pit fighter too?" Wren asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," Ess replied, expression tightening briefly.

Wren had developed a generous respect for the no-frills kill-or-be-killed fighting skills of the warriors of the Death Spectacles. If Ess was even half as good as Beia, she had a lot to teach.

"I may have to take you up on that. My sword skills reek, anything you can do to make me even passable would put me forever in your debt."

Ess chuckled and nodded. "We'll see what we can do."

They turned several corners and finally stopped at a thick door that Ess opened without preamble. Inside was a chamber around five paces across with two beds, and the basic amenities of a vanity and clothes storage. It wasn't a sumptuous room like she'd had back at the citadel, but the beds looked comfortable and well-made.

"Welcome to Duran'Gravar," Ess said. "With the Felspar clan in residence I suspect things are going to get interesting around here."

Wren sighed. "Of that, Lady Ess, I have little doubt..."

Wren is an amusing child, and truthfully I find little to be humorous. Beyond that, she is a tool of formidable strength. I foresee her on the Frielos team some day--one way or another...

--Aarlen Frielos

Chapter 36

Falcon In a Tree

Exhaustion blotted out everything. When Wren laid down to sleep, unconsciousness came so fast it was like being hit with a mattock. If she had any dreams, she was too tired to remember them. She awoke an indeterminate time later, feeling ravenously hungry. She sat up looking around the dimly lit room. Someone had come in while they slept and lit the candles in the entranceway. They'd come to another place where people moved in silence. Light no longer streamed in from the window, being replaced by a sheet of darkness smeared with color. Wren glanced to Ziedra. The dancer lay in the bed next to hers, body still as a corpse. The only thing indicating she was alive was the slow rise and fall of her chest. Wren pushed herself out of bed, went to the window, and looked out across the Jhandris valley.

The valley was nothing but a dark mass set aglow by fires dotting the clearing. The night in this strange place was truly alien, no stars or moons shone in the sky, only swaths of color that slowly swirled around each other like pigments in hot candle paraffin. She leaned on the sill, feeling a cool breath on her cheeks. The rich odor of wood was threaded through with the scent of roasting meat and baking bread. She sniffed again and her stomach growled. It had been a whole day since she'd even had a chunk of cheese for nourishment.

She glanced back at Ziedra. The woman was dead to the world. It might be bells before she awoke. Scoredays of intense workouts had tuned her body to the point where she bounced back in fractions of the time it took before.

Wren stepped into the corridor. She guessed the best place to find food would be out on the terrace. It didn't seem like it would be very hard to navigate back the way Ess led them in, all she needed to do was follow her nose.

She ran her fingers along the glossy walls, appreciating the seasons of artistic effort that had gone into creating the various images carved into the surfaces throughout the passages. As she walked along, she wondered where Damay had gotten to and what she might be doing now. She saw her only a few times during the move, she had been expending more than her share of energy.

Wren still remembered the wide-eyed expression of awe on Damay's face when the silver beast appeared in the sky over the citadel. Wren only had that brief glimpse before her own amazement and wonder drew all her attention to the colossal winged metallic thing that drifted in over the lake as though suspended on strings. The very mountain itself trembled with the nearness of the pulsing creature that all but blotted out the night sky above the citadel. Lights had stabbed out from the underbelly of beast, inhaling streams of crates they had filled and sealed outside the citadel. In a span of a few long breaths, containers that had taken bells of intense toil to fill fled into the sky suspended on strings of illumination. After a few moments more, the giant silver monster retreated into the heavens, only a distant rumbling to mark its passing...

Wren stepped out onto the platform that demarked the interior of the tree and the terrace. She looked around the terrace. Near the center, there were dozens of circles

of Myrmigynes sitting on mats around collections of pots and plates of steaming consumables. Her nose had led her true.

She stood at the rail a while looking down into torch-lit plaza so far above the jungle. Echoes of laughter and mirthful voices drifted in the breeze. Though the language wasn't familiar, she recognized the sounds of camaraderie. She scanned the throng looking for faces she recognized--she wasn't relishing bracing all these strange women for food, without knowing a single word of the language.

"Ah," a deep echoing female voice said behind her. "The sign of a true leader--someone who can follow their nose."

Wren looked back and up and felt her heart catch as her gaze met silver eyes. The Ice Falcon towered over her looking like a ghost hovering in the darkness, white-hair wreathing around a pale face, thin lips pulled into a smile.

She swallowed and made a hasty bow. "Magestrix."

"Idun-daughter," the woman replied with a nod, stepping to the rail next to Wren a looking out. "So, what do you think of Gravar?"

"It's--ummm--*different*." What was she doing here? Her mind whirled through the possibilities. Then she remembered. During all the furor in the game, she'd almost forgotten. Beia had said Aarlen was her *mate*. Damrosil even joked whether she'd heard of marriage before. How could Beia be married to this surly ice-woman? It boggled Wren's mind.

The elder brushed her hair back over her shoulder, and undid the polished gold buttons down the front of the black leather coat she was wearing. "Indeed," the woman responded in her heavy voice. "When I first arrived, I don't think I would have been that kind."

"They're providing me sanctuary, it would be rude to be critical. Especially having been here such a short time. The bed was just *fine*."

"The food is good too," Aarlen remarked. "They may not have a knack like Loric's speed-demon cook, but it's decent."

"Right now, I'd eat boot soles if they were hot."

"I doubt that will be necessary," the woman said. "Walk with me."

Wren swallowed and did as she was told. This was not a lady one demurred or quibbled with. They proceeded down the steps together. As they neared the gathering a couple of the Myrmigynes hopped up and came to Aarlen's side, bowing their heads. The Magestrix towered over even these big women, her voice when she spoke the Myrmigyne language had a clicking, musical quality that made her skin prickle. Aarlen gestured to Wren and said a few more words.

The two Myrmigynes bobbed their heads and rushed into the crowd.

The Magestrix took Wren by the shoulder and steered her to a table and some chairs set off by an enclosure. Surprisingly, she pulled the chair back for Wren before seating herself.

The woman put her elbows on the wicker table-top and leaned forward, chin on her laced hands. "So, have you given my offer any thought?"

Wren blinked. Staring into the woman's striking face. "I haven't had much opportunity to think about anything."

"What I saw you do with Mon'istiaga is probably the most impressive thing I've seen in my entire life--I think you know that's a very long time. You held a star in your hand and you kept it under control. You have truly phenomenal talent. Damay was the most powerful of the Kel'varans, but not any more."

Wren bowed her head. "I appreciate your praise Magestrix, I know that it is not lightly given. In all honesty, I'm nothing compared to her."

"You mean right *now*," Aarlen said waving away Wren's remark. "That is simply a matter of training. Training I can provide."

She gulped. "Y-y-you?"

"Precisely. Child, I am not often impressed. I want you working for me."

"Lady Frielos, I have some idea of what kind of opportunity you are offering but you must realize that I have no intention of using my talents to criminal ends."

"Criminal?" Aarlen responded with a raised eyebrow. "Am I mistaken, weren't you one of Desiray's top thieves? Theft *is* a criminal endeavor."

"We never hurt anybody, and we stole from people who deserved it. We even gave away what we made to needy people."

Aarlen leaned her head to one side. "How quaint."

"I quit Desiray's guild. There was a brief period where I thought I might work with Dorian, but things didn't work out. Right now, the only thing important thing to me is getting my parents freed and paying Mishaka back."

"You can't do that by yourself, Child. You need the resources of an organization."

She smiled, teeth ultra white in her pale face. "One like mine for instance."

"Lady Frielos, your people deal in death. I can't really see myself a part of that--I just don't have that kind of evil temperament."

"Bah," Aarlen growled. "Evil. Good. They're just words. At any rate, the Frielos family is involved in a forced makeover. We've been strong-armed into becoming more *productive* members of society." She made a sour face. "So, we've been entering into a considerable number of legitimate activities. Activities you could be a part of."

Wren pursed her lips. "Someone is forcing *you*? I find that hard to believe..."

"Child, no matter how powerful we become, there are always bigger and badder entities out there more than willing impose their desires on us."

"For you, who is that?"

Aarlen pressed her lips to a line. "The Protectorate and the eternal."

"The eternal? I saw mention of them when I was researching savants. Some texts speculate they're actually First-ones."

"They aren't," Aarlen grumbled. "Just the most powerful busy-bodies in the universe."

"Isn't that sword you use a weapon made by them?"

Aarlen straightened up. "How did you know that?"

Wren shrugged. "When Desiray and I were combined I could see all kinds of things."

The Ice Falcon's eyes narrowed. "You mentioned that Gaea gave you that power did you not?"

She raised her chin. "I did."

"The all-mother."

"Right. Pretty hard to swallow. I didn't accept it myself until she touched me. I stopped doubting then."

"I believe you," Aarlen responded. "Understand, I can see through time if I choose. You have been in the proximity of an incredible power unlike anything I have experienced. So, the First-one core exists?"

Wren's chest seized. How could she know that? Did she read her mind? See through time?

"Your paralysis is my answer. It goes together with a remark you made to Brin about being in a cooling tower. So, I take it this place was rather large?"

"L-lady Frielos, I can't..."

"I'm just curious child. By any chance did you learn the capabilities of the place?" She nodded.

"And?"

She guessed there was no harm repeating the numbers that Hyperion had told her. "There were sixteen energy shafts each capable of five hundred twenty-five terapsions. I don't know what a terapsion is so it doesn't mean much to me."

Aarlen's brow furrowed. "Burst or continuous?"

Wren felt her skin prickle. The elder knew. "Ummm, optimal continuous--at least according to Hyperion."

"That's ludicrous," the elder said rubbing her eyes. "With that kind of power, snuffing out a star would be like swatting a bug."

Wren swallowed and nodded. "It sure scared me. I was prepared to destroy the complex to keep people from getting to it."

Aarlen's expression didn't change. "Why didn't you?"

Wren's jaw dropped. "Milady, it was just a *bit* out of my league."

The elder nodded. "Ah, right. So, this place was empty?"

"Except for Gaea and Hyperion."

The elder nodded. "Fascinating. I take it the access key was confiscated when you left."

Wren let out a breath. "Yes."

"Good. Tell me, when you were combined with Desiray--could you touch that power?"

She didn't know if she should answer that question. She'd already blabbed--most of which Aarlen had already surmised. "Not well, we'd have to be completely fused to do that. She doesn't want to be my host body."

"Did it occur to you that now you have Desiray as a template, that you could make a permanent beta body for yourself the same way you did for Damay?"

Wren's jaw dropped. "Uhhh, no." It had never occurred to her. She could have a body like that for her own--permanently combined? She could have her full savant power to use against Mishaka and make that sorry witch pay for what she had done. "I see that appeals to you," Aarlen said with a nod. "Not only could I arrange that, but I have one other enticement that might interest you..."

The two Myrmigynes came back, setting a drink at Aarlen's elbow and a plate of various vegetables and meats in front of Wren. A large cup filled with a purplish liquid was also placed in front of her.

Wren took a sip from the cup, finding it to be a sweet nectar of some kind. She took another sip and leaned back. "Something else? I can see why you'd want me to have that body. It would be like having a First-one on your payroll."

Aarlen nodded. "Why have second best?"

"Power or not, I'm still not a killer."

"Tell that to the avatars and demons in Riverback village."

Wren's stomach knotted. "That was an emergency. That was survival." Wren took a few bites of the roast fowl on her plate, and then popped some fried tubers in her mouth. Aarlen was right, the food here wasn't bad at all.

"If you recall, I just declared war on Hecate, there will be lot of that kind of work."

"Aarlen, it's tempting, but you have to understand I can't do anything until I free my parents."

"That's why I'm prepared to offer you the location of one of Cosmodarus' anchor stones."

Wren's heart skipped a beat and she halted the movement of the cup she'd been raising to her lips. "Pardon?"

"You heard me, Girl. You have excellent hearing."

"But nobody has been able to find them!"

Aarlen leaned back. "You mean Loric and his children have not been able to locate any of them. His resources and mine have rather different scopes." She sniffed. "Are you interested or not?"

She gulped. "You know I am." She drew a breath. "I agree to work for you, and you'll give me the location?"

"If you are strictly opposed to working for me, I would make the deal as simple as you taking an oath never to work for anyone *e/se*. The permanent beta body--that only comes with an oath of service."

"I could really use that to fight Mishaka."

"Sure could," Aarlen responded taking another sip of her drink. "If that performance in the village is any indication, she wouldn't stand a chance. I guarantee my work--the body would be as good as Desiray's if not a few shades better. I like to improve on nature. You've seen how durable my daughters are, so I think you recognize the quality of my work."

"Magnificent."

Aarlen grinned. "Thank you."

"I can't believe..."

"Believe it child. Ever since I saw your performance in the village I've been looking for the right incentive to win you over to me. It's doubly sweet because I can win you and stab Hecate at the same time. A lovely arrangement actually."

The guild lifer in her pinched at the back of her mind. "Too good to be true, really."

"The catch?" Aarlen shrugged. "Working for me is the catch, girl. It's lucrative--not easy. I teach excellence, and I expect it. I suspect you're already used to that by now with your G'yaki teacher."

Wren scowled. "Is there anything you don't know?"

"I had to pay out two very serviceable daughters for that intelligence. It should be good."

"Two disobedient daughters," Wren remarked.

Aarlen pointed a finger. "Don't get me started. I gained a pair of Kriar daughter-in-laws. Actually, I find them more useful than my own blood at times." She sighed. "So, I guess it wasn't such a bad trade off."

Wren shook her head. This was the absolute last and worst person to be making a deal with. She *killed* Damay. But she had the anchor stone everyone was looking for. She also had the ultimate weapon that would lay Mishaka to rest. Wren was willing to die for her family. Working for Aarlen was considerably short of dying. Damn it. What should she do?

"Well, Child, in or out."

"Can't you give me time to..."

"No." Aarlen shook her head. "One time offer. Yes, I give you the stone's location and we make further arrangements. Turn me down--I break the stone."

Wren's eyes widened. "Break the stone?"

"Yes," The woman sighed, as though resigned. "Rather cruel, but it's the kind of vindictive person I am."

Wren scowled. "I don't like you much."

Aarlen ran her tongue across her teeth. She obviously enjoyed making people twist in the wind of damning decisions. "You don't have to like me. Just work for me."

"Dammit, it's not fair!"

Aarlen shrugged.

Wren growled. She had to do it. Her family was counting on her and this might be her only chance.

She drew a breath, feeling an ache in her chest. "I'm in."

The best bargaining tool is a cleaver and a good grip on a valued body part belonging to one you want to come around to your way of thinking...

--Aarlen Frielos

Chapter 37

The Ice Falcon's Apprentice and Ruffled Feathers

Sitting at the small wooden table, majestic Gravar looming gigantic and dark overhead, Wren stared at the huge pale woman sitting across from her. The lady brushed back her white hair and smiled, silver eyes glinting in the torchlight. Though the giantess smiled, it was the kind of smile that made a person queasy inside. She had agreed to cast her lot with the powerful leader of the Frielos clan, but she already felt misgivings about the decision. Gaze fixed on Wren, the woman took a slow sip from her cup, set it down, then pressed her hands together.

"Wonderful," Aarlen said in a mildly enthused tone. "We will finalize the details of our arrangement in a few days as I get things together."

Wren frowned. "You mean you don't have the stone in hand yet."

The woman shrugged. "Never fear, I will."

She narrowed her eyes. "What if I get the stone before you do?"

The white-haired woman leaned back in her chair. "Unlikely, at least I know the specific location, Loric doesn't even have that much."

"It was unlikely for me to win the game," Wren responded. "Let's say I get to re-evaluate my options if I do."

The woman rubbed her throat, eying Wren. "Child, you know your best options for success lie with myself and my organization."

"I think you know by now, I run my own race and challenge the odds. Let's just agree that if I find the stone first, that I have no obligations to the Frielos clan. I'll sign your agreement of non-aggression in either event as long as you sign a similar one for me. One time tangling with the Sen'Gen was enough."

The woman's silver eyes didn't blink as she studied Wren. She pursed her lips. "Someday I must learn how you escaped three of my operatives. They are *very* well equipped and trained."

"One part bloodsong, one part luck, and two parts G'yaki master. Do we have a deal?"

The woman's tone turned flat. "I fail to see how this arrangement benefits me."

"Wren?" A bleary voice asked from behind her.

She turned to see a sleepy-eyed Ziedra teetering down the ramp toward them. The woman's russet colored blouse was a wrinkled mess from sleeping in it, and her waist-length black hair spilled over both shoulders in un-brushed tangled strings. The short skirt and simple slippers showed the family training regimen had already improved her figure considerably since the day Wren found her waiting tables in the tavern.

Rubbing sleep from her eyes she stumbled up to Wren. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Wren frowned. "You were dead and I was hungry."

"Hmph," the woman snorted. "So who is--" she choked on the next word as she realized who was sitting across from Wren. Her eyes went wide, and her chin quaked. "*Tia Vergeben!*" She bowed. "*Mea Ahm'kuma Damak Shalat ki Frio.*"

Aarlen waved a hand at her and nodded. "*Gratia, ki lat uma Domskeya.*"

Ziedra bowed again, dark eyes wide.

Aarlen waved her hand dismissively. "Relax, Niece, this is nothing official. Have a seat."

"Thank you, aunt Aarlen," Ziedra said, bowing yet again before sitting down next to Wren with a heavy thump.

"How are your magic studies proceeding?"

Ziedra snatched a few fried tubers off Wren's plate, munched them down quickly and took a sip from Wren's cup. "I didn't get much time these last two days, but I met each level of apprentice challenge on the days before."

Wren blinked. "Aunt? Apprentice? You're learning from *Aarlen*?"

The dancer reddened. "Well, she *is* my aunt. Dorian did tell me to learn from the best. Even with all my winnings from the game, the best teachers would have used up the money in no time."

Her jaw dropped. "But *Aarlen*..."

The Ice Falcon steepled her fingers and grinned. "She made an excellent choice."

"Ziedra, did you suddenly come unhinged? You wouldn't follow Sindra and Drucilla, then you turn around and get cozy with--" She swallowed. "Her?"

The dark-haired woman shrugged. "That was before I knew I was a savant and knew I was related to clan Frielos. It stung that it took them so long to acknowledge me." She shot a hard look at Aarlen. "But now they have. I've seen what's happened to you. I don't want Hecate or some other god trying to kidnap me to do that succor-thing like you were talking about. Auntie and my cousins will keep them away."

"I *can* keep them away," Aarlen said.

"But joining them..."

"Wren, I didn't join them... I was *born* into the clan. Whether or not I acknowledged them, Sindra and Drucilla were still going to be my shadows." She sniffed. "You have to admit that Aarlen is the best, right?"

Wren shook her head. "That's not the point. It was never the point. The Frielos is--bad--"

"Wren, you don't have to tell me," Ziedra said, holding up a hand. "I know. You must realize, you've been in a guild--assets don't just walk out..."

"But you don't have to--"

"Wren, be realistic, if that lady wants me," she gestured to Aarlen who merely raised an eyebrow. "Just exactly how am I going to say 'no'?"

She stared at Aarlen. "You picked her up just to get leverage on me, didn't you?"

Aarlen put a hand to her chest in a gesture of mock pain. "Now, Wren, you wound me. While we were slow to acknowledge Ziedra's membership in our clan, it *is* legitimate. At the time we recognized Ziedra's lineage, she was learning a rather important object lesson in who to trust." She sighed. "Far be it for me to interfere in a significant developmental experience."

Ziedra snorted. She took another sip from Wren's cup. "So, it really wasn't a choice for me, Wren."

"There's always choices, Zee, and they don't always lead down the path of least resistance. What is your gold boyfriend going to think?"

"He'll think his sisters are married to my cousins. Now I'm not some poor ignorant un-landed lass without a family or a name."

Wren rolled her eyes. She was obviously getting nowhere. Perhaps she would be safe. A sheep among wolves... she'd have to learn to be wolf herself to keep from being eaten.

"All right," Wren said. "There's no point in arguing it now--it's already done and I know better than to try and renege on a deal with Aarlen. It hurts that you didn't even ask me before deciding to do this."

That deflated Ziedra. "I'm sorry Wren. It's not just for me. It's to protect you."

"Oh yeah?" Wren folded her arms. "How does this decision protect me?"

Ziedra's dark eyes searched Wren's face. "At least as a member of the family I have *some* influence."

Wren snorted. "Oh please." She drew a breath. "Zee, don't make it worse by telling me you believe that." She smacked the woman's hand as she reached toward her plate. "And leave something for me, damn it, I'm hungry too!" She grabbed the last of the fried tubers put it in her mouth. After swallowing she said, "Aarlen, would you *please* get her something to eat before I don't have anything left."

The white-haired magestrix chuckled. "You two could be sisters, you know that? That or married." She laughed again. She waved at the Myrmigyne crowd to get their attention, and made a request. Two women rose to do her bidding. The Ice Falcon turned her attention back to Wren. "The deal with finding the anchor intrigues me. Care to sweeten the pot and make a wager as to who finds it first?"

"Aarlen, I know my chances of finding it before you are long at best, I just wanted an out in that case. As I said, I'll still sign a mutual non-aggression agreement, although I see you already bought insurance." She glanced at Ziedra who frowned.

The tall woman leaned back in her chair, the torchlight played on her skin in flickering rosy patterns. The woman had the position of strength and had accounted for every angle, she definitely knew how to seal up a deal. Wren's only wiggle room was that one little crack.

"What agreement?" Ziedra asked.

"She knows the location of the anchor stone that everyone is looking for," Wren told her friend. "Either I join up with her, or she's going to break the stone."

Ziedra gasped leaning across the table toward Aarlen. "That's Wren's only chance. You can't do that!"

Aarlen's brow furrowed. "Don't be silly, of course I can. I have nothing else to squeeze her with besides threatening to hurt you. I would rather it not get personal."

Ziedra blanched.

Wren straightened, feeling the heat in her face. "I would rather hope you never try to play that card on me," Wren growled. "There's always the chance I could get a hold of Mon'istiaga again."

"Don't mistake me, Wren," Aarlen said. "I know exactly how *dangerous* you are. Damay was merely a challenge to me because she was predictable, her resolve, her passion, are not of the same scope as yours. In the past, I destroyed chaotic creatures such as yourself simply to prevent them from becoming a threat. I see in you a rather powerful tool, and if necessity serves, a weapon. You are a force that must be harnessed for your own welfare, so that you can realize your own potential. Left to your own devices, you would destroy yourself and that would be a shame."

The scary thing was that made sense to her. She had been pondering along those lines when they were on the roof of the citadel a few days ago, pondering her own sacrifice. Still, coming from Aarlen it was just so much empty fluff and ribbons. "Oh, now it's for my own good?" She shook her head. She locked eyes with the pale woman. "Lady Frielos, the only favor I want from you is the chance to lead my life without a leash."

Two Myrmigynes returned with some plates and set them down in front Ziedra and Wren, and refilled their cups.

"Give her what she wants, Aarlen," a deep female voice said on Wren's left.

Wren looked up and saw that the one who had brought the food had been Beia. The Myrmigyne tossed her braid over one shoulder and folded her arms. "One thing that *won't* be happening is you destroying that anchor stone."

Aarlen straightened in her chair. The woman's voice took on a dangerous edge and her eyes flashed. "Are you dictating to me?"

Wren felt her skin prickle. Ziedra shrank down in her chair trying not to be noticed.

Beia didn't flinch. "In this matter, I am. The last thing I want is to be standing between you two when she comes after your head swinging that damn sword of Loric's. There are other, better ways to get her on our side... like helping her get her family back."

"Beia, I dislike you meddling in my affairs."

The blonde Myrmigyne sighed. "Aarlen, you know I'm right. This girl will remember who helped, who hindered, and who was a damn *mercenary*. Remember who her parents are, and who her friends are. For once stop being a tyrant and trying to short-cut everything. Both of us owe her. Let's be *friends*, not loan sharks."

Aarlen folded her arms. "Being a tyrant works *fine*. I *like* immediate gratification."

Beia rolled her eyes. "All right, if you prefer immediate gratification, then I'll demonstrate some of my own. Wren, stand up."

Wren's eyes grew large and she pushed back her chair.

"Ziedra, get behind me."

The dancer's face went ashen. She leaped out of her chair and scrambled behind Beia.

Aarlen rose from her chair, towering over Beia and the two of them. "Do you mean to challenge me?"

Beia shrugged. "No, but she does." Beia reached back over her shoulder and out of the air drew out a shining fang that flashed and flickered with gold radiance. She pushed it toward Wren's hand. "Here you go."

Her hand went to the object automatically, closing around the pulsating hilt before she realized what Beia was handing her. She felt a rush of power surge through her body--the power of Mon'istiaga, the sword of Shiva, the world shatterer.

Aarlen's eyes went round. "Beia, she can't control that thing separated from Desiray!"

Wren felt the First-one weapon humming in her hand, it recognized the user that had been parted from it so recently. She felt it probing her body, felt its disappointment at being wielded by a vessel so fragile and impermanent. Her flesh glowed as though her bones were giving off light. The weapon felt heavy, but she had no trouble lifting it. She raised the point and aimed it at Aarlen.

"Wren?" Ziedra called, a frightened tone in her voice.

"Beia, are you crazy?!" Aarlen shouted. "She'll destroy everything!"

"Aarlen, where's the anchor stone?" Wren asked in a quiet voice that made the wooden table shudder on the planking of the platform.

"Child, you can't use that thing without killing yourself, and everyone in this tree. Put the blade down."

Wren narrowed her eyes. She slashed downward. Aarlen jerked as a searing white light lashed from the tip of the blade, straight through the table, the chairs, making a flash of pyrotechnics erupt around the Ice Falcon, shooting through the corner of a structure and off the side of the terrace.

Aarlen winced as the table creaked and fell in half. Behind her, the building groaned and the corner collapsed to the platform, and the railing beyond fell in half.

The Myrmigynes all having their evening meal leaped to their feet, grabbing weapons and looking for the source of the attack.

Beia yelled an order and held out her hand to stop them.

The Ice Falcon swallowed.

"You don't understand this weapon," Wren said in an echoing voice. "He knows if he kills me, he goes back to being a can-opener for Loric. He's bored and can't wreak any havoc without someone with First-one blood to put him to use. He's a lot like you--he *enjoys* breaking things."

"Beia I think it was very unwise to give her that thing," Aarlen growled, hand on the hilt of the sword on her hip. "What was Loric thinking?"

Beia smiled. "Loric trusts me, I'm a Shael Dal, remember? If I can be trusted to walk around with a shaladen on my hip, it's safe for me to walk around with a weapon only a First-one can use."

"Now what?" Aarlen said, putting hands on hips. "If you kill me, you won't find the anchor stone. I'm not afraid to die."

Wren spun the sword. She felt the eyes of all the Myrmigyne's on her, felt the tension in their bodies. There were bows and spears pointed at her, Beia had stopped them, but a wrong move and a dozen weapons would come at her.

Mon'istiaga felt the chaos and fear swirling around him and lapped it up, savoring the ebb and flow of emotional energy. His intellect sparked through Wren, whispering sweet melodies of violence and mayhem. She drew a breath. If the weapon scared her before, it terrified her now. During the battle with Hecate's avatars he'd taken her measure, knew her strengths and weaknesses. It knew what she wanted. The problem was Mon'istiaga was an implement of destruction, not a tool of creation or mercy. It was the sword of Shiva--living death. "Did you know Mon'istiaga can destroy anything Aarlen? In fact, he can cut your bones without injuring your flesh, cut through memories without touching your mind. The First-one who created him was truly a disciple of destruction. He can even destroy magic--he can wipe out a person's ability to be a mage without hurting them. All I have to do is focus on the--"

"All right, all right..." Aarlen held up a hand. "I get the point."

Though the woman totally masked it, Mon'istiaga tasted her fear, the flavor was sweet and heady. Wren shuddered. She felt the fear like a ball of raw energy in her stomach.

"Beia, I still don't understand why you gave that thing to her. What have you proved? You've put all our lives at risk for nothing. I won't back down, not even if she threatens to rip out my soul. I'll not be coerced."

"It's a preview," Beia said. "Wait until she gets *good* with it."

"I don't care how good she gets with it. It's my right to charge what I like for the location of the anchor stone. There's nothing wrong or even bad about that. I violate people's rights all the time, so I know what mine are. I spent the time and resources to locate that information. It's mine to do with as I will." She raised her chin. "Even destroy it if I so choose."

Wren raised Mon'istiaga's point. The weapon made a growling sound and sparks whirled around the blade. "That would make me very cross."

"This whole exchange is making *me* cross," Aarlen growled. "Don't think that simply because you have an equalizer in your hand, that it gives you any bargaining power with me."

A tyrant Aarlen might be, but not a coward.

Beia held out her hands. "Aarlen, look at her, look at what she's holding, what she's *controlling*."

"Yes," Aarlen growled. "I can see it, Beia. I shouldn't be looking at it. You handing that thing to her is a hair away from treachery."

"It's not treachery, I'm trying to get you to open your eyes. We want that kind of person as our ally, not our coerced vassal. Did you even imagine she could do that at this age?"

The woman swallowed. "No."

"Imagine what she'll be like at Damay's age."

"I'd rather not."

"She's too smart to scare," Wren said. "Beia, take this thing back before I really do hurt someone with it. She knows I'm just not mean enough to carry out a threat like that." She flipped the sword hilt first and held it out to Beia. The weapon whimpered, longing to kill and maim. The Myrmigyne had to pull it from her unyielding fingers, the touch of the weapon felt so uplifting and pleasurable, a taste of raw infinite potential.

She gasped as her fingers broke contact, the strength and elation abruptly gone, leaving her feeling empty inside. That thing was far worse than Corona had ever been. The Myrmigyne slid it away in its invisible hiding place over her shoulder.

When the weapon disappeared, Aarlen wilted for a moment, but rapidly regained her composure. "Beia, don't ever do that again! That was foolish in the extreme! What if she hadn't been able to control it?"

"Aarlen, what if you can't control Wren? She is the weapon, not the tools she uses. If not Mon'istiaga, it could be something worse. I'm pleading with you to see this."

The woman ran a hand through her white hair, silver eyes following the scorch mark that went between her feet and through the structure behind her. She smiled. "That was very well done. The wind cutter is a G'Yaki technique isn't it?"

Wren nodded. Of course, she never could have performed it without the ultimate weapon in her fist. "Aarlen, please, just give me my out. I could have threatened you, but I didn't."

"The part about the magic wasn't a threat?"

"Okay, maybe a little."

"All right, because Beia made such a stink and put us all at risk," she glowered at the blonde Myrmigyne. "If you find the anchor first you are opted out automatically. When we find the anchor, we'll *discuss*--" She shot another glance at Beia. "The price."

Wren nodded. She looked to Beia. "Sorry about the table and the building."

"Don't worry," the Myrmigyne said. "I'll take it out of your pay. Go back to your rooms, I'll have trays brought up to you. Get some rest, you both start training in the morning."

Wren bowed to the blonde woman and Ziedra did the same.

"Don't think you get out of it this easy, Beia," Aarlen snarled.

Beia raised her chin. "Fine, Aarlen, punish me how you will, I was acting for both our sakes, whether you see it or not."

The Ice Falcon glowered at the two of them. "You heard her, get lost."

Wren and Ziedra did as ordered. Leaving Beia to Aarlen's mercy...

After living around her for seasons, Vera amazes me on daily basis. All of my "gifts" as a savant, she has their equal through some unimaginable process of discipline. I am blessed to have been her student, even if we have only, in her words, been playing.

--Wren

Chapter 38

Vera's Resolve

An acrid-smelling jungle breeze blew in Wren's face, tepid and wet. It only added to the streams of perspiration already trickling down her face. She took an instant to swipe at the salty residue above her eyes. Tightening her grip on the practice sword she did a quarter-step, toe-slip and turn and brought the blade into line. The great tree Duran'Gravar loomed in front of her casting its league-long shadow across the valley. Off to her right across the practice field, one of the valley's many streams gurgled and frothed through its rocky channel, bugs skimming and dancing on its surface. Around her, more than a dozen others mirrored her motions, bodies straight, swords raised, and skin glistening.

"*Krin! Dik! Vica!*" At the head of the class, red hair flying, Beia's sister Ess called the cadence shifting from stance to stance, performing cut and counter, attack and retreat. Training in the precincts of the Myrmigynes was by far tougher than it had been at Loric's citadel. Here, a full half of every day was spent in martial training, only honored elders were exempt from this requirement, and most of them were called upon to train instead. It had been five sleep periods since the confrontation with Aarlen. The Ice Falcon had been grumbling for the past two days because she had not yet located the anchor stone. The general feeling in the air was that it might be days more before she was any closer.

Meanwhile, Loric had been following his own avenues of research and had what he thought was a good lead. Wren and Damay had been called in to assist him in a divining magic, the two of them had provided him with energy while he cast an extremely complex ritual that reached out across the vastness of space searching for the mysterious anchor stones that would allow them access to secluded Cosmodarus.

Yesterday, Loric had been crowing about a breakthrough that had narrowed the location down to a specific region of space some thousand leagues square. To Wren it didn't seem like a breakthrough. Millions of square leagues were a trifle much for even an army to search. The news while not particularly heartening to Wren had sent Aarlen into a dour fume. It appeared her lead in the search was dwindling without her being able to capitalize on it. *That* gave Wren some hope.

Dom. Jelit. Monck. Wren wiped again at the perspiration on her face before she turned in precise toe-heel fashion as taught to her by Ess. Next to her, Ziedra swung around with her typical grace. Beside the dancer, little Vera went through the motions with a stony expression, even Caldorian and Sebenreth, Desiray's sons were in the class. About a dozen other Myrmigynes trained with them, all of them young, late teens or early twenties. The one that had caught Wren's eye was a monster of a woman, easily Aarlen's size or even larger. Apparently, the girl's size hadn't bought her any popularity because she trained at the back of the class and none of the other Myrmigynes would go near her. Still, she trained diligently, her moves firm and sure as she followed Ess' demonstration.

At the first clan meeting after arriving at the tree, Cassandra had given everyone circlets that allowed the wearers to understand the Myrmigyne language. Unfortunately, the devices were something that she'd hastily assembled and didn't

enable speaking in a like manner. The mage had assured everyone, that time allowing, that feature would be added. Just the same, comprehension of the local language was enough for them to take part in the numerous martial classes taught throughout the day. It had taken Wren a while to get used to the double echo in her ears as the Myrmigynes spoke around her. There was the slightest delay between when words were spoken and when their meaning became clear. There was also a fatigue factor associated with the devices. After a day of listening, Wren's head ached.

Wren had immediately pursued her training with Ess, and the red-haired Myrmigyne agreed. Wren had hoped her training with Ess would be one-on-one but discovered that for the time being, she would have to train in a class with others. When Ess took on trainees, Wren was surprised that Vera had requested to take part. The cook was already of grand master of G'Yaki fighting, there was little if anything she could learn from such a basic class. Still, she stood at Wren's shoulder and participated, not drawing any attention to her skills. Ziedra also joined up to stay around Wren. Predictably, the dancer's ability to memorize moves and nuances made her a model student.

Because the three of them were older than all the other women in the class the girls called them the *old tuvans*. The word "tuvan" didn't translate well, the inference was that it referred to an outsider but also someone without real skills.

They finished the drill and Ess ordered them into a circle for martial practice. One of the bigger of the Myrmigynes with a circular scar on her forehead shoved Vera out of the way, almost knocking her down. The little cook glanced up but that was her only reaction. This was the third time that same bruiser with the scar had been rude to Vera.

Wren looked to Ess. It appeared the red-haired Myrmigyne had seen the action, because she was looking at Vera.

"Dikreet!" Ess called pointing to the woman that had shoved Vera and gesturing into the circle.

The big Myrmigyne straightened with obvious pride and stepped to the center of the ring of bodies, glaring around daring anyone to meet her eyes.

"Vera," Ess called.

The cook looked over with a sharp movement of her head. Her brow furrowed.

Ess gestured. "Mitabla!"

Vera frowned and shook her head.

The big Myrmigyne standing in the center laughed and said something that didn't translate well, she knew it wasn't complementary because a few of the other valley natives winced. Wren wondered what unassuming Vera might have done to make the big woman so disdainful.

"Vera," Ess said again. Wren didn't think that Beia's sister knew how good Vera really was, though someone of Ess' skill probably had some inkling. The little woman never needed to be corrected, never had to be told twice, never got tired or even perspired even after a long workout.

Shoulders rounded Vera trudged to the center of the ring and looked up at giant Dikreet who could easily have made three of her. If Dikreet had any sense at all she would have noticed there was no fear in Vera's eyes.

"*Ta-driet!*" Ess called.

Vera sighed and raised her sword. Sneering Dikreet raised her own weapon, no doubt she had some imagined drubbing in mind for the much smaller woman with her much shorter reach.

"Vera is going to kick the spit out of her," Ziedra whispered to Wren.

"Yeah," Wren murmured. "Well, at least she should. Vera's not acting right though."
"Yie!" Ess cried.

The bigger woman lunged in, swinging the wooden sword so hard it whistled. Vera made no attempt to attack or defend and was standing flat footed as the laminated blade came crashing down on her shoulder. She staggered back a step, but made no noise.

"Jop!" Ess said, raising a hand.

Dikreet guffawed at her point, but sobered as she noticed her opponent's deadpan expression.

"What's she doing!?" Ziedra whispered desperately.

Wren shook her head. She never was certain what was really going on in Vera's mind, the girl was always such an enigma.

"*Ta-driet!*" Ess called for ready position.

Vera raised her sword.

"Yie!"

The bigger woman flashed into motion again. Vera as before made no move to counter or defend as the huge Myrmigyne brought the blade across the side of Vera's head and face, staggering the little woman and leaving an angry red line of impact across her cheek.

Wren gritted her teeth. That had to hurt. What was Vera doing? She had to admire the little woman's toughness, even a man twice her size would barely be able to stand after a hit like that.

She felt Ziedra gripping her shoulder. Wren glanced to Cal and Seb, the two men were frowning. Everyone in the citadel loved Vera. To see her drubbed by a woman so much larger and not even fighting back was almost too much to bear. Why didn't Vera just clobber the witch like she deserved?

Ess called the point and ordered the opponents to their ready position.

Vera stepped to the center. She didn't even raise her eyes to Dikreet. The scarred woman wasn't grinning now. She'd hit Vera twice with all her strength and the little cook was still toeing the line barely acknowledging her existence.

Ess ordered ready, then start. Like the two rounds previous, Vera made no move but let the hit come. Dikreet put everything she had behind this last swing, yelling out a battle cry, no doubt trying to get some reaction out of Vera. This time the sword smashed into her ribs.

The cook let out a grunt, knocked two steps by the power of the swing.

Ess yelled for a halt, called the point, and gestured the two opponents to their positions. Both women stepped to the line facing each other. Ess eyed Vera with a frown, the little woman just stared straight ahead with a stoic expression. She called for a salute which Vera performed perfunctorily. Scowling, Dikreet did not return the gesture. Vera turned her back on the woman not acknowledging the disrespect paid her. She returned to her position beside Wren, and turned to face the center. Around the circle, the other Myrmigynes were murmuring amongst each other.

Wren gripped Vera's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

The little woman nodded. "I am fine, Wren-friend."

"Why didn't you fight?"

The cook's brow furrowed. "Vera did."

"You just stood there and let her hit you."

"Wren-friend, Dikreet is just a student, she does not yet even know how to swing a sword properly, she has no focus and no power. She has much to learn in her martial skills, in controlling her emotions and conducting herself with honor. I am not the teacher here, it is not my place to educate her in those things."

"You might learn the bully a little humility!"

"Do not worry, Wren-friend, I am uninjured. In sparring, Vera has been hit many times harder than that."

The murmuring continued amongst the valley women. Perhaps Vera had won a victory of sorts, with all her bluster and size, huge Dikreet had left no impression whatsoever on the cook.

Wren shook her head, there was still so much to learn about Vera and the way she thought.

Ess went around the circle picking opponents at random. Wren watched Ziedra fight in earnest for the first time. The dancer shifted around the ring smoothly, not attempting to fool her opponent. She still had a long way to go in her physical conditioning and was considerably slower than her younger and stronger opponent. Her advantage was patience and calm. When the other woman lunged in, Ziedra blocked and countered, if she did not score a hit, she did not pursue, preferring to make the younger woman attack. The dancer's defense was, by design, perfect. She performed each defending move with a precision only possible by an Ishtar Nola. The younger woman was frustrated in every attempt as Ziedra performed the corresponding defense to each attack with machine-like consistency. Ziedra simply out-lastated the Myrmigyne, capitalizing on the inevitable mistakes made by her young and easily frustrated opponent. She won with a perfect three to zero score.

The two young men from the Felspar clan acquitted themselves with honor. They were burly boys, stronger, faster, and more experienced than their opponents. They took their hits with good grace, or to Wren's thinking, gave away some points deliberately to spare feelings.

"Wren," Ess called. "Irodee."

With a fluttering in her stomach, Wren stepped to the center of the ring. The fluttering became a thrashing as a shadow fell over her. The woman named Irodee was the giant all the other Myrmigynes shunned.

"Uh, Ess, isn't she a little big for me?"

"You're not supposed to talk," the red-haired Myrmigyne scolded. "Sparring practice is so you can learn to deal with all kinds of opponents."

She looked up at Irodee. The big woman nodded to her, face serious and brow furrowed. Wren swallowed. Damn this woman was big. She readied her sword as Ess called for preparation. Irodee raised her own weapon. Wren imagined those long arms reaching all the way across the ring. For this woman, a sword was a forth *and* fifth circle.

"*Yie!*"

Wren immediately sidestepped. Giving this giant a straight line at her would be asking for a thump. Irodee pivoted with her, using the sword one-handed and chopping at Wren's ribs.

Wren used a two-handed block and spun around the axis of her sword, aiming a kick to hook the back of Irodee's knee. The trick worked and she jerked the huge woman off balance. As the giantess swiveled to keep her feet, Wren knocked the other woman's sword up and brought the edge of her weapon down on the exposed shoulder.

"Jop!" Ess yelled, pointing at Wren.

As she moved back to the center of the ring she glanced to Ziedra and Vera. The little cook nodded to her. Ziedra pressed her hands together and smiled. The Myrmigynes in the circle weren't smiling. There had been frowns when Ziedra trounced her opponent so badly, now they were all scowling.

Irodee didn't mirror the fuming expressions of her sisters. She was nodding to herself, her expression stern, but not angry or upset. She tightened the long braid she had looped around her neck and rolled her shoulders before stepping to the line in front of Ess. Wren drew a breath and stepped up.

Irodee switched the grip on her sword, turning her shoulder in an unusual fashion. "Yie!"

Wren feinted to one side and went the other way only to have the huge woman cut off the angle with one space-eating step. Wren attacked but the move came too late and the blunt tip of Irodee's sword smacked between her breasts with a crunch of pain. She gave with the blow, rolling backward and coming up on her feet, rubbing her chest and wincing. Ow. She hit hard.

"Jop!" Ess cried, giving the point to Irodee.

"That was a good one," Wren said as she stepped up to the line.

"Thank you," Irodee responded grinning. Despite her huge size, she really wasn't an unattractive woman.

"You speak common?"

The Myrmigyne nodded.

"*Ta-driet!*"

Wren squared off. So the giant could talk, and the common language at that. Around them, the other Myrmigynes were jeering. They didn't want the old *tuvans* to have any more victories. She glanced to Ziedra, who clapped and egged her on.

The two of them launched into their next exchange. Wren concentrated on speed, keeping beyond the edge of other woman's enormous reach. Their swords clunked together in rapid clacks as they pressed and countered. Wren noticed that while Irodee was in a beginner class, she moved with considerably more fluidity and poise than her sisters. Despite the length of her arms and legs she didn't have any jerkiness to her motions and kept her center of balance well within the confines of her first circle. Hooking that leg that first time had been a stroke of luck.

Wren halted suddenly in mid-retreat, shifting her weight and pivoting to avoid the thrust of Irodee's sword. A yank on the woman's wrist created that critical slip of balance, as she brought the edge of her sword up under the larger woman's left armpit.

"Jop!" Ess yelled.

Wren mopped the sweat from her brow as she trudged back toward the center of the ring.

"You shouldn't be in this class, you're too good," Wren grumbled to the huge woman.

"Look who talking," the Myrmigyne rumbled, rubbing her side.

"Just focus, you two," Ess told them. "That was an excellent exchange."

Ess started the fight again. Wren and Irodee wheeled around each other. In truth, they were more evenly matched than Wren would have first guessed. She had a speed, flexibility, and balance advantage, and the other woman had reach, power, and experience. The next point was a knee in the gut and a sword across the back of the neck that left Wren coughing in the dirt.

Ow.

Irodee helped her up. "You pretty tough for being so small."

"You're faster than you look," Wren grimaced, rubbing the back of her neck. "Good thing that's a wooden sword."

The tall Myrmigyne shrugged.

"Two points each," Ess told them. "Good footwork, good variety. This exchange decides. *Ta-driet!*"

They took their positions, swords readied. Irodee's eyes were narrowed now. Wren could see her determination to win. Well, the girl would have to earn it.

"Yie!"

Instead of defending, Wren attacked, sending cuts right and left that forced the taller woman to block and retreat. Her offensive was short-lived as the bigger woman simply bore down on her with mass and strength. Her defenses were ready to crumple in instants. Desperation made her sidestep and set for a risky counter. She never got the chance as the bigger woman kicked the feet out from under her. Wren went down as the huge Myrmigyne crested over her, blade plunging forward. She had just enough time to thrust her sword up into Irodee's middle as the Myrmigyne's weapon stabbed into her shoulder.

"Jop!" Ess cried. "Two kill thrusts. Match is a draw."

Irodee helped Wren up. "You fight good for a *tuvan*."

"Thanks--I think."

The huge woman smiled.

Wren stumbled back her place in the circle.

"You okay?" Ziedra asked. "That monster played rough."

"I'll have some bruises, that's for sure," Wren responded. "She didn't hit me as hard as she could have though. She was actually pretty nice about it."

Ziedra sniffed. "I'm the only one who should be allowed to hit on you."

"I don't think that's the kind of hitting we're here to learn."

The dancer frowned at her.

Ess gave some more formal instruction, discussing the highlights of some of the combats that they had witnessed, describing armed and unarmed techniques and their place in sword fighting. The red-haired Myrmigyne was an excellent teacher and even made the lecture portion interesting. After about a bell, Ess dismissed the class.

Sebenreth and Caldorian came over to the three of them rubbing their shoulders and working their necks side-to-side.

"I thought father Loric's workouts were bad," Caldorian said to them. "You okay Vera?" he asked leaning down to put a hand on her shoulder.

The little cook nodded. "I am fine master Caldorian."

"That was quite a go you had Lady Wren," Sebenreth said to her. "Ess set you a stern task and you set to right well."

"Thanks," Wren answered. "I think Ess planned to have me fight her from the beginning. We were too closely matched for it to be an accident."

"You seem to have the right of it," he responded. "Though one would not know it for the size of her." His eyes tracked to the huge woman who was putting gear into a sack behind them.

Caldorian was leaning over Vera. "Though you say it, I would prefer Mother Cassandra look at this cheek. There is some swelling. That beast woman hit you quite soundly."

"Ieee," Vera colored. "Not worry, I be fine."

"Vera," Cal said. "I insist. Seb, come let us take her to mother right now."

The other boy nodded and together they each took one of Vera's elbows, prepared to escort her to proper healing.

To one side Wren saw the big Myrmigyne Dikreet standing in small circle of her sisters. The scowl on her face and the glare she was directing at Vera's back was pure naked jealousy.

That's what it was all about. Everyone in the clan, male and female, doted on Vera. They treated the blushing cook like a queen no matter where she went. With the appetites around the household, it was no wonder she was practically worshipped.

The expression on Dikreet's face grew even uglier as Seb and Cal escorted Vera down the trail. She growled remarks to her friends. Wren watched as the woman picked up a rock and drew back.

Wren charged toward Vera as Dikreet let fly. She lunged the last few steps and intercepted the rock hairs from the back of the little cook's head. She came down with the stone in her hand, she aimed at Dikreet's stomach and whipped the rock to target.

The big Myrmigyne had only an instant to squawk in surprise before the hefty hunk of granite caught her in the midriff. She folded, clutching her abdomen and cursing.

That would teach that overgrown witch.

Seb, Cal and Vera turned with looks of surprise on their faces.

Dikreet straightened with a snarl, snatched up a spear (a real one) and charged at Wren, point lowered to kill.

"Oh boy," Wren swallowed, heart pounding. Maybe that hadn't been such a good idea after all. She set herself, ready to dodge and counter.

Two steps away another hurtling body intercepted Dikreet, the massive form of Irodee. The force of Irodee's shoulder block knocked the other woman sprawling in the dirt.

Instead of ending the fight, it brought Dikreet's friends howling into the exchange. The four of them plowed into Irodee punching and kicking.

Dikreet forgotten, Wren jumped on the nearest Myrmigyne involved in the four-on-one mix-up. She grabbed a fist-full of hair and jammed a knee into the girl's kidneys. The attack effectively removed the woman from the combat.

She never should have forgotten Dikreet. The only warning she got was the whistle of something coming fast, right before a hard object crashed against the side of her head. The force of the impact knocked Wren down, the nola buzzing like an angry insect in the back of her mind. If not for her savant power, the blow probably would have knocked her unconscious. As it was, the world went dark and blurry as she shook her head and tried to orient on the figure looming over her.

Wren blinked and raised her hands in defense just as she heard a hissing sound on her right. Dikreet oriented on the noise and interposed her spear to block. The wooden weapon snapped as Vera whipped a kick home that folded the big woman in half. The cook leaped up and brought her elbow whistling down between Dikreet's shoulder blades. The power of the strike drove the woman's face into the dirt with a thud.

Vera cleared the other three opponents off Irodee with kicks and punches that made bones creak and flesh blacken, each woman knocked spinning by the power of the strikes. The three Myrmigyne were still writhing in the dirt clutching their injured anatomy when Vera offered a hand to Irodee.

"Thank you for helping Wren-friend," Vera said to Irodee.

The big woman rose slowly. Her long face was bruised and scraped and hunks of her hair had been pulled out. She nodded to Vera. "Thank you," she responded.

"May Vera ask you a favor?"

Irodee nodded.

The little woman walked to Dikreet who was on her knees in the dirt clutching her side. She grabbed the much larger woman by the hair, making her groan as she twisted her fist in the strands.

"Tell her," Vera said face as stern as Wren had ever seen it. "That she hits like a girl."

Irodee grinned. She repeated the message in Myrmigyne.

Dikreet groaned. Vera shoved her away and knelt down by Wren.

"Wren-friend, okay?"

She nodded, rubbing the side of her head. She stood up with Vera's help. She looked at the writhing, groaning Myrmigynes and shuddered. Of all the people in the clan, the elders with their powerful magic and warriors with their magic swords, Vera was possibly the most amazing of them all.

"Thanks Irodee," Wren held out a hand to the tall Myrmigyne.

The dark-haired woman took Wren's hand. "You welcome." She turned her head. "Friends?"

"Sure thing," Wren responded, craning her neck to look up at the huge Myrmigyne. "Never can have too many friends."

Cassin and Annawen, it's hard to describe my feelings about them. Being the mates to Sindra and Drucilla, I can't help but be leery of them even though neither has ever done or said anything negative to make me dislike them. I know it's unfair to condemn them simply for their associations. Still, how much can you trust someone married to a trained assassin?

--Wren

Chapter 39

Damay's Proposal

Wrapped in a towel, Wren leaned back on the balcony of the bathing lounge, running a brush through her damp hair and aching. The simple chamber with its fragrant spicewood walls and reed-mat floors had become a haven for her at the end of hectic days spent training. A warm soak and time to dry in the breeze was exactly the serenity she needed. She didn't know which would kill her first, the training or the avatars. She hated the waiting. She wanted to move on and find her parents, but the task had become one where she could be little more than a spectator. True, she did aid Loric on occasion by providing him with magic the way she had with Dorian, but it still made her participation peripheral rather than direct. More than a tenday had passed and neither Loric or Aarlen had seemed to make any progress. It had actually become a contest between the two elders, Aarlen's vast organization and resources versus Loric's ingenuity and specialized magicks.

She stretched out on the bench, grateful for the breeze that made the water beading on her skin feel like little icy pebbles.

Hair wrapped in cloth in a turban on her head, Ziedra meandered out of the wash room with another towel wrapped around her middle. The dancer thumped down on the bench next to Wren with a groan.

"I think I'm going to dieeee," she moaned. "My legs feel ready to drop off."

"You used to do a lot harder drills than that back in Corwin."

"I was still in my teens then, Wren," Ziedra grumbled.

"If you hadn't let yourself get out of shape it wouldn't hurt so much."

"I told you so. I told you so," Ziedra repeated in a mocking voice. "I know you told me so, okay? Give it a rest."

"Sorry. You must be really hurting."

The dancer sniffed. "Damn straight. I swear these Myrmigyne women are machines."

"They live in a nasty jungle with predators everywhere. Fitness is cradle to grave for them--especially with Beia being the boss. She doesn't have much room in her heart for slackers."

"That woman doesn't have much room in her heart for *anything*," Ziedra remarked with a roll of her eyes. "Her only saving grace is she sticks up for you. I didn't think I would ever see someone get in Aarlen's face like that. I'm surprised Beia is still alive. Actually, after that trick with the sword--I'm surprised any of us are alive."

"I don't know how she knew," Wren said with a shake of her head. "Once she handed it to me, I knew we were committed. Mon'istiaga sure tried hard to tempt me."

Ziedra sat up and looked her in the eyes. "What does holding it feel like? I mean I'm a savant too, the sword would work for me as well, right?"

"It's hard to describe. It's like being filled with this infinite light. It burns and you sense that if you let even a little of it leak out, you'll turn everything to cinders."

The dancer's brow furrowed. "That sounds scary."

"Oh yes, it *is* scary." She drew a breath. "Would the sword work for you--yes. Could you control it? I don't know. My savant powers increased a lot after Hyperion purified me."

"Do you think I need to do that purification thing?"

Wren shrugged. "I don't know. I spent so little time with Gaea. There was so much that she didn't have time to tell me..."

She looked over as the door to the bathing lounge creaked open and Damay walked in flanked by Cassin and Annawen. Wren had seen that grouping a lot recently. Just about every time she saw the elder savant nowadays, she seemed to have the two gold girls in tow. She hadn't yet asked whether the arrangement was Damay's design or theirs.

The elder Savant wore a turquoise satin blouse and green leggings, her hair braided to keep it off her neck. The gold twins were dressed in typically daring fashion, extremely tight and brief white breeches and sleeveless matching tops. Both wore their hair brushed out and flowing over their shoulders. The jungle heat didn't bother the twins in the slightest, so it really didn't matter how they dressed or made themselves up as far as comfort was concerned. They just liked to show off.

"There you are," Damay said. "Survived another grueling day it seems."

"Barely," Wren groaned. "Between Vera and Ess, I'm think I'm coming unraveled."

"Why don't you learn the sword from Vera?"

"Because I can barely handle the training I'm already getting from her. She's twice as tough as these jungle girls."

Damay smiled and brushed at her hair, rings winking in the light filtering down through Gravar's canopy.

"Where's your puppy, Wren?" Cassin asked. "I would have thought she'd be at your feet."

"She's *not* a puppy," Wren frowned, meeting the gold girl's obsidian black eyes. The woman smiled innocently in response to Wren's direct stare. The gold twins weren't as bad as Sindra and Drucilla, but they certainly had picked up some of the D'klace's bad habits.

"Be nice, Cassin," Ziedra said, wagging a finger at the gold girl. "Irodee might be as big as house, but her heart is the size of all outdoors, and the poor thing means well."

Damay raised an eyebrow. "What's this? I haven't heard."

Cassin chuckled. "Wren made the mistake of feeding a stray, now she's following her around."

"All I did was say we could be friends," Wren said defensively, banging her head against the balcony rail.

"Irodee is lonely," Ziedra explained. "Most of the other girls won't even talk to her. Ess seems to be the only one that gives her any attention at all."

"Ah, this is must be that growling giant that Desiray was tripping over yesterday."

Wren sighed. "Desiray was ready to rip her in half."

"Irodee is very protective," Ziedra agreed.

"She hardly knows me," Wren moaned. "I don't know what to do with her. I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"Your very first worshipper, little goddess?" Damay asked with an arch expression.

"That's not funny."

"She's right, Wren," Cassin chimed in grinning. "You have to start someplace."

"Did you three just come in here to pinch my nose?" Wren wanted to know.

The elder savant strolled out to the balcony, and took a moment to survey the valley slowly falling into shadow. The waning light played across the jungle canopy like a rainbow. She looked over to Wren. "Actually, it seems Loric has some good

news. He's narrowed the location to an anchor stone further. He only needs to tighten the area a bit more and we can start combing for it."

Wren folded her arms. She'd heard that a few times already, from both Aarlen and Loric. "How long will *that* take?"

Damay shrugged. "I know it's been really slow going, but Loric is doing his best."

"Add to it that our movements have been severely curtailed by Hecate beating the bushes for us," Cassin added. "We have to be really careful not to accidentally lead her minions here."

"Security concerns aside. I still don't see how this problem can be stumping him *and* Aarlen for this long."

"As I understand it," Damay answered, settling on the bench beside Wren's. "It's a bit like your phoenix problem. What they're both searching for is moving around."

Wren's brow furrowed. "How can they narrow it down then?"

"The anchor itself is not actually moving," Cassin said, walking over to one of the adjacent benches and stretching out with her fingers laced over her stomach.

Annawen stepped up on the bench by her sister and took a seat on the rail. Cassin continued, "It's really the space that it's residing in that is moving."

"What?" Ziedra murmured, adjusting the towel higher on her chest. "How can that be?"

"This valley," Cassin made a sweeping gesture to the canopy high over their heads. "And everything in it resides on the edges of what's best described as 'wrinkled space'. Think of an unruly piece of ribbon wound this way and that and bunched together on edge. The ribbon itself is moving constantly like the belts turned by the cogs down in the plaza."

"If that's so," Wren said. "How can anything exist here? I mean nothing would stay in one place, it would all be drifting in different directions."

"Without anchor magicks what you say is absolutely correct," Cassin answered nodding. "Here in the valley, Duran'Gravar is the anchor. Beyond those cliffs out there," she swung her hand to indicate the hills in the distance. "Is a sea of chaos."

"Can anything live in the chaos?" Ziedra asked.

"Not in raw chaos," Cassin answered with a shake of her head. "There are pockets of stability that can be navigated if you know plane-walking. Fortunately, living things are naturally drawn toward the corridors that are the bridges between the pockets. The problem is that unless you know how to anchor yourself, you will be randomly drawn from pocket to pocket endlessly."

"Cast adrift in the abyss," Wren said. "That doesn't sound very pleasant."

"It isn't," the gold woman confirmed.

"Cassin and Annawen have been kind enough to teach me the chaos navigation," Damay said. "I learned the mental disciplines for anchoring one's-self in the chaotic realms. Since we're getting near to actually being close enough to search for the stone, I thought I should facilitate passing along that knowledge."

"Sounds like a good idea," Wren said. She turned to Cassin and Annawen. "We've been here more than a tenday, why are we only now learning these things? It seems like some pretty crucial information."

The gold woman rubbed the back of her neck. "It's not really our job to disseminate information. Mother Desiray would probably have told you, but she's not really fluent in these kinds of concepts. Momma Cassandra, well, she's always been a need-to-know kind of person."

"Yes, to my great annoyance."

"I think much of it is presumption," Damay said. "Everybody assumes somebody else is telling you what's going on."

Wren sighed. She stood up and went behind a dressing partition. She unwrapped the towel from around herself and slipped into a robe. She pulled it closed and stepped back onto the balcony as she pulled the sash tight. "Okay, navigation in chaotic space. Sure--why not?" She drew a breath. "Weren't you going to teach me some savant tricks? It's been score-days since the great game and I haven't gotten a single lesson."

"Exactly when were you going to squeeze me into your busy schedule?" the elder savant asked with a smile.

"Damay, you know you come ahead of anything else I am doing. I know you've been busy getting yourself together--readjusting."

"Indeed," the elder savant responded with a nod. She glanced at Cassin and Annawen, dark eyes glinting.

Wren looked at the twins with a frown, wondering what part they were playing in the 'readjustment'.

"Truth is, Damay," Wren continued, sitting down again and rubbing Ziedra's shoulder. "All this fight training is just to toughen me up, it doesn't help at all against that witch Mishaka's magic. If I don't have a defense against that, it's going to be like last time."

"You will have a defense," Ziedra grumbled. "You'll have *me*."

"You sound quite confident," Damay responded, raising an eyebrow. "Enough defense to protect her from an avatar's magic?"

Ziedra sniffed. "Something is better than *nothing*."

"Let's not get into that again," Wren said to Ziedra. "I don't want you anywhere near an avatar."

"I've seen Ziedra," Cassin said. "She's actually quite good."

"Well, you'd be the only one," Wren grumbled. "I haven't seen a spark. I don't know why her magic training has to be such a deep dark secret."

Cassin shrugged. "Aarlen's orders. She's not supposed to practice without a master present until such time as she's deemed proficient to cast in public."

Ziedra put her hands up in a helpless gesture. "If I broke the rule even a little she'd know. I don't know how, but she would."

"Good call," Cassin said. "She would. She has eyes," she turned her head from side to side. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "*Everywhere*."

Damay frowned. "Does Aarlen have so little faith in Ziedra's training that she thinks the girl is going to wreck property and kill bystanders if she's not supervised?"

The gold girl shrugged again. "I don't make the rules. I just follow them."

"You mean like being my escort?"

Cassin rubbed the back of her neck her gold cheeks coloring. "A lot like that, yes."

"You two are spies for everyone," Wren accused. "For Loric, for Cassandra, for Dorian, for the twins and Aarlen; I didn't buy for a moment your comment about it not being your job to 'disseminate information'. If my observations are worth a copper that's about *all* you two do, aside from a mercy mission here and there."

The gold woman smiled. "There is a difference between providing requested information, and being messengers."

"Yes, one is a mercenary activity, one isn't," Ziedra said rising from her seat, and walking behind the dressing screen. "We don't matter or rate that kind of attention. You don't have to pretty it up for either Wren or myself, Cassin. We've lived in the streets long enough not to be shocked."

The gold woman's brow furrowed, but she didn't respond.

Ziedra changed into a robe like Wren's, unwrapped her hair and began untangling it with her fingers. "Can both of us learn this navigation, Lady Damay?" she asked.

"I don't see why not," the elder savant responded. "I know Wren would prefer to leave you behind, but I don't think that would deter you much."

"Not a wit," Ziedra admitted. She pulled the silky mass of her hair over one shoulder and continued smoothing it. She looked up from her chore and met Damay's eyes and then Wren's. "I'd find someone to teach me."

Wren frowned at her.

The dancer smiled. "If you think for an instant you can put me through all this and then leave me behind, you're mistaken."

She sniffed. "I could tie you up."

The dancer grinned. "You could try. I think I'd like that."

Wren sighed and rolled her eyes.

"Well..." Damay suddenly became interested in the rings on her fingers. "In any event, I shall be glad to entertain you with what I know. I suggest early morning before you start that body torturing ritual you engage yourself in. You'll be pleased to know there should be absolutely no pain involved."

"Marvelous," Ziedra enthused.

"Fine with me," Wren answered. "I'll ask Vera if we can meet a little later."

"Then we have an accord," Damay said with a nod. "Dress for a hike outside--I wished us to get out and about before it grew hot."

"Done," Wren responded. "Thank you, Damay, I really appreciate it."

"No thanks necessary, Child. It is no less than I promised. I must admit I have been somewhat daunted at taking on a student of your stature."

Wren looked down at herself. "Pardon?"

"How shall I say this?" The elder savant rubbed her arms in obvious agitation. "I have spent some time familiarizing myself with your potential. I could have dived directly into showing you what I have learned. However, I thought better of it--especially in light of the things you have taught yourself with no training whatsoever. It became clear to me that I was dealing with true blood. You are Gaea's favorite because you are the one closest to her. You have truly grand potential, and I was seriously concerned at hampering you."

"Oh please," Wren said, shaking her head. "You must know I'm not some impressionable girl. I have my own mind."

"That, I have been coming to learn. Of course, part of your growth is learning to discipline that mind, and that's when and where the danger comes in." The elder savant drew a breath. "Much of what you do with the Kel'Varan is simply raw talent. You do things now that I was not doing until I was a decade or more older."

Wren's jaw dropped. "But I thought that was you in the amulet giving me inspiration."

Damay shook her head. "Gaea perhaps, but not I. That is why I have been hesitant. I don't want to limit you."

Wren held up her hands. "Damay--trust me--limit *away*. As much as I admire you, you won't box in my thinking. I'm already out of the box." She grinned. "Besides, I need to learn everything I can. To be honest," she glanced at Ziedra and sobered. "I don't think I have Gaea's weapon anymore. I think Desiray and I used up all our time in battling the avatar coven. Much as I'd like to have Desiray's body, I don't think she wants to give it to me."

Damay made a crooked smile. "No doubt you have the right of that. Honestly, Wren, it's not like you have to fight Mishaka by yourself. You don't have to be able to defeat her alone."

She drew a breath. "Damay, I wish I could believe that." She glanced at Ziedra and the twins. "I had Jharon, and all four of the twins with me--I still ended up fighting

her alone. Something will happen, I don't know what, but when it really matters I have this ugly premonition..." Her voice trailed off.

"That..?" Damay prompted.

She swallowed. "That I will be alone..."

Wren is different, I like her. I know she doesn't trust me for what are some pretty valid reasons. I guess my teasing doesn't make it any easier. I will always have a soft spot for her and the highest regard. I was watching her when she confronted Mishaka and tried to save the life of Jharon. For that, she will always have my respect.

--Cassin Felspar Frielos

Chapter 40

Dimensional Phase Training

Today felt different. Some indescribable quality about the atmosphere simply made everything seem even more strange than it normally was. The wan breeze was the barest whisper against her face, thick with the acrid jungle fragrance of decaying leaves. In the soles of her feet, she felt the creaking of Gravar's titanic boughs stirring in the morning quiet. Visible through gaps in the canopy, gray and pink clouds loomed overhead like paintbrush strokes against the purple sky. Even the aches in her body, tortured for days to teach it to perform better and faster, vibrated in some strange muted and unfamiliar fashion.

She stepped down onto the main terrace half expecting some weird spectacle to be in progress. Even at this early hour more than a dozen Myrmigynes were hard at work at various tasks. As she leaned against the rail looking out into main plaza watching wood crafters fashioning bows and spears, she couldn't shake the feeling. Even the squeak and groan of the mechanisms that operated the lifts were oddly distorted, as though the sounds were fuzzy around the edges. If any of the Myrmigynes going about their chores sensed what she did, they didn't show it. A few of them nodded to her as they headed for the lift to go down to the base of the tree.

She pulled strings on her breeches a bit tighter. Even these close fitting togs had started feeling loose in the last couple of days. Back when she and Grahm were a team, she had always considered herself fit. The brutal drilling with Vera had shown her what true fitness was. It seemed as if she had done nothing but shrink for a cycle.

She walked to the rail and looked down into the valley. The dim bluish light glinted on the surface of the streams. Flowers were just opening their petals to receive the illumination, creating dots of bright color against the backdrop of green.

She took a breath. Damay would be taking them out further into the jungle than they had ever gone--all the way to the edge of chaos. Just the thought of it made her uneasy. Though it had been more than a scoreday since she had resurrected Damay, she still didn't know much about the elder savant. Still, Damay had never given her any reason to doubt her.

"Greetings, Wren," a deep female voice said behind her.

The sudden nearness of the sound made her jerk and lurch against the rail. Startled, she whipped around.

The giant Myrmigyne Irodee grinned down at her and waved. She wore a simple leather cuirass laced down the front with black hide strips, and long canvas breeches that tucked into turndown running boots. Leaf and shadow patterns had been carefully embossed and dyed into the materials so she would be practically invisible in the jungle. A huge hunting bow hung over her shoulder and she leaned on a steel-shod boar spear that had seen significant use.

The woman might be the size of broadpaw but she moved like a cat. Wren hadn't heard her approach. She drew a breath, calming herself. "Uhhh, good morning, Irodee."

"Sorry, I scare you," the big woman apologized. Her brow furrowed and her dark eyes searched Wren's face. "You look troubled."

Wren laughed. "Irodee, with me, *everything* is trouble."

The big woman turned her head to one side. "You are scared of what waits for you."

She frowned. "How would you know anything about what waits for me?"

The Myrmigyne brushed back her hair and smiled. "I ask. They not tell much, but I guess from the way everybody act. You face big enemy."

"Oh yeah." She let out a breath.

Irodee's lips pressed together. "Is that why all Nobelisa Beia's friends all staying here?"

Wren weighed telling this girl anything. She didn't really see the harm, but then the less people who really knew what was going on, the less trouble they could accidentally create.

"Irodee, I can't really say. Suffice to say, where we were living wasn't safe any more."

The tall woman's brow furrowed. She paused and appeared to decide not to press the matter. "So, you are not training with the quiet girl this morning. Where you go?"

"A friend is going to teach me and Ziedra the chaos walking out near the edge of the jungle."

Irodee's eyebrow rose. "Is Wren's friend a Myrmigyne? The chaos cliffs not safe."

"She's not a Myrmigyne," Wren admitted with a smile. "But she can take care of herself."

"The honored elder that lady Cassin and lady Annawen follow around, yes?"

This girl was really keeping an eye on things. "Yes, her name is Lady Damay."

"Damay," Irodee repeated.

Wren heard the planks creak, and she looked over to see Ziedra walking up. The dancer wore black canvas breeches and a white blouse over which she wore a hardened leather vest with pockets. The boots, gloves, and hair band were all practical and utilitarian. Wren nodded, seeing that her friend was starting to look the part of someone who could take care of herself.

"Hello, Irodee," the dancer greeted. She looked to Wren. "Sorry, it took me so long."

"Not to worry, Damay isn't here yet." She raised an eyebrow. "So, what kept you?"

Ziedra pressed her lips to a line. "I--" She paused with a look like she'd eaten something sour. "Actually, it was a magic drill I had to get right before Aarlen would let me go out this morning."

"Huh?" Wren frowned. "You were asleep in bed."

Ziedra pressed her lips together and studied the sky. "Well, no. It just looked like I was."

She put hands on hips. "Come again?"

"Kind of a magic trick so you wouldn't know I'd gone out."

"A magic trick? I thought you weren't allowed to practice magic without her highness around."

"I can if she tells me too."

Wren's tone dropped. "She told you to mislead me and you did it?"

"Oh now," Ziedra said making calming gestures. "No harm done. She just didn't want you following me is all."

Wren growled. "Zee, listen to what you are saying."

"I wasn't happy with it either, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. You don't have to play tricks. If I say I won't spy on you, I won't. Ask me first. Don't do that again. It would have scared me to find out you weren't really in that bed. What if I tried to wake you up?"

"I would have grumbled and rolled over. The spell would have alerted me I would have come back to the room then."

"After I wondered if you were dead or something."

"Wren, I apologize. I have to do what Aarlen tells me."

"Maybe you need a different teacher."

Ziedra winced. The subject of her learning from Aarlen was a sore one that was pricked on a daily basis. Ziedra had been unusually resilient in her choice of master. In times past, the dancer would have backed down or changed her mind. This time she was adamant. Whether it was due to the tenuous family connection or something else, Wren couldn't say. She had suspicions that there were veiled threats involved. Aarlen was the type to play both sides, and threatening Wren would be an easy way to get Ziedra to comply. She sighed. It was another problem that she'd have to turn her attention to before Aarlen's hold on Ziedra became too strong to break.

"Ah yes, my students are already waiting for me," Damay's calm and pleasant voice said from behind them.

Wren turned to see the elder savant dressed in a green button down tunic and thick canvas jungle breeches. Like Irodee, the clothes were dyed and stitched with other fabrics to serve as jungle camouflage. She wore soft climbing and hiking boots, and stitched hide gloves with the fingertips cut off. For the first time since Wren had known her, the woman was armed. She wore a sword strapped across her back, and daggers in a half dozen sheaths on her belt, thighs, and calves. Her dark brown hair was rolled into a tight bun and held in place with a leather strap impaled by two gleaming steel pins that looked far too sturdy to be purely cosmetic.

The weapons and dress were not for show. The woman obviously knew how to configure herself for optimal stealth, utility, and response time.

Wren's brow furrowed. "Are we expecting a fight?"

Damay pursed her lips. "Well, the chances for an encounter are not high, but it is better to be prepared than not, wouldn't you say?"

"Can't disagree with you there."

"Lady Damay," Irodee said. "Irodee would be honored if she could serve as guide for you."

The elder savant looked up at Irodee. She glanced at Wren and the corner of her mouth quirked up. "Are you a good guide, Irodee?"

The big Myrmigyne's face tightened, dark eyes narrowing slightly. "Irodee has spent much time on the ridge alone."

The elder savant pushed out her lower lip and nodded. "Then by all means lead on."

Irodee nodded. She started by jogging over to one of the women on the terrace and having a brief discourse which Wren guessed was to leave word with Ess where she had gone. She came back to them and indicated the lift.

Together the four of them filed onto the platform. After a few moments it lurched downward, and they began the slow journey to the base of the tree.

"Irodee knows an easy way up the ridge," the Myrmigyne informed them.

Damay nodded.

When the lift let them out at the bottom, Irodee led them out through the fields where Myrmigynes were beginning their day tending gardens, fashioning tools, and preparing goods for barter.

The big woman stopped by a stall, spoke to a woman and was handed some dark brown stitched bags of slick-looking material. She handed one to each of them. "Fill at the stream."

Water. Seemed like a good idea to Wren.

Kneeling by a snaking blue stream that gurgled through some rocks Ziedra looked up to Damay. "So, why do we need to learn this trick way out there?"

"Never trust theoretical practice," the elder said, adjusting the strap on her water bag for better carrying. "Especially when the consequence is being lost for eternity."

Ziedra pulled her bag from the water and shoved the waxed wooden stopper in the bottle mouth. She frowned. "Eternity is a long time."

"As in forever," Wren said. "I have to agree with the practical experience sentiment."

Irodee looked between them with a furrowed brow and said nothing.

When they finished, Irodee set a brisk pace off down a trail. Young she might be, but obviously woods-wise and intimate with the environment. Damay followed behind her, a smile on her face, obviously enjoying the trek.

"The newness still hasn't worn off has it?" Wren asked the elder savant.

Damay looked back at her. "Is it that apparent?"

Wren nodded.

The elder chuckled. "I was trapped in that amulet for millennia. I could make up new environments to live in, but after a while you run out of ideas. Everything is derivative. I am *free*. Child, each day I wake up in bed and see the light I realize how much I owe you. When I think about how I almost talked you out of freeing me..." She shuddered.

Wren patted her on the shoulder. "I knew you were crazy. I never really entertained leaving you in there."

Damay sighed. "Stubborn girl. Thank Gaea for that hard head."

Ziedra laughed. "Too bad nobody else appreciates it."

Wren shot her friend a hard look. "Ha ha."

Irodee glanced back with a furrowed brow. Again, the towering Myrmigyne said nothing, but Wren could see her thinking. What those thoughts might be, Wren couldn't begin to guess. Perhaps she simply thought the exchange odd. That would be a natural reaction for an outsider who had no knowledge of everything that had happened to them.

The jungle grew thicker and the paths Irodee followed increasingly more narrow and sketchy. The musky scent of the jungle was heavy in the humid air. Somewhere nearby, water churned and gurgled. Birds squawked and creatures leaped and swayed through the branches overhead.

They broke through the foliage and turned upstream along a sizeable water-course. As they picked their way along rocks and deadfalls, Wren felt a tingling in the back of her skull. It wasn't the same as when her nola operated, but had a similar texture. The feeling grew sharper as they moved.

Uneasy with the unfamiliar sensation she came to a stop.

The rest of the group slowed and looked back.

"Is something wrong?" Damay asked.

"Yes, I'm getting this weird tingling sensation in the back of my head. It's getting stronger the further up this stream we go."

"Strange," Damay said. "We are still some distance from the chaos."

"I don't feel anything," Ziedra said.

Wren closed her eyes and turned slowly. The tingle seemed strongest when she was facing one direction. She opened her eyes and pointed across the stream.

"Whatever it is. I feel it most when I'm facing that way."

"Interesting," Damay responded. "Irodee, do you know of anything unusual in that direction?"

The Myrmigyne frowned and stared off that direction. "The spirit cave is that way."

"Spirit cave?" Ziedra repeated. "You mean as in ghosts?"

Irodee nodded. "It is a place of strong magic."

"Is it a forbidden place?" Damay asked.

"No," the Myrmigyne answered with a shake of her head. "Forbidding is not necessary. The sisters know well enough to stay away."

"Do we know well enough to stay away?" Ziedra asked in wistful tone.

"Hmmm," Damay murmured. "I do not believe it is related to Wren's savant senses. Otherwise, I would feel something. Leave us go that direction and see what we discover."

"Spirits, Lady Damay?" Ziedra asked. "I thought we were learning chaos walking."

"Not spirits in particular, Ziedra," Damay responded. "Wren senses something, and I am curious to see if it's important."

"I don't need to see it," Ziedra said. "I know what it is."

The elder raised an eyebrow. "And what is that?"

"Trouble."

Wren smiled. She couldn't argue that.

Damay smiled too. "Trouble or not, I think we should investigate. Irodee, if you would, please lead on."

Irodee frowned, but made no vocal comment. She found a shallow rocky place to ford the stream, and they all headed off toward the darkest part of the jungle.

The feeling grew stronger as they moved, a scratchy sensation like fingers scraping across a drawing slate. The jungle became almost impassible and Irodee was forced to hack a path through the undergrowth. The terrain turned rutted and rocky.

As they blazed a path through the resisting foliage, the valley wall hove into view, a vertical precipice of stone some hundreds of paces high. Vegetation clung to the sides of the abutment, long tendrils and patches of moss that seemed determined to scale the surface. An icy breeze and mist rolled down off the wall making Wren shiver.

Irodee came to the base of the cliff and turned along it. The scratchy sensation became a burning. With it there was another sensation, a prickly itchy humming on the skin that while not uncomfortable did make her muscles twitch.

"Now there's something else," Wren said. She paused. "Itchy."

"I feel it too," Ziedra agreed.

"That is the chaos," Damay said. "What about your other sensation Wren?"

"It's stronger now, like a burning in the back of my head near where I feel my savant power."

"How close are we to this 'spirit cave', Irodee?" Damay asked.

The Myrmigyne looked around and rubbed the back of her neck. She was obviously getting uncomfortable. "Not far, perhaps a few bowshots away."

"What do you think Wren senses, Damay?" Ziedra asked.

"I have a suspicion, and kick myself for not having thought of it earlier."

"What?" Wren asked.

"Never mind, Child, keep walking. We'll know soon enough." She looked to Irodee. "Go on."

They clambered along the rocky hillside, shoving through brush, negotiating rock falls, and fallen trees. The light in the valley was growing brighter and the heat

increasing. Wren wiped the perspiration from her forehead. The burning at the base of her skull was just on the edge of being uncomfortable.

The cliff bulged out into a headland and then cut back into a deep notch of jagged rock. The walls here appeared to weep, green water trickled down through the cracks. An odd sulfurous smell filled the air. A strange clinging mist swirled in the gap, casting it in strange shadows. The itchy sensation on the skin had become like a slimy caress. Irodee halted in the shadow of the massif now showing visible signs of nervousness.

"No wonder they think this place is haunted," Ziedra said rubbing her arms. "This place is creepy."

"There are chaos whorls in the rocks here." Damay said looking around with narrowed dark eyes. The movement was subtle but Wren saw the elder woman gripping the handle of one of her knives. "This area is at the furthest edge of Gravar's anchoring force." She looked to Wren. "That other sensation, still there?"

Wren nodded. She closed her eyes and turned until the burning seemed strongest. She opened her eyes. "It seems strongest back in that cleft over there."

Irodee's face paled. She swallowed and gripped her spear.

Damay took note of their young guide's tension. "If you'd prefer, Irodee, you can stay here. I know you're not comfortable with exploring this place."

The giant Myrmigyne stiffened and her chin came up. "I will lead."

The corner of the elder's mouth quirked up. "Then lead on."

Irodee drew a breath, turned and headed into the mists. The going was much slower now, due in part to Irodee's discomfort and the poor light. The rocks themselves seemed to tremble around them.

"Whoa!" Ziedra skittered to one side her sword abruptly in her hand, as the cliff groaned, seeming to bend and warp toward her like something alive.

Wren jumped away, pulling out a dagger.

Eyes wide, fists clenched, the four of them braced.

With a moaning sound the rock relaxed, appearing like slimy granite again.

"What in *Hades* was that?!" Ziedra demanded, sword vibrating in her hand.

"A spirit." Irodee determined with wide dark eyes.

"A reality disjunction," Damay determined. "This area is very tentatively anchored."

Wren's heart was still pounding. Whatever Damay called it, that bulging rock had seemed like something supernatural. Everything about this place had an icy otherworldly feel.

Damay looked around at them. "Irodee, you do know the plane-walking, do you not?"

Still shaken, the Myrmigyne nodded.

"All right you two," Damay said. "That was enough warning for me. The area is only going to get more unstable the further in we go, so we will have to stabilize the area ourselves by anchoring." She looked to Ziedra. "Zee, I'll show you first since it's easiest for you to learn." She held out her hand.

Ziedra smiled, stepped forward and took the elder savant's hand.

"All right," Damay said. "Wren you can follow along, your nola will help here. Feel around for the climbing tingle, only now you don't want to pull against it, you want it to pull against you."

"Reverse climbing?" Wren asked.

"Essentially," Damay said. "That's where it starts. The idea is to push yourself at right angles to everything. The act is similar to how you creep up a tight space by pressing against the walls with your back and feet. With anchoring, you use your will to literally pinch between layers of ether."

"Ummm, okay."

"For a force savant, it's easier to do than it sounds. It's mundanes that have a devil of a time getting their will strong enough for the task." She nodded to Irodee.

Irodee made a faint smile, at another time Wren was certain she would have been pleased to be praised by an elder like Damay.

"All right," Damay said. "First we find the first axis and start pulling." She reached out with her free hand. "Then we start gathering and twisting." She closed her fingers and balled them into a fist, like she were grabbing someone's coat to threaten them.

Beside her, eyes narrowed, Ziedra mirrored her actions perfectly.

"The third bit is the hard part," Damay said. "To teach anyway. You're pulling and twisting, but that still allows you to slip. You need to turn that last axis inside out and take hold. That's where the Kel'Varan can help you Wren. You have to feel for that *other* surface that is at right angles to everything." She hooked her hand up, then down and twisted in a single sinuous motion. Her hand began a dull red glow.

Ziedra reproduced the move exactly and her hand began to glow as well.

Damay looked over at the dark-haired dancer. "Ah yes, I do envy the Ishtar Nola's way with magic."

"Thank you," Ziedra said with a grin. "Ummm, it stings though. Now that I have it, what do I do with it?"

"You'll find it's like a bit of stretch candy," Damay answered. "Take that force and wind yourself up in it. That sting will go away when you get used to it. You want to get that red glow around your whole body. That's when you've done a good job anchoring yourself."

Ziedra frowned, brow furrowed and teeth gritted as she seemed to struggle with the ether. The red glow would engulf an arm or leg, only to vanish from another part of her body.

"It's slippery," Ziedra complained.

"Indeed," Damay said. "Hence the need for practice."

"Ready, Wren?" Damay asked.

She nodded, and began following the procedure as Damay described. She had never tried to grip anything but solid objects with her nola power, so this posed a new challenge. The itchy feeling in the back of her head also competed for her attention. What was it and what did Damay suspect?

After a while of trying she was able to get a 'two-way' grip, but the third axis and twist were the devil. Every time she tried to twist her hold inside out, everything would come to pieces.

Ziedra on the other hand was managing to slip into and out of her anchor state, able to get the glow around her limbs simply by concentrating.

"I think I'm comfortable with it now," Ziedra determined.

"Show off," Wren mumbled.

"I love it when I can be better at something than you," Ziedra grinned. "You show me up in altogether too many endeavors."

"Hurrumph," Wren grumbled.

"It took me a while," Damay admitted. "Cassin and Annawen made it look considerably easier than it is."

"That reminds me," Ziedra said. "Where are they?"

"By coincidence, they had some errands that needed doing."

"Coincidence," Wren said. "I wonder."

Damay shrugged.

Irodee stepped over by Wren. "Don't need special powers for the 'rooting'," she said. "Pick a single spot." She pointed in the air in front of herself. "Focus there. You

must bend your thoughts around it." She reached forward and a rusty red glow flared up her arm and around her body. "Feel the otherworld, make *it* help in the bending."

If a girl six years her junior with no special powers could do it, she could do it. She reflected on Damay's explanation, and then on Irodee's bending concept. They both had that 'inside out' idea in common. That final twist that made it work.

Feel the otherworld, make it help in the bending.

The otherworld was that itchy, slimy feeling she felt on her skin. What had Ziedra said--*slippery*. She tightened her concentration down to a single mote in the air in front of her. When she tried to twist on that third axis, things stuck and tore. She needed to make it slide more easily.

Gathering the forces together with her will she reached out to that slimy sensation she felt on her skin and pulled it around herself as she twisted.

Red light flared up her arm and spun around her and she felt half of her body enveloped in stinging force.

"Good!" Irodee cheered.

"Excellent," Damay said. "Now you're onto it."

Wren shook her fist, a sense of accomplishment making her feel warm inside.

"Not bad," Ziedra said with a wink. "Now you have to get it the rest of the way."

She grunted and struggled with creating a complete envelope, but made steady progress. After another half a bell of practice she could bring up the anchor force with decent reliability.

"All right," Damay said. "Let's anchor ourselves good. If you start to feel tired, yell early so we have time to get to safety. Okay?"

Wren and Ziedra nodded.

One by one each of them sheathed themselves in the red glow of anchor forces and started forward into the cleft. Around them the rocks and vegetation seemed to waver and fluctuate. Even the sounds distorted and bent.

Every step they took, Wren felt a reverberation through that 'other' sensation, the burning finally became a screech that made her yelp. "Ow." She put a hand to her forehead.

They were still several paces from the spirit cave that Irodee had mentioned.

No matter which way Wren turned the burning sensation was the same. Whatever it was, emanated exactly from the spot she was standing.

"Wren?" Damay asked.

"It's here," she said.

"What's here?"

"Whatever 'it' is," she answered. "The burning thing in the back of my head."

"Here?" Irodee repeated. She seemed delighted that they didn't have to go into the cave.

Wren nodded again.

"It is loud," she said. "A pulsing that makes my bones vibrate."

"I don't feel anything," Ziedra said with a frown.

"Nor I," Damay determined. "Although, through our savant rapport I can sense that she is indeed feeling something very strong on this spot."

"There's nothing here, unless it's buried," Ziedra said. "The chaos is so close though, if you dug down more than a foot or so you'd be in nothingness."

"Buried," Damay repeated. "Maybe what Wren senses is simply not physically here."

"Huh?"

"Cross-over?" Irodee said. "I not think they know anchoring well enough yet to phase. Maybe you not either."

"Maybe not," Damay said. "Can you look for us Irodee?"

The young woman swallowed. She glanced at Wren. "All right. Wait." She closed her eyes. The red glow around her skin flickered and abruptly she was gone.

"Irodee?" Ziedra asked.

"She phased," Damay said.

"Phased?" Wren asked.

"She shifted between the many parallel spaces that co-exist in the chaos at this juncture."

"Can't she get lost?" Ziedra said with a gasp.

"That's what she was warning us about. If the girl can anchor herself while asleep, she can remember where she came from when awake."

"Can all of the Myrmigynes do that?" Ziedra wondered.

"I doubt many of them can," Damay said. "She seems quite a rare girl."

Wren winced. The pulsation seemed to be getting stronger. "Ow."

"I'm starting to feel it to," Ziedra said rubbing her temple.

"You're feeling it through your link to Wren," Damay said.

"My link to Wren? What link?"

"All savants are linked," Damay answered. "Haven't you two been able to tell what the other was thinking?"

"Well sure."

"It wasn't as accidental as you thought," Damay said.

"So, I can telepath with other savants?" Wren said. "Like I did with Desiray?"

"Between savants is how it works best, I'd dare you'll have to teach Ziedra to 'speak' but she should be able to hear you with little enough coaching."

With a burst of light Irodee reappeared. The Myrmigyne staggered. "Demons!" She yelled. "They are gathered around a strange crystal right on this spot, striking at it with weapons."

"Oh lord," Ziedra gasped.

Wren's eyes widened. "A stone that I feel...?"

"The anchor!" Damay let out.

From the first time we sparred I knew Wren would be my friend. I am not even sure why--perhaps it was simply fated.

--Irodee

Chapter 41

Defense of the Anchor Stone

Chaos.

Pure fear-driven chaos.

Damay's words exploded through Wren. *The anchor!* In a burst of realization, she knew the elder savant had to be right. A piece of Cosmodarus, the city of her birth. Of *course* she could feel it! That and a thousand other things whizzed through Wren's mind in one staggering instant.

She jumped forward and gripped Irodee's arm. "Take us there! Quickly, this may be our only chance! Hurry!"

Damay stepped forward and took hold of the Myrmigyne's other arm. "Make haste."

Ziedra gripped the woman's belt. "Go!"

Already frightened by what she had seen, Irodee looked around at them as if they were crazy.

"Go!" Wren hollered, feeling her heart hammer and her body grow hot. "Go! Go! GO!"

The barrage of 'go's startled the Myrmigyne into action, with a glowing fist she punched forward into the air in front of her, seeming to rip the valley asunder. The rock wall split apart as though parted down the middle with a knife. A miasma of images and sensory information tumbled around them, harsh sounds, brilliant lights, and numbing cold. Flash. Flash. Flash. Landscapes flickered into being, blurring, jarring, before vanishing and being replaced by another.

With a sudden wrench like being slammed in the gut with a baton, they erupted into another place.

The rocky clearing was a little over a stone's throw across and surrounded by twisted and dying trees that looked like withered corpses. The sky looked like fresh-welled blood dotted with brilliant pin-pricks of light and cut through with swaths of charcoal black. Puss-colored tendrils crisscrossed the desiccated ground like veins in rotting flesh.

A short distance away, megaliths twice the height of a man and many times as thick stood in a semi-circle, drawing attention to the glowing thing that stood between them, and the dark silhouettes roaring and crashing around it.

Wren saw the glowing gemstone and half-dozen six-armed monstrosities pounding at the shimmering field of radiance coming from it. Only one thought impinged on her consciousness.

Destroy.

Azimuth the dagger of flight was out of her hand and whistling at the nearest creature's head before she even took a moment to think. The hard-hurled weapon scored in splash of green gore that knocked the creature down, howling and tearing at itself.

She started to step forward and was jerked back by Ziedra who yelled a single piercing note. From the dancer's fingertips, brilliant blue bolts jagged out with a roar, scattering the creatures as the blaze leaped and bit amongst their reptilian bodies repeatedly like the strikes of a maddened snake. The power of the magic blast knocked the creatures beyond the circle of the megaliths.

"Kill them while they're disoriented!" Ziedra cried.

The order focused everyone and they charged across the clearing, weapons out. The glowing anchor crystal pulsed and thrummed as Wren ran toward it, a hot caress in the back of her mind. She didn't have time to think. They had to keep those demons away from the crystal.

Damay reached the first of the scattered bodies two steps ahead of Wren, sweeping the head from the demon's shoulders in a single powerful slash. Wren hacked down on her target with her short sword but found the weapon's edge woefully inadequate for penetrating the thick armor. The creature howled and convulsed but was not slain. Irodee's huge boar spear had little more affect even powered by the girl's formidable mass. Ziedra hacked at her target and met with the same minimal result.

"Am I the only one with a magic weapon?" Damay demanded, leaping toward the next creature and plunging her sword deep into its body.

What she would have given for Desiray's sword right now. She called Azimuth's name and as the weapon appeared in her hand she stabbed down on the demon, driving the blade into its chest seeking a vital spot. The monster howled, clutching at its chest, forcing Wren to flinch out of the range of its claws.

The effects of Ziedra's spell were quick to wear off and the remaining four demons rose and focused on them with eyes like burning embers, slathering jaws clicking, and taloned hands spread to rend and dismember.

"Now what..." Ziedra's voice trailed off as she backed in the direction they had come.

"Nethra..." Irodee moaned, gripping her spear.

"Spit," Wren cursed.

"Get behind me," Damay growled, stepping in front of them.

As the elder said the words the largest of the demons leaped forward with a roar that made the rocks quake. Its massive fist pounded down on Damay who raised her hands as though she were signaling to someone far away.

The creature's fist made a thrumming sound that made the air vibrate and light up around the four of them in an amber colored sphere. Damay growled as tendrils of energy flicked around her legs and into the ground.

In an instant, the other three demons were pounding away at Damay's shield of force, making the savant cry out in obvious pain.

"Wren!" She shouted. "Don't just stand there. Use the stone. I can't hold them off forever!"

She looked around in surprise, heart thrashing in her chest. "I don't know how!"

"Figure it out, damn it!" Damay reeled back a step with a groan. Arms shuddering, bolts of energy rasping and licking around her arms.

Wren turned to the glowing anchor stone. It was nothing more than a featureless bluish crystal a pace tall and cut into a spindle shape and held in a thick iron cradle bolted to a huge granite slab. Strange symbols were etched in the surface, and painted on the stone base.

The demons hadn't even been able to get near it, what was she supposed to do?

She reached out and her hand met a tentative resistance like she were pushing her fingers into jelly.

"Wrennnn!" Damay growled.

She shoved against the resistance and was able to touch the surface of the crystal. The material was hot under her touch, and sent a shriek of power coursing up her arm. Images and sounds pulsed through her mind.

"Any *time* now!"

Wren focused through the whirling images, concentrating on a single desire.

Home.

She gritted her teeth, clenched her eyes shut, and demanded the crystal to reveal its secret.

Home.

"Damn you," she gritted. "Open!" She let the urgency and frustration pour out of her into the stone.

"Focus, Wren." Ziedra urged.

She gave a final heave of desire.

Home.

A cone of greenish-light erupted from the stone into the clearing describing reflective disk floating close to the ground. Through the shimmering glass-like surface a tree-shrouded hillside valley was a visible and beyond it, the skyline of a massive city.

"That's it!" Ziedra squealed.

"Run!" Damay yelled. "I'm right behind you. Go!"

Wren glanced back at the fiercely concentrating elder as the demons thrashed and hammered away at her defensive barrier. She pushed Ziedra and Irodee ahead of her, and the two dashed forward and jumped into the portal.

"No heroics, you too!"

Wren glanced back in time to see Damay making a shoving motion.

A powerful force knocked her reeling backward into the silvery surface of the portal. Her skin went icy and then her guts knotted as she spiraled through nothingness and slammed down hard on her back, and skidded to a breath-stealing stop in the dirt of another place.

Gasping for breath, she tried to get to her feet but the landscape pitched this way and that in her vision. "Damay!" On hands and knees she could only groan as the circular portal began to close. Visible on the other side, the elder savant continued to battle the demons making no attempt to turn and jump through. "Damay." She screamed again.

The portal had already closed.

Cosmodarus, I saw it and nearly wept. It was colossal, stately, and just plain beautiful. It had to be-- it was home, and I had been away a very very long time...

--Wren

Chapter 42

One Moat From Home

"Oh spit," Wren cursed staring at the empty patch of air where the portal had been only instants ago. Her chest ached and her stomach was a tangle of knots. Damay was gone, deliberately staying behind to prevent the demons from following. The elder had isolated herself a universe away in some unknown speck of migrating reality that after score-days of searching neither Loric or Aarlen had been able to locate. The race to the anchor stone had been won, and Hecate was the surprise victor. The goddess had located it before either Aarlen and Loric even got close.

Only pure dumb chance had called Wren across the dimensional fabric. She still wasn't sure how that happened. If Damay were here, she would have said it was a blessing from Gaea. She didn't know how else to explain that happenstance. She turned and looked over her shoulder.

The sky in this place was a sparkling sapphire blue. Pinkish tufts of clouds drifted low overhead. The air had a dry acrid smell to it, a sharp bite that reminded Wren of the high desert areas. From where they stood, the ground sloped down into a steep-sided valley that curved away to their left and right, the further ends lost in the distance. Several watercourses snaked through the thick vegetation at the valley floor, mists twining through floating islands of reedwood and tanglefoot. On the far side, the land rose at a steep angle for over a hundred paces before leveling out to a flat plane. At the crown of the ridge, a wall sloped up out of the rocky soil into a gleaming smooth expanse of blue-gray stone that Wren guessed must be close to fifty paces high. Even standing several bowshots away it looked huge.

Cosmodarus' curtain wall was amazing enough, but beyond it, spires, minarets, and buildings bristled like a dense forest, their silhouettes repeated in varying forms into the distance until they merged with the visible horizon.

Simply titanic.

A walled city more than a league across.

She stared at it and finally drew a breath.

Somewhere inside that vast metropolis Mishaka waited.

"Spit," she muttered again.

"I don't think this was exactly the plan Loric had in mind," Ziedra said in surprisingly calm voice. "I *know* we weren't supposed to lose Damay."

"Hecate wasn't supposed to know we were searching for the damn anchor stone," Wren growled.

"What we do now?" Irodee wanted to know, her voice going up an octave from its normally deep tenor.

Wren swallowed and glanced at the city again. Ten Ivaneths could fit in that monster, or five Corwins. Cosmodarus was simply staggering in its proportions. She reminded herself it was supposed to have been built by a god. What she could see from here lent credence to the claim. Such a place could easily support more than ten million people. How much of it did Mishaka control? Just thinking about the army such a place could command made her mouth dry.

"I don't know what we're going to do Irodee." She drew a breath. "Let me ask a stupid question..."

"No," the Myrmigyne said apparently anticipating her question. "I cannot planewalk back to Gravar."

Wren gritted her teeth. "All right, scratch that idea. Can you...???" Irodee shook her head. "No Damay either...?" Irodee nodded.

She winced.

"We're in trouble," Ziedra summed up.

"Right."

"Do you think Lady Damay will be okay?" Irodee asked.

Wren reflexively glanced back to where the portal had been. "Do I think the demons might hurt her--no. She could have run any time. She just didn't want the demons coming after us. What I don't know, is if she can find her way back to Gravar."

"Don't you think she'd kill the demons and come after us?" Ziedra asked.

"If she could have used the portal, I think she would have by now. I think the anchor-stone was keyed to only certain people."

"One of them being you?" the dancer asked with an incredulous expression.

She shrugged. "I don't have a better explanation."

The dancer looked across the valley. "That is a *big* city."

"Sure is," Wren agreed.

"We going in there?" Irodee asked eyes wide.

"I don't see where we have another option."

Ziedra sat down in the dirt. "We're really in trouble."

It took a while for Wren to nerve herself to action. She was itching to find her family, but also terrified that she would find that entire city mobilized against them. They did not stir from their spot until she was certain Damay could not follow. The worst possibility had come to pass. She had been separated from her most powerful weapons against Mishaka. She no longer had either Desiray or Damay. Instead she had a sky-scraping young Myrmigyne, and a fledgling Ishtar nola with barely two scoredays of training. While each was formidable in their own way, they were woefully lacking in preparation. Hecate's demons almost slaughtered them because they did not have sufficiently powerful weapons. A detail she knew Loric would have rectified--had they the opportunity to prepare.

When they proceeded down into the valley, her pace was more than conservative. She picked her way along the hillside, examining the way down with extreme care.

"You're trying to come up with a plan," Ziedra determined walking at her shoulder.

"Of course," Wren responded. "When we get in there we need to be focused." She pressed her lips to a line and looked sideways at her friend. "You know, that lightning you shot at those demons was pretty impressive."

"It was wasn't it?" The dancer grinned. "So funny, I even thought to myself, 'what's Aarlen going to do to me here, ground me?'"

Wren let out a tight laugh. This situation was horrible.

"Irodee not see what so funny," the Myrmigyne grouched. "We not ready. We not enough. Not for *that*." She gestured to the city. "Even Gravar small compared to that."

"Don't mind me, Irodee," Wren said. "I get like this when I'm nervous. We just have to hope that Damay eventually finds her way home and can bring help."

When they reached the valley floor Wren realized that it was more of a city defense than a natural feature. Deliberate excavation had deepened the river trough. What appeared like placid water from the valley rim was actually a steep sided basin choked with vegetation and silt.

Ziedra looked up and down the valley as it curved right and left. "It's a moat. A huge moat for a monster city."

"We not swim across it," Irodee said.

"No," Wren said. "We might get across through those trees though." She nodded to a copse of bent trees whose branches seemed to span the river.

The three of them approached the trees cautiously. The tall thin boles of the swamp-wood leaned and curved like mooring ropes in a freight yard. Only a few steps into the confines of the trees, the temperature dropped sharply. The ground became marshy and sucked at their boots. The musty smell of decay grew thick in the air. Bugs hummed and clicked, and water bubbled.

"This place would be a nightmare for an army," Ziedra said looking around.

Wren nodded. "I think that was the idea."

"Irodee doesn't like it," the Myrmigyne said.

"Then they did their job well," Wren remarked.

She led them deeper into the wood, watching how the trees intertwined overhead. She didn't think that was accidental. It was probably to lure enemies into risking the trees. The bog that surrounded the roots of the trees was deep and could easily drag down anyone who fell in it. They needed to be careful to negotiate this hazard.

After a short search, she found what appeared to be a viable path over the deep part of the treacherous swampy river. They would have to climb up and navigate across the thin limbs to get to the far side, but it looked doable.

The three of them studied the area for a few moments, listening to noises of the marsh bugs and gas bubbling up through the muck. It looked terrible and smelled worse; a place where death claimed the unwary.

"You're kidding," Ziedra finally said, rubbing the back of her neck. She leaned against a tree, folded her arms, and crossed one leg over the other. "If a limb breaks you are worm food."

"Those limbs are sturdier than they look, all crossed over one another. They should hold up even under Irodee's weight."

The Myrmigyne frowned at the branches. "We train to climb trees like those. Irodee has walked them."

"Good," Wren said. "Just the same, you two wait until I've checked it out."

After surmounting smooth vertical walls, climbing a tree however convoluted was a trivial chore. She was skipping across the boughs instants later. The part that made the task more tough was the hops from branch to branch, and judging when a limb was too thin to support weight. The crossing required some thought in spots but she never felt in serious danger, the branches groaned and creaked but she didn't sense any on the verge of giving way. Of course, she was comfortable walking along something as narrow as a rope. She doubted either Ziedra or Irodee would feel as safe.

She climbed down on the far side and tested the footing. They could walk out. Now, all she had to do was get them on this side.

"Looks good," she called to them.

"Wren, you're crazy," Ziedra called back. "That did not look 'good'."

"I'll get you across, don't worry. Unless you've already learned to fly."

"Very funny."

She made her way back across the branches, less cautious because she knew the way, skipping from limb to limb with ease. In moments, she paused on a sturdy branch above them. The two women stared up at her.

The Myrmigyne shook her head. "You good climber."

"She's crazy good," Ziedra said. "You think I can get over that?"

"I'll help you get over. You don't have to balance across like I did, there are places to hold on." She sighed. "I just wish we had some rope. I could rig up a safety line."

Ziedra looked up the tree. "No use in crying about things we can't change. Let's give this a try."

"All right, Irodee, I'll come back for you."

The Myrmigyne nodded.

Wren tested the branch she stood on again, making sure it would support her and Ziedra's weight and held a hand out to the dancer. She helped pull Ziedra up with a little effort. The dark-haired woman had some work to do before she became a cloud walker.

"Damn, the branches look even thinner up here!" Ziedra complained.

"Use those vines and leaves overhead to keep your balance. Walk where I do." Wren turned backward and sidled out on the limbs.

Ziedra's dark eyes widened. "Lords, how do you do that? Backward?"

"Don't worry how I do it," she said, holding out a hand. "You just worry about going forward. One step at a time. Come on now."

Ziedra took a few moments to nerve herself, balancing with the help of thin branches overhead she took a few tentative steps toward Wren.

"Good," Wren encouraged. "Keep moving." She backed up a few more steps, urging Ziedra to follow.

By the time they were half way across Wren was perspiring, and her back ached from crouching. The network of limbs swayed and creaked, making Ziedra's every step tentative. Wren glanced down into muck below them, it would be a horrible place to fall, thick mud sucking at your limbs. Even someone strong might be pulled under and suffocate.

To Ziedra's credit, she had excellent balance, it was just the unstable nature of the path, and perils down below making it hard.

Wren forced herself calm, and concentrated on keeping Ziedra focused.

"Can't turn back now, Zee. We're half way there."

"Damn, we should have just found a bridge."

"We couldn't do that, Zee, we need to be able to scout unseen. Come on, stop stalling. One foot after the other, just a little ways more."

The woman drew a breath and moved.

In a few more long breaths, she had Ziedra down on the loamy ground hugging a tree.

"Good job," she patted her friend on the shoulder. "I'll make an adventurer out of you yet."

Ziedra took a heaving breath. "I'm not sure I want the job."

"Too late," Wren laughed. She sobered and looked back through the trees and mist to where the giant Myrmigyne waited. She drew a breath. "Now for the hard part," she said.

"Please, be careful," Ziedra said.

Though taxed by the ordeal of getting Ziedra across, she felt confident the Myrmigyne would be easier, being more fit and focused than her friend. She skipped back across and stopped on the branch above Irodee.

"You ready?"

"A moment," Irodee said. She called to Ziedra. "Watch yourself." She took a step back and launched her spear.

The big weapon hissed as it arced across the bog and stuck shuddering in a tree on the other side. Wren stared, damn she was good with that spear. Ziedra too seemed to be fixed on the swaying weapon. Irodee wasn't Beia or Ess, but she was certainly no person to discount.

The Myrmigyne unstrung her bow, and pushed it into a leather sheath she had in her pack, and pulled the drawstring tight. She hurled long bundle like a spear, which arced true and landed in the pile of leaves near Ziedra. Last, the Myrmigyne pulled off her pack, and whipped it underhanded to the far side.

The dancer stepped over and picked up the pack and bow. "Got it."

"Now Irodee move better," the Myrmigyne determined.

"Good plan," Wren answered. "Let's do it."

The Myrmigyne stepped up to the tree and clambered up the bole with confident hand and foot holds. It wasn't until the huge woman was standing on the limb almost hugging her, that Wren realized just how massive the girl was. Most of that sky-scraping height was muscle. She hoped those branches held.

As she did for Ziedra, she backed out across the branches showing where they were strongest.

Irodee's long face set, and her jaw tightened. The woman's dark eyes narrowed. She drew a breath and stepped out, steadying herself with the branches overhead. The woman's height made it so she needed to stoop to avoid some of the limbs. Her impressive reach gave her access to hand-holds that Ziedra would have needed a ladder to touch.

Step by step Wren backed out across the path of limbs, feeling the structure vibrate and sway under Irodee's weight. The big Myrmigyne moved with a steady and methodic rhythm, finding a secure purchase and gradually shifting her weight forward. More than once a branch wasn't strong enough to hold her, forcing Wren to back-track and find a sturdier limb.

Wren wiped the perspiration from her eyes and glanced to the bog below. A little bit further and she could deliver this oversized package to the opposite shore. Blood-sucker bugs whined around her face. The pulsating thrum of water-skimmers seemed deafening.

A breeze swept through the trees making all the boughs creak and moan. Irodee reflexively reached for a better purchase. Wren staggered and back-pedaled, her foot missed the branch and she gasped. Heart hammering she wobbled precariously on one leg, arms wheeling to retain her balance.

Irodee lunged forward to steady Wren. The woman's foot went straight through the matted branches with a crash. With a frightened gasp she pitched forward hands flailing for a grip on anything substantial.

The weakened canopy shattered as Irodee's entire weight slammed down across the lesser branches and the whole framework gave with a crack, heaving the Myrmigyne toward the bog.

The branches under Wren bucked down and then up as the Myrmigyne's great weight bent them down to the breaking point and released them as she fell through. The slingshot effect whipped Wren up off the branch forcing her to hook the limb with her heel and fall backward and upside down with the back of her knees hooked around the limb.

The precarious position, however unintentional, swung Wren's hands down to the already floundering Myrmigyne who caught her hand with a convulsive heave.

"Augh!" Wren let out as her body was stretched, and a pain shot through her knees.

"Wren!" Ziedra cried.

Gasping and puffing, upside down and neck craned, Wren stared down into the bog. Irodee was up to her shoulders in slimy green-brown muck, a hand gripping Wren's wrist with white-knuckle ferocity.

Wren felt the bones in her arm grinding under the Myrmigyne's panicked grasp.

"leee," Irodee let out. "leee." She pulled and latched on to Wren's arm with the other hand.

"Argh!" Wren cried. "Don't pull me off the branch! We'll both drown!"

"Wren!" Ziedra yelled again.

"Scared," Irodee moaned.

"Hold still," Wren hissed, wincing, feeling pain shoot through her back and legs. The branch her legs were locked around groaned ominously. "Take my other hand." She reached out with her free hand. The Myrmigyne flailed and caught it with steely fingers. "Ack." Wren gritted her teeth against the pain. "Zee--urrgh-- we need help! Is there a vine--anything over there?"

The dancer started frantically kicking through the leaves and piles of dead wood. "Nothing!" The woman determined. "Just Irodee's spear."

"I have to get--ugh," she groaned. "Have to get Irodee to the base of a tree where she can climb up."

"Hold on!" Ziedra cried, she launched into the trees on the far side like she really could fly.

"Okay, I'm going to try to get us to a thicker part of the limb. Just keep a good grip and try not to pull too much, okay?"

The Myrmigyne made a grunting sound, obviously biting down on her fear. Wren understood, her whole body was quaking and her breaths came in bursts. Agony shot through her knees, skin chaffing and abrading, she forced her legs to sidle along the branch toward the thicker part of the bough.

She heard Ziedra puffing and grunting as she scrambled across the branches. She hoped the woman didn't pitch herself into the swamp and doom them all. Each move and shift of her legs was a scrape of burning discomfort. She felt blood trickling up the backs of her thighs. She moaned.

Gritting her teeth, she continued until she felt her knee come to an obstruction and stopped. *Spit*. Craning her neck, she found the block. The branch she hung from and another merged into a larger limb. Unbending her legs to pass the spot would put them both in the bog.

Closing her eyes she concentrated in her climbing power, pushing it into her legs. She felt nola force sizzling through her pain. She drew a breath, trying to blink away the salty sting of perspiration in her eyes.

"Have you said your prayer to Nethra, Irodee?"

The Myrmigyne swallowed, eyes wide. "Irodee always says her prayers."

"Good." She took another breath and let it out slow. "I want you to try to climb out. When I say go, climb fast, I can only hold you for a moment. All right?"

The woman nodded, dark eyes wide. "You can hold?"

"I'm sure as Gaea going to try," she moaned. "I'll help you with my powers, so when you start climbing, just go as fast as you can. Let me worry about holding on."

"Okay," Irodee said in a tiny voice.

She concentrated on Irodee and the branch, pushing more climbing force into her hands and legs, reinforcing herself against the terrible weight that would soon be pulling against her. She felt her heart speed, and the tingle in the back of her head changed timber.

A dull red-glow surrounded her legs and grew to a brilliant blue. Her hands started to shimmer and flicker. She braced. "Ready...*go!*"

Irodee pulled. Agony shot through Wren's spine. Irodee gripped further up her forearm, and then again near the elbow.

Clenching her teeth, she gritted, "Don't stop!"

Wren's shoulder became a blaze of pain. She kept the nola focused on around Irodee's hands, creating a blue spot for each placement of her fingers to prevent slippage. The bog slurped as the Myrmigyne struggled, veins standing out on her arms. She took hold of Wren's upper arm, nails drawing blood as they bit into shuddering flesh.

The branch crackled.

Slick with blood the crook of her knees slipped. She hooked her toes under the other limb focusing more of the nola around the area. She felt muscles and ligaments stretching.

Irodee reached Wren's shoulder, her fingers twining in the canvas and leather tunic pulling the whole thing into a bunch around her arm pits. Wren's back creaked, it felt like knives were gnawing into her spine.

"Hurry," Wren groaned, fearing the Myrmigyne would pull the tunic off her body and fall in the muck anyway. Taking rapid breaths, eyes clenched tight she pushed nola power into her chest and around her torso.

The Myrmigyne gasped, gripping one-handed, and straining to catch the bough.

The limb quivered and popped.

Irodee yelled and lunged. To Wren it felt as though she were being drawn and quartered. She heard flesh smack against bark, then a sickening crack. She screamed as the bog rushed up. She felt a savage wrench as her tunic jerked tight. Still in Irodee's grip, she flipped and slammed into the big woman's thigh. She felt the coppery taste of blood running down from her nose. She twitched, body feeling numb.

Irodee groaned, taking sharp breaths. Wren hung knee-deep in the bog.

The Myrmigyne groaned. "Irodee have you. Is Wren all right?"

"I can't move."

"Wren *must* move. Irodee not have a good hold." Pulling her around, she tried unsuccessfully to heft Wren up to the limb.

She fought to move, overcoming the paralysis with a surge of energy. Wren put a death-lock around Irodee's waist and pressed her face against the hardness of the Myrmigyne's mire-slicked stomach.

"You hold." Irodee's voice wavered. "Irodee let you go." She grabbed the limb with both hands.

The iron-hard Myrmigyne clambered down the branch. Her strength amazed Wren. She'd seen superior feats but they were performed by immorts. Irodee was simply blood-and-guts strong.

She moved until the limb became too massive for her to keep a grip.

"Not go further. Wren must climb now."

Climbing Irodee now seemed impossible. She felt lucky to be able to hold on. "I don't think I can."

"Irodee not strong enough to pull us both up!"

Wren heard some mumbling on the tree above them, then saw a flash of light. The limb vibrated as Ziedra stepped out onto it. "Okay, you two. Irodee, take hold." She extended the spear butt down to them.

"Zee," Wren gasped. "You can *not* lift us."

"Shut up and grab the spear," the dancer huffed.

Obviously desperate, Irodee latched on.

Ziedra grunted. "Ugh." Teeth gritted, the woman leaned back, and with shuddering arms started hauling both of them up a fist full of spear at time.

How in Hades was she doing that? Wren didn't care as long as she could get up where it was safe.

Veins stood out in Ziedra's neck and down her arms as she puffed and gasped and pulled, finally slapping a hand around Irodee's wrist. Together all three of them groaned and ended up wrapped around each other and the bole of the tree.

Wren ached in places she didn't even know she possessed. Arms wrapped around the tree and the torso of a slime-covered Myrmigyne, she pressed her forehead against the wood and moaned.

Ziedra was making similar sounds on the opposite side of the tree.

Paces up the side of a tree, half-dead, hugging a muddy woman who smelled like gutter runoff, the absurdity of the whole situation struck Wren like a lightning bolt. She let out a painful laugh that made her whole body shake.

Irodee looked down at her like she'd gone insane.

Seeing the Myrmigyne's furrowed brow only made it worse. She shook her head and wiped at her eyes.

The laughter was infectious and Ziedra started laughing too. Irodee finally joined in, and the three of them chuckled like crazy women.

Ziedra sobered first. "Now, how do we get out of this tree?"

Wren shuddered. "What do you mean? The same way you came in."

The dancer shook her head. "I couldn't run across those branches like that again if I tried. I wasn't thinking about falling, just getting to you two."

"One step at a time, Zee, one step at a time."

Chapter 43

Bird On the Curtain

When the three of them finally had their feet on dry ground, Wren fell down on her back with a gasp. She stared up at the sapphire sky, breathing in the dusty acrid air. The buzz and click of bog insects was a muted humming behind them. A cool breeze turned the perspiration on her face into icy beads that stung her eyes.

She heard Ziedra and Irodee collapse next to her.

"This isn't an exactly a good place to relax," Ziedra moaned. "Anybody could see us."

"Yeah," Wren mumbled. "We'll move. I'm just too destroyed to walk up that hill right now." She paused. "Did Aarlen teach you any magical healing?"

"No," the dancer grumbled. "We'll have to patch up your legs and arm with some cloth."

"Irodee is sorry," the Myrmigyne apologized. "Thought Wren would fall. Irodee did not mean to hurt you."

"Don't worry about it, Irodee. It was as much my fault as yours. I let myself get distracted for a moment." She groaned. She felt like a piece of stretch candy. She tilted her head to look at Ziedra. The dancer was wincing and rubbing her shoulders as she lay in the dirt. "That was quite a save, Zee. That's twice now. You're starting to catch up with me."

"Well," Ziedra said, eying Wren with a meaningful pause. "Friends don't keep count." She rolled her neck side to side and drew a pained breath.

"Irodee thanks you, Ziedra," the Myrmigyne paused and looked to Wren. "And you too, Wren. You save Irodee's life. I am in your debt."

"No debts between friends," Wren said. "We help each other in a pinch, okay?"

Irodee nodded with wide brown eyes.

Wren looked over to Ziedra who was still wincing and rubbing her arms.

"I see you hurt yourself pulling us up. I'm still not even sure how you managed that."

"Intensified strength spell," the woman answered. "Even then I almost didn't do it." She rolled her shoulders again.

Wren drew another breath. What should they do? They hadn't even made it to the city and she was already injured and bleeding. Unprepared and poorly equipped, the situation couldn't be much worse to hunt for an avatar.

"Zee, Irodee," she said. "This experience has taught me one thing. I can't ask you to go with me. It's just too damn dangerous. Mishaka and Hecate don't know anything about you two. You can walk away. As long as you aren't seen with me, nobody should bother you."

"What are you going to do by yourself then?" Ziedra demanded.

"What I came to do," Wren said, a cold feeling twisting through her stomach. "We knew this would happen. Can we be surprised it did?"

"Wren," Ziedra sat up. "You are not alone. I'm here with you and I can help."

"Zee, you have a life ahead of you. I don't want you getting killed on my account."

"And you don't have a life!?" Ziedra snapped, dark eyes flashing. "Don't give me that! I lost my parents too, remember? I saw them killed. They are dead. You have a father and a mother and they're in there!" She pointed to the walls that rose from the

cliff top. "Wren, you were my only family for a long time. You got me off the street, you were my sister, my anchor, and you took care of me. I'm alive today because of you. I will help you any way I can, whether or not you want me to. You can't leave me behind now. So, just shut up about it."

Wren closed her eyes. Though it scared her, Ziedra's fierce determination to stick by her made her warm inside. Facing this huge ordeal by herself was almost too much to bear.

"Wren is Irodee's friend," the Myrmigyne said sitting up. "Irodee does not have many friends. She has to hang on to the ones she has. Irodee will help as best she can." She straightened, emphasizing her tremendous height. "Irodee-- /--know it dangerous. / will do it anyways."

Wren nodded and pushed herself up. "Are you two sure? This will be bad. Mishaka doesn't want you two. If you help me, it will not be nice."

"Frell Mishaka and the goddess she rode in on," Ziedra said. "Remember I'm a savant too, and we have to stick up for each other."

"Irodee does not care," the Myrmigyne declared. "Wren is friend to the *Nobelisa* Beia, and to Irodee's *matra* Ess. Wren is respected by many, and Irodee too. Wren risk her life for Irodee. Irodee cannot do less."

Wren sighed. "Okay you two. Just the same, if it looks hopeless, we all give up, okay? Nobody has to die."

"You better do that," Ziedra growled. "Otherwise, I'll drag you out myself."

"Agreed."

"Now, let's get you patched up."

The dancer and the Myrmigyne worked around Wren, binding the cuts gouged in her arms. She saw Irodee wincing. The woman knew she had inflicted the injuries even though unintentionally.

"What do we do about Irodee's gear?" Wren asked. "And mine for that matter. We're covered in mud."

Ziedra unbound the laces on Wren's leather leggings. "There I think I can help," she said. "Roll on your stomach." Wren did so. She heard the woman making clucking sounds. "Good thing those leggings are tough, or these wounds would be worse. It kept most of the dirt out of the cuts." She wiped at the residue, and snorted after a few strokes. "This stuff is terrible. Let's see if this works..."

The dancer murmured some words. Wren saw shadows cast around her body, and heard Irodee draw a breath. She felt a tingling go down her legs, and the itchiness on her skin vanished.

"Oooh," Irodee murmured. "Nice."

She craned her neck to look back. "What did you do?" Then she noticed all the mud and dirt on her legs and boots were gone.

"Cleaning spell," Ziedra said. The dancer turned to the Myrmigyne. "Irodee, stand up, I'll do you."

The Myrmigyne rose. As Wren watched, Ziedra waved her hands and murmured a few guttural words, and a dim red light panned over Irodee's body where the dancer pointed. Wherever the light went, the crusted mud and slime vanished.

Irodee grinned, looked down at her clothes and skin which were now spotless. They looked as though freshly washed.

"Oh, that is wizard," Wren breathed.

"Thank you," Ziedra said. "Good to be useful once in a while. Okay, enough of that, back to patching you up. This will be makeshift at best, so we'll need to get a real healer to look at you later."

They finished binding the torn skin on the back of Wren's legs.

"Think you'll be able to walk?" Ziedra asked.

"Uh," Wren grunted. "I've fought with worse." She tied down her leggings and looked up the hill. "Let's get going." She got to her feet with a grunt, wincing at the cuts chaffing on the backs of her legs.

The three of them trudged up the hill toward the city. "First thing to do is get the lay of the land," Wren said as they climbed. "First, we get our hands on some local currency, and then see what we can do about better weapons and a healer."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Ziedra remarked.

"Irodee agrees," the Myrmigyne chimed in.

They hiked slowly up the ridge until they reached the base of the wall. The structure looked even more imposing than it did from across the valley. Wren ran her hand against the unnaturally smooth blue-gray stone. The joints in the giant blocks were perfect. It took close examination to even see the seams much less feel them.

The touch of the stone, the very feel of the energy of this place somehow felt right. She hadn't dared to believe. Could this really be the place where she was born? She swallowed. It made a hitch in her chest. After everything she'd been through, she was close enough to touch it.

"Magic wall," Ziedra remarked.

"Huh?" Wren broke out of her thoughts and looked at her friend.

"These stones were formed and placed with magic. I can feel it," the dancer said running her hand along it appreciatively. "It's old magic too--*ancient*."

"You can feel magic now?" Wren asked.

"Yes," Ziedra said. "Ever since your 'experiment' I've been getting more and more aware of it. It's actually quite fascinating, all the things that you can learn about magic auras."

"Hmmm?"

"Like the nature of mage that created it, their power and such. Every magic-user leaves a unique imprint on the magic they create."

"Like a fingerprint?"

"Yes."

"So, you could recognize someone's magic, if you'd seen it before?" Wren asked.

Ziedra nodded. "Sure, unless they deliberately disguise it. Some mages do. I notice that Dorian alternates the patterns of her magic."

Wren shook her head. "That sounds like her. Hmmm," She rubbed the back of her neck. "Damn, it sure would be nice to if you could recognize Mishaka's magic."

"If I had something magical of hers, I'm certain I could," Ziedra determined.

"Could you sense her from far away?" Wren asked.

The dancer narrowed her eyes. "Maybe."

That was a valuable ability. Somehow, she had to figure out a way to turn it to their advantage...

They walked along the wall. Distant sounds drifted to them from the other side. At places where the wall notched downward some ten paces they caught hints of strange odors, reminiscent of spice incense. Occasionally, the ground would rumble underfoot as though something large were burrowing beneath their feet.

The three of them stared at one another, no-one daring to voice a speculation aloud. They didn't stop walking, and the wall continued in an unbroken line into the distance.

"Where did they put the damn gates?" Ziedra wanted to know.

"I was wondering that myself," Wren remarked, feeling the pain in her injured legs.

"Big," Irodee mumbled.

If she were alone, she would have already climbed over. She didn't figure now would be a good time to mention the fact.

"Doesn't look like people do much wandering outside the walls," Ziedra remarked. "We haven't seen a soul."

"It's dangerous out here," Wren remarked.

"Anchoring not strong either," Irodee added.

After half a bell's walk they finally caught sight of activity. They slowed their approach, staying in the shadow of the wall and behind what obstacles they could to minimize any chance they would be observed.

It appeared they had finally discovered an entrance. A trickle of people were coming and going across a bridge built over the moat gorge. Rows of megalith stones lined a wide cobbled road heading out into the wasteland. Between the massive standing stones, several trails lead out to stone circles like the one where they fought the demons. In the center of each circle were granite pedestals that all looked similar to the one they had seen holding the anchor stone.

"They all look like gateways," Ziedra said pointing.

Under the watchful eyes of dozens of heavily armed guards, people filed into and out of the anchor-stone circles.

"I see dozens of people coming and going," Wren growled. "Why couldn't Loric and Aarlen find any of these ways in?"

"The universe is a big place," Ziedra tempered. "Hecate may also have those places concealed." She looked at Wren. "Now that we're this close, we should be thinking about a disguise for you. It wouldn't do for you to be recognized before we've had a chance to look around."

"And how do we disguise me?" Wren asked. "I suppose you know a trick or something?"

"Indeed I do," Ziedra said. "Let's start with the hair." She chanted a few words and ran her fingers through Wren's scalp.

Wren felt a warm tingling shoot down her spine, making her skin prickle. "Ack, that tickles." She pulled a strand of hair in front of her face to see it. "Red? You made my hair--red?"

"Suits your temperament," Ziedra chuckled. "It also goes with that white skin of yours. All you need are some freckles." She tapped Wren's face a few times on each cheek. "Perfect."

"Hmph." Wren glanced up at Irodee. "Do I look silly?"

The Myrmigyne shook her head and grinned. Her long face was serious and appreciative. "Irodee likes red hair. Wren is cute."

"Cute." Wren rolled her eyes.

"I do have a plan," Ziedra said. "I think the best way to avoid you being detected is for you to go over the wall. I can make you invisible, so you won't draw attention to yourself. Irodee and I can go through the gate, and meet you on the other side."

"Not that I disagree with you, but if you can make me invisible, why not make all of us invisible and we just stroll through the gate?"

"Because of what I see by the gate." Ziedra said pointing. "There's a lot of magic being used over there. It feels like probing magic. I'd wager a handful of crowns they're looking for things that are magically concealed. On top of that if you look there." She gestured to the wall. "The walls have repelling magic that would prevent them from being climbed any 'mortal' means. At the top there is a strange energy

that seems to disrupt the magic flows," she pointed to the summit of the bastion. "I'm betting that keeps people from using magic to fly over."

"Wow," Wren breathed. "You can see all that?"

The dancer nodded. "More *feel* it than *see* it, but yes."

"Okay, you convinced me," Wren said. "Let's do it your way." She looked at Ziedra.

"So, how long will this 'invisibility' last?"

The dancer winced. "Welllll..."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"You know this magic stuff is still pretty new to me..."

She frowned. "I thought Aarlen was like this great and powerful teacher?"

"She is," Ziedra responded. "It's just that my magic still isn't very consistent.

Sometimes it's really powerful, other times it can barely light a candle."

"But I saw you do some really amazing spells," Wren said.

"Oh yes," Ziedra nodded. "If I have someone to tap into I can do impressive things. It's when I'm not mimicking that it gets--ummm, wobbly."

Wren's brow furrowed. "Wobbly?"

The dancer shrugged with a pained expression.

"Ookay," she drew a breath. She looked up the huge wall. "I guess I'll go fast. Ummm, how strong is that 'repelling magic'?" She reached up and pulled against the stone with her nola power. It didn't seem to resist her.

"It gets fairly strong about half way up," Ziedra said looking toward the top of the wall and narrowing her eyes. "That climbing power of yours is pretty strong too though."

"This keeps getting better and better," Wren growled. "All right, let's do this thing before it gets any worse."

Ziedra glanced back toward the gate some distance off. She drew herself up and closed her eyes. After a moment her lids fluttered and a ghostly blue light shined from her eyes. She held up her hands, and chanted in the sing-songy language of magic. As her fingers made passes over Wren's body she felt a tingling go through her limbs.

With each movement of Ziedra's hands, Wren saw that her skin and clothes were gradually growing more translucent, until she looked as though made of glass. After a few more moments of warm tingling, she finally faded from view completely.

Wren held up her hand, there was an extremely faint distortion around the edges, a ripple of color that made objects seem to shimmer. A person would have to be extremely sharp-eyed to pick it up even at close range.

"Nice," she said. "Well done. Meet you on the other side. Let's meet in the first square out of sight from the gate, okay?"

"It's a plan. If anything goes really bad, we meet back here at this spot at nightfall." She looked up to the sky. "Assuming there is a nightfall. Or whenever they ring the dinner bell around here."

"Okay, good luck," Wren said. "See you on the other side." She gave Ziedra a quick hug, did the same with Irodee, and turned to the wall.

"Be careful," Ziedra said behind her.

She started up without hesitation, knowing she'd already lost valuable time. Her legs ached, but they were still strong enough to propel her up the glossy smooth wall. Any other guildier would have been defeated at the onset, there were simply no cracks or projections to get a purchase on. Despite being fatigued, the first third of the climb didn't prove to be difficult.

Then she began to feel resistance. Her fingers stopped having the same purchase.

She glanced to where Irodee and Ziedra were standing. The two hadn't moved. Ziedra was looking up with her hands clasped together and pressed to her lips. Gritting her teeth and pressing her nola out through her fingertips she focused her climbing power on each hand and foot hold. She forged upward through the resistance as if she were swimming against a strong current. Perspiration ran down her face, and her heart thundered. The ground was a long way away...

Roughly half way up the wall, the surface snapped and popped under her fingers much the way Cassandra's wall in Ivaneth had. She remembered with chagrin that the gold mage's wall had in fact defeated her climbing ability. She'd learned a lot since then, and her nola had been purified.

"Gaea, give me strength," she muttered. She put all of her spirit and courage into her mind, and willed herself up the wall. Grip and slide, grip a slide... she would surge up, and come scraping back down.

This wasn't working. Pure brute willpower was not enough, she was just tiring herself out. She needed to try something else.

What could she do? The wall's magic was blocking her power.

Or was it?

How had Everia explained it worked? Her ability took falling force and turned it sideways. The wall was deflecting the energy she was redirecting to climb with.

She needed to use something else to grip with.

What about the wall's resistance itself?

Wren drew a breath. She reached out with her mind. The magic of the wall would be like the biophase, or the energy from a physical attack, a charge she could tap into or redirect--if she didn't burn herself out. She felt around until the wall grew hot under her hands and feet and she felt a humming vibration surge through her.

The force of the wall flickered and sparked around her body, and the resistance abruptly relented, instead she was sucked against the rock like steel to a loadstone.

"Ugh," she grunted. The power burned. It didn't feel right.

Limbs shuddering she forced herself to continue climbing. After a few paces the resistance relaxed, and she could let go of the power. Her breaths came in gasps and it hurt to breathe. She swallowed and glanced down. She was easily twenty paces up. Ziedra waved to her, somehow sensing her attention.

She turned her attention back to climbing and rushed up the rest of the wall at best speed. She reached the top in a few long breaths. She climbed between the merlons and thumped down on the battlement with a gasp.

Made it.

She looked back down over the wall, still feeling her speeding heart. Ziedra waved up again and she and Irodee turned to walk toward the gate.

Now all she had to do was find her way down off this wall.

She hoped it was easier than getting up.

Oh damn, you had to bring that up. I thought Dorian had been kidding, or it was something unique to her. Frelling mages...

--Wren

Chapter 44

Homecoming Lesson: Pockets That Bite

From the top of the Cosmodarus' curtain wall, Wren turned to take in a vista that made her pulse quicken and her flesh prickle. She had been in several big cities, and this place dwarfed all of them. The dozens of streets were like canyons that cut around and through a maze of multi-story complexes. Raised walkways, ramps and bridges, formed a shimmering metal and stone web around and between the structures. On top of the flat roofs of the biggest buildings, domes, pyramids, towers, minarets shone in a variety of colors.

She found the city to be a marvel, but the people were what took her breath away. Many places where she looked the citizens were flying. A few seemed to propel themselves like arrows shot from a bow, but most stood or sat on large squares of what appeared to be cloth weaving their way among the towers with sweeping grace. Clothing tended to be bright primary colors, although she did see more muted colors among those walking on the ground streets.

A humming resonated in the air, an energy that pulsed like something alive that made Wren's skin tingle. A smell hung in the air, a loamy-sweet redolence like heavy spice incense.

She took a few steps forward and stopped, realizing her hands were shaking. As she paused she noted it was more than her hands, her whole body had begun trembling. She had no specific memory of this place, yet somehow it felt familiar...

Wren clenched her fists. This was not the time for analysis. She didn't know how long Ziedra's spell would last. Actually, it had lasted longer than she expected after the dancer's weak assurances.

She glanced down the paved battlement. A fine layer of dust covered the stone structure, nowhere disturbed by footprints. It had probably been centuries since anyone had even considered manning these walls. The city was so isolated, and even if an army did find it, the walls themselves would be nearly indestructible. The smoothed granite blocks were probably some ten paces thick at the base, and as she had encountered, reinforced with magical energies. She couldn't even imagine the kind of power it would take to burn through, much less break, a barrier like that.

A ramp leading down from one of the guard towers proved easy to locate. She descended the paved incline, wary but viewing the environment with a held breath. One of the things that seemed obvious was that if the city were under some kind of martial law, it appeared awfully relaxed. While there were a fair number of guards visible, their posture seemed too relaxed, and the people too casual for it to be some kind of forced rule.

Was Mishaka really here? If she was, what was going on? Gaea had said that her parents were captives. She guessed it could be possible that an avatar might go unnoticed in a city this size. Nowhere did she see anything to indicate the presence of Hecate's followers. Yet, Hecate's demons were definitely trying to destroy that anchor stone, a stone that created a portal that led her here. She had been the only one in their group keyed to open it. Otherwise Damay would have followed them. Coincidence? It seemed rather unlikely.

A series of five ramps snaked down the face of the wall. Heavy reinforced steel doors opened into the body of the guard tower at each odd numbered level. If she'd brought her lock-picks along she might have been tempted to open a door simply to see what might be found inside.

Finally at the ground level, she glanced along the perimeter street toward the gate. The width of the avenues made them seem empty even with the large number of people going about their daily business. The walkways above the street level thinned out the population even further. At least she didn't have to worry about shouldering through a press while invisible.

Wren headed down the avenue, taking in the sights and the people of this far off place--a place that everything indicated had once been her home. She noticed that there didn't appear to be many beasts of burden. The ones that were in use looked nothing like any of the animals she'd ever seen--the two she saw looked like a horse-sized canine with six legs.

She saw nothing unusual about the people she passed. Most were fair-skinned and fair-haired. The features tended to be sharp, the eyes slightly turned up. It looked like a combination of traits from the northlanders and desert nomads. Stature seemed to run toward the short side. Irodee would really stand out in a crowd here.

Because of the apparent scarcity of beasts, the majority of the people on the street used large packs or pulled barrows. Clearly, clothing played a role in indicating caste. The laborers, with patchwork clothing, dressed in drab colors, sometimes wearing sashes or hats that had brighter colors. All the people she saw in the bright colors wore nicer clothing, she noted jewelry and often weapons among their attire. Being a mage was obviously a badge of status here, as the ones flying tended to wear either bright blue, yellow, or green. Flying was obviously nothing extraordinary because no-one looked up to note those passing overhead.

As she neared the gate she moved to the far side of the wide avenue. A large collection of people milled around the square just beyond the entrance. A complement of guards, dressed in silver mail and red tabards, lined either side of the barbican's interior. A livery that looked like a hammer and crossed swords superimposed over a starburst was emblazoned in bright yellow on their backs and over the left breast. A half-dozen men dressed in charcoal gray shirts and leggings also stitched with the city coat-of-arms stood among the guards scrutinizing the passersby. They were the mages to be certain. Two of them had jeweled staves similar to the one that never seemed to leave Dorian's hand. Occasionally, the gems embedded in the steel and wood flashed and glowed as people moved by.

She didn't see Ziedra or Irodee anywhere. Everything seemed business as usual so they must have passed through without raising suspicion.

Wren turned down the broad fairway that led from the gate toward the heart of the city looking to either side of the street for Irodee. The Myrmigyne would be hard to miss.

She continued deeper into the city, the buildings around her like the walls of a canyon. She had come some five hundred paces and saw no hint of either of the women. Could something have happened to them? Perhaps they had gone up onto one of the levels above the street. She turned back. Maybe she simply missed them. No way could she have overlooked the giant woman. Did Ziedra make them invisible for some reason?

Wren felt her chest growing tight and the sense of urgency speeding her heart. She swallowed a lump. Though she had braced herself to brave the city alone, she was not prepared to lose Ziedra or their new friend Irodee. They couldn't have been captured that fast could they? Surely there would have been some residual

commotion, some agitation amongst the people around the gate. Those two would have not gone quietly.

Mind swimming, she retraced her steps, scanning all the byways with extra care. This city was a maze in the worst sense, not only could people be on the ground they could be as many as five levels above the street on a walkway.

The sheer size and complexity of the place could daunt anyone.

Stomach curdling, she stopped half way back to gate with hands on hips.

Damn it, Ziedra, where did you go?

People filtered past her on either side of the wide street. As the city goers strolled by she realized that they weren't speaking any language that she knew. Standing there listening as groups of two and three passed, she didn't recognize any of the languages. She determined there were at least two distinct forms of speech. The commoner working-class citizens seemed to have their own dialect. The wealthier nobles seemed to converse in something different.

She drew a breath. Damn, more complications. Not that it really came as a surprise this far out in the universe.

She needed to find those two. She'd just have to risk detection. She stopped by a walkway support and closed her eyes. She pulled Ziedra's picture into her mind. As she had practiced with Desiray and Cassandra, she formed the sound of her voice in her head. She then projected that 'sound' at the image of her friend.

<Ziedra!>

Down the street toward the gate, a figure dressed in gray robes yelped, staggered and spun in a circle looking around. Next to the robed figure, another woman in light-brown robes clutched her shoulder.

That didn't look like them!

<Zee, this is Wren, I know you don't know how to answer me telepathically yet. Is that you in gray robes? Just raise your hand.>

The figure looked left and right, then tentatively raised her hand.

<Just keep coming toward city center.>

Body vibrating, Wren waited for them to come up the street toward her position. When the two figures passed, she fell into step behind them. After watching for a moment she knew the one in gray was definitely Ziedra. The way the dancer walked was as unique as a fingerprint, no matter how she dressed or disguised herself. Who was the other one though? She had black hair like Irodee, but...

Both ladies were looking right and left, Ziedra was clutching her chest obviously disturbed by the experience.

Wren guessed that maybe Ziedra had used magic to shrink Irodee. That had *not* been part of the plan. How were they supposed to find one another?

"You two scared the life out of me," Wren said conversationally.

Both women jerked, Ziedra stumbled and half turned, while the girl in the brown robes brought a sword out so fast the air hissed around the blade. When she saw the woman's dark eyes and the fighting stance she knew it was Irodee.

"I don't remember disguises being a part of the plan," Wren continued.

"Wren?" Ziedra said, pushing back the hood of her robe. "You're still invisible!"

"Indeed," she answered. "And you're not where you're supposed to be--or *who* you're supposed to be for that matter."

"Oh stop it," Ziedra growled, glaring toward the sound of her voice. "Did you see the people around here? Even I'm tall around these folks. Irodee would stand out like a tree in a pasture. How was I supposed to explain her when I can't speak the language? We needed to be inconspicuous."

"I needed to find you," Wren grumbled.

"Is Wren okay?" Irodee asked, putting her sword away and adjusting her robes. The Myrmigyne scanned the street with a wary expression.

"I'm better now," she answered. "This place scares me."

"It scares me too," Ziedra responded. "But you scare me more, that yelling in my head took ten summers off my life. What was that?"

"Oh, a little savant-to-savant mindspeak," Wren replied. "That was risky, there might be mages who might overhear, but I couldn't find you."

Ziedra wiggled a pinky in her ear. "It was so loud."

"You just *think* it was loud. You get used to it."

"Hmph." The dancer took a breath. "Okay, we're inside. Now what?"

Wren opened her mouth, then closed it. Her gaze tracked back to Irodee. "Irodee are you all right, you look pale?" The Myrmigyne's dark skin looked almost white and perspiration dotted her forehead.

The Myrmigyne frowned. "Irodee is okay."

"You don't look okay."

"Irodee is short."

Wren glanced to Ziedra. Obviously because she was invisible, the dancer didn't pick up on her look.

"You're not short, you're normal," Wren said.

"That's what Irodee said," the Myrmigyne confirmed.

That didn't exactly track. Well, she could wonder about that later.

"We need to find an inn," Wren said. "And a healer. And some way to speak the language."

"I think you need to change the order of those," Ziedra said. "We need money first. Knowing the language would help a lot when asking for a room."

"Hmmm, you've got a point," Wren looked around. "Think I can fix that, I'll meet you up at that next corner in a little bit. Stay right *there*, I won't be long."

Ziedra narrowed her eyes. "Wrennn, what are you going to do?"

"You said we needed money," she answered. "I'm going to get us some."

"How?"

"That's a silly question. Now get going, I don't want you to accidentally get involved."

"Wren, this is a city of mages. Didn't you notice? They're everywhere. You don't have to do anything rash, I have--"

"Yeah, mages with fat purses," she interrupted. "Go on."

"Wren, really, I have--"

"Zee, I have it covered."

The dancer sighed. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'm duly warned. Have a little faith."

The dancer rolled her eyes and nodded to Irodee.

"Nethra be with you," Irodee said to her.

She turned to follow Ziedra toward the corner Wren had indicated. As they moved away Wren searched for an appropriate target.

Like in the big cities where she grew up, the really wealthy types tended to have guards trailing after them. She saw a few of those. Unfortunately, it seemed that money meant a citizen could afford flying transportation. The only nobility on the ground seemed to be doing business with the shops along the avenue.

With her being invisible this should be an easy task. She watched a portly merchant type with thinning reddish hair and a drooping mustache land a carpet outside one of the shops. She was mindful that he might also be a mage, because he carried an ornate battlestaff, and there were a couple different wood and metal rods in his sash.

Wren followed him into a business that appeared to deal in tapestries and artwork. Only a few patrons were examining the shop's wares so it was a simple matter to slip close to him. He didn't have any purses that might be easily cut off his belt. He did have some pockets in the deep maroon robes he was wearing. One pocket did have an inviting bulge to it.

It had been almost two summers since she had picked a pocket. It felt so strange that the first thing she did upon returning to the city of her birth was to rob someone. She rolled her eyes. She really needed to stop thinking such things. She was doing what was necessary.

The heavy-set merchant began negotiating with the shopkeeper over some pieces hanging on the wall. Wren used the opportunity to reach toward his pocket.

She ducked the man's elbow twice as he gestured. Finally, she saw her opening and dipped her hand into his robe.

Her fingertips encountered what had to be a coin purse. She took hold and started to gingerly lift it out.

Suddenly, the fabric of his pocket clamped down on her wrist and she felt sharp points bite into her flesh. Wren forced down a yell as the merchant's pocket seemed determined to chew off her hand.

Wren felt her nola power awake in the back of her head with a snarl, and a blue glow flashed around her arm. The force of the nola loosened the pocket's grip long enough for her to yank her hand and the purse she was gripping free. The flash of the energy made the shopkeeper cry out in surprise.

Obviously feeling the tug on his robe, the merchant was quick to react, swinging the staff around with a snarl and a curse.

Wren ducked under the staff and sprinted for the exit.

The mage screamed a word at her back and a burst of fire exploded in the doorway behind her.

The concussion staggered her as she ran, but only increased the speed of her flight. The man continued to yell and gesticulate in the doorway as she dashed across the street. Every step made her regret that she hadn't yet received the attention of a healer.

The explosion brought guards running from the gate. She ducked down an alley, and checked for pursuit. No-one had followed. At least they didn't have some way to magically track her. She kept moving, circling around the block to where she told Ziedra and Irodee to wait.

As she ran up the street she realized that there was a flickering around her limbs. In a few more steps, her flesh shimmered from glassy transparent to opaque. The invisibility had worn off.

She stumbled to a stop by Irodee and Ziedra. She leaned on Ziedra's shoulder gasping for breath and held up a pouch. "No problem."

"Is Wren hurt?" Irodee asked.

"I'll live. At least we have some money now."

"My spell didn't wear off while you were alerting half the city did it?" Ziedra asked.

Wren shook her head. "No, it lasted just long enough. Nobody saw me."

"Wren, I thought you wanted to be discreet?"

"Couldn't help it," she complained. She held up her arm with the ring of bleeding gouges. "His bloody pocket *bit* me!"

Ziedra sighed and put hands on hips and stared her.

"What?" Wren growled.

The dancer shook her head.

"Don't you care? It hurts." Wren grumbled, rubbing her bleeding arm.

Ziedra rolled her eyes, stepped over and took Wren's arm in her hands, clucking in empathy. "I swear, you live around mages for all this time and you still don't know better."

"Well, I know better now," Wren said. It made her flash on a conversation she had with Dorian. The day the mage had revealed that she had led them into the avatar's attack in order to test Wren's power. What had she said? *Guess, I'm going to have to start wearing the pockets that bite again...* At the time, Wren had thought it was just talk. Apparently, she had been serious! Bloody mages.

Ziedra bound up Wren's arm and the three of them looked at the pouch which had about two dozen coins in it. There were at least five different denominations. Wren had no idea whether she had garnered a fortune or a pittance. She felt confident that the coins made from platinum had to be fairly significant though. There were four of those.

"So, how do we learn the language?" Wren asked. "We'd have to ask someone to find out where to go."

"Irodee think we should go to a tavern."

"A tavern? Why?"

"Visitors go to tavern, maybe we find people who can speak with us."

"Sounds like a place to start," Ziedra agreed. "If we can't order, we can look at what money people are putting on the counter and just point."

"I need a drink anyway," Wren said. "My legs are really starting to hurt." The fear rush was waning and her knees shook. That mage almost got her. This city was a rough place. "Let's go." She took a few steps and staggered.

Irodee caught her arm and held her up. "Wren is not all right," she determined. She swung Wren's arm around her neck. "Irodee help you."

She swallowed. "Thanks."

Together the three of them made their way down the avenue. The commotion from Wren's robbery continued to draw attention behind them. The guardsmen were still involved in questioning bystanders around the shop.

"What a mess," Ziedra said glancing at the scene. "Next time we'll just pawn one of my rings or something."

"Pawn?" Wren repeated. "What rings?"

"These." Ziedra held up her hand. On her thumb she had a large platinum ring set with a ring of rubies and sapphires, an index ring with three large diamonds, and pinky ring set a with a single large glowing opal. Any one of the pieces was worth at least three or four thousand gold royals. "I have a whole box of these back at the tree. Presents from friends and family of house Frielos."

Wren hit her forehead with her fist. "Zee, it would have been nice if you'd mentioned that before I almost got cooked by a fireball."

"Wrennn," Ziedra drew out her name. "You wouldn't let me talk. You were the one in a hurry. Remember?"

Wren growled. Her head hurt.

In a city the size of Cosmodarus, it took little effort to find a tavern. Wren passed on the first few they came to, seeing a crowd that she sensed was just a bit too aggressive. She also wanted a location that doubled as an inn.

The light in the sky was fading and a bite had come into the air. Wren's legs felt like wooden logs and a deep throbbing ache pulsed through her muscles. The arm bitten by the mage's pocket had turned black around wounds, and the punctures themselves burned and itched.

They stood in front of an inn with sign graven with an image of what looked like a winged unicorn. Wren sure hoped this place was what they needed. She simply didn't

have the strength to search any further today. This was a quiet part of the city, near a large canal. The silhouettes of three large towers cast the building in shadow.

They entered through the double doors and looked around the commons. A huge brick and marble hearth blazed at the back of the room. A modest number of quietly conversing patrons occupied most of the burnished hardwood tables. Tapestries, statuary, and carvings depicting various equine creatures hung on the walls, pillars, and ceiling rafters. A standard hung from single large pennon staff over the center of the room depicting a blonde woman dressed in black armor astride a huge white horse. She held a war hammer in one hand and carried a shield emblazoned with the hammer and crossed swords emblem.

"Wren does that remind you of anybody," Ziedra pointed to the picture.

Wren shrugged looking at the nobly depicted warrior. "Should it?"

Irodee put a hand on her shoulder. "That is you."

She snorted and glanced at the picture again. She laughed. "That? It doesn't look anything like me."

"Yes it does," Ziedra insisted. "Well, more like your--" She paused. "How your mother might look..."

Ziedra's words struck a chord in her that made a chill run down her spine. She swallowed. Could that really be Euriel Idun-daughter her mother? The longer she stared at it, the more certain she became that Ziedra was right. There still had been the slightest doubt in her mind that this was the place of her birth. Now she knew.

She was home.

Chapter 45

Fortuitous Collision

Wren stood in the entry-way of the inn, staring at the standard hanging over the commons. It was made of heavy blue velvet stitched with gold thread around the edges. Shades of azure blue and white depicted a cloudy sky, and green and brown hues made up a mountainous backdrop. Dominating the foreground was the image of the war-horse and its female rider dressed in silver and black armor. She cut a regal profile, her hair braided back beneath a winged silver helm. The hammer and shield she carried were illustrated with exacting care, detailing each nick and scratch of her well-used implements of battle. As Wren stared at the artwork, the detail that really struck her was the care with which the standard had been preserved. It was obvious the regard that the proprietors held both for the art and for the person depicted. Her vision turned blurry and she wiped at her eyes. Her face felt hot and her stomach abruptly hollow.

"You okay?" Ziedra asked.

"What?" She blinked and rubbed the moisture from her cheeks. "Sorry. I just..." Her voice trailed off. She really didn't know what to say. That *was* her mother. She was a respected and revered person in this far off place.

"Uck." Irodee made a strange sound behind them.

Wren snatched around to see the Myrmigyne shudder. "Irodee?"

The woman had her eyes clenched closed, and she was clutching herself. "Cold," she muttered.

Ziedra gasped. "Damn, her disguise is wearing off." She looked around frantically and pointed toward a stairway leading up. "Get her arm, we need to get her out of sight!"

Together the two of them dragged the quivering and groaning Irodee up the stairs. As they struggled up the steps, hit the landing and turned the corner to forge up the next flight the three of them piled into another group coming down.

"Look--" Ziedra never finished her words.

Wren's head hit something hard before she had a chance to look up. The force of the impact knocked her reeling backward on her already unsteady legs.

"Whoa." Someone let out, she felt a hand grab her tunic as she fell backward. Unfortunately, the person's attempt to halt her fall resulted in both of them being pulled off balance down the stairs.

The resulting movement caused a chain-reaction. She fell pulling one person down who grabbed for purchase on another, resulting in all six of them tumbling back onto the landing in a pile of bodies.

"Ow," Wren groaned. "Ufff. Get off, I can't breathe." She tried to push the heavy body off her without much success. All she could see was the man's back and his legs tangled in the banister and the stairs.

"My word," the man muttered struggling to push himself off her. "Apologies, Milady."

"Uck." Irodee let out another incoherent sound. She gripped her head and writhed.

"Ouch," Ziedra grunted as she sat up and the two other men in the tangle collected themselves.

"Terribly sorry, Ladies," the biggest of the men said in a deep baritone voice, pushing himself to his knees. "I--is there something wrong with your friend? She seems bewitched."

Ziedra was obviously stunned that they had found someone who spoke common so quickly. It slowed her response. "She--"

The dancer never finished her sentence. Irodee let out a yell, her flesh rippled and a glow spread around her body. The Myrmigyne stiffened as her limbs expanded with gurgling sound. She exploded out of her robes in shriek of tearing fabric.

"By Ukko--!" The man who had spoken lurched back against the stairs.

In a few heartbeats, Irodee filled most of the landing, the torn robes barely covering her huge body. Tendrils of smoke trailed into the air off her skin and dissipated. She groaned.

The man held a hand over his heart. "Milady--you--you're--*beautiful*."

Irodee who was trying to orient and cover herself at the same time looked up at him. He was a big man with broad shoulders, he wore a black and silver surcoat with a flaming sword emblazoned over the left breast. He had a broad well-chiseled face, with a sloping nose, and a strong chin that was framed by a long mustachios that hung down past the corners of his mouth. His deep gray eyes seemed to glow and sparkle. He had the kind of smile that warmed the hearts of men and women alike.

The Myrmigyne pushed herself to a sitting position, rubbed her head and blinked. She looked up at the man again. "Pardon?"

The man frowned and glanced at his two compatriots who were still lying on the floor staring at Irodee in dumbfounded amazement.

"Childers, Reginald, get off your blighted backsides and help these ladies up."

The two men stiffened, and scrambled to their feet.

The man who fell on top of Wren, carefully pushed himself away, stood and straightened his black jacket before lending a hand to assist.

The other fellow did the same for Ziedra.

"My apologies ladies," the man said. "The collision was purely accidental. I hope none of you are injured." He knelt by Irodee. "Milady, it seems you are in need of assistance. Let me offer you my coat." He unbuttoned his jacket and handed it to Irodee.

The Myrmigyne took the offering numbly, and started pushing her arms into the coat.

"Reginald! Avert your eyes man. Leave the lady her dignity would you."

The man jerked and turned his back.

"So sorry," he said. "Milady, allow me to assist you." He bent and helped Irodee to her feet. Though he was a big man she still towered over him. He looked up at her with open admiration. "I stand humbled by your grace, Milady." He nodded to Wren and Ziedra. "Ladies, I am Sir Laramis De'Falcone of the order of Ukko. I could not help but notice you spoke the common tongue of which I am acquainted. Pray tell, what are your names?"

"I'm Ziedra," the dancer said. "This is Wren," she gestured. "And Irodee."

"Irodee," the man repeated, obviously marveling at the huge Myrmigyne.

"Well met, Lady Ziedra, and Wren and Irodee," he said with a bow. "Would you three happen to hail from one of the core worlds?"

"Core worlds?" Ziedra wondered aloud.

"We're from Titaan," Wren said. "We both come from Corwin."

"Corwin is it?" Laramis said rubbing his chin. "I hail from Coormeer, in the south of Ivaneth. Pray have you heard of it?"

"I've heard of it," Wren said. "Coormeerian brandy is popular in Corwin."

"Aye." The man grinned. "Just so. Tell me ladies, how is it you come to be in this far off city?"

"We we're about to ask you the same," Ziedra said, obviously beginning to recover her wits.

"Indeed," Laramis said, raising his eyebrow. "Might you ladies do us the courtesy of your company so that you could share this tale? It seems you are on a mission. One that I think may coincide with my own."

"Mission?" Wren asked archly.

"Mission," he remarked. "Or should I say, Mishaka?"

"Mishaka." The word fell cold and dead on Wren's lips. "If your end is to see her slain, we're interested."

Laramis' eyes narrowed slightly. "Quite so. I have quarters that we may retire to."

"Sir?" the man near Wren said.

"Pipe down Childers, I know what I'm about." He looked to Irodee and held out a hand. "Lady Irodee, surely you would like a place to attire yourself properly."

The Myrmigyne smiled, her cheeks coloring. Obviously, she'd never been treated in such a courtly fashion. She cleared her throat, and spoke in an uncharacteristically high voice. Even her accent changed. "Milord, we thank you for your hospitality."

"Excellent. Leave us go then."

Wren looked at Ziedra. The dancer looked back with a raised eyebrow. That hadn't sounded like Irodee at all!

The six of them headed up the stairs and to suite at the end of the hall. Laramis produced a key from his pocket. "Ladies, pardon the austerity, 'twere it my real home I would be able to treat you to more fitting hospitality." He unlocked the door, and stepped aside revealing an excellently appointed suite. It was easily the nicest inn room Wren had ever seen. Having lived in Loric's citadel for seasons she'd grown used to lavish appointments, but she had to appreciate being able to find them in a city inn. The suite was divided into a sitting area with a divan and two chairs, a doorway opened into a sleeping chamber.

Wren stumbled forward and collapsed gratefully into a chair. Ziedra found another chair to sit in.

"Lady Irodee, you may use my bed chamber to change. I will stay out here and entertain your friends."

"Thank you," the big woman said, heading where he indicated.

"Would either of you like some water or wine? I have some here."

"Wine would be good, please," Wren said.

"The same," Ziedra agreed.

"Wine it is." Laramis said. He turned to his guards who were still standing in hall. "Childers, make yourself useful and bring up some food for us. Reginald, you may retire for the evening, I have changed my plans."

The guards seemed totally caught by surprise.

"Sir?" Childers said.

Laramis' face darkened and he folded his arms. "Childers, it is not my habit to repeat myself. It is clear that Ukko has sent these women to me, so I must attend what they have to share. Now, be on your way."

The man drew a breath and saluted. "Yes, Sir." He turned and left. The other guard bowed and headed down the hall to another room.

Laramis closed the door and turned them. "My apologies ladies, for that unseemly display."

"Your men are very loyal," Wren said.

"Aye," he agreed. He opened a cabinet, scooped out three glasses and a decanter. With a deft grace he uncorked the container, handed them each a glass and poured with an obviously practiced flourish. He filled his own glass and sipped from it before them.

He settled on the divan and crossed his legs. "So, I have before me a Silissian princess, and a Corwinian guild mistress." He looked to his bedchamber. "Oh yes, leave us not forget the young sister of steel."

Wren's jaw dropped. How did he pick up those details? Did he read their minds? "I am not a guild mistress," she said.

"In organization only, milady. You have the mark. Take it from one who has seen his share of guilders."

Ziedra was frowning at him. "Princess?"

"I may have only been a stripling at the time, but one does not quickly forget the face of the finest dancer in Corwin. I must say, you have aged gracefully Milady. Rumors abounded in court. However, your involvement with Lady Degaba and the Frielos clan was something of keen interest to the counsel of justicars. They worked the divinations on you and the D'klace who watched over you."

The wine glass stopped half way to Wren's mouth. "You're a justicar?"

Laramis nodded. "Indeed."

The door to the bedroom opened and Irodee ducked to come through the doorway. She was dressed again in her jungle garments. The woman looked naked without her spear and bow. All she had was Ziedra's spare sword.

Laramis stood up. "Milady. I trust you feel better now. Join us would you?" He gestured to the divan.

"I don't understand," Wren said as Irodee carefully seated herself. "What's your involvement with Mishaka?"

"She's an avatar, milady. The worst kind of blight. Surely you know of the massacre in Ishtar's precincts?"

A knot hardened in Wren's stomach. "I was there. Master Jharon was my friend."

Laramis' eyes widened in shock. He put a hand to his chest and dipped his head. "My sincerest apologies, milady, I did not know. It must have been a terrible experience to be certain."

"It was," Wren said woodenly. "This counsel of justicars isn't trying to catch her are they? She's far too powerful for that."

"Nay milady," Laramis shook his head. "My interest in Mishaka is actually quite personal. In my late teens, I went to school in Malan."

Irodee's eyes brightened and she leaned forward. "Malan? At the Kel'Ishtauri?"

"The Kel'Ishtauri?" Laramis pronounced. He shook his head. "Nay, milady, I am not so bright as to merit academics such as that. At any rate, I attended school there with a lad by the name of Azir, he was the son of noble lady who was friends with Queen Kalindina. The two of us kicked around quite a bit."

Wren blinked. A cold sensation gripped her body. "Azir?" she murmured. "Azir Kergatha?"

Laramis nodded. "Why, the very same, Milady. Tell me, do you know him?"

Her throat felt like a rock was trapped in it. "Of him," she managed to force out. "Go on."

The justicar gave her a strange look. "Well, the short of it milady, is Azir's family was set upon by Mishaka and her foul minions. The witch took his parents captive, and spirited off his sister to some fell purpose. Azir managed to escape and has been looking for his sister. He tracked her to Titaan. Since we were friends, he enlisted my aid in finding some of the haunts of that awful monster Mishaka. We eventually

determined that his sister had been taken to Cor--win." The justicar cocked his head. "An interesting coincidence that."

"But the temple had been destroyed, right?" Wren said.

"Aye, just so," he said. "We searched the city for little Liandra for scoredays. It broke his heart, but we had to give her up for gone. To this day, he still holds that she is still alive. Brother's love for a sister and all that. Know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do," she answered staring at him.

"Ahem," Laramis cleared his throat obviously uncomfortable with her intensity. "At any rate, the flow of time here in Cosmodarus is a great bother. A day here is like a tenday on Titaan. The two of us have been trying to plan a way to break his parents loose from that fell creature, Mishaka."

"Azir? He's here?" Wren gasped.

"Well," Laramis rubbed the back of his neck. "I believe so. He failed to show up to a meeting I scheduled a few days ago. I had to return to Titaan to beseech Ukko for a boon to help us in our endeavor and had agreed to meet him. He didn't show. Beastly bit of luck, that."

What were the odds? No way could chance have put her on that stair-way at the precise time this man was coming down. No way, could she pick the very inn where he was staying, or be just near enough to hear the anchor stone call. It pushed probability beyond reckoning. Was it an elaborate trap to lure her to Mishaka away from her friends among Loric's clan?

Chance. Fate. Hecate or Gaea. Her mind whirled. The string of coincidence seemed so preposterous. Yet, she had met Tal Falor who had also seen her mother and father. It wasn't the first time that 'chance' had brought her into contact with links to her past. She had been the one to steer them to this inn, passing up several others in the process. How could Hecate predict that? She didn't know herself until she saw the sign outside.

Maybe Gaea was helping her.

"Wren," Ziedra said. "Are you all right?"

She let out a breath. "I'm so tired. I don't know what to think anymore."

"Milady?"

"She was hurt pretty badly earlier today," Ziedra explained. "She's been toughing it out. You wouldn't happen to have any healing would you?"

"Aye, healing I have aplenty. If one plans to fight a war, wouldn't do to come unprepared for injuries."

Wren shook her head. "Indeed."

Such a sweet man, we had only "met" moments before and he was already complimenting me. Every man I had met before saw me and was terrified. I knew something special had to be happening...

--Irodee Skyesteel

Chapter 46

Laramis

Wren sipped her wine, feeling the sweet nectar slip down her throat. It helped calm her nerves because she was still not exactly sure what to believe. Of course, it was nearly unthinkable that anyone so tooth-numbingly sweet as Laramis could be a pawn of a Hecate or her minions. The man was so much a paladin his blood probably didn't even leave stains. He even smelled like flowers. The only creature more white she had ever met was Desiray's husband, Bertram Terrantil. Come to think, Bertram was the high Justicar of Ivaneth and all of Sharikaar. If Laramis was on the counsel he would have to know Bertram. The justicar's marriage to Desiray would have to be a closely guarded scandal that only people in the circle would know. That would be a good test of this man's authenticity.

She leaned back in her chair checking around the sumptuous accommodations of the inn suite. She noticed that Irodee was totally focused on the man, watching his every move. The Myrmigyne leaned forward each time he spoke. Was she really making moon-eyes at a paladin? Nobody was that silly. Were they? Of course, Irodee probably didn't know the reputation of paladins. She had just his looks to go by.

By appearance, Laramis was well endowed with both money and taste, down to the polished buttons on his coat and lapels. The man's real talent was in having an eye for such details in cloth, jewelry and hygiene without looking like a dandy. It made her stomach tighten. A trait he shared in common with handsome gentle Jharon.

She swallowed and pushed that thought away and focused on testing him. "Tell me, Sir Laramis," she asked.

The man seemed to sense the change in her mood. His wide face turned more serious. "If I can," he responded.

"Do you know Bertram Tarrantil?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course, Milady, he is the patron of counsel of Justicars. Why do you ask?"

She looked down and laced her fingers. "Please pardon me, I just want to make sure you're who you say you are."

Laramis frowned. "I assure you, Milady, it is the truth."

"Anybody can claim anything," she responded. "I don't have a way to tell truth from lie. We are in a city of mages and people can appear to be other than they are."

The man let out a breath. "There is no discounting verity of that, Milady. My oath, I have spoken no falsehoods. Still, I grant you should have your assurances. What would you know of me?"

Wren nodded. Actually, even with no further knowledge of him she was fairly certain of his authenticity. It didn't hurt to probe a bit, just to see how he would react. "Sir Laramis, what do you know of lady Desiray?"

Laramis' eyes widened and his cheeks colored. "Sir Bertram's closet wife?" he sputtered. "I know as little about her as possible. What kind of question is that?" He glanced to Ziedra and Irodee.

"To know that you'd really have to be on the counsel," Wren answered.

"Ah," he responded with an expression of obvious chagrin. "Just so."

"I bet there are rumors about her."

His brow furrowed. "Aye. 'Tis not a subject lightly dwelled upon, Milady. Lord Tarrantil is a model for us all."

Wren smiled and rolled her eyes. She glanced at Ziedra who was frowning. "I'm sure he is. By the way, if the rumors are that Desiray is a guildier. It's true."

The man's face colored. "Milady, please, that is not funny, not even in jest. Such a thing is unthinkable."

She stared at Laramis. "Have you *seen* Desiray? I wouldn't imagine it's all that 'unthinkable'."

The Justicar swallowed. "I must admit that she is rather--striking... Still, Lord Tarrantil is a *paladin*. Such men are not swayed by mere beauty alone. He would never involve himself with a common peddler of stolen goods."

She felt her face grow hot. It was that attitude that had kept her and Jharon apart. She guessed in Desiray's case, her immense wealth and some hefty donations had been enough to sway the church. Damn the church and his kind anyway.

"She's not 'common'," Wren growled. "She's my grandmother."

Laramis' eyes grew round. "P-pardon? Grandmother?"

"Oh yes, and for your information she's not just a guildier, but a mistress of two prominent guilds. The Brethren of Corwin, and the Brethren of Ivaneth, perhaps you've heard of them?"

"Aye..." his voice trailed off, face paling.

Her voice dropped. "So, Lord De'Falcone, perhaps you'll rethink the unthinkable."

"That's enough, Wren," Ziedra broke in. "I'm satisfied he's a Justicar. Sir Laramis, I apologize for my friend. She's been on the bad side of a few Justicars. Hazard of the company she kept."

Wren folded her arms and glowered at Ziedra. That 'common' remark had stung a lot more than she wanted to admit. Is that how Jharon's peers had seen her? The Brethren were very uncommon, they had given back to the kingdom. How many guilds ever did that? Perhaps it had been that very argument that had opened the door between Bertram and Desiray. Still, it would be a terrible stigma to fight. There were things she still had yet to learn about the white-haired guild mistress.

"Desiray is not really Wren's grandmother," Ziedra continued, eying Wren. "Wren's more of an adopted daughter of the family."

"An adopted daughter of the Felspar clan?" Laramis repeated. "Then you know lord Felspar?"

The man was obviously well connected to know that Desiray was involved with Cassandra and Loric. She pushed down her irritation. It wasn't Laramis' fault. He was a product of a church upbringing. His opinions merely reflected the superior airs put on by the purveyors of church doctrine.

"Yes, we know Loric. We helped him wipe out Hecate's treasury in northern Stonewood."

"Astounding," Laramis breathed. "The council wondered who had riled the temples so fiercely."

"All it bought us was a castle full of demons," Ziedra grumbled. "Now we're all living in a tree."

"The great tree of Duran'Gravar," Irodee piped up. "The temple to honored Nethra."

Laramis glanced at Irodee, his brow furrowing. "This is all quite boggling. So, let me see if I understand. Lady Wren, you are after Mishaka for what happened within Ishtar's precincts?"

Wren nodded. "That's a part of it to be certain. Jharon Ko was one of my very best friends. Mishaka also tried to have me succorund."

"That vile creature," Laramis growled.

"There's more," Wren said. "A lot more."

"More?" Laramis repeated.

There was still a tiny shred of doubt in her mind, but she pushed it away. She sensed nothing but good from this gentleman. He knew Azir and was an important link to her past. The best way to get his help was to reveal who she was and see where it led. She reached into her tunic and pulled out the phoenix amulet. She slipped the necklace off over her head and handed it to him. "This should explain the rest."

The man took the flaming bird emblem with a curious expression, rubbing the gold metal with reverent fingers. He turned it over and read the inscription on the back.

"Liandra," he breathed. His head came up and his gaze found her eyes. "Liandra?" She nodded.

His jaw dropped and he blinked. "You are Liandra Kergatha?"

Wren swallowed. "I think so."

The justicar's eyes widened. "Oh my... Oh my... By Ukko I *thought* you looked familiar! By all that's holy!" He was up out of his chair and giving her a hug.

Wren returned the hug numbly, this man was still a stranger to her.

Laramis pulled back with a frown. "But your hair is *red*. And this thing about being adopted by the Felspars..."

"My involvement with them is a really long story." She let out a breath. "As to my hair. You don't really think it would be a good thing for everyone to recognize me do you?"

The man's brow furrowed. "Ah, right." He drew a breath and handed her the phoenix amulet back. "This is truly amazing. It does indeed explain your vendetta against Mishaka. So, how is it you came to be injured? What have you been doing all this time...?"

Wren held up a hand. "One question at a time. Better yet, could I get some healing first? It won't be a short explanation..."

Laramis' face flushed. "I am deeply sorry, Milady, I forget myself. Of course we must tend those wounds immediately." He rose to his feet. He gestured to his bed chamber. "If you would."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "If I would what?"

Laramis pressed his lips to a line. "Milady, I am a justicar, and a friend of your brother. I have no desire to take advantage of you. Please, use the changing partition, remove your blouse and leggings and lay down upon the bed. It is difficult to mend your injuries if I cannot see them. I have every intention of maintaining your propriety."

"Trust him," Ziedra said with a frown. "If you can't trust a paladin, who can you trust?"

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. "Right." She rose and abruptly her left leg buckled. Laramis and Irodee shot out of their seats and caught her shoulders to steady her. "Urrrgh."

"Leave us take care of her properly," Laramis said. "Will you assist me, Lady Irodee?"

The Myrmigyne smiled and nodded.

The movement happened before Wren had an opportunity to protest, Irodee swept her off her feet and started carrying her to the bed chamber.

"Good show, Lady Irodee," Laramis said in approval.

"Hey!" Wren let out. "You don't need to carry me! I'm not that hurt."

"Hush." Irodee told her ducking and turning sideways to enter the sleeping alcove. The big woman carried her in to the big four poster bed, set her down and began

untying the straps on her leather leggings. "It is Irodee's fault you were hurt," she said in a low voice, too quiet for Laramis to hear from the other room.

"So," Wren grumbled. "That doesn't mean you get to mother me. I'll be okay."

The woman focused on her with dark eyes. She glanced back at Laramis and knelt next to Wren. Her voice dropped to whisper. "What do you think of him?"

"Huh?" She glanced to the outer room where Laramis was now speaking with Ziedra. "He's a paladin."

"Irodee thinks he's nice. He said Irodee was beautiful."

Wren's brow furrowed. "Now that you mention it, he did."

The big woman sighed. "No one has ever said that to Irodee."

"That's sad," Wren said. "The other Myrmigynes should treat you nicer, it's not your fault you're so tall."

"Irodee's size is not why sisters shun her," the woman said. She looked as if to continue but she stopped. "Do you think Laramis is nice?"

She frowned. "Why?"

Irodee glanced over her shoulder at Laramis and looked at Wren. She didn't say anything, but Wren understood the expression.

"Oh. Well..." she sighed. "Let's discuss it later. I should let him do whatever he's going to do."

Irodee nodded. She helped Wren pull off the leather leggings and dark tunic. She put them in a chair. "We talk later, okay?"

"Sure."

Laying on the bed in her short-clothes she looked into the other room. Laramis seemed to strike some sort of agreement with Ziedra before turning his attention toward her. He stopped by a cabinet and pulled out a black bag before entering the room.

"Aie," he muttered. "You were injured worse than I thought. Surprised you could move at all with all these bandages."

"I'm tougher than I look," Wren said guardedly.

"Then you share something in common with your mother," Laramis said.

"You've met her?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Indeed I have," he said sitting down on the bed next to her, and opening the black bag in his lap. "Only a few times mind you, and briefly at that, but enough to know her character."

"What's she like?"

"Steel, milady, like a keen blade. She gleams, she's sharp and deadly, and oh so straight to the heart of a matter. And like a sword if you handle her wrong, she'll cut you. But also like a good sword she's constant and sturdy, short on words and heavy on action."

The elegance of his prose made Wren's skin prickle. "You can say all that from a few brief meetings?"

"She leaves quite an impression," Laramis tempered. "It does not hurt that Azir is very struck with his mother. He speaks of her often with regard and deep affection, always proud to be her child." The man sniffed. "I have a deep abiding love for my own matron. It is not the awe that Azir obviously has for your mother Euriel."

"I was told she was the daughter of a goddess," she said.

Laramis drew a breath. "The verity of that would not surprise me in the least. Her strength is a marvel to behold." He rummaged around in his bag and pulled out a small blade. "Pardon me, I must cut off these bandages."

Wren nodded.

With quick certain flicks of his wrist Laramis removed the blood stained cloth from her shoulder and arm, then the bindings around her legs.

"Tsk," he muttered. "These must have smarted some, milady."

"A lot," Wren confirmed.

"Though your friends did their best to cleanse the wounds, there are signs of infection. This looks like the blight from that warding bog that surrounds the city."

"It is."

"Humm," Laramis murmured.

"Does that mean you can't cure it?" Wren asked, heart starting to beat faster. How ironic to finally get to Cosmodarus and then be laid low by the simple corruption of a wound.

"No milady, it just makes it harder. The Justicars of Ukko are required to be proficient in medicine. Let me see..." He thumbed through some pockets in his bag.

"Ah. You are fortunate, Milady, I have the precise tincture for this." He lifted out a small cloth bag. "I must warn you however, it is not a painless medicine."

"Can't you just close the wounds with magic?"

"Aye, Milady, I have that power, but the flesh would still fester. The blood must be cleansed before the wounds are sealed."

Damn, she wished Desiray was here. She trusted her healing more than this paladin however honest he might be. "Frell the pain. Do it," she grunted. "It has to be done right."

"Indeed, Milady. Now, I must reopen these wounds to apply the medicine, so prepare yourself."

She gritted her teeth. "Go."

He took a cloth and a bottle from the bag, and emptied out an acrid smelling concoction on the fabric and rubbed it across the wounds.

Immediately a burning shot through the cuts. "Ack," she grunted.

"Hold on, I will be brief with this," Laramis soothed. He gripped her leg and she felt sharp steel press into her skin.

"Urrrgh," she growled.

Laramis moved with swift efficiency, cutting away bad tissue, and pinching medicine out of the little bundle. The powder he sprinkled into the wounds burned like liquid fire.

"Owwwrrrchghhh," she let out a long moan, bunching her fists in the pillow.

"Are you okay, Wren?" Ziedra asked her from the doorway.

She gritted her teeth. "Jussst, grrreat... argh." She buried her face in the pillow.

Ziedra came and held her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I apologize milady," Laramis said. "I must drain these abscesses before closing these wounds."

Laramis kept busy, working around her legs, cleaning up and cleansing the injuries. After what seemed like an eternity he began to chant, that ended with him gripping her legs. A surge of soothing warmth swept away the discomfort and the pain vanished.

"Ooohmph," she subsided with a sigh. "Oh, that's a lot better."

"The deep tissue injuries are repaired. You should have full mobility back by the morning," Laramis determined. "Now, let us see to that shoulder and arm. These do not appear nearly as severe."

The paladin tended those injuries as efficiently as the previous ones, and thankfully with little pain involved.

After carefully cleaning his implements with a cloth, he placed them in the bag and closed it with a snap. "You should be fit to wage war in the morning, Milady."

Her voice still shook a little. "Thanks, Laramis, I really appreciate it." She sat up and tested the mobility of the arm that had felt like Irodee stretched out to twice its normal length. The paladin's magical curing had done its job well. The shoulder was only a little sore.

"It is nothing less than a friend would do," the man said. "You are the sister of Azir, and I could do no less for him."

"So, what's our next step?" Irodee asked, leaning in the doorway.

"I think we stick with the plan," Ziedra said rubbing Wren's shoulder in empathy. "We need money, we need translators, and we need weapons and armor."

"I believe I can assist on those accounts," Laramis said. "Azir and I had been planning to raid the citadel for some time." He sighed. "The catch has been that Azir has gone missing."

"Could Mishaka have captured him?"

"I must confess that it is a possibility," Laramis said pulling at his mustache. He rose from the bedside and slipped past Irodee in the doorway, and put the bag away in the cabinet. He turned and leaned in the opposite side of the doorway. "His absence is a foul bit of luck because I was relying on his familiarity with the city, the language, and his contacts amongst the higher castes. I have only a simple device for the language and a sketchy knowledge of a few districts. I do not know how to contact the members of the castle entourage that he spoke of."

Wren let out a breath. "Great. So we need a new plan is what you're saying. Do you know where my parents are being kept?"

"Kept, Milady?" Laramis said with a curious expression. "Your parents are not imprisoned."

"What?" Wren's voice rose.

"No, Milady. Mishaka has them under some sort of thrall. The populous does not even know the city is being run by her except in the most general fashion. That is the devil of it milady. If your brother and I didn't mind killing faithful retainers and knights of the kingdom, we could have mounted an assault before this." He looked down to the floor. "And now it appears that something has happened to your brother."

Wren rubbed her face. "Well, there you have it. Don't know that I should be surprised."

"Milady?"

"Laramis you'll soon learn something about me." She clenched a fist. "Nothing is ever easy."

I stared at that standard for a long time looking up at the image of the lady I strongly suspected was my mother. If she was, those were damn big boots to fill, and when I found her, what was this noblewoman going to think of her daughter the guildler?

--Wren

Chapter 47

The Proclamation

Wren's eyes fluttered open, her cheek was pressed against cold stone and she smelled the sharp taint of burning sulfur. The back of her head ached. She blinked, her blurry vision taking in the dimly lit confines of a large feasting hall. How had she gotten here? Where was everyone? As she started to sit up she heard the clack of hard boot heels on marble flooring. The sound brought her bolt upright.

Her insides knotted up as a silhouette melted out of the surrounding darkness. The figure materialized around a pair of gold glowing eyes, resolving into a female face around which strands of white hair played. Red lips the color of fresh welled blood parted in a smile. Long nailed hands gripped a long flaying lash that glittered with sharpened barbs.

Wren's heart beat faster and her fists clenched. She felt a heat rush through her that felt hot enough to melt steel. "Mishaka," she growled.

The avatar of Hecate paused with hand on hip, the whip slung over one shoulder. "Why, Liandra, how good of you to finally join me. Such fun we are going to have!"

"Damn straight," she snarled. "Azimuth!" She called to her dagger.

The weapon did not appear.

Mishaka shook her head. "Sorry, Dear, you are not allowed to have any of those droll little toys. It will be just you, me, and..." She snapped the lash against the floor with a crack, making sparks skitter over the stone.

Wren felt a cold shudder run through her, but she would not turn from this monster. She would fight to the end. She dropped low into a fighting crouch, hands and feet stiffening into blades, breath hissing between her teeth in the serpent's growl.

Mishaka shook her head. "Will you strike me then, Little Girl?" She grinned with gleaming white teeth. "Come if you can, I am undefended." She spread her arms. "Come."

Wren didn't hesitate but called upon all her energy to land a single killing blow right between the evil witch's eyes. She surged forward a half step only to have her body freeze as though mired in amber. Her hands and legs shuddered as she struggled harder and harder, sharp pains shooting through every limb. An icy hand clenched her insides, she couldn't move!

"Well?" Mishaka said, raising an eyebrow. "Ah, I see, all bark and no bite." She sighed and put her hands behind her back and sidled closer, coming so her face was almost touching Wren's.

Wren's nose was filled with scent of dying flowers. She tried to flinch away, to even scream, but nothing more than a gurgle would come out.

"Tasty little girl..." Mishaka murmured. The evil creature ran a glowing fingernail up Wren's neck. Wren forced a snarl out, trying to jerk away as Mishaka trailed her fingers up the inside of her thigh. "You kept yourself pure just for me?" She leaned forward and sniffed Wren's neck and moaned. "Sweet sweet blood. Mmmm..." She drew a breath and dipped her head down.

Wren felt sharp teeth clamp on her neck.

"Nooo! Nooo!" Wren screamed sitting bolt upright in the bed, flailing and pushing.

In the darkened room, a body smothered her thrashing, hugging her close. She heard Ziedra's familiar voice. "Wren! Wren! Calm down, it's just a dream. Shhh. Shhh."

Wren snapped out of her panic, realizing she was tangled in the covers of the inn bed with Ziedra kneeling over her. She dropped her fists to her sides, heart still hammering and breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Ziedra let out a breath. She leaned to the side table and turned up the faint glow of the lamp. The flickering orange light showed her mussed dark hair and pale face. She looked frightened as well. She rolled to a sitting position and rubbed her shoulder. "Ow. Damn you're strong. I thought you were going to break my arm."

Wren swallowed, body still shuddering. "Sorry."

"That must have been a horrible nightmare."

Wren rubbed her face and nodded.

Ziedra's brow furrowed. "You okay?"

She held her breath, closed her eyes and tried to force a sense of calm over her body. "Getting there. It--" She shuddered. "I--damn. It--" She paused, not even able to say it.

"Mishaka?"

Feeling numb, Wren nodded.

"I really don't think she knows we're in the city," Ziedra said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Something would have happened by now otherwise. I think it would take a god to pick out one person in a city this size."

She winced. "She *is* a god."

"Not all the time, she's not." Ziedra took her by the shoulders. "Come on now. That's not the way we're going to beat her."

"Damn it," Wren growled. "You don't know what it was like in the temple. She just looked at me and I couldn't do anything. The only way I got free was Sindra did something in my head."

"Paralytic touch," Ziedra said. "It's pretty powerful, really strong mages don't even need to touch you. They still your body with the power of their will."

"Dorian froze me with it, and so did Gabriella. It's the scariest feeling--and I can't do *anything* about it!"

The dancer straightened up and cupped Wren's face in her hands. The woman's palms were warm and soft and the expression she gave her was one of sincere concern and affection. "Yes, you can. I can. If that's what scares you then we'll figure it out, okay? If she tries to paralyze me, I'll laugh at her."

Wren scowled. "You'll--*laugh*--at her..."

"Trust me," Ziedra said. "You just get some rest and heal. We have all day tomorrow to plot and plan. You need all your strength."

She sighed and nodded. She pulled Ziedra in for a hug. "Lords I'm glad you're here, even though it scares me speechless."

The woman squeezed her tight with shuddering arms. "I couldn't take it if you were here alone. It would kill me." She leaned her forehead against Wren's shoulder. "Promise you won't try and leave me behind. It would make me crazy."

Wren swallowed, feeling icy inside. "I--promise."

Wren plodded down the steps toward the commons. The night had been neither restful nor inspirational. She didn't have even the beginnings of a plan of how to get to her parents. Though Laramis had provided some good information, he was woefully

lacking in the critical details necessary for any kind of strategy. He didn't know how Mishaka was controlling her parents and had not even the most basic intelligence concerning their disposition or even where they were being held. She *assumed* that since they weren't *physically* prisoners that they were staying in the Baronial Mansion, the castle where her father was lord (one of the sparse bits of Laramis' knowledge). Before they could even act on that most rudimentary knowledge they needed to be able to speak, they needed weapons, and they needed a source of intelligence.

Damn. As much as she had disliked Cassandra's matronly hauteur and Dorian's manipulations they would be incredible assets right now. She had seen both of them in action and they were awesome opponents, gritty, savvy, and just plain powerful. She wondered what they were doing right at the moment. Damay's party would be considered long missing now. If Damay hadn't gotten back to Duran'Gravar, Loric would no doubt be hunting for her. Desiray would demand to search as well, that simply being the way their relationship had developed. Even Aarlen might get involved, having a vested interest in Damay, and well as herself and Ziedra.

If only she could get word out, but she had no way of getting a message to Duran'Gravar. She didn't know where it was. There was still a chance that the Felspar clan would find Cosmodarus. That would change the character of this battle considerably. She simply couldn't count on that happening. She needed to act before Mishaka knew for certain she was in the city. Once the avatar was on the offensive, the three of them wouldn't last long. The avatar had a serious home base advantage in addition to having hostages, superior numbers, and the simple fact she was an avatar actively being backed by a goddess. Hecate didn't have that many avatars left, Wren killed most of them herself. Where else would the goddess focus?

Wren sighed and shook her head. This was bad, bad, bad. How in Gaea's name was she going to get herself out of this mess? One thing was certain there really wasn't any turning back. Either she fought or Hecate's minions would find her and she'd fight anyway; best to join the combat at her discretion and her own terms.

The common room was abuzz with morning folk, travelers and merchants gathered around the tables with their packs and wares. Threads of cook-smoke and fragrant pipe weed twined around the columns like holiday streamers. The hearth had been stoked and lit the room with a cheery warmth. A half dozen serving maids swayed through the crowd with plates of victuals and refilling mugs.

She found Ziedra already at a table hunkered over something in front of her sipping something that looked like the potent darkroot tea she so strongly savored in mornings. The dancer had braided her long hair, her well-scrubbed face had an intense expression as she studied whatever was between her hands.

As Wren pulled up a chair next to the dancer she saw that Ziedra was looking at a parchment.

The dark-haired woman looked up with a smile and touched Wren's shoulder as she sat down. "Good morn," she greeted. "I hope you got some sleep."

"A little," Wren admitted.

Ziedra raised her arm to get the attention of one of the serving maids. She pointed to her own plate and then pointed to Wren. The woman nodded in response and waded off into the crowd.

"Amazing how much language you can get away with not having," Ziedra remarked.

Wren looked at the parchment. The runes lined across it looked somewhat familiar though she didn't know their meaning. "What's that?"

"It's the daily bulletin," Ziedra said. "Apparently, here in Cosmodarus they have some way of making thousands of copies of the script."

"Okay, it is a city of wizards. So what has you frowning?"

Ziedra tapped the script with her finger. "The writing. It's old Silissian."

Wren's jaw dropped. "Huh? How could that be?"

The dancer pushed a hand through her hair. "Let me rephrase that. I think old Silissian is a derivative of this language. Over long periods of time, languages drift so after a several centuries the same language in different areas can develop into completely undecipherable dialects."

She frowned. "Okay, so... how could you read this then?"

"Symbol based writing is very resistant to drift, because whole words and grammars are represented in a symbol. While the 'names' of these symbols have changed, their meaning is still essentially the same. I can't speak the language but I can read some of it. Apparently, there are two dialects here. More common writing is apparently in the lower caste dialect which has drifted considerably. Official documentation, like this bulletin." She held up the parchment. "Is in the noble tongue."

"I don't understand," Wren said. "How did people from here get to Silissia?"

"Well, I don't know that," Ziedra admitted. "Silissian is derivative of an even older draconic language." She took a sip of her drink. "Think about this. The gods had to communicate with their servants, the ones that built this place. What language was that?"

Wren's brow furrowed. "I have no idea."

"Exactly," Ziedra said with a nod. "I'm speculating, but I think the very oldest languages like old draconic, and its derivatives like ancient Silissian are based on the spoken and written languages of the gods. We're in a city filled with people who are descendants of the people that built this place for Isis. So their written language is at least the language she used to direct them in the construction. The dragons that ruled Silissia for millennia were servants of goddess Kali. Kali's city Zohrtauhrn, was built by them for her. Again their language was her language. So these hugely separated places had the language of the pantheon lords in common."

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a nice bit of reasoning, and it makes sense. I had no idea you knew so much about languages."

"Benefit of being a noblewoman for twelve years," Ziedra said with a faraway look in her eyes. "Mother and Father made sure I never shirked my studies. They wanted me to--" She paused and swallowed. "They wanted me to make something of myself."

Wren rubbed Ziedra's shoulder. "You did, Zee. You did."

The woman sighed. "Nothing they ever would have been proud of."

"A savant of magic, Zee. How many people get to be that?"

The dancer looked at her with blank expression. "I never thought of it that way."

"Do think of it that way. Some day you'll be doing magic your parents only dreamed of." She looked to the printing on the parchment. It only looked like a bunch of strangely formed slashes knotted together in bundles. "So, can you read it? And is there anything about us in there?"

Ziedra took the change of subject to heart and her demeanor brightened. She smoothed the curled sheet. "It's rough going, I studied old draconic a long time ago. I can get the gist of most of it though. The good news is there's nothing about us. However, there is something worthwhile. Listen to this: Ziedra cleared her throat and read.

"Let all concerned heed this proclamation the word and will of her most holy eminence, leader of the twelve armies, the Baroness Euriel Idun-daughter-Kergatha. The matron Kergatha condemns the very acts and deeds of the Cult of the Dagger and the Guild of the Hand in their skirmishing especially where it involves the

innocent citizens of the most fair Cosmodarus. Further collateral bloodshed will be punished harshly..."

Ziedra's voice changed and she looked up. "--La la la, it goes on to enumerate the form and measure of the way she's going to admonish their posteriors if she has to get involved."

"The Dagger guild," Wren breathed. "Here."

"Bit of a coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"An unhappy one. Mishaka killed the traitor Vulcindra who sold the brethren out to Hethanon and Dagger cult. We never did make the connection. Loric found evidence that Hecate and Set might be working together."

"Maybe cross-purposes where you're concerned. I mean Hethanon tried to kill you."

"Yes, we still don't have the whole story on that yet. So, there's a turf war going on between two guilds." She rubbed the back of her neck. "We might be able to use that." She shook her head, and thought back to Ziedra's words. "Are you sure you read that right? *Her most holy eminence?*"

Ziedra looked up to the standard hanging over the room. "Your mother is the highest nobility around here Wren. The biggest fish in this pond. And strange as it seems, she's still leading here somehow."

"I don't get it. That lady up there," she pointed to the picture feeling a twist in her guts, a burning sense of faraway kinship. "Would not tolerate Mishaka's presence here. She would track down her children if they were taken away. She wouldn't stop until they were found."

Ziedra picked up her mug with both hands and sipped from it slowly. "Maybe," she said, drawing out the word. "Maybe they *were* found."

"What?" Wren turned to Ziedra.

"Laramis told us that Azir said that your parents were under some kind of thrall. Put the elements together. Radian was attacked because he found out that someone in Odin's court was falsifying communications between Idun and her daughter--your mother. Why? What for? It seems like a needless expenditure of energy. It's not though, you keep Idun out of the way, and more importantly it furthers the illusion."

"You're saying they don't think anything is wrong? Why go to all that trouble?"

Ziedra shook her head. "I can't answer that. I think it comes back to you and Azir both being savants though. Maybe Hecate tried to force them to have babies and it didn't work, maybe there's something about them Hecate is trying to learn. The falsified communications to Idun says to me that your parents still have a certain amount of control here. And somehow, Mishaka has some sort of power over them. Something that would keep them from knowing their children are missing."

"Damn," Wren muttered.

One of the serving maids came up and set down a plate full of seasoned tuber shavings, fried eggs, and long strips of boiled meat. Wren sniffed the food, it didn't have the mouthwatering delicacy of Vera's cooking, but it was more than decent. She picked some tubers off the plate and chewed the spicy flavor.

"We have a lot to figure out," Wren said. "I think we can take advantage of that turf war. Guilds fighting like that are always looking for new recruits--that and actively fleecing for money to buy weapons and equipment."

"So, how does that help?"

"If there's anyone who will know this city, it will be a guildier. If there's a secret way in and out of the Baronial mansion that Laramis mentioned--can you think of someone else more likely to know?"

"Well, those retainers Laramis mentioned."

Wren nodded. "That would be my first choice too. He doesn't know where they can be found though. So, our next best option..."

"I'm with you on that," Ziedra said. "So, first we get the language and weapons, and then hunt for guilders?"

"No," Wren said.

"No?" Ziedra said perplexed.

"Then we freelance on their turf. Make a few big hits in their territory."

"Are you crazy!? You told me freelancing can get you killed! Think how big the guild is in this city!"

Wren nodded. "You're right, but I don't have time to apply and work my way up to get noticed by the lifers in-the-know. I have to get the attention of the guild elders directly. The best way to do that is to shake them down." She rubbed her chin.

"That's going to take some muscle. Laramis and Irodee should be great help in that. Thinking of those two, where are they? I knew Irodee was up to something when she insisted on having her own room."

Ziedra shook her head. "I haven't seen them since last night. She was making doll-eyes at him all evening."

"Well, he was responding too, you don't suppose..."

The dancer shook her head. "He's a Justicar, Wren. No way."

"He's a man before he's a paladin, Zee."

"There is *that* I suppose. I hope Irodee doesn't get hurt."

"She's a big girl, Zee. A *really* big girl."

A Myrmigyne and a paladin, no it doesn't surprise me. Living in Loric's house, I saw more surprising things--and more strange as well.

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 48

Family Leverage

Wren and Ziedra sat at breakfast for another half bell, enjoying the food and the warmth of the hearth. Wren outlined in more detail her plans to 'shake down' the guild of the Hand. Not only did they need to get the assistance of the guild they simply needed to take the measure of this gigantic city, learn its ways and customs.

After the painful experience with the merchant's pockets Wren was not eager to learn another such lesson the hard way. That meant also locating a mage guild. Though Wren never trucked much with organized groups of mages, she knew they existed in Corwin. With Cosmodarus being so populous with magic-skilled folk, it was a certainty that such an organization existed. Ziedra was their key to getting in. There was a risk that word of another Savant in town might get back to Mishaka, but the resources of a guild of mages were simply too valuable to pass up.

The mage guild was also their best chance for getting word to Loric. Desiray and Dorian had both mentioned having close ties to Isis, Everia and Darin'kel also served in the goddess' court. Someone in the mage guild would know how to reach the minions of the goddess of magic--this was after all, the city that Isis once occupied. Wren's third avenue of contact was the All-World's tournament. Her mother and father had been regulars of that year round event. Tal Falor and several other players in the great game had dealings there. They might be able to send word through the tourney organizers.

"I don't know why you think this is so thin, Wren," Ziedra was saying, leaning back in her chair. She stroked one of her braids and smiled. "This is a decent plan of action. I don't know *if* the mages will help, but I'm confident I can impress someone enough to get us in. Sending a message through them to Isis is inspired. We both know you can pull strings on the Guild of the Hand, if you can't get into a thieves guild I don't know anyone who could. The All-Worlds is another sharp bit of thinking. What's happened to us is certain to get back to Loric. It's just a matter of time."

Wren drew a breath and shook her head. "But can it get them here before Mishaka finds us? I only know it would be stupid not to try. I was too angry to care, but I remember how scared Beia was in that hall."

"I've seen Aarlen's crystal recordings of your fight with the avatars," Ziedra said. "They are incredibly powerful. Of course they were no match when you and Desiray combined. Then when you picked up that sword, that was..."

"Frightening," Wren said taking a sip of fruit cider from her cup. "We don't have either of those things this time. If Mishaka catches us before Loric can get here, it will get ugly fast."

"We'll find a way--" Ziedra paused and looked up. "Ooop. There's Laramis, and Irodee." She raised an eyebrow. "Whoa you may have been right about Laramis."

Wren looked around to see the Justicar coming down the steps next to Irodee. The broad shouldered man was wearing an indigo surcoat and had his long hair in a tail, held in place with silver brow circlet. Dressed in her jungle togs, the giant Myrmigyne swayed at his side, grinning like a woman walking on clouds. There seemed a bit too much spring in the man's step for someone who'd spent a night in cold sheets. Laramis' two retainers walked behind them, their bodies particularly stiff.

There was no certainty of anything having gone on between the Myrmigyne and the justicar but a lot of evidence suggested it.

"Good morn, Ladies," Laramis said in hardy voice walking up to their table. "Early risers I see. Already prepared to brace the day I take it. Lady Wren, I see you've put your hair back to that of your Dam."

Wren frowned and pulled a strand of hair around in front of her face. "Oh, I guess Ziedra's spell wore off."

"It suits you, milady." He looked up to the standard depicting Euriel Kergatha hanging over the room. "A fairness that would do any mother proud."

Wren felt her cheeks warm a little. "Thank you." No surprise why Irodee liked him.

Irodee smiled and nodded to Wren and then Ziedra. She had a glow that just had to have come from *something* happening. "Friends," she said. "Your night was good?"

"I've had worse," Wren murmured.

Laramis gestured his retainers to the far end of the table. The two men nodded politely to Wren and Ziedra before taking their seats and flagging for the serving maid. The Justicar pulled out a chair for Irodee and allowed her to sit before himself taking a seat.

Wren could see the Myrmigyne soaking up all the gentlemanly attention. It really meant a lot to the young woman to be treated with courtesy.

Laramis seated himself at the table with a bow to Wren, then Ziedra. "So, my friends, I trust you have already considered our options at length. Might I partake of your musings?"

"Sure." Ziedra said. "First, can you read old Draconic?"

The man pulled at his mustache. "Draconic is it? I must confess that I am not strong in my letters. I did learn it in the academy. I can muddle through. Why do you ask milady?"

Ziedra handed him the bulletin.

The man took it with a frown, and studied the page with a furrowed brow.

With her sky scraping height, it was an easy matter for Irodee to lean and see the page over Laramis' shoulder.

"Wren's mother wrote the proclamation," Irodee said with a smile. The grin turned to a frown. "And the guild that hurt Wren is here."

Ziedra's eyes widened. "Irodee, you can read that?"

The Myrmigyne nodded.

"Where from?" Wren asked.

"I learn in Malan," Irodee answered with a grin. "At the Kel'Ishtauri academy."

"Did you not know, Lady Wren?" Laramis asked. "I must say, Lady Irodee has a considerable edge on me in academic matters. She is a senior alumni of the academy, what was it you said, my Dear?"

Dear? Wren wondered. A senior alumni? The girl could barely speak common!

"Graduate Sara Kan Fara," Irodee answered with pride in her voice.

"Sara Kan Fara?" Ziedra repeated. "That's top honors."

"Indeed," Laramis said. "You wouldn't think of it, a sister of steel with a flair for the bard-lore. I was impressed." A serving maid set of mug of darkroot in front of him and he sipped it with relish. "Ah. Yes, you know her step-mother Countess Ess Targallae is a Matayan of some repute."

Ziedra looked at Wren who was looking back at her. "A lore knight?"

"Quite so. No surprise that she'd send her charge to the best school money can buy."

Wren stared at Irodee. "Irodee you..."

"Wren," Irodee said closing one eye. "/--" She stressed the word. "Have a hard enough time fitting in among the sisters without them thinking I'm a *tuva* as well."

Damn, all the time they had been talking around the big girl thinking that she barely understood common. Little did they know!

Ziedra's cheeks had reddened, obviously she was thinking the same thing.

"It's interesting the things you hear," Irodee said in perfect Malanian common.

"When people think you don't understand, or just think you're slow in the head." She tapped her temple.

"Beastly bit of human nature," Laramis confiding. "We tend to think if a person is big that they aren't very smart."

The details came together for Wren like a bowshot. She should have put it together sooner. She had wondered how a girl barely out of her teens was already able to planewalk and anchor herself in the valley even while asleep. Of course she was smart! She and Ziedra had both bought the woman's coarse barbarian act without a second thought. She guessed that didn't say much for *their* smarts.

"So about this article," Laramis said looking at the bulletin. "If you would, my Dear."

"Certainly," Irodee answered with a grin. She took the parchment and read, "*Let all concerned heed this proclamation...*" The girl read the words clearly and fluidly with none of Ziedra's pauses to puzzle out words.

The Justicar listened to the contents of the bulletin with a serious expression. After she had finished he drew a breath. "So," the man said scowling. "Hethanon's thugs are here. One can only wonder how far behind their master is."

Wren's eyes widened. "You know about Hethanon?"

"Indeed, milady," he answered, rubbing his forehead. "Another avatar is naught that we need. His exploits are well known amongst the counsel. How very *odd* that he should be here at this particular time."

"We don't know that he's here, not from this," Ziedra said.

Laramis shook his head. "The fiend is the soul of the Dagger cult. There is naught a place where they fester that he is not in their midst. I dare it would be a sorry bit of luck to have to deal with him *and* Mishaka."

"I sure *hope* they aren't working together," Ziedra said.

"Perish the thought," Laramis said making a sign with his fist and looking to the sky. "So, Lady Wren, since Ziedra has indicated your interest in this proclamation, I assume that you wish to use the guild conflict to some advantage?"

"I want to get into the guild to see if they can get us into the Baronial Mansion."

"Ah," Laramis said nodding. "Stealth is their forte after all. From what I know of such folk, they are not overly trusting, and outsiders would find access to the clan elders difficult even if you bandied about large sums of money. Do we have enough time for such dalliances?"

"With the right plan we do," Wren said. "We have several things we want to try to do as long as you're willing to help us."

"I am to serve," Laramis said dipping his head. "I fear for my friend Azir's well being, and I will do anything within reason to secure his safe return."

"Good," Wren said. "Okay, here's what we've been thinking..."

Irodee, Laramis and his retainers ate breakfast while Wren explained what she and Ziedra had been discussing. The man nodded as she explained the reasons and rationale for everything she wanted to do.

After she finished, he set down his mug and pulled at his mustache. "Well conceived, Milady. I have no quibbles with any of it. I know where we can get language items like this circlet," he tapped the band on his forehead. "Azir introduced me to a merchant who is a dealer in magick armaments. I believe our only

impediment will be funds. Such things are expensive, and my supply of local currency is limited."

Wren glanced at Ziedra. "We have a source of funds if you know where we can find a jeweler."

"Of jewelers, I have no specific acquaintances, but I do recall seeing a rather well appointed shop not far from here."

"Okay. Are the language items expensive?"

Laramis frowned. "They are moderately so, about the equivalent of two or three thousand crowns."

Wren winced. "We're good for that amount, it's just that we..."

"You need to do the jeweler exchange before you have any money," Laramis finished. "Irodee explained that you are here a bit unexpectedly. I would like to think that all these exercises are motions only. While I relish the opportunity to combat such an evil as Mishaka, taking on her entire entourage with just the group of us six does not strike me as a winning strategy."

"I'm not looking forward to it either. If you help us buy the language items I promise we'll reimburse you."

"Pay it no mind, Milady. I had no intention of quibbling, we must all be able to communicate adequately in this place in order to gather information. The loss of Azir is a sobering turn of luck, much of what we planned revolved around his intimate knowledge of affairs in and around the mansion." He drew a breath. "So, we have a plan and purpose, shall we be off?"

Wren nodded. "Certainly."

He rose from his chair, turned toward the door and paused with hand on chin. He looked back to Wren. "Milady, might I make a suggestion?"

Wren looked at him curious. "Of course."

"Your attire, and that of lady Irodee, and dama Ziedra..." He paused and looked at them. "No offense milady, but I think for appearance sake that while we are out making purchases, that we get you fitted for more appropriate clothing. You may have noticed that color is rather significant here."

She smiled. "You don't want to appear to be walking around with a bunch of peasants, Laramis?"

"Milady, I would never put it so indelicately as that. I believe it will help our negotiations if you appear to be from the proper caste."

Wren made a calming gesture. "You don't have to be defensive, Laramis, I was only jesting. I should have taken that into account, thank you."

"Ah," he said. "Very well. All right, *now* we shall be off."

Together the six of them headed out of the commons, and onto the street. Threads of mist twined through the buildings glistening with morning dew. The highest towers stood silhouetted against crimson and orange sky shading to bright azure blue. A musky sage scent hung in the damp chilly air. The streets were already filling with people, farmers and peddlers heading to market.

Wren blew on her hands to warm them. The air was far colder she would have expected given the desert-like environment outside.

Laramis looked around for a moment before picking a direction and setting off down the street.

"This place is beastly large," the Justicar told them. "Every time I think I have my bearings I'm always getting turned 'round again."

"Laramis," Ziedra asked. "Can you see the Baronial mansion from here?"

"Not from here, Milady," he answered. "It is in the canal district, on the far side of city center." He pointed toward a cluster of taller red and black spires. "A good 4 to 5 furlongs off. Easily a half-bell's walk if the crowds are heavy."

Laramis lead the group down the street, winding around passersby with graceful confidence. After turning a corner, he headed up a ramp to the levels above. Wren kept an eye out for people that could be from either of the warring guild factions. She also tried to stay alert for individuals who might be agents of Mishaka.

Laramis took them up another ramp and stopped at the third shop they came to. The place didn't look like much, little more than a black awning covered with red runes, a heavy scalewood door, and a large glass window around which steel bars had been placed. Symbols had been painted on the glass, and Wren saw strange looking gems and jewelry on display in cases in the window.

She certainly wouldn't have known it as a place they could purchase the magic translators.

Laramis entered without preamble. Inside the shop it was surprisingly warm, the wooden floors well oiled and swept. Scattered throughout the fair-sized shop was a large variety of shelves, racks, pedestals and hanging nets. Wren saw all manner of objects on display. When she stopped to examine one rack, she noted everything from what looked like a worn out broom to a strange-looking bronze chamber pot. There were bottles of what looked like spices, various quills, hats, gloves, and all kind of unrelated bric-a-brac.

"What a bunch of junk," she murmured.

"It's not junk," Ziedra said next to her, looking around with wide eyes. "Most of it is magic."

"This stuff?" Wren stopped at a shelf and picked up a cute black box that was painted with images of mice scurrying around the edges. A pair of realistic looking cat eyes were embossed into the front below the gold latch.

"Mmmm hmmm," Ziedra said, taking the box out of her hand and putting it back where it had been sitting. "Some of it pretty *strong* too."

Wren frowned at Ziedra and then at the little box. When did their roles change anyway? She used to be the one always cautioning Ziedra. At least the magic training was teaching the dancer to guard herself better.

Wren looked around to find huge Irodee. The giant Myrmigyne appeared enamored of the books and was examining the covers of all she passed. The woman didn't look like a bookish sort at all, especially with muscles like those.

Laramis set out for the back of the shop toward the proprietor who was dressed in deep forest green. Wren followed the Justicar, wanting to hear the exchange. The stocky shop owner would have looked normal if not for his purple hair and eyes that appeared to be clear glass behind which rainbows spun and churned. The skin of his broad face had smoky color to it and a shine that made it look oily. A series of five large red jewels were pressed into his forehead, these flickered and glowed as he moved. He kept a large black stylus tucked behind his left ear. When he smiled, he appeared to have two mouthfuls of teeth. His grin sent chills down Wren's spine.

"Good surrah, you return!" the proprietor said in a rusty hinge voice that echoed twice in Wren's ear. Having worn Cassandra's circlet for translating the Myrmigyne language, Wren was now familiar with the delayed effect of such a device. Apparently, the shop keep utilized his own wares.

"Indeed I do, Master Molivar," Laramis said with a bow. "I come seeking a boon of your most excellent wares."

The store owner grinned again. It reminded Wren of the toothy gape of the fang fish that sailors often fell pray to at sea. "Surrah, I am but to serve." Rubbing his hands together, he bowed. "How may I be of gracious assistance?"

"It is a simple matter I assure you," Laramis explained, pulling at his mustache. "Recently, I purchased 3 of these circlets from you for myself and my men here..." He tapped the band around his head.

Molivar frowned, the rainbows in his eyes dimming to dull red glow. "No refunds. No guarantees, Surrah. No warrantees, sold as is, they are..."

Laramis held up his hand. "No, no, no, the devices work fine. I need three more."

Molivar stopped in mid-demur, and scrubbed a clawed hand through his purple hair. "More you say?"

"Indeed, Sir, for these three fine ladies." Laramis said, gesturing to them.

"Humm," Molivar fingered his lower lip. "Is problem. Many cross-worlders this month. I sell all my stock."

Laramis' brow furrowed, and he folded his arms. "Good Molivar, is there nothing?"

"Humm..." the proprietor murmured, narrowing his eyes which darkened to shadows. His brow furrowed.

Wren shook her head and whispered to Ziedra. "Here comes the shakedown."

The dancer rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Ah yes!" Molivar brightened. "But they are not cheap."

Wren sighed. "Told you," she whispered.

"Show us," Laramis enthused.

"Patience be you to wait," Molivar said with a bow. "I shall fetch them." He turned and went through a door behind the counter.

"Laramis, do you really know this guy?" Wren asked, hands on hips.

"Indeed I do, Milady," the justicar answered. "I know his semblance is somewhat daunting, but in the few times I have dealt with him, he has transacted in good faith."

"You'll pardon my saying it," Wren said. "I've *never* seen a guy who looked more like a fence in my entire life."

"Milady we should judge people by their actions, not their appearance." He glanced up at Irodee and smiled. The Myrmigyne grinned back at him.

She shook her head.

Molivar returned moments later with a thin blue case under his arm, made from some kind of polished wood. He set it down on the counter with a flourish, and spun the box around so that the latch faced them.

"Waiting I have," he said with a superior smile. "For the right customer. Perhaps, that buyer you might be?" He undid the latch and opened the case.

The three women sidled closer to Laramis to see.

"Oooh," Ziedra murmured.

"Pretty," Irodee said.

"Ouch," Wren groaned. Inside the case were four sets of ear-rings arrayed on the felt lining of the box to best visual advantage. They were extremely ornate pieces with a series of long sapphire spinets and a platinum braid designed to clip higher on the ear. Cut fire crystal bangles festooned the braid, polished and shaped to catch the light and reflect a whole spectrum of colors. It was jewelry a princess would wear, or an extremely wealthy noble.

"Beautiful and functional," Molivar started in to his sales pitch. "These not only translate, but teach as well. One need only use one of these for a scoreday actively speaking a dialect, and the wearer will assimilate the language. Language translation is natural and only detectable by an expert. For the ladies without ear piercing, they painlessly create an ear hole. Obviously, works of a creative genius." He sighed and

looked around. "For you my friends, I will make a special deal. Thirty thousand for all four."

Laramis choked. "Zounds man. Thirty thousand!?"

Molivar frowned. "Surrah, I assure you that is an exceptional price. They are easily worth three times that."

"He's right," Wren said, folding her arms. "I could get ten thousand each for them without the magical properties." She shook her head. "They're pretty, but they're just way out of our price range."

"Now, hold up a moment, Wren," Ziedra said leaning forward. "Sir, might I try one out first to see if they operate as you say?"

"Of a certainty, Damsel," Molivar said holding up the box.

Ziedra grinned. She took a pair out and examined them in her palm. She turned the gems over, fingering each of the festoons and scrutinizing them with narrowed eyes. "Tell me," she said, her attention still on the bangles. "Do you know where these come from? I believe I've seen them before."

Molivar eyes narrowed imperceptibly, their color shifting toward the red. "Damsel, it is my understanding, these are crafted upon the core world of Numinor, by Beldigard the great magician jeweler."

"Really..?" Ziedra drew the word out with a glance at Wren.

Molivar nodded.

The woman had a plan, but Wren couldn't guess what it was.

Ziedra removed Cassandra's circlet from her forehead and put it in a pouch. She pulled her braids back, and removed the fancy earrings she was already wearing and put them in a pocket. She then fastened on Molivar's earrings. She looked to Irodee and spoke.

When Ziedra's lips parted her voice sounded slightly higher than normal, and she uttered what sounded like the Myrmigyne language to Wren.

Irodee's eyebrow rose. "You can pick language?"

"Apparently," Ziedra said. She turned to the proprietor and met his eyes. When she spoke again, it was in a clicking raspy tongue that sounded like no words Wren had ever heard.

"As you see," Molivar said. "Very versatile, very functional. Worth the price. By touching jewels you can get different effects."

Ziedra tried as directed. The device being able to broadcast in all languages at once at the cost of not looking natural, Ziedra's lips moved but the words were not in sync with what she said.

"Lastly," Molivar said with wide smile bristling with sharp teeth. "Best selling point. Wearers of these," he pointed to the earrings. "Can talk silently to each other over a distance of a league."

Wren drew a breath. "Oh, that *is* nice." She laced her fingers together; a way to communicate magically without using savant telepathy. They were worth every copper for that capability alone. She started looking around the shop should the deal sour and she decided to visit in less *obtrusive* fashion.

"What price for just three?" Laramis asked.

"Twenty-five," Molivar said. "It would be a crime to break up the set."

The justicar winced and shook his head.

Ziedra slowly removed the earrings and held them in her palm for a few moments before placing them back in the box carefully.

"Is this price negotiable at all?" Laramis tried lamely.

Molivar cocked his head to one side. "Twenty-eight hard currency. No scrip. Best I can do, Surrah."

Laramis looked crestfallen. "I apologize ladies, I see the versatility of these devices, but I simply do not have such a large amount of funds with me."

Ziedra fished the earrings she'd been wearing out of her pocket. She seemed to come to decision. "Master Molivar, might I ask a question?"

"Of a certainty, Damsel."

"Do you recognize jeweler's marks?"

"Of a certainty, Damsel, one can not truly value an item without knowing the marks of the famous and legendary smiths."

Wren glanced at her friend. Where was she going with this? She could tell Ziedra had a plan.

"All right," Ziedra said. "Can you tell me who made these?" She held out her earrings.

"Ah good quality, fine work," Molivar said taking them from her. He weighed them in his hand. "True white gold. The Damsel has excellent taste." He took a magnifying loop from his robes and examined the jewels. "Hmmm, the mark is hidden..." He turned the piece over a few times in his palm. "Ah, here it is Damsel, this is second generation craft of the Frie--" His rusty voice caught. "Ios..." He ended in a whisper, his eyes widening.

Ziedra frowned and folded her arms. "Now, is it my imagination, or isn't that mark-- that *flavor* of magic, the same as you have in the box there."

All the smoky color of Molivar's oily skin bleached out. He swallowed. "Perhaps they are similar, Damsel, but I assure you this is the work of Lord Beldigard of Numinor."

"Uh hmmm," Ziedra said with a raised eyebrow. "So, if I called my aunt Aarlen and had her come look at these she'd agree with you."

Molivar's whole body seemed to sway under her words. "A-a-aunt?"

"Yes, see," she held her left hand out. On her index finger was a large blue stone upon which the stylized Falconhead crest of the Frielos had been embossed.

The proprietor glanced down at the ring and his lower lip started trembling.

Wren glanced at Laramis and Irodee, the two of them were mesmerized by the dancer's act. Gaze going to each face as they spoke. She had to admit, Ziedra was playing name game to the hilt.

Ziedra raised an eyebrow and went on in a conversational voice. "I don't know if you're aware, but my *aunt* is rather aggressive and hot tempered when it comes to family heirlooms."

Molivar suddenly didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. He put Ziedra's earrings down like they'd suddenly become too hot to handle. He held his stomach with one hand as though in pain. His other hand gripped the side of his face. "I-i-is that so?" He said in trembling voice.

"Yes. I'm certain she'll be happy to hear you kept them safe for her." She picked up her earrings, and took her time putting them on. She looked to Wren. "Come on, let's go tell aunt Aarlen." She turned to leave.

"D-d-damsel!" He threw himself over the counter and caught her belt.

Ziedra stopped. "What is it, Master Molivar?"

Wren had to smile. The fence had bought the whole sham.

"I wouldn't want to *trouble* your aunt," he said, his eyes like dark pits in his face. He swallowed and made a forced smile. "You don't suppose there's a *reward* for finding these?"

"Of a certainty," Ziedra said with a big grin. "I'm a little tight on funds, but I'm certain this would be a decent reward." She pulled a large sapphire ring off one of her fingers, and set it down on the counter in front of him.

Molivar looked at the ring with considerable chagrin.

"You know, I've met her aunt," Wren said. "She's got a real nasty temper. Likes to *blow* things up."

Molivar gritted his teeth.

Ziedra glanced sideways at Wren and looked at shop keeper with a shrug. "True."

Molivar picked up the ring with a sour expression. The piece was worth a great deal but nothing compared to the 8 items of magical jewelry in the case.

"If that's not satisfactory, I can have her come get them herself."

"No, that's not--" His voice cracked. "Not necessary. This will be just--" He choked. "Fine."

"Well then," Ziedra said. "We have an accord." She closed the box and latched the lid. She attempted to slide the box off the counter but Molivar took hold of it.

He stared at her, his glassy eyes pulsing with red light. "Are you really the niece of Aarlen Frielos?"

Ziedra's brow furrowed. She raised her right arm and pushed the sleeve down, revealing a D'klace assassin's tattoo. "My cousin Sindra gave me this, do you like it?"

Molivar's jaw dropped. He let go.

The dancer put the box under her arm. "Pleasure doing business with you."

The group of them filed outside. When they were out of earshot of the shop Wren let out a laugh. "That was awesome, Zee."

"Thank you," the dancer responded with a nod, cheeks coloring.

"A grand deception," Laramis said. "It was a fine bluff to get the price down."

"Bluff?" Ziedra said looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Why of course you are not related to Aarlen Frielos, Milady!" Laramis let out. "I admit the crest on your ring is similar, and the tattoo..." His voice trailed off. His eyes got wide. "You can't really be... *can* you?"

"I'm just jesting with you," Ziedra said with a roll of her eyes. She winked at Wren. "Can't you tell? I'm much too sweet to be related to the Ice Falcon. It was all a trick with illusion magic."

Laramis let out a breath looking vastly relieved. "Ah yes, of course."

Ziedra giggled and put an arm around Wren and pulled her close. "Of course."

Ziedra grew so much in such a short time. Sometimes I wish to have the old innocent needy Ziedra back. I guess it's just the selfish competitive part of me talking. I guess when I urged her to learn independence I never really expected it to happen. Silly me. She *is* a savant after all...

--Wren

Chapter 49

Shades Of Another Life

Wren strolled down the walkway next to Ziedra. The air still heavy and fresh with mist. Here on the upper levels of Cosmodarus there was a fraction of the foot traffic they had encountered on the ground. The orange and red of the morning sky was shifting slowly to a bright sapphire blue. Whiffs of cook-smoke from a nearby square brought the smell of roasting meat and baking bread. With the beautiful sky and palatable smells it was hard to believe the danger this place posed. The Cult of the Dagger lurked in shadows somewhere. She owed them some paybacks, especially their despicable avatar leader Hethanon. Desiray hurt him, but that wasn't nearly enough punishment, not enough for the death of Grahm.

Here on the third level looking off toward city center she could just see the tip of the spires that marked the Baronial Mansion. The place where she might finally be reunited with her family. It was also the place where she must confront that witch Mishaka.

Every fiber of her being looked forward to a reckoning with the avatar of Hecate--and dreaded it as well. Mishaka killed Jharon, the man she most admired and cared for. The white-haired monstrosity had made the last moments of his life an indescribable torture--slaughtering his friends and colleagues in the temple--making him see their defiled bodies. The evil creature deserved destruction. Wren would see to it if at all possible.

Ziedra took Wren's hand and pulled her close. She gave Wren's fingers a squeeze, then reached up and brushed the hair back from her face. "What's the matter? One moment you're happy and then you got this faraway look."

Wren forced a smile. She pointed off across city to center to the canal district. "Up here, you can just see the towers of what must be the Baronial Mansion."

Ziedra looked. "Whoa, that must be a big place."

"Yes," Wren murmured, voice turning hard. "Sooner or later, that's where we have to go."

"Aren't you glad you have a partner to help?"

Wren focused on Ziedra's dark eyes. "You can't be my partner, Zee. Not now, not ever."

The dancer's face tightened, and her brow furrowed. "Why would you say that?"

Wren swallowed. She reached up and touched Ziedra's face, feeling the warm perfection of her skin. "Because, Zee, all of my partners end up dead."

The dancer pressed her lips to a line. She rubbed Wren's shoulder. "Like it or not, Girl, you're stuck with me." She looked down and after a moment smiled. "If I can't be your partner--you can be mine. We'll see what we can do about changing your luck." She draped her arm around Wren's neck. "I always wanted a sidekick."

Wren's shoulders slumped. "Zee, it's not funny. Everyone I get close to dies."

"Well, Darling, all due consideration to Grahm and Jharon, they were fine men--but I'm a woman and I'm also a savant--just like you."

"Zee, you have no idea what a curse being a savant is..."

The dancer rolled her eyes. "The same curse that has you living in Loric's mansion, friends with Desiray, learning from Vera, winning the great game and kicking the dung out of Hecate's avatars... We are talking about the same curse--right?"

"Zee, if not for my being a savant, Mishaka would never have taken me from here. My parents would be free right now!"

"Would they?" Ziedra said. "I don't know about that. Didn't they say your father was a savant?"

"Well, yes, so..."

"So, no matter what, you were going to be affected by this 'savant's curse' one way or the other. Your brother is a savant too, remember? With your mother being the daughter of a goddess, I'd think you not being a savant would be even more terrible. What did the bulletin say...? 'her most holy eminence, leader of the twelve armies...'. That's an awfully large shadow to be in without something going for you. Take it from me, I know. My mother was a cloud-walker and my father was one of the most renowned war mages ever. When you have parents like that, people expect great things of you..."

"Well..." Wren started lamely.

"Wren, just give the 'curse' stuff a rest, okay? No quibbles, you've had some horrific things happen to you. On the other hand, you and I have potential like most people can only dream of. Sure, it's got its down side--but hey, I'm just starting to like being a savant. So don't ruin it for me." She put the earring case down, put her arms around Wren and gave her a hug. "Now cheer up and stay focused. That's an order--*sidekick*."

Wren returned the squeeze with a fierce grip that had Ziedra gasping. "All right, damn you. You just watch yourself." She put her chin on Ziedra's shoulder, enjoying the warmth and the sense of togetherness. It reminded her she wasn't alone. She blinked, noticing that Laramis and Irodee stood in the walkway studying them. The two of them were holding hands.

Chalmers and Reginald, Laramis' two retainers stood behind them with arms folded looking uncomfortable.

She drew a breath and pushed away from Ziedra with a sheepish expression. "So...Laramis," she said. "Where now? Didn't you want us to get different clothes? We saved you the price of the translators, so you can cover wardrobe costs right?"

Ziedra picked up the blue wooden case from its place at her feet and patted it.

"Well..." Laramis cleared his throat. "That should not be a problem milady. There is a decent tailor shop on this level if I recall rightly. Take the next bridge on the right." He looked up to Irodee. "I think you should look rather striking in a deep violet doublet, my Dear. Some nice hose to set off those beautiful long legs."

The Myrmigyne smiled.

"Let's go," Wren encouraged. She pulled Ziedra along. "Thanks for cheering me up," she whispered to her friend.

"That's my job," Ziedra said, putting her hand around Wren's waist. She glanced over her shoulder at Laramis and Irodee. "Is it my imagination..." she whispered.

"Nope," Wren confirmed.

"Good for her!" Ziedra said with a shake of her fist.

"You're such a romantic."

"Harrumph. And you're too cynical."

* * *

They arrived at the tailor. Large glass windows looked in on a cozy-appearing costumer's shop with red paneled walls, and a host of carved wooden statues upon which the dresses, coats, and other finery were displayed. Bolts of cloth on spindles were arrayed along one wall. A rack of already made clothing ran down the opposite side. At the back of the room a screened hearth cast a rosy glow on the numerous wares.

Before entering, they opened the blue case and handed out the earrings. Wren had never worn much jewelry and Ziedra had to help her don the fancy bangles. Once both earrings were on, she felt a faint tingling go through her skull and an unusual warmth in her throat and behind her ears.

She looked around to Ziedra. "*Oooh, orda und struiken tas, dama...*" She stopped startled. Her voice was different... the *words* were different. She spoke what felt like common, but what came out didn't sound like it at all! Now, *that* would take some getting used to.

"Ah," Ziedra said. "Silissian, even with an eastern accent."

Wren rubbed the back of her neck. "Is that what I'm speaking?"

Ziedra nodded. "You have to make eye contact. You speak the language of the person you focus on. There are adjustments to speak to crowds and such, but I need to work with it more to figure it out."

"Adjustments, now how would...?"

"I'm a savant of magic, remember?"

"Oh, right..." She really needed to start taking Ziedra's new talents into account. She had not really thought about what all a savant of magic might be able to do. Certainly figuring out of the properties of a magical item was an obvious bailiwick for a magic savant.

She noted the satisfaction that the voices of the passersby had changed from incomprehensible mumbles to recognizable words.

"They appear to be working fine," Laramis said. He looked to Irodee. "Did you understand?"

"*Monla kalla sup*," Irodee answered.

"Ah, Coormeerian," Laramis grinned. "I guess they are all working. Fascinating the way these work. I wish they were more masculine in aspect else I would be interested to use this last pair." He looked down at the last pair of earrings in his palm.

"Think you look cute in them," Irodee said smiling.

Laramis rolled his eyes. "Indeed."

Inside they met the tailor, a plump dark-haired older woman who had been attractive in her youth. Her wide dusky-skinned face with its upturned eyes, flat nose, and broad mouth still had a beauty of its own even in her advancing years. Her shiny black bangs lapped around her face as she flitted about the three women, making suggestions as to style and color.

Being of average size and build (for Cosmodarus) there were many things on the pre-made rack that fit Wren. Ziedra being taller, and still a bit overweight, was a bigger challenge, but nothing a little magic couldn't help with. The lady seamstress worked with a set of tools that were obviously magic, able to fix seams, let out hems, and cut down sleeves in the space of a breath. This simple, but convenient magic made it possible for Ziedra to squeeze into an attractive wine-red riding outfit that accentuated her curvy body and shiny dark hair.

After thumbing through the rack, Wren kept coming back to a black and silver formal uniform. She didn't know why, but she just liked the style, the cut, and everything about it. Normally such uniforms being the symbol of authority, had never appealed to her much. This particular outfit had been designed for a woman. It had a

simple elegance. The silver epaulets and gold lace giving it just enough color to look dignified.

Laramis argued against it, saying such a color might attract too much attention. Black and silver was reserved for the very highest echelons of nobility in this city.

In the end, Wren decided to damn the risk. A little acting and this uniform just might buy them bargaining power in future negotiations. She pulled on the soft velvet vest and pantaloons. A few clips with her magic scissors, and a dart here and there with her needle and the seamstress had let the chest out a bit so Wren could breathe easier. She pulled on the coat, buttoned it, and flipped out her hair.

She pirouetted for Ziedra who was already dressed in her red jerkin. "What do you think?"

"You look excellent; a little blonde general."

Laramis shook his head. "I hope you don't regret wearing that, Milady. That is officiating regalia like what I wear to court. Someone in the guard may take exception."

"Let them," Wren murmured, not to have her small enjoyment ruined. "If they do, I'll have them digging latrines."

They turned their attention to clothing for Irodee. Nothing in the shop, female or male, came close enough for the seamstress' limited magic to alter it to fit. The only choice was to make something from scratch.

They watched the lady tailor circling Irodee with a measuring tape making distressed sounds.

Ziedra leaned on Wren's shoulder as they studied Irodee.

"That is one healthy girl," Wren remarked. "In every dimension."

"You're not kidding," Ziedra said.

Irodee frowned at them. She sniffed and brushed back her hair.

Laramis glanced at them with a stern look, then turned to Irodee. "Pay them no mind, my Dear. They don't appreciate your beauty the way I do."

"I never said she wasn't pretty," Wren said, hands on hips. She grinned. "She's a whole *lot* of pretty."

"Acres of it," Ziedra added, smiling.

"You two are just jealous because you're so short," Irodee grumbled.

"Trust me," Wren said. "There've been times I wished I was big like you. Well, maybe not *that* big. Try being short, it's much worse than being tall."

"Even from scratch she's a problem," the seamstress was muttering. "Oh dear, the bolts are too narrow, oh dear..."

The tailor looked up at Laramis. Her dusky face set in a grimace. "It will take me at *least* an extra bell to make something that fits well and looks good."

"We can come back," Laramis said told her. He looked to Wren. "You don't mind?"

"It's okay, we need to move quickly, but we have a lot of scouting to do before we take any action."

Laramis and Irodee discussed the fit and cut that the seamstress should create, and picked out the fabric. Laramis paid for the outfits that Ziedra and Wren wore.

"Now for a jewelry shop," Wren said. "We need funds for weapons. Maybe Zee can scam--I mean *persuade*--the shop keeper with a little more name dropping."

Laramis scowled. "Lady Wren, I will not tolerate you encouraging unlawful behavior. I saw fit to be permissive with the earrings because Molivar had obviously acquired them through dubious channels. He misrepresented their origin and willingly ceded to Dama Ziedra's *story*. While I frown on the deception, we had a real and *honest* need for those devices."

Wren folded her arms. "We have a real and *honest* need for weapons. What are we going to buy them with--our good looks?"

"If you wish to forthrightly negotiate a price for the items you carry, I have no quibble with that. However, I will not idly bear witness to this--*scamming*."

Wren tapped her foot on the walkway and sniffed. "You don't have to watch."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You know what I *mean*."

Wren growled.

Laramis growled back.

Ziedra rubbed her forehead. "A guilder and a paladin--*friction*--what a surprise. Laramis, there are certain tools that we simply can't *succeed* without. We don't have backup and our available opportunities are shrinking. We have to get what we need, however we can get it."

Laramis folded his arms. "Unacceptable. Faith will provide. I am certain there are legitimate ways to acquire funds without committing some morally egregious act."

"Laramis, there isn't *time*."

"Dama, do not think I am deaf to necessity," the justicar rumbled, his voice dropping a notch. "I am however opposed to tossing moral discretion to the wind prior to having *first* exerted some energy toward appropriate means and measures." He stared at Wren. "The right course is not always *easy*, but it is always the right course. If our need becomes desperate for lack of more honorable methods, then we shall revisit these less *ethical* tactics."

"Bloody waste of time," Wren murmured. She let out a breath. "All right, let's go to the jewelry shop..."

As they started walking again, Irodee broke away from Laramis and came up beside Wren and put a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at the giant lady. "What?"

Irodee focused deep brown eyes on Wren. "Please don't be mad at Laramis. He wants to help."

She sighed. "Irodee, we don't have the luxury to use justifiable means. You think that avatar is going to stop and wonder whether it's moral before she eats my face? No. And neither will her minions."

"The end doesn't always justify the means," Irodee said in a quiet voice.

"Well, this is my life, and my family, and that murdering witch has them. That justifies a *lot* in my mind, *okay*?"

Irodee's shoulders slumped and she nodded. "I understand."

"Good. I'm glad you do. Now, convince your boyfriend."

Irodee looked over her shoulder. "I don't think--"

"Never mind," Wren waved it off. "Maybe you'll put that fancy education toward figuring out how we get that money then."

The Myrmigyne's face tightened. "I will give it serious thought."

Wren nodded.

Irodee dropped back to walk with Laramis.

"Wren, aren't you over-reacting a bit?" Ziedra said.

"What can I say? Paladins rub me the wrong way." She sighed. "Don't tell me you're going to take Laramis' side in this?"

"Well, in a way," Ziedra said. "You said 'a lot' was justified in your mind. How much is that? It occurred to me that if Mishaka is controlling your parents, she might be controlling or manipulating others. Does getting your parents free justify killing innocent people?"

Her friend was getting more incisive every day. She was starting to ask some damn hard questions! She looked up at Ziedra. "I'm not a killer, Zee. I don't like hurting people. Then again, I won't lay down and die--not for anybody or any reason."

The dancer nodded. "Fair enough, I suppose."

The rest of the walk to the jeweler was spent in silence as each person in the small group kept their own counsel.

Laramis stopped them outside of a large shop. The plaque over the door proclaimed the place '*Masahabrick's Fine Jewel Emporium*'. Exquisitely rendered murals adorned the walls around the barred shop. The merchant's wares glittered in the window, hung around the necks of wooden mannequins.

Wren peered at a sparkling emerald brocade necklace and whistled. "Where was this shop when I needed retirement funds?"

"Lady Wren," Laramis said in a warning voice. "You will restrain yourself."

She rolled her eyes.

They filed into the shop, the inside far larger than it appeared from the walkway. Two long counter displays on either side stretched the forty paces of the shop, and three circular tables with glass domes showed more wares at the center. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and murals of sea scenes, forest settings, and mountain backdrops decorated the walls. At the far back, she saw a gem cutter's work-bench.

The shopkeepers stood with the stiff self-important postures she'd come to associate with people who cater to the rich. The willowy man at right counter had a nose so hooked he could have caught fish. He dressed in a blue velvet surcoat with the store symbol over the left breast.

The silver haired woman sitting at the other counter looked like she put most of the store's profits in her mouth. A blue gown the size of tent covered her doughy body. As she spoke to a customer her double-chin wobbled, eyes glinting in a face wider than it was tall.

A slender woman dressed in white with a shock of hair so black it looked blue stared at a glistening bracelet while the fat woman babbled on about its lineage.

Hands on hips, Wren looked around. Ziedra and Irodee studied the nearest display. Ziedra loved jewelry, the girl wore every bit she could afford. Irodee's eyes had the wide open glaze that showed she was true admirer of things that sparkle.

Hook-nose was frowning at giant Irodee in exactly the manner that always irritated Wren, typical haughty gentry-man looking down his nose. Wren frowned and folded her arms. The movement attracted the man's attention and he glanced at her. A sudden transformation went over the man's seamed face. His brow un-beetled, the eyebrows rose, and his mouth twisted into an obsequious grin.

"Mibaronia Liandra!" The merchant's hook-nose twitched, no doubt detecting the odor of deep pockets. "I didn't notice you without your regular guards, my sincere apologies!"

Liandra? How in Gaea's name?

Everyone turned to look at the shop keeper, then stared at her with wide eyes.

Her mind was whirling over the possibilities. To cover her confusion, she forced a stony expression. Best just to play along. Maybe she could figure out who this man thought she was. He'd called her by her real name though. Could that mean...

She drew herself up, best to keep him on the defensive. "Do you not approve of these guards, Sirdom?"

The man blanched. "I meant no offense, Madame!" He inclined his head. "How may I serve?"

Wren thought quickly. Whoever he thought she was must have patronized the shop before. "I wish to look at the set I considered when I last came here."

He looked lost. The fat woman responded.

"Remember, the diamond choker and earrings?"

"Ah yes, this way." He led her to the end of the counter. Getting over their initial shock, Ziedra and Irodee followed, Laramis and his two retainers trailing after with perplexed expression.

Irodee and Ziedra looked over her shoulder as hooknose pulled out a satin case with a sparkling platinum braid necklace encrusted with blue-white diamonds. The earrings matched and were shaped like tiny star bursts.

Whoever this Liandra was, she had excellent and expensive taste.

He sized up Irodee and Ziedra. "Will Madame be getting anything for her new guard-maids?"

She glanced at Ziedra. The woman grinned back. She turned back to the man. "My credit is still in order is it not?"

He didn't even blink. "Of course."

She couldn't help but smile. They had just stumbled on the funds they needed. "Then I believe we'll look at the one with the moonstone centerpiece and tourmaline accompanies, that string of angel-stones and let's see--also those fire opals look excellent."

"Madame's command of gems certainly has improved."

Still grinning, Ziedra kicked her in the ankle. "Wrennn..." she whispered.

He took out the cases of the gems. They were exquisite. She had good taste too. Irodee kicked her other ankle.

Oh yes, don't draw it out.

"Seems like ages since I looked at these, how long ago was it?"

The merchant narrowed his eyes. "Madame, it was only yesterday."

Yesterday?

Ziedra kicked her again.

Ow. "I mean I've been so looking forward to purchasing these, it just seems like ages..."

The proprietor frowned. "Are you well?"

"Fine." She turned to Irodee. "You like that necklace of opals? Goes with your hair."

Irodee nodded vigorously.

"How much?"

"Thirty thousand."

She almost gagged. She'd picked nice stones that weren't overly expensive. Apparently the prices adjusted to the deepness of the pockets.

"That will be fine, and the moonstone?"

"Twenty-two."

"Excellent." What the heck, it was this other Liandra's credit. "If I were to buy all four, what kind of deal are we talking?"

Both Ziedra and Irodee kicked her. She wasn't going to walk for a tenday!

"For you Madame, the whole lot for one hundred."

"Done." She dodged the two toes that attempted to lame her.

"Excellent, let me prepare the proper documents. This may take a little while."

She nodded and looked back to them.

"Would you lay off kicking me!" she gritted in a hushed voice.

"That's too much," Ziedra hissed.

"We'll get in trouble," Irodee warned.

"We need that money," Wren said. "These will fence for forty or fifty. That should get us some decent weapons."

They spent a few nervous fractions of a bell while the shopkeeper made up the proper documentation. He showed Wren her credit balance. Apparently she--Liandra--had done transactions of this size before.

She cleared her throat. She needed to know. "Sirdom, tell me, has my mother ever come in?"

"Her Excellency?" he wondered. "Not that I am aware."

"Ah." He *did* think she was the daughter of Euriel Kergatha! If that was so, and she had been in here only yesterday--what in Gaea's name was going on?

A cold hand gripped her insides. Ziedra had been right. Maybe her mother and father never knew or didn't know she'd been taken.

Hooknose presented the jewel case to her. She took it, checked the contents and handed it to Irodee who put it under her arm with a grin.

Initially, she had felt a little guilty about this maneuver. Now she was angry. Some witch who looked like her was using *her* family's money!

The group of them turned to leave. As she proceeded to the door a younger woman also dressed in black and silver swept through the doorway, a blue brocade cloak trailing after her. She was Wren's size and moved with a commanding grace, her blonde hair looked a little longer than hers.

Four guards dressed in gold chain-mail with a silver lightning bolt emblazoned across the chest strode behind her. Well armed, the men moved like veteran warriors.

Wren didn't take much notice beyond that, concerned only with making progress toward the door. The proprietor's gasp made her look back.

Now only five paces away. She saw the young woman's blue eyes go wide.

She was staring at herself.

Chapter 50

Mirror Mirror

The blue-eyed woman froze in the middle of the jewelry shop staring at Wren. Wren blinked. It was like staring at herself, only this girl was younger, perhaps just hedging her late teens. She wore a daring silk blouse. With her face made up and hands manicured, she looked prettier than Wren imagined she might look. A lacy uplifting bodice accentuated curves she normally tended to hide.

The girl, Liandra, snapped out of her shock. She pointed at Wren. "Guards, detain that woman!"

The four men in gold armor swung around. The fat-woman squealed and hooknose started yelling 'not in the shop' over and over.

Laramis and Irodee leaped past Wren in a heartbeat, weapons out. Childers and Reginald, always the silent sentinels spoke loudly with their weapons picking the two guards not already engaged. The men in gold armor might have looked like veterans, but Laramis and his retainers handled them like they were green recruits. Laramis had his opponent disarmed in three sharp strokes. Reginald and Childers were only hairs behind their master. What Irodee lacked in experience she made up for in raw force, she slammed her opponent to the floor with an overhand swing that made the shop windows vibrate.

Liandra wasn't idle, she chanted something and gestured at Wren.

Instinctively, Wren knew what was going to happen and braced, calling on her nola power.

There was crackle and a brilliant flash that leaped between them, then a roar that shook the whole shop. The sound made everyone duck. Wren felt a sharp sting, and a warmth suffused her body.

Fist glowing with magical energies, she stood there staring at a younger version of herself. She looked down at the sphere of energy licking and sparking around her hand. "Nice try, I bet that would've hurt."

"Imposter, how dare you mock me!" Liandra started into another spell.

Ziedra stepped between them.

"Zee, no!"

Another blast shrieked out. Ziedra captured the bolt like she might grab a ball from the air. She threw the glowing sphere of energy to the floor and stomped it out like she were destroying an annoying bug. "That's enough of that!" Ziedra lunged forward and caught Liandra's hand. "No more spells. Someone might get hurt."

Liandra thrashed trying to beat and kick at Ziedra but the dancer twisted her arm and levered the girl still. She locked an arm around Liandra's neck and squeezed tight enough to make her gasp. The girl wiggled and squirmed, but was not strong enough to break the older woman's grip.

"Wren, she sounds just like you," Ziedra said, grinning. "She even has your attitude."

"Very funny," Wren growled.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I blocked the magic," Wren answered. She stepped forward and glared at Liandra. "I'm more hurt that some cheap copy tried to kill me."

The girl pried at Ziedra's arm with no success. "I am--*not*--cheap!"

"Oh we can tell that, Sister," Ziedra said. "Nice clothes."

"Let us get these ruffians outside," Laramis said, gesturing with his sword to the man in front of him. He extended a thumb over his shoulder. "Out."

Irodee and the two retainers did the same with the other three guards, and filed them out of the shop.

Ziedra started to herd Liandra toward the doorway, but the girl started kicking and thrashing.

The dancer growled. "If I have to carry you it's going to be *very* uncomfortable."

Liandra glared at them. "What is the meaning of this? Why do you accost me? Why do you pretend to be the daughter of the Baroness?"

Wren frowned. "I am not *pretending*."

"Preposterous, you're much too *old*."

"Brat," Wren bristled, knotting her fingers in the girl's blouse. "I'll give you *old*."

"Wren," Ziedra held out a hand. "Calm. We need her. She has what we need to know."

"I'll not say a thing to the likes of you," the girl said with a sniff.

Wren flexed the fingers of her glowing hand. "Suits me."

"Nay, Lady," Laramis said. "First leave us exit this place. Dama Ziedra, I carry with me something that will keep her magic from being a nuisance." He reached into a pocket, pulled out a broad green band. Liandra flailed, forcing Laramis to capture her arm. After a brief struggle, he snapped it around Liandra's wrist.

"A caster shackle," Ziedra said. "Guess that means you won't need me damping her magic then. Irodee, why don't you carry her?"

The Myrmigyne took Liandra's shoulder.

The girl looked up at the huge Myrmigyne and cringed.

"Sir, I demand an explanation," Hooknose said, getting over his fright. "You cannot just spirit off the daughter of the Baroness!"

Laramis turned to the shop keeper. "Which one is Liandra Kergatha?"

"She spoke one obvious truth, Sir. This one," He pointed to Wren. "Is to *old*."

Wren growled.

The man backed up a step.

"Which one attacked and threatened lives?" Laramis asked. "And which one conducted herself with restraint. Which one is a warrior worthy of the Baroness? Let that be your measure."

"I am the real Liandra Kergatha!" the girl shrieked. "That *old* lady is an imposter! Call the guards and have her--*ow!*" Liandra subsided clutching her skull. Irodee had popped the girl in the top of the head with a knuckle thump.

Ziedra gripped her own head in empathy. "Careful Dee, she needs to remember stuff for us."

The Myrmigyne shrugged. She pushed Liandra toward the door.

The rest of them filed outside. Liandra's four guards stood in the walkway disarmed and frowning while Childers and Reginald held them at sword point.

Wren shook her head. "Damn it, we can't drag this girl all over town. And what do we do with these four?"

"I think I can solve that," Ziedra said. She raised a hand. "Boys, look this way."

Liandra's guards took a step back toward the railing, frowning at her.

She closed her fist and there was a bright flash.

The men staggered and fell to their knees clutching their heads.

"Witch what did you do to them!?" Liandra demanded.

"We better move on," Ziedra said, ignoring the girl. "We don't want to be here when they recover."

"Are you certain, Milady?" Laramis asked. "They can report us to the authorities."

"Trust me, Laramis," Ziedra said. "They won't remember their own names for about half a bell. After that, the last hour will be nothing but fog."

"A forgetfulness spell?" Wren asked.

Ziedra nodded.

"Smart," Irodee lauded.

With Irodee herding Liandra, they headed down the walkway until they were well out of sight of the girl's guards.

"We need a safe place to have a little chat with Liandra."

"Please," Liandra whined. "Just let me go. I don't understand."

"We might," Wren said. "If you tell us what we want to know." She glanced up and down the walkway. "It's a risk going back to the inn. It's a fairly long way back. Anyplace close we can go Laramis?"

"I confess, my knowledge of this city is limited," the justicar responded. "I don't recall seeing another place appropriate to our needs close by."

"We can't take any chances. We have to assume she's working with Mishaka."

"I'll disguise her," Ziedra said.

"No!" Liandra started thrashing in Irodee's grip. The Myrmigyne frowned and took her around the neck. The girl's eyes bulged.

"Kid, I wouldn't make her angry if I were you," Wren told Liandra. "She'll pop your head like a pimple."

Liandra froze, eyes wide.

"Like a pimple?" Laramis wondered. "How very *graphic*, Milady."

Wren shrugged.

Ziedra chanted something and gestured toward Liandra. The girl cringed as a glow went around her. The magic flickered on the surface of the girl's skin sparking and rasping but affecting no change.

"Interesting," Ziedra said. "She's been shape locked--and by a powerful caster too."

"What does that mean?" Wren asked.

"She's already disguised," Ziedra answered, hands on hips. "And the disguiser doesn't want it undone."

"That makes sense," Irodee said, still holding Liandra. "If Mishaka did the change, she would not want it removed."

Mention of the name Mishaka caused Liandra to turn pale and go very still.

"So, you are working with Mishaka," Wren said.

"Well, it's not exactly a surprise," Ziedra's said. "Guess the best we can do is throw a cloak over her head and hope nobody wonders what's going on."

Wren turned to Liandra. She called Azimuth to her hand which appeared in a rasp and flash of light. She took Liandra's chin with her fingers and held the knife point up under her nose. "Now, listen to me very carefully. I could really use what you know. Don't think for an instant that Mishaka will do to you any worse than I will. I have a decade of pent up hate and frustration waiting to find a target. If you make another sound, even *twitch* wrong, I will vent on you and you will be sorry in ways you can't even imagine. If you force me, I *will* kill you and make do without. We have to get you someplace safe. Irodee could carry you, but I would *prefer* you just pull your hood up, walk quietly with us and try not to be noticed. It's your choice."

Body trembling, Liandra swallowed. "I-i-i'll go with you." She pulled up the hood of her cloak and pulled it close around her body.

Wren nodded and put the dagger back in its sheath. She gestured to Laramis. "Let's go."

Face serious, the justicar eyed Liandra for a moment before motioning his retainers ahead. He touched Irodee on the shoulder and headed out. Liandra followed him, Irodee's a huge shadow looming over her. Wren and Ziedra fell in step behind them. Ziedra leaned next to her. "She's just a kid, Wren," she whispered.

"We can't assume," Wren growled. "That's one lesson I've learned."

"She's scared."

"She should be." Wren glanced up and down the walkways watching for potential trouble. This city was a nightmare, people could observe from so many different potential angles.

She tried to keep herself calm. Liandra's presence explained part of how they were keeping her parents under control. Mishaka had arranged it so everything seemed normal, down to having this girl pose as *her*. She clenched her hands into fists. Where did Mishaka's trespasses end? Was there nothing that creature would not take from her? Even her identity had been stolen! She swallowed, pushing down the anger.

Ziedra wrapped her fingers around Wren's fist. "You okay?"

"No, Zee, I'm not. I'm so mad, I--I--" Her voice subsided, she just didn't have the strength to put words to it.

"You have a right to be mad," Ziedra murmured squeezing her hand, dark eyes wide in a sympathetic expression. "What's been done is so wrong." She drew a breath. "Seriously though, I think that girl is just a pawn in this."

"You think that matters to me?" Wren growled. "That--that--*thing* took my place. Did you look at that *spoiled* self-righteous little brat?"

"She's had it good," Ziedra agreed in soft voice.

"I mean--could I--" She shook her head. "Would I--really have turned out like that?"

"She's not you. She just looks like you."

"Maybe."

The walk back to the inn was a nerve-wracking quarter bell of constantly looking over her shoulder and scanning every shadow for enemies. Laramis and his retainers were also feeling the pressure. They knew the significance of this prisoner, and they moved with the wariness of people who might be involved in a deadly struggle at any moment. Irodee moved with smooth confidence, keeping Liandra in front of her at all times. Liandra herself had subsided and walked meekly where she was directed. Ziedra was right. The girl was scared. She had more than just them to be afraid of.

The group of them entered the inn, bodies pressed together around Liandra in a tight knot. Chalmers and Reginald took Liandra's elbows as Laramis lead the way up the stairs toward his suite.

Once through the portal, the door shut firmly behind him, the Justicar deflated like a wineskin with all the liquid let out of it. His shoulders thumped against the door as he relaxed.

"Milady," he said in a tight voice. "This is a dangerous turn. We must act quickly now."

"I know," Wren said. "We still need weapons though."

"When they learn she's missing, they *will* look for her," Irodee added. She moved to the divan and settled her long body onto the cushions, and stretched out her legs.

"*Both* your mother and Mishaka," Ziedra added. The woman went to the cabinet where Laramis kept the wine and pulled out the decanter and some glasses.

The two retainers warily set themselves in a corner where they could watch Liandra and the door. Neither man looked big or powerful, certainly not in the way Laramis did, but they had a honed quality that Wren had come to associate with capable people.

Wren drew a breath. "All the more reason to push for information, right now." She turned to Liandra who had slunk into a corner. The girl was fidgeting with the bracelet that Laramis had clamped on her. No doubt she would have caused more trouble if not for that caster shackle. "Are you going to talk to me?" Wren said to her.

Liandra looked up at her. Her wide blue eyes fixed on Wren's. "I have nothing to say."

"Really?" Wren growled. "Did you *know* you were stealing my life?"

"You're dead!" Liandra said frowning, folding her arms. "You died a long time ago."

"Is *that* how you justify living as me?" she said in a low tone.

The blonde girl stared at her. "I am Liandra Kergatha. I don't live *as* you or like you. I am myself. I don't know who you think you're supposed to be, but you are not me, and I am certainly not *you*."

"Girl, I won't play word games with you. Euriel Idun-daughter-Kergatha gave birth to me, Vanidaar Kergatha is my father. I want my parents back, and I want Mishaka dead."

Liandra laughed. "Want all you like. You can't kill a god."

Wren sniffed. Her voice dropped to an acid rasp. "Watch me."

Liandra shrank back against the wall.

Ziedra pulled on her arm and handed her a glass of wine. "Wren, I doubt you'll get much useful from her. The best use we'll get out of her is getting into the mansion." She turned and held out a glass to Laramis.

The justicar straightened from his spot at the door and took it with a nod. He sipped from it and sighed. "That is the rub, Midama. It is a great boon to have the key fall into our lap. 'Tis no good to us unless we can mount a proper assault."

Wren looked to Liandra. "Liandra, this is an easy question. Is Mishaka in the baronial mansion?"

The girl gave her a wary look. "She is the adviser to the Baron. Of course she is in the mansion."

"The advisor!?" Wren let out. "What--" She stopped herself. Yelling at this girl just wasted time. She took a breath, then sipped the wine Ziedra gave her and let it trickle down her throat. After she had mastered herself she tried again. "Why would the Kergathas allow an avatar of Hecate to be an advisor, Liandra?"

Liandra stared at her. She shrugged. "Mishaka does not advertise herself as such. In any event, Mother and Father pay little mind to anything she does actually."

"That's the thrall, Wren," Ziedra filled in. "They don't see her as a threat. She's set up shop in the castle where she can keep an eye on them."

Wren turned to the justicar. "Laramis, how powerful are my parents? I mean how much could they help if we broke one of them free of this spell Mishaka has them under."

"I must confess I do not know much beyond the broad strokes, Milady. Your father is a fearsome mage to be sure. As for your mother, there are few that would meet her eye, much less fight her."

"Can we beat Mishaka with their help though?" she pressed.

"Milady, obviously their help wouldn't hurt. Quantifying the resources necessary to best a creature such as Mishaka is difficult. It is more a product of having the right tools, rather than the right people."

Wren sighed. "That's true. If I had Mon'istiaga, we could probably walk through the gate, call Mishaka out, and dare her to fight back."

"Mon'istiaga?"

"It's a really powerful sword," Ziedra filled in. "Scary powerful."

"Ah. Just so. At any rate, that's why I understand your preoccupation with weapons. Without magic you cannot beat her demons--and in any prolonged encounter, there *will* be demons."

"Trust me Laramis, I know. I've been literally up to my eyes in demons. Riverback village outside Ivaneth was destroyed by avatars of Hecate."

"You were there, Milady? I had heard that the Band of the Crescent Moon fought a battle there recently, and that there was a great deal of destruction but there were not many details."

"The Band of the Crescent Moon?" She looked to Ziedra who shrugged.

"Queen Targallae, honored elder Cassandra," Irodee said leaning forward on the couch. "She, Desiray, Lords D'Tarin, Falor, and Terrantil, are all members of the band."

Laramis' eyes went wide. "You fought in the Band of the Crescent Moon?"

"Huh?" Wren rubbed the back of her head. "No, I live--*was living* in Cassandra's castle. I've just been training with them. I've been learning sword skills with the Targallae sisters."

The justicar nodded in obvious appreciation. "Your teachers have impressive battle credentials. Lady Targallae has settled many territorial disputes in northern Ivaneth. She is a truly awesome sister of steel."

"You bet she's awesome," Wren said. "Damn, if all we had was her we could take Mishaka out. I watched her take Mishaka down in the temple of Ishtar in Corwin. Three arrows and it was over."

"Alas," Laramis said. "I believe such allies are going to be denied to us. We have wasted valuable time even in this short discussion. Let us hie to create a course of action." He drew a breath. "Lady Wren, I believe you should stay here and keep an eye on our guest." He glanced to Liandra. "If a search commences even earlier than we expect, your appearance would attract the wrong kind of attention. Though barter will bring us a lesser price, I believe the jewels purchased on your credit should suffice in getting us a least a few weapons of reasonable power. Lady Ziedra can assist me in a picking them out, I sense that enchantments are her bailiwick--especially seeing how she handled the magic in the jeweler. I will send Chalmers and Reginald to pick up Lady Irodee's raiment." He turned to Irodee. "My dear, I would request that you habit the commons downstairs while we hasten to these errands. You can give warning should there be need, and flank any enemies if necessary." He turned to Wren. "This will leave you to spend some *quality* time alone with miss *Liandra*." He sighed. "I suspect that time can be spent more *productively* without others around to interfere. What do you think? Is that plan satisfactory?"

Wren's chin came up. She glanced at Liandra. The girl's eyes widened. "Works for me, Laramis." She stared at the blonde girl. "Perfectly."

Seeing the fake Liandra filled me with so much doubt. Doubt about my own identity, doubt about my parents, doubt as to the essential essence that separated me from some stuck-up high-browed little nobleman's brat...

--Wren

Chapter 51

Preparatory Action

When everyone had left on their assigned duties, Wren knew she had to make best advantage of her 'quality time' with Liandra as Laramis had called it. For a paladin, the man wasn't all that bad. He did know necessity, and didn't let high brow morality get into the cogs of survival.

A silence had fallen over Laramis' suite of rooms, nothing audible except for the popping of flames in the corner hearth, and the occasional creak of a board from people moving around in adjacent areas of the building. From somewhere came the far-off and muffled sound of laughter. Sitting on the divan, legs crossed, Azimuth the dagger on cushion beside her, Wren sipped wine and stared at Liandra in silence.

On the opposite side of the room, the girl huddled in a chair close to the hearth, feet pulled up on the seat, arms locked around her knees. Her blue eyes had a haunted look and her pale skin now looked milky. Gone was the haughty noble's daughter, the confident and defiant wielder of magic--she was afraid.

Her fears were well justified. Liandra was an ally of Mishaka. For that alone Wren wanted to cut out her heart.

While not the author of Wren's woes, she played party to them. This imposter aided in a sham to keep her mother and father under control. This girl took her place, made herself the object of her parent's affections and favors. She even learned magic from them. The clothes, the hair, the pampered skin and meticulously kept nails. She certainly didn't suffer while doing this duty.

"Are you going to kill me?"

The sound of Liandra's voice startled Wren. She realized that she had been staring at the girl without really seeing her and that her hand was now gripping Azimuth's hilt.

Wren blinked and focused on the girl who had raised her eyes to hers.

She drew a breath. "I won't deny that it occurred to me." She paused and focused harder on the girl. She felt her own heart speed. "Do they care about you?"

Liandra's chin came up. "My mother and father love me."

She narrowed her eyes. "Do you really believe that? Do you really believe they are your parents?"

Liandra's head canted to one side. "They are now. That's what matters."

Wren's hand tightened on the dagger. "Did Mishaka put you up to this?"

"I hate Mishaka," Liandra said frowning. "I would destroy her if I could."

"Then help me."

Liandra blinked. "You are a fool. She will destroy both of us. The way she destroyed my family. She is a god--a cruel evil whimsical witch who delights in pain. Your pain." She swallowed. "My pain."

Wren's brow furrowed. "She destroyed your family?"

Liandra shuddered and rested her forehead against her knees. "My mother is Euriel Idun-daughter, my father is Vanidaar Kergatha, my older brother is Azir..."

"Liandra, what happened to your family?"

"Nothing, they are right here in this city."

"No, your *real* family."

"They *are* my real family. All I have left. Without them I have--*nothing*." Her head came up, blue eyes wide. "Don't take them away." Her voice trembled. "Please, I have nothing without them."

Wren's eyes narrowed. "You'll get used to it." Her voice tightened. "I did."

* * *

It was the better part of a bell before anyone returned. The two retainers came back with Irodee's clothing which turned out to be not one but three outfits. Not being privy to the conversation with the tailor, she didn't realize that Laramis had ordered more than the one they were discussing. The impressive thing was the seamstress had finished them in such a short span of time. She guessed that in a city of magic, many things were possible. A glance in the box showed they were well crafted pieces of double sewed clothing, every seam straight as an arrow. That woman did good work.

She looked up from the box to Childers. "See anything unusual while you were out?" she asked.

The tall man met her gaze and brushed a strand of brown hair out of his deep green eyes. "Nary a thing out of the ordinary," he reported. "We were watching for trouble, but saw naught."

"I hope we can take that as a good sign," Wren said.

The man sighed and shook his head. The lines of his blocky face pulled down into a frown. "It is often quiet before war breaks out."

She winced. He was right about that. "I know what you mean. Why don't you or Reginald go spell Irodee so she can come up and change clothes? We'll want to move out quickly. We've already been here too long. They will probably be able to track us as is."

Childers nodded. "A reasonable suggestion, Milady. I will act upon it directly." He bowed to her. He made a hand signal to Reginald, and headed for the door. As Childers closed the door behind him, the other man began rummaging through the closets, pulling out packs and cramming stuff into them.

Wren turned to Liandra. "You know, keeping quiet does you no good. Even if you don't tell me anything, Mishaka will still treat you like a traitor."

The girl stared at her with wide eyes.

"You are replaceable. She can make anyone look like me." Wren spun the dagger on her fingertip, flipped it around her hand and slid it into the sheath on her side. "I had all the reason in the world to hurt you." She narrowed her eyes. "I didn't. Give me something."

Liandra drew a breath. "Mishaka knows the real Azir is here in the city. She has been meeting with people, and has been really upset over something."

"I could think of some reasons she might be upset," Wren said. "Did she ever *find* Azir?"

"I haven't seen Azir for weeks--either one."

Wren frowned. "You knew about the real Azir?"

She nodded.

"Did you tell Mishaka?"

Liandra shook her head. "I try to stay away from her. She's--" The girl shuddered.

"I understand," Wren said. "Did you hear anything about another avatar being here in a city?"

Liandra's eyes widened. "How did you...?"

"I get around," Wren answered. "Did you hear or see how Mishaka reacted to that?" The girl shrugged. "It upset *mother* a lot. Mishaka didn't seem to care."

Wren's brow furrowed. She didn't like the sound of that. She hoped it wasn't as members of house Felspar suspected--that Hecate and Set were cooperating. Mishaka and Hethanon allies...? The thought was too harrowing to entertain.

"Last thing, Liandra," Wren said. "Will you help us get in the mansion?"

"You'll die. We'll *all* die."

"At least with us, you'll stand a chance. We're not insane."

The girl raised an eyebrow. "One could debate that."

Wren rolled her eyes. "Okay, granted."

The door to the suite opened and Irodee ducked to come in. The Myrmigyne scanned the hall behind her before closing the door. Wren saw from the woman's bearing that she felt the seriousness of the situation.

Irodee turned deep brown eyes on Wren. "You okay?"

She nodded.

The Myrmigyne glanced at Liandra. The girl cringed. The big woman found the package that the retainers had brought, removed what she wanted and went into Laramis' bedchamber.

Reginald continued organizing gear, some he obviously meant to stash for later use, the rest would be brought with them.

Wren turned back to Liandra. "Is it possible to sneak into the mansion?"

The girl looked down. "Maybe."

"Look, either you can or you can't."

"Avoiding mother's guards is one thing," Liandra said, staring at her. "Avoiding Mishaka's is another."

Damn. Trying to get to her mother and father still seemed like the best course of action. Of course, how would they break the hold Mishaka had over them? She was gambling that Ziedra's savant talents would be able to remove the magical control the avatar had on them. What else could they do? Waiting was not an option. When Mishaka learned she was in the city, the avatar would come for her. What little advantage of surprise they might have would be gone then.

That brought her to another problem. If it was herself alone, she could easily slip past guards and through almost any magical wards. How would she do that with three tagalongs? If she went in without Ziedra, how would she deal with the avatar's magic? It was all a big mess. The plan had holes in it a dragon could fly through. Sireth taught her to plan carefully; to know the foe. Making it up as you went is what got you caught, or worse--*killed*. They were dealing with a powerful creature, they couldn't afford any mistakes. Everything was a shambles, Liandra falling into their hands was both boon and bane. It left them with no time to scout and allow for contingencies. Worse, they hadn't yet sent a message to the Felspars, so their backup wouldn't be coming.

"Two questions, Liandra," Wren said. "Do you know where the mage's guild is, and is there a way to get in contact with the All-World's Tournament here?"

Liandra's brow furrowed. "Yes, mother is a member of the guild and goes there in plaza Terraza once a tenday. The All-World's Tournament has a recruiter in plaza Norial in city centre. What do those things have to do with anything?"

"Perhaps a lot."

Irodee stepped out of the inner chamber dressed in an outfit of deep indigo blue only a few shades away from black. She wore long-sleeve azure silk blouse underneath the sleeveless deep cut tunic, the two color top, and the kilt over leggings

gave grace to her impressive height, and the deep colors gave her a room-filling presence that drew the eye.

"Whoa, Irodee, you look awesome in those."

The Myrmigyne looked down at herself. "Feels good. Laramis knows clothes."

"He sure does," Wren said with a nod. "Irodee, I'm kind of embarrassed to ask. Can you write common?"

She nodded.

"I can write," Wren admitted, "but I'm slow and my pen is shaky. I never had much call for it."

"What do you want me to write?"

"We need two messages for the Felspars. One to go through a tournament I know about, and another to go through Isis." She looked around. The lavish suite did have a drawing board, some parchment, ink, and quills. She pointed. "There."

Irodee went to the desk, took a sheet of parchment, shook up the ink and pulled out the quill. "What do you want me to write?"

Wren folded her arms and thought for a moment. "Hmmm, okay, write this..."

Wren spoke and Irodee scribbled. Watching the woman write, Wren had no doubts she was a scholar, she had a flowing script that was as speedy and as accurate as any of the mages she saw in the Felspar citadel. They had just finished the second note when Laramis and Ziedra entered with packs on their backs and cases under each arm.

"Apologies for our tardiness, the negotiations got a little rough," Laramis said, setting down the handled wooden cases with a thump.

"I needed to get a little creative," Ziedra told them with a grin, putting her items down as well. "Like threatening to tell his customers that some of the stuff he was selling as magic were actually just some shoddy weapons with faked up auras."

"Were you able to get anything good?"

"Indeed," Laramis said. "Our dama Ziedra has a fine eye for weapons and magick."

"Laramis knew everything I didn't," Ziedra said, with a glance at the Justicar.

"I think the one most appreciative will be our Lady Irodee." He bent and opened the longer of the two cases he had been carrying. Inside, something long and reddish brown glimmered like a jewel.

Irodee's eyes widened, and she walked across the room to kneel next to the case. She swallowed, dark skin going pale as she ran her hand along the glossy surface of the crafted handle and down the length of one of the thick re-curve arms. "A bloodspar," she breathed. "Laramis, it's beautiful."

"It has a mean pull, my Dear," Laramis said, putting his hand on top of hers. "Too much for most people, and that's why I thought you should have it. An exquisite weapon for an exquisite lady."

The way he said it, it was like a marriage proposal. From the look in Irodee's eye, you'd think the Justicar had given her an engagement ring. She lifted the heavy composite-bow out of the case with both hands held it up with awe on her face. She turned the bow and the gripped the handle in her fist. A large jewel embedded in the wood began to give off a soft pulsating red glow.

Irodee's already pleased expression lit up. "Laramis!" She put her arm around the Justicar and gave him a kiss. "Thank you. Thank you for thinking of me!"

His cheeks flushed. "Of course, my Dear."

"I was pretty sure she'd have the spirit energy to activate it," Ziedra said toward Wren. "Being able to planewalk so young like she does."

"What does it do?"

"It enhances the skill of the user," Ziedra said. "The better you are, the greater the effect. Only the shadowspar bows are more powerful. The bow itself is extremely accurate as I understand--if you can pull it that is."

Wren looked from the bow to Ziedra. "I don't understand. How do you know all this about magic weapons? You've never studied anything like that."

"I think it's part of my Nola," Ziedra answered. "Apparently, when a mage works with a weapon they imbue some of their essence and knowledge into the magic. Ever since you woke up my power and I started handling magic things, I've started picking up little bits and pieces. I guess it's similar to the way I learn spells through touch."

Wren suddenly felt a warmth inside, a realization of camaraderie that had always been there, but an even deeper sense of how being savants made them like sisters. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I've been aware of my powers for some time, and I'm still learning nuances. Gaea's gifts are truly awesome when you can appreciate them." She closed her eyes for a moment. "So, if you can read an item, that means you probably could use it too."

Ziedra nodded. "Probably."

"That may help us." She drew a breath. "So, what else did you get?"

"We have three swords, for yourself, Ziedra, and Irodee," Laramis said pulling at his mustache. "The dama said you favor a shorter weapon."

"I do."

He opened a case, revealing a gold-handled sword with a large blue jewel in the pommel. The slightly curved blade was half an arm of blued high-quality steel with a single cutting edge. Half way down the spine of the blade the metal was pinched into a series of serrated teeth.

"Oooh," Wren breathed, kneeling down. "Mean looking. A lot like the ones Vera uses."

She reached down and closed her fingers around the wire-wrapped hilt, testing the weight and balance of the weapon. It was heavier than she liked, but it had a sturdy feel to it, a blade that could be trusted not to break.

"Guaranteed demon bane," Ziedra said. "That edge is made to bite creatures from the outer-realms."

She stood up and swung it experimentally. The weapon moved much more easily than the heft suggested. "Nice. The balance is perfect."

"One thing about getting all that sword knowledge poured in my ear," Ziedra said. "I can pick out a good blade for certain." She opened the case at her feet revealing a sword with a dark green blade, and a simple steel and leather pommel with an oversized guard fashioned to look like upswept feathered wings. The blade itself flared from the tang to a triangular lunge-stop then narrowed down the length of the blade until it widened into a diamond tip with an exaggerated blood runnel. It was an exotic weapon that matched Ziedra's extravagant nature.

The dancer lifted the weapon from the case and a reddish sheen flickered along the blade. She lifted it up, and twirled the weapon along its axis and caught it. She did a fancy flourish before bringing it to her side.

Laramis nodded. "Very competent milady, you did not mention you were a blades-woman."

Ziedra chuckled. "I'm not. I just do a fair imitation."

Wren grinned. "She is totally frustrating to fight. Her blade is always in the damn way when you try to hit her."

Laramis chuckled. "As it should be."

"It appears my Dear, you get more toys than the rest of us," Laramis said to Irodee, as he crouched to open the last case. As he flipped open the lid the torchlight

reflected off the mirror finish of the broad tapering blade of an evil looking Shakiran warwand longer than Wren's arm. "Don't ask me how this got here from all the way from Blackstar, but one look at the smithing mark told me this would hold up." Laramis lifted the blade out and held it up to Irodee. "Did I not already have a stalwart blade of my own, I'd be more than satisfied with this one."

Irodee set down her bow and took the long two edged sword, which looked heavy to Wren. The giant woman made a few test sweeps with the weapon and it made a humming sound. It appeared as light in the Myrmigyne's grasp as the wooden practice blades they used to spar with. Irodee made an 'ooohing' sound.

"Guess it's the nasty temperament of Dwarves," Ziedra said. "The magic in that thing isn't powerful, but it sure is mean."

"What does it do?"

"It's a 'wounder' sword, designed to sap the strength of an opponent."

"Don't all swords make wounds?" Wren asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not like that one. Trust me," Ziedra said. She put down her sword and unshouldered her pack. "I know we better get moving. So, let's get out our last acquisition. I'm glad I found these." Setting the pack down on a chair she undid the ties, reached inside, and pulled out a small rolled up bundle of something that glistened like spider webs on a damp morning.

As she unrolled the object, Wren's brow furrowed. Not only did it glisten like webs, it seemed to be a metallic spider web, strands of flattened wire crisscrossing in a dizzying pattern, tiny blue jewels were dotted through the lattice giving off a faint light. As Ziedra completely unfurled the object and held it up, Wren realized it was actually a like a joined hauberk and leggings. As the woman turned the almost transparent material this way and that in the light, Wren felt a tingling in the back of her head where she felt her climbing power. *Strange*.

She stepped forward and her hand out toward the fragile appearing substance she felt a warmth go up her arm, at the same time she felt a kind of *pushing* sensation like the material were trying to repel her hand.

Wren raised an eyebrow. "All right, you're not going to tell me that flimsy stuff is supposed to be armor are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to tell you," Ziedra said with a grin. "Armor done elf style. It's a Malanian war web. Extremely light, easily hidden under clothing, but it will turn a knife or sword just as well as a bulky chain hauberk. Of course, the key thing--" she waved the material in the air. "No noise. You can be quiet in this."

Wren eyed the thing dubiously. "All right, that's fine for you and me," she glanced at burly Laramis and ceiling scraping Irodee. "How do you get them in that elf-sized stuff? Looking at it, even with all the weight I've lost, I think I'll have a hard time squeezing into it."

"Taken care of," Ziedra said with a wink. "You'll see." She looked up to Irodee. "Sorry, you'll have to change clothes again. This needs to be against your bare skin for it to work."

Irodee looked doubtful. "I won't fit in that."

Ziedra draped it over her arm and nodded to Laramis' sleeping quarters. "I'll show you. You think I would fit in that any better than you? I already have one on." She lifted up her blouse. The surface of her dusky skin appeared to be dotted with jewels.

"Where are the wires?" Wren said bending close to look.

Ziedra bit her lower lip. "They kind of sink in. It's something like that living stuff you came back from your adventure wearing."

Wren bit her lip. "Do you know how to get it off?"

Ziedra grinned again. "Fairly sure."

"Great," Wren rolled her eyes.

"Had I not seen the warlords of Malan using them," Laramis said. "I would be as dubious as thee. For what you see, or rather *don't* see, the protection is substantial."

Wren nodded, glancing at the magic cloth over Ziedra's arm. "Does that mean you'll be getting in one of those Laramis?"

The justicar grimaced. "Aye, milady. It would not be my first choice, but I understand the need for concealment and speed."

She smiled. "All right, let's get these things on, and move out. They may be hunting for Liandra already. There's too much magic in this town, they could trace her here."

"Indeed."

"Okay, Zee, show us how we get into these things..."

Reginald kept an eye on Liandra while Ziedra taught the three of them how to get into the Elf war-webs. The process of squeezing into the odd material was a strange and unpleasant experience. She could only liken it to the way a snake sheds its skin, only in reverse. As they pushed their head and arms into the silvery lattice, the material would stretch and deform, slowly expanding to accommodate their bodies. The crawly sensation of the slick metal filaments as they pulsated and wriggled across the surface of her bare skin made her shudder. The hot itchy sensation as the wires melded with her flesh made her gasp.

Irodee enjoyed it no more than she did, her face grimacing as she stretched the material around herself. She did not see Laramis do the procedure, but from the sounds he made, it was obvious it felt as strange to him as to the rest of them.

Laramis came back out of the room, shrugging his jacket back on his shoulders and shaking his head. His brow was furrowed, the corners of his mouth twisted down like he'd eaten something sour.

"I swear," Ziedra said. "The sounds you three made. It feels odd I know, but nothing so bad as to make faces like that."

"Zee, you're just strange. You like weird things."

The woman eyed Wren. "That's true. I like you."

Wren sighed. "I suppose I deserved that. Okay, here's what I've been thinking." She glanced to the corner where Liandra was staring at the group of them. "Laramis, I had Irodee write up some notes. One for the mage's guild in plaza Terraza, the other for the All-World's Tournament recruiter in plaza Norial. Both notes give directions and offer a substantial reward if representatives of the Felspar clan can be directed here. I'm hoping that Childers and Reginald can take care of that for us, while we see if we can get into the mansion."

Laramis nodded. "I had planned something along those lines myself."

Reginald looked up from where he was leaning against the doorway with folded arms. The man frowned. "Milord, surely you don't mean to leave us out of this?"

"Lad, there was only enough money to outfit us four. Without demon-bane, that mansion will be a death-trap. Also, lady Wren will have her hands full enough trying to guide the three of us. We will all be done a much greater service if there is some chance that allies will come to assist."

The retainer's brow furrowed. "Milord, I am very unhappy with this, but I shall do however you request."

"Good man," Laramis said, stepping over and clapping Reginald on the shoulder. "Don't think this is an unimportant task. If you can get lord Loric here, it would be a dozen times any assistance you might provide with skill-at-arms. Your responsibility does not end with these messages. Your efforts need to be ongoing. The Felspars have several allies that will be able to get word to them. One that Lady Wren did not consider is Lord Tarrantil. Husbands usually keep track of their wives. He will know

where Desiray is, and she can get Loric. There is also one other means to use as the last resort. While lady Ziedra and I were in plaza Demonorian I saw a Dream Merchant kiosk."

"Dream Merchants, Milord?"

"Aye. While I regard them with distaste, they do have methods that may assist us in our need."

"Dream Merchants?" Wren asked. "I thought they were only legends."

"Nightmares perhaps, but not mythical in the least." Laramis said. "They are the worst kind of mercenaries, but their organization is vast and they have means of communicating not duplicated elsewhere."

"But, Milord, if I go to them, what shall I use for payment?"

Laramis drew a breath. "You use the credit of a lord of Coormeer." He pulled a ring off his finger, and handed it to the man. "The De'Falcone seal is as good as any scrip. They will have a way to verify this. It's their business."

Reginald looked down at the ring in his palm. "Are you certain, Milord?"

"Azir was a school friend of mine, and his family is in dire need. Ukko will provide. You may find the way back to Titaan blocked, in which case, the Dream Merchants will be your only recourse. They can courier a message to Lord Tarrantil and--" He cast a look at Ziedra. "Dama Ziedra's... aunt... Aarlen Frielos."

"Thanks Laramis," Wren said. "I know it's kind of weak, but all I can do is thank you."

He nodded. "I suspect your friendship will pay me back many fold, Milady. You have already brought me something precious." He glanced up to Irodee. The big woman's cheeks colored. He thumped Reginald on the shoulder. "Gather up the packs, we need to be gone from this place."

Wren drew a breath. She put a hand on Irodee's arm and gave Ziedra a hug. "Thank you two as well for staying with me."

"Don't worry, Wren," Ziedra said with a sly look. "I'll find a way for you to pay me back."

"Hey you," Wren growled with a smile. She turned to Liandra. "Are you ready?"

Liandra looked up at her with glassy blue eyes. "We're all going to die if you take us there, you know that, right?"

"There's that chance. I have people counting on me, so I'm going to try really hard to make sure that doesn't happen. You do your part, and we'll try and stay alive."

She frowned. "It won't work. I don't want to die with you."

"Liandra, let me put it to you this way. You're going to die if we don't protect you. Mishaka is going to kill you for being a traitor, and I think you have some idea what that will be like."

The girl paled.

"If you're not going to help to the best of your ability, I'll leave you here for Mishaka to find. You can try and convince them that you didn't help us, even tell her our plans. You'll die before we do, I guarantee it. So, what'll it be?"

Liandra gritted her teeth. "This is stupid. We should be trying to get as far away from her as we can, not go closer."

"Sometimes the best place to hide is right at the enemy's feet," Laramis said.

"Come, let us discuss this elsewhere. We've been here far too long."

Wren nodded, took Liandra's arm and pulled her off the chair. The girl resisted at first, but gave in to her greater strength. She nodded to Irodee who came and took the girl's shoulder.

They each took up a portion of the materials and filed downstairs where Laramis quickly briefed Childers on the task that he wished done. The other retainer was even

less happy than Reginald about his lord's decision, but like his companion was loyal to Laramis' will. Wren gave them the notes which they put away.

Outside the inn the two retainers went their own way while they headed toward city centre.

"This is it," Ziedra said. "Do we have a plan?"

"As best as can be devised on such short notice," Wren said. "We're Liandra's new guards--she just hired us."

"What about the old ones?" Irodee asked.

"I doubt they'd be quick to go back to the mansion and tell 'the commander of twelve armies' that they lost track of her daughter, and can't remember what happened."

"Aye," Laramis said. "'Twould take a while to build up the courage to face that prospect."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"It's pretty thin," Ziedra said. "Thin indeed. You're gambling on a lot."

Wren nodded. "I know, but thin got us this far. We're down to our last bet. We just have to hope our luck holds."

Laramis pressed his fist to his forehead. "May the will of Ukko be with us."

Irodee put a hand over her heart. "May Nethra bless us."

Wren closed her eyes and crossed her fingers, hoping she wouldn't be as lucky as usual...

I find Lady Ziedra to be an interesting mix. She is so unlike the many noble-women I have met. Gentle and compassionate, but able to put on a warrior's face if need be. I count myself fortunate to have made her acquaintance.

--Sir Laramis De'Falcone

Chapter 52

Mansion Approach

Wren walked through the streets of Cosmodarus with her hand on the hilt of the new sword. As they neared the city centre, the throngs grew thicker, thousands of people, merchants, craftsman, farmers and other dwellers spilling out of the many plazas onto the side streets. The all-to-familiar din of hawkers and bartering laced with bard music, conversation, and the laughter of children pressed in on Wren's isolation sharpened hearing. She wrinkled her nose at the strong smell of the mostly unwashed masses. Wood smoke, burning pipe weed, many other odors Wren did not recognize were threaded through the acrid scent of humans. Living in Loric's pristine quietude all that time had sharpened her senses tremendously. That extra sensitivity proved more bane than boon in this giant press of people. The volume of the sound made her ears ache, and taints she would barely have noticed a season ago now had her cringing with distaste. Wren kept her head down to keep from making eye contact with anyone. The translator earrings could make the clamor around them into a "deafening" flood of words, idioms, and concepts as it converted the dozens of languages in use around them into understandable words.

With the light of this far off plane just past its zenith, most of the bite in the chilly air had gone. Wren stopped at an intersection, where the press of bodies gave her room to breathe. She closed her eyes, and took a moment to calm the pounding of her heart.

"You okay?" Ziedra asked, her voice raised to be heard in the din. "You look pale."

"Tough to focus," Wren answered. "So damn many people."

"This used to be your element, Girl."

"It still is, Zee. It's just--" How could she put words to it? Was her soul quieter now? A cycle of seasons spent amongst the Felspars *had* left a profound mark on her. Days on end struggling to hear Vera's soft spoken words of wisdom and self discovery. Dozens of quiet walks through the wilderness with nothing but her own thoughts. There was strength in the clan's insular world. That strength came from a regimen of discipline, reinforced with knowledge, honor and, of course, love. Though it sometimes got lost in the banter and the strange ways, the Felspars cared deeply about each other and their friends. Sireth taught her and Grahm a different kind of order, the guild too had its knowledge, and an honor of sorts. Love? She had loved Sireth. She cared for Grahm. She might have loved Jharon. Those were times of chaos, where order was simply making sense of a cruel world. Of finding the path that let you see the next sunrise. It was never about finding peace. She never wanted peace until she finally tasted it. That's all she wanted now.

Peace.

She would find it too, if she had to pry it from Mishaka's cold dead fingers.

She drew a breath and put a hand on Ziedra's shoulder. "I'll be okay." She glanced around, noticing that most of the street people gave them a wide berth when they could. The dark colors they wore marked them as nobles, and Laramis and Irodee had the look of formidable guards. She turned to look at Liandra. The girl's head was

down with her hood pulled up, strands of blonde hair falling around her face. She focused back on Ziedra. "It's just nerves, I--"

She stopped in mid-word as movement up on one of the overhead bridges caught her eye; a group of men traversing one of the walkways above the street. She'd seen thousands of people on those overhead bridges, but something about this group made them stand out.

They wore dark leather against even darker skin. The four men moved together with a confident predator's stalk, heads turning as they scanned the crowds below.

Wren's stomach tightened. Dagger cult rakes on the hunt for something. She didn't like that coincidence at all.

"Spit." She gave Ziedra's shoulder a squeeze. "Stay alert, I just saw some Dagger Cult thugs." She nudged Laramis and then Irodee. "Watch the upper levels. I saw some of Hethanon's men."

The two nodded.

Wren set off again through the crowd, pushing into a fast walk. She hoped seeing cult thieves now was only a coincidence. The last thing she needed now was to get tangled up with those evil, poisonous, knife-wielding monsters.

They turned a corner out of the shadow of the tall buildings revealing a view of the gleaming stone towers of the baronial mansion. Even hundreds of paces away, Wren's eyes widened at the place's size. The sprawling complex easily exceeded the size of Cassandra's walled compound in Ivaneth. The wall around it looked considerably higher, bristling with parapets and emplacements.

Wren swallowed. It was her first view of the place where she'd been raised. It had a stark simplicity, two main towers bracketing a square multistory manse that wrapped around a portcullis-guarded courtyard. There were many other outbuildings, their presence all but obscured by the tall perimeter wall. The whole structure resonated with strength, a bastion that could frustrate the toughest of armies. She found it ironic that the place had fallen not to a force, but to a single creature--Mishaka.

"That's not a mansion," Ziedra murmured. "It's a bloody fortress."

"A rather well appointed one," Laramis added. "I walked that perimeter a few days ago. The guard posts are well placed with overlapping fields of view. The guard captains have been excellently trained, and shift changes are frequent and practically random."

"Damn, my parents must have a lot of enemies," Wren murmured. "Let's not worry about the outer defenses. I think Liandra can get us past those. It's what's inside I'm worried about..."

"Before we draw closer," Laramis interrupted. "Leave us have a regrouping plan. Not far from where we now stand, is the water plaza." He pointed off to their left. "There is a canal there. From the plaza bridge, you can see a grove of trees. There lie the precincts of Meliekki. I have negotiated with the priestesses there for safe harbor. If you but tell them my name, they will aid you as they can. If we get separated or something goes wrong and we must disperse, let us all meet there."

"Meliekki?" Wren asked. "You asked druids for help?"

Laramis shrugged. "Not all nature cults are inhospitable, Milady. One simply needs to know the proper 'suasions. It so happens that my family owns some of the finest vineyards in Coormeer, and I recently learned that many of Meliekki's chosen have a passion for wine. A gift of a few nicely aged casks to the wood-matron and her subordinates made them amenable to our needs."

Wren grinned. "Laramis, you are certainly no ordinary paladin."

The man grinned. "Thank you, Milady."

"Okay," Wren said. "Sounds good to me. I really hope it doesn't come to that..." She drew breath, scanning the streets around them. "All right, let's just work our way up to it."

As the five of them moved slowly toward the mansion gates, Wren deliberately kept pace with a crowd of laborers also moving in that direction. She kept her eyes on the upper walkways, and street crossings. She didn't know what to expect, and for certain didn't know how well informed the enemy was. Did Mishaka know she was in the city yet? How did Hethanon play into this? Why couldn't these damn avatars just stay dead? She and Desiray killed that bastard many times over. Cassandra had banished him from Corwin to be certain. She guessed that was not death for these creatures, they just reformed elsewhere.

Barely a stone's throw from the gates she stopped again. She pulled Ziedra in the shadow of a building. "Do you see them?"

Her friend's brow furrowed. "Hmmm?" She looked around. "Where?"

"The roofs, Dama," Laramis said eyes narrowed and hand on the hilt of his sword. "I cannot say I like the look of this."

"Irodee sees six," the Myrmigyne reported as she looked around.

"There's more," Wren said. "I can smell them."

Crouched on the corner of the rooftops near the mansion, Wren saw Dagger cult sentries. They were dressed in colors to match the dark roof slates, faces and skin darkened with soot to help them blend in.

"Who are they watching for though?" Ziedra said eyes widening.

"That's what's got me gritting my teeth," Wren said. "If they're watching for us, we'd be fools to go in there."

"You'd be fools regardless," Liandra said at her back.

Wren rounded on the girl. "How long have they been watching the mansion?"

Liandra's blue eyes widened. She swallowed. "I-i-i know not. I n-never noticed them before."

Wren pinched the bridge of her nose. "Spit. This just keeps getting worse." She clenched her fists. "All right, we keep on. If it looks like they're moving in on us, we break off and figure something else out." She put a finger in the front of Liandra's blouse and pulled her close. "You remember your story?"

The girl blinked, face turning pale again. "You're new mercenary sentinels I hired in the plaza."

"Good," Wren said. "From here, you lead and we're your guards. Just a reminder." She snapped her fingers, and Azimuth appeared in her hand in glittering flash. "Don't get any strange ideas. You would not even believe how good I am with this. You try to give us away, and you will be dead before you take three steps. Understood?"

Liandra's lower lip quivered and she nodded.

Wren pushed the dagger back into its scabbard. She pulled the hood of her cloak up. There was no point in chancing someone recognizing the similarity between herself and Liandra. The four of them arranged themselves to flank the girl and urged her forward.

Wren's heart thumped harder and her chest tightened as they headed toward the main gate. She felt acutely aware of the lookouts on the rooftops. This plan was thin, probably the thinnest she'd gambled her life on. She was counting on the amount of respect her mother had with the troops, and the regard they had for the daughter of the baroness.

The gates loomed large in front of them. Wren noticed there were Dagger cult rakes lounging around the corners of the buildings nearest the gate. She saw Ziedra reaching for her sword hilt and put a hand on her arm.

The gates to the main compound were open with nearly a dozen guards waiting in the shadows of the barbican. They were burly looking toughs wearing armor for fit and function, not show. The men made a show of being casual but Wren saw from their eyes they were on the alert. A lot of their attention seemed to be on the Dagger cultists across the street. That explained veteran warriors standing watch. The mansion forces didn't like the guild on their doorstep--and for good reason. Hethanon was not a neighbor anyone would want to keep company with.

The watch captain was a lean blade of a fellow with a rugged face, long dark hair, darker eyes, and half-day's beard shadow that looked like it belonged on a wood rasp. His sleeveless chain hauberk emblazoned with the captain's crest and the Kergatha family emblem showed off his muscled arms, marked with scars and tattoos from more than a dozen battle campaigns. Her recent training with Beia and Ess allowed her to recognize the kind of fighter he was by the arrangement of his sword-sheaths. The angled quick-cross draw style was favored by masters of the Jacdaw two-handed style. The spikes jutting from the pommels of the well worn weapons solidified her surmise. The last thing they needed was a confrontation with this fellow.

"Captain Stark," Liandra said with surprising confidence, walking up to him. "Good day to you."

The men straightened up at the sight of her. The gesture was enough to be considered respectful, but relaxed enough that Wren realized that Liandra commanded none of the respect that her mother did.

Stark stepped forward, barring the gate entrance with his body. He bent slightly at the waist, and nodded to Liandra. "Ladyship." His head came up; probing their group. "Where are your guards?"

Liandra drew herself up. "I dismissed those fools. They were incompetent. I hired these four in the plaza. They are far more capable than those others."

Stark raised an eyebrow. His hand dropped to the hilt of one of his swords.

Laramis shifted ever so slightly, hands still at his sides, but his shoulders tensed and his chin angling down. Ziedra leaned her head to one side, a ripple of tension flickering through her booted feet.

The Captain's eyes narrowed. "Since when are you an expert on warrior's talent, Ladyship?"

Wren saw Liandra quiver. "Captain, I must present them to mother and let her judge. It's not like she would go to them. Besides, I think these four are far more attractive. Don't you think?"

Stark frowned. He glided forward a few steps, nudging Liandra aside. He stopped in front of Irodee, his gaze traveling up her long muscular form and focusing on the bow over her shoulder. "A bloodspar." He pressed his lips together. "Looking closer, these four are actually a rather bit *overqualified* as personal guards."

Liandra's voice dropped. "Pardon me, Captain?"

Stark stepped back from Irodee. He eyed Ziedra and then Laramis. "They seem better suited as..." His eyes met Wren's. "Assassins..."

Chapter 53

Confrontation

Standing in brisk Cosmodarian air outside the gate of the baronial mansion, the word 'assassin' sent a ripple through their whole group. The gate guards behind Captain Stark all stiffened and pulled their weapons. Dark eyes hard and expression flat, Stark stepped back, arms and hands still relaxed,.

Wren was careful to keep her hands away from her weapons as they focused on the Captain. If they fought now, it would only confirm his suspicions. Looking to one another, Ziedra and Irodee were doing the same. Laramis folded his arms and leaned back.

"Perhaps the lord captain is looking for some sport?" he said in a raspy voice that did not sound at all like Laramis. "We are not assassins. Guarding the little one is easy coin. Good food, good bed; a nice retirement job. Those other guards were lambs, and you *need* good guards now. We heard there's an avatar kicking about." He nodded over his shoulder to the cultists across the street.

Stark's eyes became slits. "Tell me, you didn't happen to *kill* those lambs did you?"

Laramis snorted. "We don't kill lambs. Besides murder is more trouble than it's worth. No doubt they are still hiding their heads in shame for having lost track of their charge."

"Stark, they didn't kill anybody," Liandra pleaded.

Wren drew a breath. Nothing was ever easy. Just her luck that Mother hired guards with some real skill and real sense. Now what did they do? Fight their way in? This Captain Stark would be a handful all by himself.

"So, what did happen, Ladyship?" Stark asked, keeping an eye on Laramis.

Liandra's gaze darted to Wren and then back to Stark.

"We got into a fight in a jewelry store," Liandra said. "They beat James and the others handily. That one," she pointed at Ziedra. "Cast a spell on them to make them forget."

"A mage?" Stark glanced to Ziedra. "With a sword?"

"It pays to have more than one skill," Ziedra said, raising her chin.

Stark relaxed a little, glancing between Ziedra and Laramis. "You swear those men were not injured?"

"I believe their egos were dealt a mighty blow," Laramis said. "But naught else at our hands. We cannot say what has happened to them since. We have seen quite a few of the Dagger cult about." He hung a thumb over his shoulder. "For some extra pay, we'd be willing to help clean up the trash."

That brought a smile to Stark's face. "Aye, if only I could take you up on that offer. We have been ordered to leave them be, as long as they do us no aggression."

Laramis frowned. "Why would such an order be given, Captain? They are the worst kind of scum. We have seen the proclamations."

Stark shook his head. "The foulest bewitchment I am certain. In days past, her Excellency would not have tolerated them in the least. Now..." His voice trailed off.

Wren felt a cold shiver travel up her back at the sound of defeat in Stark's voice. This was a loyal retainer to the family, someone who knew her mother and father.

"Take our word Captain, we mean the family of the manor absolutely no ill." He glanced toward Liandra. "She needs guarding. All of them do I wager."

Stark's brow furrowed. "Indeed." He rubbed his chin. "Well, I don't suppose there would be any harm in letting Lady Kergatha look you over."

"There would be harm," a glass-crunching rasp called out behind them. "A great deal of harm."

Wren glanced back and saw all the cultists moving forward. Her heart skipped a beat, and she gasped. Ahead of the advancing men was a figure she hoped never to see again.

Dark eyes smoldering in his axe-like face, the leader of the group stared at Wren, a broken-toothed yellow grin spreading across his sallow features. The daylight reflected on the surface of his polished black leather armor, and a gust of wind stirred a purplish cloak the color of a bone-bruise. As he came closer Wren felt the face-pressed-against-needles sensation of a creature of malignant power.

Hethanon.

Wren's heart rushed to a gallop and she felt a pounding in her temples. She felt an icy chill spread across her body. She gripped the sword on her side, glancing to the thirty-odd cultists closing in on all sides.

The avatar stopped a dozen paces away and frowned. "No Desiray? I was so looking forward to getting reacquainted after our last encounter."

The men with the avatar lined up around them two ranks deep, weapons glinting in the daylight.

"I wish she were here," Wren growled. "We could have showed you a marvelous time."

Behind her, she sensed Stark and the house guards lining up.

Hethanon raised an eyebrow. "I admit to being somewhat surprised at your recovering from the jikartandak, but I suppose that would defeat a fancy bit of irony if it were otherwise."

Wren scowled. She rocked back and forth, eying their opponents, judging their distance, looking for the weakest link. "What are you talking about? Why are you here?"

Hethanon grinned. "Little girl, you and me go way back. I hadn't realized in the poor light in the guts of the guild. Even then, I thought you looked familiar." He narrowed his black-black eyes. "I gave your stubborn bitch of a mother over to Mishaka, and thought you long succorund. Guess, I'll just have to make sure its done right this time."

Captain Stark made a low rumbling sound deep in his throat behind her. Steel slithered on steel as he pulled his swords from their sheaths. She didn't know what Hethanon was playing at, but revealing that in front of the guards of the Baroness only helped her. Without even seeing him fight, she knew Stark was nothing to trifle with--the dozen men with him would be formidable in their own right. Laramis and Irodee took stances with their weapons ready. Ziedra held her arms at her sides, fingers spread out.

Wren snarled. "We are not easy marks, Bastard. Come at us, and you'll learn."

"I shall," Hethanon said. His already harsh voice sharpened. "Kill everyone in sight but that one." He pointed his knife at Wren. "No witnesses. Go!" He slashed down with his knife.

She called Azimuth to throw, and Laramis and Irodee surged forward, but it was Ziedra who struck first, bringing her hands up wrists together and uttering a 'sound'. Though the noise seemed to issue from the dancer's mouth, the shriek gathered around and through her like the howl of a thousand storms. It burst from her outstretched hands in a roaring fist of destruction, shattering cobblestones and ripping a bloody swath through the cultists on one side.

"Run!" Ziedra screamed, charging into the gap made by her magic.

Wren didn't question, but pursued her friend, Laramis and Irodee at her heels. Even Stark and his guards were quick to capitalize on the opening and rushed to escape the noose of the avatar's followers. There were too many guards though and the gap too small for them all to get out. The four at the rear disappeared beneath a carpet of writhing bodies as cultists swarmed over them, poisoned knives rising and falling.

Wren looked back again at the black tangle of forms. There hadn't been that many before! Where there had been only a few dozen cultists were now several score.

Ziedra charged down the street faster than Wren had ever seen the woman run. She ran like all the demons of the abyss were chasing her, which wasn't far from the truth. She skidded to stop as black armored forms poured out of the alleys ahead of them. She made a sharp downward clawing gesture. There was a thrumming, and a blue flash of light and huge ice spikes rained from the sky, pounding the street and the armored minions of set. Many of the creatures fell impaled by the shards, their bodies twisting on themselves like injured spiders, a noxious green gas spewing out of the gaps in their armor.

"I told you we would all die!" Liandra yelled from somewhere behind Wren.

"We--aren't--dead--yet!" Ziedra spun and made a slashing motion with her arm. The tips of her fingers seemed to scribe a single black line in the air between the rearmost of the baronial guard and the oncoming horde of froth-mouthed cultists rushing toward them. A hum and a sparkle of light trailed along the length of the line.

Dozens of cultists splayed along the line, bodies folding backward on themselves, limbs and torsos splitting asunder as they ran up against the immeasurably thin scythe of force. Wren gasped, marveling at how much power Ziedra had gained in so short of a time.

The sudden pile of corpses and the flood of blood, gave warning to the second rank, but the now slick cobbles made for poor stopping and third rank drove the second line against the barrier in a new spray of flesh-parting destruction.

As quickly as those were down, a flood of new cultists were spilling into street through glowing red portals opened at Hethanon's gesture.

Ziedra staggered and gripped her head. "Oh ow. Sorry, no more fast-casting for me."

"No apologies, Dama," Laramis called. "You've done enough!" The paladin charged into the already battered minions. He moved with startling speed, the point of his glowing sword ripping through black mail like an axe through kindling.

Irodee and Stark surged forward in his wake. The Myrmigyne spun and slashed, driving home brutal strikes that sent armored forms skittering across the cobbles. Stark flew into the minions, his swords and body a rending tornado that hacked into everything that drew close. When Wren had judged him to be dangerous, she had been more right than she knew. Stark's guards moved in unison behind him, keeping Liandra with them and concentrating on any opponents that drew close.

Heart pounding, Wren pursued the group, keeping Ziedra with her. Even though weakened by her casting, the dancer was strong enough to use the sword on her side. Wren had always feared that when the press came, Ziedra would crack and panic. The woman had simply never shown that kind of bravery. Perhaps it was the all-or-nothing play for survival that brought out the strength in the softhearted Silissian girl because she gritted her teeth and raised her blade to take the charge of the enemy without the slightest waver.

As Wren had told Laramis, Ziedra had a knack for always having her sword in the way. The minions and their brutal strength were no more effective on her than any other opponent. She shunted their powerful attacks with deft flicks of her sword.

When the minions focused on Ziedra, Wren used the openings to plant Azimuth in their face plates.

Behind them, the horde of cultists had discovered the edges of Ziedra's lethally sharp barrier and were crawling underneath it.

"They're coming through!" Wren screamed a warning.

Laramis and the other warriors were too busy fighting to acknowledge. They had to clear the path ahead, there was no way to survive or pass that wave of blood-crazed cultists.

"Zee! We need another spell!"

"No--energy left--to fast-cast!" Ziedra gritted between swings, sparks showering from her blade as she turned the minion's glowing weapon. She fainted to one side drew down on the hissing monstrosity's blade and reversed her sword with a yell, sweeping off the creature's head in a gout of stinking green gas. "Need time!"

"Do it! I'll keep them off you!" She threw Azimuth through the face plate of an on-rushing minion. She called the weapon back and whipped it side arm into the mass of cultists finding their footing on the blood-slick cobbles.

Ziedra was already into a spell, her voice rising and falling in a guttural cadence.

It became a frenetic race for time as Wren flailed at opponents ahead and behind, slamming kicks into armored warriors and planting Azimuth in every eye that dared look in their direction.

How many heartbeats the fierce exertion lasted Wren couldn't say, it felt like every bit of an eternity before Ziedra thrust her hand out in front of her.

"*Hell-seeker!*" She cried. A greenish light gathered around her body and spiraled down her arm before exploding forth in a jagged blast of energy that leaped from minion to minion, stabbing through their bodies like a giant needle and thread. Each creature hit seemed to shake apart, their armor turning crimson and shattering like glass. In one shot, she had opened the path.

No-one needed to be told, the whole group scrambled away from the cultists. As they raced up the street along the wall of the mansion, Wren dared to hope they might actually escape.

Wren and Ziedra slid to a stop as a ball of fire arced overhead and landed a few steps ahead of the group surrounding Liandra. The explosion scattered bodies and sent smoke pluming into the air. Before Wren could even think to go around another blast hit the ground near the first, making her and Ziedra recoil from the burst of heat. Like a torch thrust into a trough of oil, a line of fire erupted across the street.

Wren heard Laramis, Irodee, and Stark yelling on the other side of a wall of flames several paces high. Liandra had been knocked back and lay on the ground clutching her leg. With no way through, Wren put the scalding blaze at their back, and faced a snarling pack of cultists. Blades glinting in the daylight, the thieves of the Dagger guild had formed a line across the street.

Ziedra's eyes widened. "Wren take my hand!"

Even with Ziedra's warning she almost moved too slowly. Even as her fingers closed around her friend's wrist she felt a powerful force grip her body. The riveting sensation went away, the force sliding off her mind as a tingle shot through her body.

Behind them, Laramis and Irodee continued to call out.

"Go!" She screamed. "Don't you get caught too! Run, damn it!"

A deep female voice loud enough to be heard over the crackling of flames called out to them. "Liandra, Darling, you weren't planning on leaving without saying hello were you?"

A pale woman shimmered into being standing on a floating carpet a few paces away. Her eyes burned like hot embers, blood red lips parted in an unsettling smile. A

breeze flicked through her milk white hair as she stepped off the carpet to the cobbles and pulled the hide flaying lash off her side. Her high-heeled black boots clicked on the stone as she took a few steps toward them.

"This her, Wren?" Ziedra whispered.

"Oh yeah."

"Thought so. Damn she's strong. Any ideas?"

Wren looked back at the fire behind them, feeling the smoldering heat. "The fire is looking good."

"I can't shield us both--uhhh..." She staggered back as sparks whirled around her, causing her hair to fly as though she were caught in a gust of wind. She narrowed her eyes and balled her fingers into a fist. "Back off--*you*." She thrust her shoulder forward. The air itself wavered and shuddered like ripples of heat in the desert.

Mishaka staggered back a step, teetering on her high heels. Her eyes widened. She brought the pommel of the whip to her mouth. "Oooh. Such a delectable friend you've brought with you, Liandra, so juicy sweet with magic."

Mishaka pointed a finger at Ziedra, the air around the avatar darkened and a rumbling went through the stones. A single dark pinpoint of light started at the tip of her finger, swelled, and then detonated in a howl of sound and an eye-tearing, brilliant flash.

Wren covered her face with her arm as the blast smashed into Ziedra, striking her outstretched hands and knocking her and Wren sliding backward. Wren gritted her teeth, feeling blood trickle down her neck.

"Yow." Ziedra growled, shaking her hands. Her hands were bright red as though burned.

Mishaka's grin faded. "What is this?" She raised her chin, eyes narrowing.

"Damn it." Wren called Azimuth and threw.

The weapon whirled out and clanked against something invisible more than a pace from the avatar.

"Spit."

Ziedra closed her eyes, drew a breath and then made a slamming motion with her fist.

Mishaka made an incoherent sound, like all the air were being sucked from her lungs. Ziedra pumped her fist like she were pounding a spike. The avatar staggered as though being pummeled by physical blows.

Wren wanted to help her friend, but they'd never gotten the opportunity to learn to join their powers the way she had with Dorian. If she let go of Ziedra even for an instant the avatar would get a grip on her with that paralyzing power. Wren closed her eyes and concentrated on her climbing power and sharing that energy with Ziedra. The flames still roared at their back. She no longer heard the cries of their friends. They were on their own and had to fight their way out if they could.

She remembered the feel of biophase and what Dorian had done within her mind to call it. She reached out to the power and felt it at her fingertips. She felt the invigorating forces flood into her body and let it spill into Ziedra.

Ziedra let out a gasp, her body stiffening next to Wren's. The woman didn't question or waver, but slammed away at the avatar.

On her knees, shoulders heaving under Ziedra's assault the avatar rocked her head back. "Enough!" She screamed, throwing her arms wide.

Ziedra yelped, clutched her head, and fell to her knees.

"Bah," Mishaka growled, making a dismissing gesture. "Take them--*both*." From behind the line of cultists large crystalline flasks arced out.

Even as the containers were still in the air, Wren heaved on Ziedra who was still dazed from Mishaka's counter attack. "Come on--"

The containers crashed near their feet as Wren pulled them toward the flames, she would rather die in the fire than be captured by Mishaka.

A purplish mist billowed up around them. Wren held her breath but it didn't help, even before she finished a second step she felt her strength fading. The blistering heat of the flames licked against her face. So hard to move. In an instant, it was as if her body had been turned to clay. Her heart thrashed, and her stomach churned, but her legs simply wouldn't move.

She had to move. She couldn't let Mishaka...

The cobbles rushed up to meet her face with a stinging thud.

The heat of the flames and the light of the day dwindled...

Chapter 54

Cell

Wren's face pressed against something hard and cold. Her eyelids cracked, sliding part way open with gritty sensation. A throbbing pulsed in her temples, and her stomach felt hollow and queasy. It took a few moments for her to muddle through what had happened. After several tries, she managed to push herself up to a sitting position to look around. A reddish light filtering down from tiny glow-globes allowed her to survey the dank confines of the stone cell.

She swallowed, the spit like a hard lump in her throat. The chamber stank of old, dried feces and urine. She heard the distant crackling of torches, and the echo of water dripping. A few handfuls of golden-reed had been tossed into the corners of the bleak cube that was about three paces on a side. The slick gray stone walls looked as impenetrable as slabs of steel. The slotted iron-bolted scale-wood door was twice the thickness of her fist, the pitted surface moldy and blackened from seasons of wear.

Wren rubbed her cheeks with shaking hands. Damn. What a stew this was. She checked her equipment. They'd left her with her clothing, but nothing else. She rubbed the skin of her arm, feeling the jewels of the Malanian war-web. They hadn't removed the concealed armor. She couldn't get it off herself, no surprise the jailers couldn't either. Forcing herself to stand on wobbly legs, she went to the door and stood on tip-toes to look out through the slot.

The view outside did not reveal much except for a cellblock of perhaps eight chambers including hers. A grill and gate of heavy iron cordoned off the far end. No guard had been posted there. That wasn't much consolation with this massive wooden portal between her and freedom.

She thumped back to her heels, then dropped to her knees. She didn't know why she wasn't already kissing Hecate's boot, but that would happen at Mishaka's earliest convenience. Her thoughts turned to Ziedra--what had happened to her? Would Mishaka have killed her? Damn it, she should have come alone. She deserved to die for such a colossal error. She should have turned back the moment they saw the Dagger cult watching the mansion. She simply didn't want to believe that both Mishaka and Hethanon were against her. More the fool her, it wasn't as if she hadn't already experienced outrageous odds and callous betrayal. What had Sindra said? *Paybacks aren't fair, they just feel good.*

Hethanon and Mishaka were probably having a grand laugh right now. She had walked right into their hands.

Why was she still alive? Did Hecate still mean to succorund her? Probably, she'd lost a lot of avatars. What about Ziedra? She made an even better avatar, her magical abilities were awesome. A tenday of Aarlen's training and she was capable of far more than Wren imagined possible.

Was she even still in Cosmodarus? She didn't know how much time had passed. She rubbed her stomach. It didn't feel like she'd been unconscious very long. Damn, she had to get out of here, if not for her sake, for Ziedra's and her family. At least Laramis and Irodee had gotten away. Still, what could the two of them do against Mishaka and Hethanon? They might have Stark's help, and his knowledge of the mansion, but that certainly wouldn't be enough to prevail over two avatars.

She had to get out.

How? She pushed herself up on her palms and turned herself to face the door. Folding her legs she stared at that nearly impenetrable wall of scalewood. Even with an axe it would take bells to hack through. Over time the sap in that seasoned wood hardened, after a few seasons it was hardly softer than a piece of granite. The iron reinforcing just made it sturdier. They hadn't posted a guard because it would take an army to knock down that hinged nightmare.

She stared at the door itself. She didn't see any weaknesses in the design to exploit. She'd been in a dungeon or two in her seasons as a guildier and one of the 'usual suspects'. Once she was put in a cell with hinge pivots on the inside. A cell made to keep idiots penned up and little else. It hadn't taken long to escape confinement that time.

No such luck here. The door was solid with only a tiny viewing slot at eye level too small to slip her arm through. There was a narrow tray slot at floor level, but the opening was sheathed with bolted iron flanges, and the slot itself covered over with some kind of metal closure. If she had sat down to design something inescapable, it would look a lot like this; a cell with no furniture or materials to make a tool with, seamless slab walls that even a giant couldn't effect, and a hardened door with no exploitable gaps.

Wren let out a breath. She might still have a tool. She raised her hand.

"Azimuth," she whispered.

A light flickered around her fingers and solidified into the form of a gold dagger with an elaborate wire-wrapped hilt.

Gasping, she stared at the weapon in disbelief. It worked! If she got out of this mess, she'd have to give Cassandra a kiss.

She frowned at the knife. Slim lot of good this did her now. It would only be useful if a guard tried to come in the cell. That wouldn't happen, not until Mishaka was ready to move her. She needed to be gone long before that time. She slid the weapon into her belt. Back to that door.

What she wouldn't give to be strong like Tal or Algernon. Either one of those two could knock that door off its hinges with a few hits. She narrowed her eyes. Lords, she'd settle for being strong like Vera. The little woman had busted through one of the citadel doors without even trying. Those portals were scarcely less sturdy than this one.

How was that possible? Vera hardly weighed anything. She should have just bounced off. Somehow she generated enough power to break those door hinges. Gabriella had said something to Sindra. *A trained G'yaki assassin can put their hand through thousand-fold steel.* She'd seen Vera do that very thing, shattering the Sen'Gen's armored breastplate.

It seemed impossible. She'd hugged Vera. The woman wasn't a monster. She was no weakling certainly, she had a wiry kind of strength, but nothing massive. Ziedra wasn't powerful either and she had turned aside the hideous strength of Set's armored minions with barely any effort. In Zee's case, it was perfect execution, turning the blade in a precise fashion so that dissipated and redirected the energy of the attack.

From working with Vera, she knew the G'yaki art was something similar. The shadow fighting was to train the mind and body to act in unison, to strike, block, and move with an exactly prescribed synergy. Somehow that accuracy created power.

Or did it?

She stared at the door. She pulled the dagger from her side and held it out in front of her. When Aarlen and Damay blasted her out of the demon ring, it had been the

sharp point of Desiray's dagger Khairhavlul that had parted the way. The sum total of that massive power had been concentrated down to a needle's prick.

It made sense. A sharp blade cut better than a dull one because the energy of the cut hit a smaller area.

It was focus. The light of the sun aimed through a spy-glass could burn. Vera could channel the entire weight of her body, strength, and mental energy into single point of contact that wasted none of the force.

Wren scrubbed her face. Great, all she needed now was a few decades of training to learn how that was done!

She was the Kel'Varan Nola, a savant of forces, channeling energy was what her ability did. Ziedra's power was magic, as she had more than ably demonstrated. She remembered the shock on Mishaka's face as Ziedra shook off the effects of that horrendous magical attack. She probably wouldn't have been hurt at all if she hadn't been so tired. What had Ziedra's problem been? She mentioned twice not having the energy to fastcast. She guessed that Zee had been calling the magic from within herself, rather than doing a spell in the normal fashion.

Couldn't she call force from within herself? When combined with Dorian she had been able to pull the biophase into herself. She'd even done it in the street to help rejuvenate Ziedra. When she and Desiray were together, if she wanted more strength she just summoned it; it gave her virtually limitless vitality. The problem was this body. It wasn't made to hold energy like Desiray's was.

How much did she need? With barely a thought she had put Sindra through a brick wall. How much of that had been Desiray's marvelously gifted body? She had seen Damay gather tremendous force into herself and she had been using what was essentially Wren's body. In theory, if Damay could do it, she could too. Again, it was a matter of training, of experience. The elder savant had several millennia of practice with her savant powers.

Practice or not. She had to try. Otherwise, she'd still be sitting here when Mishaka came.

She rose and looked at the door. Freedom lay on the other side. She had to get through. The wood and metal themselves were too sturdy to break. The hinges were the weak point. The anchors in the stone were rarely reinforced, and the anchors needed only to be dislodged enough that the locking mechanism was disabled.

Picking a spot, she lined up a spinning kick, one guaranteed to bring the full force of her weight against the door. Pretending it was a practice session with Vera, she stepped through the move, seeing it in her head.

Letting out a breath, she called biophase into her body, feeling the invigorating strength dispel the fatigue and nausea. She concentrated on her climbing power, thinking of the force flowing ahead of her heel, focusing *past* the door.

With a cry, she whirled and slammed a kick into the door with all her strength. There was a heavy thud, and clank, as the portal shuddered under the impact.

The attack had considerably less effect than she'd hoped, and now her foot and leg ached.

"Spit," she muttered. Not exactly an auspicious start.

She lined up again, and whirled another attack against the wood. The material showed no more affect than the first time.

Combined with Desiray, finding the flows of energy had been trivial, a mere flick of a whim.

She had to find that right focus.

She slammed home a third, a fourth, and a fifth attack. The door shuddered under each impact, but remained just as impassible. Gasping for breath, she bent at the waist, hands on knees. Vera made it look so simple.

"Damn it!" She snarled. "I--need--out!" In her rage, she planted a thunderous front kick in the middle of the door.

The force of the strike just hammered into the door and stayed. Sending a bone rattling shock up her leg.

She jerked back clutching her calf. "Ow. Owowow."

Bent over and holding her leg she realized abruptly there was more light in the room than there had been. It took a moment to determine *she* was the source of the light.

Wren looked at her hands. A faint glow now surrounded them.

"What?"

Somehow that last bone rattling kick had done something. She hadn't really been focused, just angry.

Forgetting the pain in her leg, she thought again about her climbing power, only this time, trying not to focus it, but instead just wrapped it around herself, the way she did the phase energies to anchor herself on the plateau.

She whipped another kick into the door. The wood grunted, but this time her foot didn't hurt and neither did her leg. She felt a tingling spread up through her knees.

Wren hammered the door with four more attacks, her 'unfocus' getting better with each try. She felt a warmth gathering in her middle. The glow around her body was a tiny bit brighter. Her body was storing up the energy of the impacts. Even the noise and vibration of the attack seemed to be partially absorbed.

Bam! Bam! Bam! She hoped there was no-one near enough to hear the noise.

After twenty attacks, she paused with a gasp. Breathing hard, heart hammering, she leaned her head back and renewed herself with biophase. That was a lot of exertion, hitting with everything she had. Her whole body was trembling.

Now, to see if she could channel that power.

She thought about the power in her middle, and focused on it through the tingle in the back of her head. She imagined it all flowing out in a savage rush, ahead of her heel, striking *through* the wood.

Fists clenched, she lined up. Without pausing she let out a grunt and sent a kick whistling into the door, sending all the massed energies inside of her ahead of it.

Her heel struck with a boom that made the floor and walls vibrate. The door itself gave out a loud rattle as the play was knocked out of the hinges.

It didn't give, but this time there was the unmistakable impression of her heel gouged into the rock hard material.

She had succeeded. She simply needed enough stored energy. Damn Mishaka, she'd get out of this trap yet. She had surmised it would take an army to level that door. She was going to store up an army of kicks, and blow that door off its hinges...

To minimize the noise, she kicked the solid rock wall. The last thing she needed was to keep making noise to the point it finally irritated a guard.

Attack by merciless attack, she stored up the power of the strikes, taking breathers to replenish her stamina.

Two hundred assaults? Four? Five? She'd lost count. The power in her middle burned hot, and the glow around her was like the light of several candles flickering in the gloom.

Puffing for breath, she halted and leaned on her knees. She felt ready to burst. Her heart thundered and perspiration trickled down her face. It was like a hellish version of one of Vera's interminable kick drills. It didn't feel like she could sustain any more energy. As time went on, some of it was leaking away. Her arms and legs shook with

fatigue. The biophase was having less and less affect. She knew better now than to call upon more than the briefest surge. If the energy she'd saved up couldn't do it, then there would be no escape.

Boots clacked on stone outside, metal clanking against metal. There was the unmistakable sound of rusty metal hinges groaning. The boots clumped closer. Whoever it was sounded alone.

Now or never.

The footsteps stopped. There was a scraping near the bottom of the door and what sounded like a hasp being thrown back.

Taking quick breaths, Wren situated herself, fists clenched and ready.

The metal at the bottom of the door slid aside and something wooden was shoved through the slot. The metal enclosure was clanked back into place, and the hasp creaked back into position.

Heart thundering, Wren stared straight ahead through the peep slot, thinking about the flow of the energy burning in her. She thought of Grahm, of Jharon, of her family, of everything she'd lost, letting the heat burn through her.

A pair of dark brown eyes were abruptly looking at her through the gap in the door. She could see enough of the person's face to see his brow furrow.

"Aieeeyahhh!" She whirled into the kick, pumping all of her passion and desire for freedom behind the energy bursting through her.

The impact of her foot was like an explosion, causing an eruption of light and a thunderous crack, as she laid all of her will and spirit against the barrier.

The guard didn't even have time to cry out as the door buckled and shattered outward, smashing him into the far wall of the cell block.

The massive hunk of wood shuddered, the man's hand twitching around its edge before the wood careened to one side with boom. The stunned guard slumped and fell face down, the cell keys still in one outstretched hand.

Weak from the exertion, Wren staggered a few steps and fell to her knees. She struggled to calm herself and hear through the pounding of in her ears. She heard only the crackle of torches, and the drip of water. Apparently, they were deep underground and the walls were too thick to carry much sound.

She crawled forward and snatched the keys from his hand. She pulled Azimuth from her belt and forced herself to stand on shaking legs.

She was free.

It was so strange. All that magic came from me. Not only did I scare the enemy-- I scared myself...
--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 55

Prisoners

Alone in the cell block, Wren checked the other cells quickly. All were empty. She checked the guard that had been behind the door. He was roughed up, but would probably live. She dragged him in a cell and locked it. She opened the iron gate and stepped into the passage. A channel for water ran down one side of the corridor and went through a grate at the far end. This is where the dripping sound she heard came from. There were four other cell blocks along the arched passage. She prayed Ziedra was in one of them.

Wren still didn't understand. She was Mishaka's prize captive. Why this lax treatment. She would have thought the avatar would be hovering over her, to gloat if nothing else. Had something else happened while she was unconscious? Perhaps, the loss of Stark and the gate guards had created a problem. If she understood Liandra correctly, Mishaka's control over her mother was anything but absolute.

Well, she wouldn't waste her good fortune. Going to her right up the passage, she checked the next cellblock and found all the chambers empty. The block at the end of the passage was equally empty.

Standing at the end she looked back toward the stairs and the last cellblock. Had they put Ziedra in a whole other area of the dungeon? She plodded to the last set of cells. Opening the gate, she went inside. Heart beating fast, she checked each of the cells, holding out hope that her friend might be in one.

She let out a breath, body going cold inside. All were empty.

Damn.

She didn't have time to search the whole dungeon for Ziedra. The place could be huge.

She stood in the cellblock rocked with indecision. She couldn't hesitate long, the jailer would be missed. She had to risk a telepathic call to Ziedra.

She thought about Ziedra and the way she had contacted her in the city. She had to find out if her friend were still alive.

Wren made her mind quiet, and made her mental voice a whisper. <Zee, it's Wren calling to you. I hope you can hear me. I know you don't know how to answer me even if you want to. Think about a picture of me. About the part of me down inside that you know better than anyone else. Impress your words, your thoughts, on that image of me. Make words form inside of your image of me.>

She paused, hearing nothing but the crackle of torches and the drip of water.

<Damn it, Zee. You have to be alive. You've got to talk to me. Help me find you!> Wren felt tears trickling down her face. <I love you, we were just getting to know one another again. Please don't be dead.>

She waited another few moments and heard no answer.

Feeling icy inside, she shook her head, and headed toward the steps. She couldn't help anyone if she was caught still wandering around down here.

At the door she summoned Azimuth to her hand and listened for activity. Hearing none, she opened the portal.

The door opened onto a landing that was at the base of a staircase on her right. Each of the other sides of the square landing had doors, straight ahead and on her left. The flickering light of torches showed the stairway ascending around a corner.

Did she take the time? Those other two doors probably lead to two more sets of cell blocks. Could she give up on Ziedra?

She could not. Her friend might be hearing her voice and simply unable to answer. The thought of leaving Ziedra in the dungeon to Mishaka's insanity was nothing she could stomach.

<Zee,> she pleaded. <I need you to answer. There's not much time. Think of me, think of the words flowing from you to me. You are so smart. I can't imagine you not being able to do something like that twice as good as me. It's so easy. Especially between close people. Come on. Answer me.>

She gritted her teeth in the intervening silence.

Pick a door. Right or left. Every moment counted.

She picked the right and opened it.

The portal opened onto a flight of steps which lead down into a passage that was a mirror of the one she had just been in. Four iron gates leading into blocks of eight cells lined the right wall.

The first gate was rusted so tight she couldn't get it open. Ziedra wouldn't be in there. The next gate she swept through.

"Zee?" She called. "Are you in here?"

Not hearing any answer, she went to each cell in quick succession. All eight rooms were vacant. Damn, she was wasting time. If she didn't hurry she'd be discovered. She ran up to the next cellblock. It didn't make sense that the jailers would make a longer walk for themselves by putting a single prisoner way down at the end.

The next group were more than empty. Water had begun seeping in from the ceiling, the floor awash in putrid water. This part of the dungeon must be under one of the canals they'd seen above ground.

Frowning she moved to the endmost gate. It seemed like a waste of time, but she refused to give up.

Water dripped from the ceiling, but the cells were in better repair in this chamber. There were wet marks on the floor. Someone had passed through here recently.

"Zee?" She called. "Zee, are you in here?"

She didn't hear an answer. She started peering through slots. "Zee?"

A pounding started coming from a door behind her.

Skin prickling, heart racing she spun and went to the door, fumbling through the ring of keys to find the one that opened the lock. "Zee!"

The key cranked in the lock and she jerked open the door.

The excitement she felt died with an icy sense defeat. Her shoulders slumped, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. "Oh. *You*."

Her blonde other self stood in the doorway legs and arms trembling. She looked wrecked, face whip-marked and bruised, fine clothes dirty and dripping as she stood up to her ankles in water.

"Don't sigh at me," Liandra growled stomping her foot with a splash. "You got me into this."

Wren turned away. She didn't have time for spoiled brat imposters. She needed to find Ziedra.

"Hey!" Wren heard Liandra's squishy footsteps scrambling across the cold stone floor. "How did you get out?"

"That's the difference between a copy and the original." Wren murmured, jogging back the way she'd come.

"Wait!" Liandra called. "What are we going to do?"

"I am going to find my friend." Wren snapped.

"What about me?"

Wren stopped at the top of the steps and whirled on Liandra. "What *about* you? You're alive, and I let you out. Run away."

"But--"

"Li, *escape*. Find your own way now, like I did. At least you have your memories. Try the temple of Meliekki." She opened the door and went through. It was just a waste of breath. For being educated, the girl wasn't very smart.

She glanced up the stairwell. She saw no shadows in the flickering torchlight, and heard no alarming sounds. She gestured Liandra up the steps, then turned to the other door. Hopefully, the idiot could avoid capture and keep the alarm from being sounded. She opened the door and headed down the steps into a corridor that looked identical to the other two.

Soaked shoes squishing with each step, Liandra followed her down.

Wren rolled her eyes. She should have locked the girl back in her cell.

The check of the first cellblock revealed nothing.

"Mishaka probably killed your friend," Liandra said behind her.

"Shut up," Wren growled.

"Zee, you have to be here." The next set of chambers were equally empty.

Wren clenched her fists. She should go, and not waste another moment on a fruitless search. <Zee, please!>

No answer.

The next block was barren. The wooden doors black with mildew and disuse. She moved on to the last set of chambers. Wren's heart fell when she saw that the doors and hardware had not even been finished. It was nothing but some chambers without doors.

Damn.

She turned to Liandra. "Is this the only dungeon in the mansion?"

The girl shrugged. "The only ones I know of. Can we get out of here now?"

No. Wren hit her fists on the passage wall. She pressed her forehead to the warm stone. Mishaka wouldn't kill a valuable catch like Ziedra. Maybe she felt her to be more of a threat because of her magic. Hades, she couldn't escape and leave Ziedra a prisoner. There must be another place. Maybe Mishaka had Ziedra close for safe keeping. What did she do then?

Her forehead pressed against the stone, Wren blinked. Warm. Why was the rock warm? Eyes widening, she frantically started running her hands along the wall. A section a little bit larger than the width of a doorway was warm, the rest was cold.

"What are you doing?"

"Hush."

Was it an illusion, or a concealed door? Her bet was a camouflaged door. Mages like Cassandra (or her mother) saw through illusions too easily. Ziedra was important enough of a find to hide, for several reasons.

Hands fluttering across the rock surface she traced the seams. It was definitely a door, but how was it opened? After scrubbing her fingers across the rough surface of the war-web to sensitize them, she started probing the wall for some hidden catch that would release the door.

"Wren, we have to get out of here."

Wren continued her search, feeling down the wall. "Go, I'm not keeping you here."

"I'm scared."

She sighed, focusing on her search. Damn, it was here someplace. They usually didn't put the catch far from the door. Sometimes it was a kick-stone. She started nudging the wall at floor level with her toe.

"Wrennn..."

"Another word and I'll flatten you," she snarled. That catch had to be here. She couldn't be imagining that seam.

Kicking around she noticed a drain down in the water sluice. In all the other passages, the drain had been at the end against the wall. This one was suspiciously close to the concealed door.

She dropped to hands and knees and started pushing and pulling on the grate. No effect. Were her instincts wrong? Wait, the thing appeared to be fastened down in center. An axle?

She took hold of the grill and turned.

Something in the wall clunked, and the camouflaged section popped out a finger width.

"Whoa." Liandra murmured behind her.

Wren spun the grate another full turn, and the catch holding the door fully released. She rose, cast a withering look at Liandra who shrank back, and pulled the door open.

Inside was a cellblock similar to the others with one difference. The doors were heavier, made from solid metal. The anchors were double bolted in the stone. These appeared to be cells to keep truly powerful prisoners.

"Zee?"

Wren didn't hear an answer but began peering through peek slots.

"Zee?"

Gaea, please let her be here.

Five of the eight cells were empty.

"Wren, she's not here," Liandra whined, rubbing her arms.

Ignoring the girl, she kept checking. The sixth was empty, she moved to the seventh. Empty. She swallowed. What if she wasn't in this last cell?

Wren pounded her forehead, and rushed to the last door.

Nothing.

Wren pounded her thigh in frustration. "*Spit!*"

"Let's go," Liandra urged.

"Damn," Wren growled. "She's got to be here. She--"

Wren paused. Had she heard something?

She looked around and moved back to the center of the cellblock.

Right as she stopped there was muted clunking sound behind her.

She spun.

"Did you hear that?"

Liandra frowned. "What?"

The clunk came again. This time Liandra turned. "I heard that." She pointed at the sixth cell.

Wren ran up to the door and peeked through the slot. The room still appeared empty.

She frowned.

The clunk came again, right at her feet.

"Lords!" She flailed through the key ring looking for a key that fit the locks on these metal doors. None of them fit. "Grrr." She snarled. She looked at Azimuth. Too thick.

"Zee are you in there?" She called through the slot.

Clunk. Clunk.

"I'm coming."

Clunk.

Damn. A tool. She needed a tool. She'd been stripped, and hadn't carried lock picks with her since the Great Hunt. She looked around frantically. They didn't have much

time. The unfinished cellblock had door wood in it. Could she pick the lock with a sturdy splinter of scalebark wood? Nothing but to try.

Hands on hips, Liandra watched her scramble into the adjacent chamber where she found a door section. Using Azimuth's wickedly sharp tip, she split off a long, thin piece of wood and ran back. Breaking it in half, she probed the lock mechanism. Yes, they felt strong enough to push the tumblers.

It didn't feel like a complex lock. Closing her eyes she felt around in the mechanism. Yes. Doable. Almost there.

The lock clacked, and Wren yanked open the door.

Leaned against the metal surface, Ziedra collapsed onto the cellblock floor with a grunt, making muted sobbing sounds.

The poor woman had been trussed up like a holiday bird ready for cooking. Her arms were manacled behind her back, and a mask of some kind had been clamped around her head. She had a least four different kinds of spell shackles on her fingers, wrists, and arms.

"Od's blood," Liandra let out. "How dangerous do they think she is?"

Wren undid the straps on the mask and pulled it off.

Tears were pouring down the dancer's face. "Wren," she cried. "Oh. I heard you calling. I tried to answer. I thought. I thought..." She gasped.

"Shhh." Wren hushed, giving her a hug. "Shhh. You're okay. Let me get all this stuff off you."

It was no wonder that she couldn't send any telepathic message. Head clamped in that mask and all manner of anti-magic devices binding her up. It was amazing that she'd heard anything.

Liandra helped Wren pull all the shackles off Ziedra. The dancer could barely stand.

Wren put her hands on the woman's temples. "Okay, now don't take this the wrong way." She called biophase into herself and channeled it into Ziedra. The dancer's droopy eyes went wide, and she gripped Wren's shoulders with sudden strength.

"Awake now?"

Ziedra blinked. "Uh huh. Whoa." She rubbed the back of her head.

"Ready to leave?"

"Absolutely."

"Let's go."

I owe Wren my life and more. When it counted she was always there for me. We're older now, it's my turn to be the hero... I do get a turn, right?

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 56

Path of Most Resistance

"Go. Yes. Good." Ziedra took a breath and shook herself. The dancer looked down at the mask lying on the floor and kicked it back into the cell with a growl. Long-hair disheveled, fists clenched, and eyes flashing Wren had never seen the woman look so dangerous. For the first time since she had known Ziedra, the dancer was showing some of the dark Silissian warrior blood of her mother and father. Instead of being beat down by their defeat and imprisonment, the woman looked even more determined. Ziedra started to kick at the spell shackles and stopped. Eyes narrowing, she gathered them up and put them in her pocket. She turned to Wren, dark eyes focusing on her. "Do you have a plan?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Just checking." She thumped Wren on the shoulder, and gestured her out.

Wren nodded and started out at a jog. Outside of the secret cellblock she reset the door, and led them back to the main landing. Listening for a few moments and not hearing anything, she proceeded up the steps to where they turned the corner.

Ziedra followed with Liandra squishing along in her wake. In the near silent stairwell, those sloppy footsteps seemed inordinately loud.

Wren glared at Liandra. "Can't you be any quieter?" she rasped in a whisper.

Liandra held her palms up in confusion. "What?"

"Your *boots*." Wren gritted, pointing at the offending footwear.

Liandra looked down, brushing her blonde hair to one side. "The cell was filled with water, what was I supposed to do?"

Wren rolled her eyes. "Take the frelling things *off*!" she snarled.

"But the floor is cold."

"Take them off or I throw you down the stairs," Ziedra said in a tight voice.

Wren glanced at her friend's serious expression. Spending time in a cell certainly had made the woman more assertive.

Grumbling to herself Liandra did as she was bid and pulled the boots through her belt. The girl scowled, padding her bare feet on the icy stone steps.

Nodding in satisfaction, Wren continued the climb. It was three rounds up a square stairwell until they were in sight of the top landing. Flickering torchlight streamed in through an open archway. She held up a hand, indicating for Ziedra and Liandra to hold position.

On toes and hands, she crawled to the edge of the landing. The sound of armor clinking made her flinch and duck down.

Nerving herself she peeked again. This explained why there were no guards down in the cellblock. There was a double-gated guard station covering the only exit. Four guards dressed in the Kergatha house livery stood in small knot at the chamber's center talking to one another.

Wren retreated, and pulled Ziedra and Liandra back down the steps out of earshot of the guards.

"Trouble," she whispered. "There's no way through unless we kill the guards, or slip through invisible."

"I can make us invisible," Ziedra said. "No guarantees it will last a very long though."

Wren looked at Liandra. "Li, how do you think your being put in the dungeon is being explained away?"

The girl snorted. "Didn't you hear? I'm an imposter. The real Liandra has been kidnapped. I was a clever imitation, sent to infiltrate the castle for some, as yet, undiscovered reason."

Ziedra shook her head with a grimace. "How original."

Wren shrugged. "Sometimes the truth works. Did Mother see you?"

Liandra shook her head. "I think Mishaka hid me down there just so I'd be out of sight for a while until she can come up with a better story."

"So, do the guards know you're an 'imposter'? How will they react to you?"

The girl shrugged. "That's not something you tell all the guards. The watch captains maybe."

"Hmmm," Wren thought aloud. "You want to get out of here?"

"Of course."

"You're going to make a run for it."

Liandra's eyes went wide. "Pardon!?"

"You said it yourself, they still think you're the daughter of the Baroness. They'll bow and scrape as they normally would."

Liandra frowned. "They never bowed and scraped to me."

"Oh right, I noticed that," Wren remarked. "Still, they'll let you walk out. Mishaka is not expecting either of us to get out of those cells, not this fast. Now *those* guards," she hooked a thumb up the steps. "They might be wise, so we have to slip them."

"Not a chance," Liandra said, shaking her head. "No."

"You don't want to follow me," Wren said. "I'm going to find my Mother."

"You are?" Ziedra asked, incredulous.

"Frell yes, I won't get a better chance, I'm already on the inside, and I have an awesome diversion." She pointed at Liandra.

The blonde girl frowned. "Don't be foolish. Mishaka will catch you again."

"You let me worry about that. You just try to slip out. Maybe you'll be nice and send word to Laramis and Irodee." Wren held out her palm. "Give me your wrist."

Frowning, Liandra put her hand in Wren's. She used Azimuth to cut off Laramis' spell-shackle binding the girl's magic.

"There, that'll give you a better chance."

Liandra stood in the dim torchlight rubbing her hand. "You're crazy, you know that don't you?"

"Never said I wasn't," Wren said. "If you ever wanted to pay Mishaka back for everything she's done to you, this is your chance. I *promise*, if you get me the time I need to find Mother, I will make Mishaka regret every wicked breath she has ever taken."

Liandra shook her head. "If I saw another way, I would tell you to frell off. Just be warned, Mother will never think you're her daughter. It's your neck though, if you'd rather get killed by her than Mishaka, I suppose that's your choice."

The way the girl said it, the certainty with which she spoke, made Wren's skin prickle. "That it is. Where am I most likely to find her?"

"Her study, sitting room, and library are all on the second floor," Liandra said.

"When she frets, like she probably is doing now, she tends to pace around the colonnade overlooking the inner courtyard. It's just down the passage from her study, which is around the corner from the main stairs in the back hall."

A very lucid answer, maybe the girl wasn't as vapid as she'd seemed all this time. Well, she had learned magic, so she couldn't be entirely dumb. "I can work with that." She looked to her friend. "Zee, you--"

The dancer grabbed Wren's arm and took hold. The taller woman frowned at her.

She looked down the fingers pressing into her flesh. "Uh, never mind. So, I guess Zee will make us invisible and we get as far as we can before it wears off."

Liandra looked down at her arm and the reddened skin where the spell-shackle had been clamped around her wrist. "She doesn't sound too sure about her spell. I'll use my own."

"You can do that?"

Liandra brushed the blonde hair out of her eyes and frowned at Wren. "That's the difference between the copy and the original."

Wren sighed. "Okay, I never said I wasn't a witch."

The girl snorted.

"Go ahead, Zee."

Eyes closed, Ziedra composed herself. After a moment, she opened her eyes and dim blue light shone from them. She raised her hands, and chanted. As her fingers made passes over Wren's body she felt her skin tingle, and noticed she was slowly going translucent as she had the time before outside the city. In a few more moments, she had completely vanished from view.

Liandra stepped to one side and thrust a fist out to her right, then made a stiff arc with her hand, fingers outspread and inhaled. She repeated the motion with the other arm, and brought her hands together, fingertips pressing together. The girl's eyelids fluttered, the tips of her fingers whitening as she bore down on her hands. With a grunt, she snapped her hands apart with a flourish and made sinuous motions with her arms while chanting a strange cadence of words. As the girl's arms crossed over one another, she became increasingly harder to see until she blended in with the background.

"Interesting technique," Ziedra remarked. "Let me show you a trick." She stepped out exactly as Liandra had, hand and arm wheeling in the same punch gesture. Motion by motion she duplicated the girl's spell down to the last nuance and word.

As Ziedra began to go transparent, Wren heard Liandra draw a breath. "How in Od's name...?"

"She's good," Wren said. "Well, actually, she's the best..."

Wren heard the smile in Ziedra's voice. "Thanks gal-friend." She felt the dancer fumble around and take her wrist.

"You want us to go first, or you?" Wren asked.

"Give me a twenty count, then start up after me," Liandra's voice said from down the steps.

Wren heard the damp smack of bare feet recede up the steps.

"What do you think her chances are?" Ziedra asked.

"Better than ours."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

After the agreed upon time, Wren pulled Ziedra up the steps. She had no way to know if Liandra had already proceeded through.

Ziedra's hand probed up Wren's arm and found her ear. The dancer leaned close and whispered in Wren's ear. "She's just on the other side of the station."

She guessed Ziedra's ability to see magic allowed her detect Liandra.

Wren walked cautiously up to the landing. The men weren't moving much, but there wasn't a lot of room to maneuver either. Since the men were standing, they could

lean back, stretch or shift unexpectedly. With the two of them together, it further increased the chance of detection.

She pulled Ziedra close and found her other hand so she could better judge where she was at. Step by step she drew them into the enclosure.

"What is keeping, Degal?" one of the men asked. "How long does it take to throw some water and food to the prisoners?"

One of the other guards shook his head. "Sometimes that one gate sticks and it takes a while to open."

"This long?" another man asked, scratching underneath his helmet. "Is anyone else down there?"

"Not that I know of." The last said.

"Wasn't he supposed to clean some of the cells?"

"Don't think so."

All the while the men were talking, Wren pulled Ziedra around the barred perimeter, stepping cautiously around puddles of spilled ale, piles of wood dust and golden-reed.

Two steps from second gate, one of the men stepped back from their little conversation circle and raised his arms in a stretch. Ziedra who'd been moving easily beside Wren stiffened, and clutched Wren's arm pulling the both of them to a stop. She heard the dancer grunt as the burly fellow shifted back onto his heels and rolled his neck from side-to-side. Ziedra started making tiny squeaking sounds and punching Wren in the shoulder with her free hand.

With a sigh, the man shrugged his shoulders and stepped forward. Ziedra shoved Wren out the gate and a few dozen steps down the empty passage.

Beyond the guard station, the mansion took on a more decorated appearance, the flagstones carved with patterns and colors. Shields and various coats of arms hung between the pillars and from the archways. Ziedra dragged Wren into a shielded alcove with a gasp.

"Arrrgh," the woman snarled through clenched teeth. "My foot..." She gritted in a forced whisper. "The fat bastard smashed my frelling foot. Ommm. Aie. Aie. Aie!"

Wren could hear Ziedra hopping on one leg, and could visualize the woman clutching her abused toes.

"Are you okay?" Wren asked.

"No, I'm *not* okay... urrrgh. Ommm." She felt her friend swinging side-to-side.

"I mean is it broke?"

"Gah. How should I know?" She felt Ziedra stiffen up. The woman bit down on her pain, put her arm across Wren's chest and pressed them both against the wall. Her heart speeded as she felt a strange vibration hum across her body, making all the hair on her skin stand up.

The sensation seemed to grow stronger and weaker as though it were emanating from somewhere nearby and being shone around like a beacon of light. After a few moments, the effect went away.

Wren swallowed. "What in...?"

Ziedra covered Wren's mouth. "Scrying. Powerful scrying--"

The dancer never finished what she was going to say. A resonant thrumming sounded from deeper in the mansion. Behind them the guards in the guard room rushed into the corridor and started looking around in surprise. Further toward the front of the mansion, horns and whistles made shrill reports.

Ziedra dragged on Wren, pulling her away from the guard station. Gathering her wits, she went with her friend. What had just happened? Scrying? She wasn't sure, but it seemed like Ziedra had shielded them from some invisible magic force.

They dodged up the corridor, forced to lunge into alcoves to avoid being trampled by squads of guards rushing from the back of the manse toward the front. She wanted a distraction. Apparently, Liandra had given it to them, whether intentionally or not.

They worked around to the back hall Liandra mentioned, and found the main stairwell. As she put her foot to the stairs Wren noticed that she was no longer completely invisible. There was now a ghostly outline and a glassy distortion where light shone through her body. Ziedra's spell seemed to be holding though. It made sense, she had copied the magic from Liandra.

Wren drew a breath and hurried, pulling the dancer up the steps behind her. The stairs opened into the corner of a vaulted hall with passages leading straight ahead, and directly to their right. Carpets decorated in brilliant colors and complex patterns laced the floors. Conservative artwork depicting pastoral nature scenes dotted the walls.

She picked the passage straight ahead, noticing that she was growing more visible with every step. Thirty steps up the hall, the passage opened again to their right and Wren saw doors and arches which could be the study and sitting room that Liandra mentioned. All along this part of the hallway, raised planters and trellises created a display of vines on which blossomed a rainbow of colors and shapes.

Wren started to pull Ziedra toward the sitting area when the dancer dragged her back to stop.

"Wha--?"

A movement caused her to turn as a figure dressed in gray swept around a corner further down the hall.

The woman while not running was still moving at a fast trot, robes fluttering around a well formed body that would be only a little taller than Wren. She slid to a stop in the hall, deep blue eyes locking on Wren. The woman's chin came up and she flicked her thick leather-bound braids over her shoulders.

As the woman's eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened, Wren recognized her as the figure depicted on the standard in the inn.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her chest seized. This was Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha.

They had found her mother.

"You." Euriel pointed a fist at Wren. "What devilry is this? And what have you done with my daughter!" As the blonde woman finished the last of her words, a jewel on her brow gleamed and flashed with a bluish light.

"No devilry," Wren breathed, holding up her empty hands and walking closer. "I *am* your daughter."

"You think me a fool, girl?" Euriel snarled. "You are nothing but a distraction, so your assassin can catch me from behind." The woman moved with blinding speed, thrusting her arm into the area next to Wren.

Ziedra made an incoherent sound as Euriel's hand clamped down on what appeared to be empty air. Sparks whirled around the blonde woman's hand and a thrashing gagging Ziedra appeared, speared around the throat.

Wren gasped. "Mother stop! It's a mistake!"

Before she could even think to dodge, Euriel's steely hand had clamped around her neck as well.

"The only mistake, Child," Euriel gritted, blue eyes wild. "Is yours..."

The first time I saw my mother after our long separation, I thought to myself, "she's beautiful." Then she saw Ziedra who was invisible and I thought, "she's smart." Then she started choking the both of us and I thought, "Ack! She's dangerous!"

--Wren

Chapter 57

My Mother My Enemy

Wren thrashed in the grip of her typical bad luck. She'd worked so hard, and come so far to find her family, now it looked like she'd end up getting killed by her own mother. Could it get any worse? Stupid question. Of course it could. She and her *best friend* could get killed by her!

Little the blonde baroness might be, only a finger taller than Wren, but she had a grip like a giant. The eyes burning in her pale face had a warrior's intensity that would make anyone blink. Sparks of magic flicked around the woman's stocky body, making her gray robes flutter as though caught in a strong wind. The triangular gem embedded in her forehead gleamed brighter.

Staring hard at Ziedra, the baroness' fierce expression lightened, and her brow furrowed. "An assassin without a weapon?" Her intensity did not waver as her attention flicked back to Wren. The grip on her neck lessened slightly. "Your weapon is sheathed."

"Gurrrk," Ziedra clawed at Euriel's hand. "Nnn--not--" At the sound of words, the muscles in Euriel's arm tightened. Ziedra's eyes bulged. "Gggg!"

"Mother, *please!*" Wren begged.

The word 'mother' made the Euriel's teeth grit. The jewel on her brow flashed, a reddish glow throbbing through the facets of the crystal. Her fingers clamped down on Wren's throat. "Stop calling me that."

Wren's vision was going blurry. She wasn't going to get the opportunity to appeal to her mother. Euriel couldn't hear her words through Mishaka's magical control. Lords, she did *not* want to fight with this woman. No choice, she was going to break Ziedra's neck.

Folding herself in her nola power to absorb the crushing power of her mother's fingers. She swung her legs up in cross-clamp around Euriel's neck and pivoted the entire weight of her body in sharp twist just as Vera had taught her.

Wren's wiry legs, by far the strongest part of her body, twisted the baroness' head, bowing her backward and pressing down on her throat. The powerful move instantly took Euriel's attention off Ziedra. Gaggering and reeling off balance, she tossed Ziedra away to deal with the shin crushing down on her windpipe.

Wren threw her body the other way, sending the two of them to the ground, with a crash. A big crash. When the blonde woman hit the stones, the floor shook.

Completely free of Euriel's grip, Wren flipped to her feet. What in Gaea's name did she do now? She glanced to Ziedra who was leaned over coughing, supporting herself against the vine-wrapped trellises on that side of the hall.

Euriel didn't give her a chance to decide. The woman flashed to her feet and lunged in on Wren.

The exchange was fast, Wren moving purely by the instincts instilled in her by Vera's intense training. She dodged two swings, leaped over a kick, and wheeled around a whistling punch. As the force of Euriel's attack reached its apex, Wren used the impetus to yank her mother close and send a full force *da'kagama* elbow strike

straight between the woman's eyes. The attack hit with a thud that sent a shock through Wren's bones.

Euriel's head snapped back and she reeled a few steps clutching her face. Lords the woman was tough. A normal man twice her size would either be on his haunches or his back.

Wren winced, pain shooting through her elbow. Ow. Hitting Mother was like pounding on a stone.

Euriel pulled her hands from her face with a snarl. "You little *witch*."

"Wren, it's the gem!" Ziedra cried.

The baroness' attention snapped to the dancer. She thrust her hand out.

Wren leaped forward. "No!"

A blast of blue-white energy jagged out of Euriel's palm with a roar, smashing Ziedra back into the trellises. Wren landed a kick square in Euriel's chest, knocking the woman off balance but doing little more than make her angry.

"Stop this, I'm your daughter." Wren cried. "You have magic. You can *tell*." She glanced to Ziedra. The woman was lying on the floor. She wasn't moving. A shock went through her. Oh no. She was supposed to be immune to magic!

The triangular jewel on Euriel's brow pulsed, giving off a flash of crimson light. The baroness winced and snarled. "I tire of these tricks. You will tell me what happened to my daughter, if I have to choke it out of you."

Wren clenched her fists and growled. "You're not listening. *I'm* your daughter." Somehow she had to take Euriel down long enough to break Mishaka's control.

She swallowed. How was she supposed to do that? The woman was tough as iron and strong as a rhinotaur. She had to try. Maybe the crystal itself was vulnerable.

Euriel left no more time for consideration. She raised her hands, not to fight, but to cast another spell. If the woman's magic was so powerful that she could blow down Ziedra, she did not want to get hit by it.

Wren dove and rolled, launching into the spinning-demon shadow form.

Already hit powerfully once, Euriel aborted her spell to defend herself. Wren spun and weaved, throwing every kick and punch she had learned, simply trying to keep her mother off balance.

Eyes narrowed, a gleam in her eyes, one corner of her mouth turned up in a smile, the baroness weaved backward, wheeling elbows and knees to block and slip the barrage of Wren's attacks. So far, Euriel's attacks had been unfocused and without finesse. In the span of a few exchanges, her motions became more fluid, and she rocked and weaved with sinuous precision. A golden light gleamed in the woman's eyes, and she lashed forward, slapping aside Wren's attacks and driving a palm straight into her chest.

All the air rushed from Wren's lungs in a stunning impact, and she landed sliding on her bottom with a thud that rattled her bones before she smashed into the trellis with a crunch. Ow.

She clutched her ribs. She could imagine the already dark blue knuckle print between her breasts. Mother was not playing. She tried to push herself up, and simply did not have the air or the energy to do so.

Brow furrowed, Euriel shook her head. "G'yaki fighting style? Aesirian language. Clothes. Appearance... Child, you just don't make sense. What were you planning?" The woman glanced around, head turning left and right. "Where did the other one go?"

"Right here." A voice said. At the same time Euriel's arm was yanked out straight and one of the large spell shackles that was used to bind Ziedra was clicked into place with a rasp of crackling energy.

Euriel gasped, eyes going wide as a dark aura surrounded the band and spread up her arm. Yelping, she started clawing at the thing to tear it off her arm. Using the distraction, Ziedra lunged in behind Euriel, throwing an arm around her neck and levering her wrist behind her back.

"Wren, break the gem!" Ziedra gritted, struggling with the thrashing, snarling baroness.

Heart racing, Wren found the energy to move. This was her last chance to make things right. If Euriel defeated them, who knew where things would go from there.

Summoning all her energy, she fought to her feet. She focused the power of her Nola, concentrating it all into the tips of her fingers. She thought of Gaea, of Damay, of Vera, and all the people who had showed faith in her, and taught her.

Euriel thrashed, but somehow Ziedra held her. Calling Gaea's name, Wren put all her hope and desire thrust behind a single finger aimed at the dark heart of Mishaka's hateful magic.

Her finger made contact with an explosive rasp that sent scintillations of brilliant light cascading through the hall. Euriel screamed, throwing Ziedra off and grabbing the sides of her head. She writhed, swaying and dipping in pain, the jewel on her forehead was cracked and leaking magic like blood.

Mishaka's gem had to be completely destroyed. Body hurting, lungs tight in her chest, Wren weaved in, concentrating the power of her nola and tightening it down to her palm.

She grabbed Euriel around the back of the head and thrust her palm against the jewel with a smack. The baroness reacted with a snarl, throwing her arms around Wren's back and clamping down.

Wren gasped as her bones groaned under the assault.

Mind swimming, she wrapped the nola around herself, focusing the power toward that jewel. Her mother's Aesir strength would help free her.

Burn. Force sparked and danced through her body in a bloody haze. It hurt. Mishaka's magic squirmed under her will like a thing alive.

Her mother snarled, clamping down even harder, sending ripples of pressure shuddering through Wren's agonized body. Dots spun in her vision. She channeled the impact into the jewel which made a creaking sound under her smoking palm.

Burn.

Euriel howled, rocking side-to-side, trying with all her prodigious vitality to shatter the source of her pain. With a battle yell, she bore down even harder. Wren's bones crunched, her nola becoming a scream in her mind and body. The power flooded through her and smashed into Mishaka's gem with a sizzling rasp. Wren felt the gem begin to crumble against her palm.

Burn.

Her mother let out another shriek, her knees buckling. Wren's vision flickered, her grip on the nola faltering. The room spun as they listed and fell to the floor with a thud.

Pain hissing in her skull, shafts of agony worrying into her back, Wren's view of the passage faded into darkness.

Euriel Kergatha is just plain scary. I'd fight Mishaka twice before I took her on again. Ouch.

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 58

Thrall Gone

Wren awoke feeling pats on her cheek. Her body felt as if she'd been stomped on by a rhinotaur. It was tough to breathe. Coughing, she opened her eyes.

"Wren," Ziedra murmured. "Thank the lords. I thought she killed you." The woman pulled her to sitting position and hugged her.

The dancer's dark-russet outfit was charred all down the front, and the skin of her chest, neck, and face was reddened as though burned.

"Killed me? I thought she killed you!" Wren gasped for wind. Simply talking hurt.

"She almost did," Ziedra growled. "Damn your mother is powerful. Mishaka didn't hurt me half as bad."

Wren looked over to see her mother lying on the floor. The flesh of her forehead was burned in an area the shape of Wren's palm. The woman's gray silk dress looked barely mussed. Without a piece of jewelry or a single hair out of place, it seemed impossible that the woman had just been through a savage brawl.

She dropped to hands and knees to listen for a heartbeat. "Is she--?"

"Dead?" Ziedra scoffed, behind her. "I don't think Hecate herself could kill that witch."

Wren heard a steady thumping from her mother's chest, her breathing was shallow but unlabored. She reached out and touched the smooth skin of the woman's face. She didn't look more than fifty summers old. Of course, neither did Dorian.

She glared back at her friend. "She's not a witch. She's my mother."

"Well, your *mother* damn near killed us both." She stood up with a grunt, pulling Wren to her feet. "We have to move fast. All that screaming, not to mention the *lightning bolt*, will have to have attracted some attention. I don't know what to do with your mother."

Wren frowned. "We take her with us."

"Hah." Ziedra folded her arms. "Right."

A sinking feeling in her stomach, Wren pulled on Euriel's arm. Even that little part of her was heavy. Just the tiny effort of lifting made a twinge shoot through Wren's side. She was crunched up even worse than she thought. "Urrrh," she grunted holding her side. No wonder hitting her had been like punching a rock. "Frell. She weighs even more than Desiray." Wren shook her head. Euriel wasn't just an enhanced human. She was an actual immortal. Wren looked over her shoulder as she heard the clinking of armor coming from the stairwell. "Spit. Guards."

Ziedra looked around with frantic jerks. "There's no place. Just behind the trellis here."

"Go. Get in there."

"But..."

"Now."

Ziedra glanced down the hall, shook her head and squeezed in behind the leafy barrier covered with flowers.

The only way to move Euriel was to get her to move herself.

"Mother, I need you to wake up." Wren slapped her cheeks and massaged her head. "Come on. You're too tough. Get up. I need your strength."

The woman showed no signs of stirring. The sounds of armor were getting closer. The men were obviously taking their time. She heard them muttering to each other.

If Euriel couldn't hear with her ears, maybe directly into her mind. Wren pressed her hands to her mother's temples. If telepathy worked between savants, who better for it to work with than the flesh that bore you?

She focused on the figure before her, seeing the face, already knowing the powerful warrior spirit that lay before her. <Mother, I need you to hear me. Please.>

She smacked her face again.

<Mother, you've got to wake up!>

The guards were close. They seemed reticent to actually come all of the way up the steps though. Ziedra made hissing sounds, gesturing for her to come behind the trellis.

Wren put all her will and desire behind her thoughts. <Mother, you have to move!> She slapped her again. <Move, please! We'll be caught!> She raised her hand to slap Euriel again when the blonde-woman's eyes snapped open.

That same steely hand was back around Wren's throat in an eye blink.

She coughed gripping Euriel's hand. <Mother, no! The guards are coming.>

Her mother's eyes flashed and she looked toward the sound of men murmuring to one another. Wren felt an icy chill as the baroness' brow furrowed and the grip on her neck tightened. Wren's gaze flicked to Ziedra as she pried at her Mother's fingers.

Euriel noted Wren's shift of attention and looked toward Ziedra. The dancer ducked back behind the trellis. With a growl, her Mother rose to her feet and went to the plant shrouded woodwork. She pressed through the plants dragging Wren behind her. The sweet pungency of flowers and leaves grew heavy in Wren's senses.

The guards finally nerved themselves to enter the hall instants after they were concealed. Euriel loosened her grip on Wren's throat. She took Ziedra's arm and pulled her close. Ziedra winced at the obvious pressure applied.

The four men were moving cautiously, looking this way and that in the hall. They continued to mumble to each other, they obviously were not comfortable in Euriel's demesnes. They moved in and glanced into the sitting area and study.

Wren gritted her teeth, the pain in her side was getting worse. Her mother had pulverized her good. She studied the woman standing in the shadows behind the trellis. She felt Euriel's confusion, sensed the tension in her body.

The guards moved in a hurried fashion, acting like people in a place they shouldn't be. Finishing their minimal examination, they glanced at one another with a shrug, and made a hasty retreat from the area.

When they were well out of sight, Euriel first cast a warning look to Ziedra, then hooked a finger in Wren's tunic and pulled her close. "Explain--*now*."

"I'm your daughter. The *real* one."

"My real--daughter." The woman's brow furrowed. "That is what you have been babbling all along."

"Mother, Mishaka took me away from you a long time ago. It's taken me this long to find my way back."

"Mish--" She didn't finish the name. She gritted her teeth, hand scrubbing the spot on her brow where the gem had been.

"You and Father have been under her power for I don't know how many seasons. Azir has been trying to get you out for quite some time. He was here with a friend. I think he was captured because he disappeared. It's all been a mess..."

Euriel held up a hand. "Stop."

Wren stopped.

"Was that you I heard in my head?"

She nodded.

The Baroness looked at Ziedra. "If either of you move, I shall hurt you both. I still do not know if this is some grand farce or the truth. I plan to find out though." She dropped her chin, deep blue eyes boring into Wren's. "Will you let me?"

Wren nodded again.

Euriel let go of both of them. Gently, she cupped Wren's face in her hands. Her fingers felt feverishly warm.

Wren opened her mind to her.

With a sigh, Euriel bowed her head so their brows touched. A tingling went through Wren's body, and she experienced a twinge where she felt her savant power. A reddish mist seemed to swarm and pulse around her, memories spinning out from the depths of her mind in long glistening threads that unfurled like glowing holiday banners. It was like the time Corona had joined Desiray and herself. Recollections coursed between them, events, places and people. How was her mother doing this? It was so much. Even the last few seasons were a lot. In the storm of imagery, she sensed her mother focusing on figures-- Mishaka, Hethanon, Desiray, Cassandra, Loric, Dorian, Ziedra, Gaea...

The flood of experiences slowed as her mother seemed to realize that simply too much had happened in recent memory to make sense of it all. The probe seemed to focus on specific events. After shining through her mind like a search lantern it focused on the scene in the street outside the manor. The snarling visage of Hethanon stood before his band of fanatics. His words stung the brisk air in his harsh glass-crunching rasp. *I gave your stubborn bitch of a mother over to Mishaka, and thought you long succorund. Guess I'll just have to make sure its done right this time...*

Euriel jerked her hands away from Wren's face as though burned. She leaned away, head bowed and arms wrapped around herself as though to keep warm. Body trembling, she shook her head as if unwilling to accept everything she had seen.

Wren rubbed her forehead, feeling the moisture where they had touched. She swallowed. That was a lot to take. Who wanted to find out that whole cycles of their lives had been stolen from them? Wren remembered not being very happy about the illusions shattered in her own life.

"Are you okay--?" Wren asked, putting hand on her mother's shoulder.

The Baroness flinched, glassy eyes tracking to Wren's hand. The woman let out a shuddering breath. The lines of her face hardened and she seemed to compose herself.

Another twinge jagged through Wren's side. She gritted her teeth trying to keep her knees locked against the pain. That beating was really catching up to her. The agony won and Wren's legs buckled, she fell against the wall and slid down.

Euriel's flat expression became one of concern. "Oh damn, Liandra--" She dropped to her knees. "Od's blood, I almost killed you." She put her arms around her and pulled her close.

Wren groaned. "It's okay, Mother--urgh. Just call it credit against the next thousand things I do wrong."

The older woman sighed. "Child, you are too hurt to be making jests." She looked up to the dancer. "You are Ziedra, correct?"

The woman nodded.

"For now, all I can do is apologize for my actions." She bowed her head. "I did you hurt as well, thankfully much less than I intended." The Baroness held out her hand.

Dark eyes wide, Ziedra took Euriel's hand in both of hers and dipped her head. "Excellency."

Euriel smiled. "Help me with Liandra, I need to get her in some light to examine those injuries."

"Mother, we don't have time," Wren moaned. "Just get us out of here to the temple of Meliekki."

"We have time," Euriel growled. "I will make the time. If Mishaka walks in on us, I will turn the bitch inside-out." She looked to Ziedra. "Come." She stepped around, crouched and pulled Wren's arm around her neck. "Get her under the hip. Her ribs are probably broken."

Ziedra bent down next to Wren and pulled her arm around her neck.

"Why is it," Wren grumbled. "That I'm always the one who gets injured the worst?"

"Because you've got more heroism than common sense," Ziedra snapped.

Together Ziedra and Euriel toted Wren across the hall to Euriel's sitting room. The area was a plush carpeted chamber made for entertaining guests, several divans nestled between carved wooden pillars sat in a semi-circle near the center. A long panoramic painting of a massive battle with winged maidens flying overhead decorated the back wall. A large painting of an exquisitely beautiful gold-haired woman looking out a window toward a rainbow took up most of another wall. Given the size and positioning of that picture, Wren guessed that figure was someone important to Euriel. Could that be Idun, Euriel's mother, and her grand mother?

She grunted as they set her down on one of the divans. Euriel quickly began unbuttoning Wren's surcoat.

"Mother... we really don't have time for this."

Euriel scowled at her. "Let me worry about that. What is at the temple of Meliekki anyway?"

"Allies. I'm hoping Laramis and Irodee will be there. Stark may be there as well."

Euriel's brow furrowed. "Captain Stark?"

Wren nodded.

Euriel and Ziedra gingerly coaxed the coat down off Wren's arms. Pushing the silk slip up, she probed the swollen and discolored surface of Wren's rib-cage. The older woman gritted her teeth in empathy. "Oh ow, Baby, I am so sorry. I wish you had taken more after me than your father."

"Believe me, I've wished the very same thing more than once," Wren groaned.

Euriel's brow furrowed, running her fingers across the jewels dotting the surface of Wren's skin. "What is this, a war-web?"

"Malanian war-web," Ziedra filled in.

Euriel raised an eyebrow. "How did you get those? The T'Evagdurans let perhaps a handful of those out of Malan every decade or so."

"I got the impression from the dealer that perhaps they weren't exactly legitimate purchases."

Euriel nodded. "I should think not." She ran a hand across Wren's forehead, her fingers riffling through her hair. "Well, that armor is all that's holding you together. Regular healing potion will do nothing for this." She closed her eyes, and dipped her face close to Wren's. "I apologize for our fight. Thank you for getting that wretched bitch's magic off me." She stroked the side of Wren's face. "I promise to make it up to you."

"Just getting us out of this alive will be enough," Wren groaned. "We've got two avatars, and who knows what else to deal with."

The baroness put a finger on Wren's chin. "One villain at a time. Right now our enemy is your injury. The temple of Meliekki will serve us in that regard." She frowned. "The question is what to do about your father. He remains under that bitch's control."

"I don't understand," Ziedra said. "Mishaka had us. Why did she just throw Wren and I in the dungeon rather than take us to Hecate."

"I had her occupied some of that time," Euriel said with a frown. "She had to explain why half my elite guard is dead in the street out front, and the rest run off." The Baroness shook her head. "Then there was the 'kidnapping' of Liandra and the disguised infiltrator..." Her voice trailed off. "Od take her. The flop I allowed myself to believe. It makes me ill."

"Mother, you were under a spell," Wren protested.

"I should have broken it," Euriel answered in stern voice. "I am Aesir."

"Still," Ziedra pressed. "She had enough time to take us away from here so she wouldn't have to risk a rescue attempt."

The blonde woman pressed her lips to a line. "There has been a strange distortion in the ether the last few days. It has been preventing teleportation in and out of the city. People can still leave by the portal systems outside the wall though."

"I can see her not wanting to risk transporting us any distance," Wren said. "Too much chance of reprisal. She doesn't know if Loric has discovered this place or not."

"Do we know he hasn't?" Ziedra asked. "With the whole city blocked like that."

"I don't think he can do that. Your aunt though... *she* can do it."

Euriel pushed out her lip and glanced sidelong at Ziedra. "It is still hazy, I picked up so many memories from Wren. You are the niece of Aarlen Frielos?"

Ziedra nodded. "So she says."

"And that's why the two of you are wearing her work on your ears?"

Reflexively, Wren reached up and touched the earring. In all the tension, it never occurred to her that Mishaka hadn't taken it away from her.

"In a manner of speaking," Ziedra said. "How did you know it was hers?"

"That is the festoon of women of royal family of the fourth alliance. I've dealt with them on a few occasions. It is very distinctive." She looked at Wren. "Am I to understand the Frielos are *against* Hecate now?"

"Mostly on my account," Wren answered.

Euriel rubbed the bridge of her nose. "This is too much to absorb. I need time. You need healing. Let us get this back on you." She and Ziedra carefully assisted Wren back into her coat.

"So," Ziedra asked, standing up. "We just walk out of here?"

"I think it best we use more expedient means. There is quite a furious search going on below. If the two of you are--" She jerked and looked around. "Damn." She scooped Wren up in her arms, leaped over the divan, and slid to stop in the corner of the room. She deposited Wren in a pile of pillows and pulled a floor screen over to block the area from view. She grabbed Ziedra and pushed her down close to Wren.

The Baroness made a gesture that sent a cascade of golden sparkles washing over the area where they sat. Wren noticed the air all around them shimmered as though they were looking through a bubble of water.

In the distance, Wren heard the distinct clack of hard boots on stone growing closer.

Euriel closed her eyes and passed a hand over her features. The burn on her forehead vanished, and the triangular jewel Wren had shattered appeared on her brow. The woman moved purposefully to a nearby bookcase, snatched out a book, flipped it open and settled in a chair as a figure turned the corner into sitting area.

Wren felt a familiar skin prickling sensation. Sucking a breath, she gripped Ziedra's shoulder.

The boots clacked to a stop. Through the thin paper of the screen, Wren could make out a silhouette of a figure in high heel riding boots.

"Euriel," a harsh feminine voice asked. "What are you doing here?"

She swallowed. There was no doubt. That was the deep, edgy voice of Mishaka.
"What does it appear that I am doing?" Euriel growled. She smacked the book in her lap.

Wren felt the tension sizzling in the room.

"You should be down stairs aiding in the search," Mishaka rumbled.

"For the prisoners that you were supposed to be taking care of? You specifically told me to leave the matter to you." She paused, and Wren could feel her mother's intensity. "*That*--I have done. What have you done about finding my *real* daughter?"

Mishaka growled. "The investigation progresses."

"Does it? Have you thought to hunt down those cultists who sit on our doorstep? They are the likely culprits."

The avatar drew herself up. Wren heard the tines of the flaying whip she carried strike the leather of her boots. "I assure you, they are not the authors of this particular crime."

"And what of my son?"

The avatar slapped her hip. "I have told you before, we are looking for him."

"So you have said," Euriel growled. "Now, both my children are missing. When you took charge of security, was this not the kind of thing you were supposed to prevent?"

"Yes."

"Then, might I suggest you do your job? Otherwise, if you cannot muster the competence, I shall look for them myself."

A brittle silence ensued. Wren couldn't see the glares being exchanged but she felt the tension in the air. She heard a hand tightening and loosening in a glove. Mishaka wanted to smite Euriel. She felt certain her mother would welcome the excuse to fight.

"That will not be necessary," Mishaka rasped. "They will be found." The avatar paused.

Ziedra abruptly wrapped her arms around Wren. Instants later she felt a crawling sensation play across her body, the same one that she'd felt near the guard station.

Wren heard the avatar snort and smack her lash on the floor.

"Is there something else, Mishaka?" Euriel prompted. "I am *certain* there are things you should be doing."

There was another tooth-grinding moment as Wren felt Mishaka's glare focusing directly on them.

"Yes," Mishaka muttered in flat tone, turning away. Wren heard the clack of the avatar's boots recede.

They stayed quiet until the footsteps were long out of hearing.

"She has left," Euriel said, pulling the screen away. "We should be safe. I thought sure she had caught you. I felt her cut right through my cloaking magicks."

"I shielded us," Ziedra said, sitting up.

"How?"

"It's a talent."

"Ah, you mean a talent like Liandra's."

The dancer nodded, standing up.

"An ishtar nola?"

Ziedra nodded again.

"She's pretty handy to have around when she's not getting into trouble," Wren said with a grin.

The dancer put hands on hips. "When /'m not getting into trouble?" She looked to Euriel and pointed to Wren. "This girl of yours--I have never heard of someone who gets into more bad spots."

The Baroness grinned. "And you love her dearly, I can tell."

Ziedra's cheeks colored. "Well..."

"I am glad Wren found such a good friend that you would risk so much for her. You have our family's thanks and our highest regard." She bent down and gathered Wren up in her arms.

"Mother," Wren protested. "I'm not a baby, I can walk."

"You just hold around my neck and hush," Euriel told her in a firm tone, walking out of the chamber toward the passage. "You hardly weigh anything. You are little more than skin and bone. Do they not feed you anything where you live?"

Walking along next to them Ziedra laughed. "She eats like a horse and trains like a demon. If she's not whacking something with a sword, she's breaking her knuckles on blocks of wood."

Euriel turned her head and smiled down at Wren. "I experienced some of that training rather acutely. Worthy blows if ever ones were struck." She shook her head. "I must laud your trainers. The Liandra we have had under our roof these cycles has been something of a disappointment. She was--is--a--a--"

"A priss?" Ziedra tried.

"A priss!" Euriel nodded. "Exactly. More concerned with clothing and primping than discipline. It is to my great pleasure that I discover my true issue is a girl with a spine."

"A broken one anyway." She grimaced, and shook her head. "Mother, I can't believe you're thrilled that your own daughter pounded on you."

They rounded a corner into a colonnade. Wooden columns carved with interlocking patterns that featured human, animal, and demonic appearing faces rose from floor to ceiling here. Three stylized boats hung between the columns, their hulls carved with runes and inscriptions. A giant stylized tree with twelve branches had been engraved into the floor in the center of the hall, the edges of the carving gilded in gold, and the hollows filled with a mixture of glass and silver dust. Light streamed into the chamber through stained glass windows that cast rainbows of color across the tree engraving, making the silver and glass sparkle and flash.

"You do not know the despair I felt over that other girl." She frowned, stopping in the center of the tree emblem, and the light streaming in from outside. "Do you think she is still alive?"

"Probably," Wren said. "I broke her out of the dungeon myself. If Mishaka was still hunting, then maybe she got out." She looked around at the decorations. She felt sure much of it was tied to her mother's Aesir heritage. A pair of large doors opened out from this area, presumably to the balcony that Liandra mentioned.

Euriel started walking in that direction. If she was burdened by Wren's weight even in the slightest, she had not shown it.

"In any event, she and I have a reckoning for her part in Mishaka's duplicity."

"Mother, she's just as much a victim in this as us."

"A victim perhaps, but a little too comfortable in her role. Ziedra, if you would get the door."

Turning the ring and pulling one of the huge wooden portals open with a creak, the dancer looked around the railed balcony. "What are we going to do? Fly out of here?"

"In a manner of speaking." She looked to Wren. "My Dear, I shall need my arms now."

With Ziedra's assistance she settled Wren on her feet. Even that little bit of jostling sent shrieks of pain through her sides. How Euriel had managed to carry her all that way without making her scream was a feat she could only attribute to a mother. Hobbling a bit, Wren leaned on the dark-haired dancer and glanced around the compound and up to the two towers that loomed over them on the right and left.

Euriel looked to the tower on her right and raised her arms, tracing a star-like pattern in the air and chanting a short phrase. Instants later something flashed out of one of the tower windows high up the structure and arced down toward them. As the object grew closer Wren saw it was flat and rectangular in shape.

"Whoa, a flying carpet," Ziedra said, as the blue patterned rug settled at their feet. Appropriately, patterns of clouds and birds had been stitched into the fabric. Her excitement ended abruptly. "Wait are we...???"

"Did you think we would walk?"

"But--"

"Damn, Zee," Wren chided. "With the way you're afraid of heights, no-one would ever know your mother was a cloud walker."

Ziedra gritted her teeth and stepped onto the carpet.

"If you are not used to flying, I recommend you sit. Take hold of an edge."

Brow furrowed, Ziedra settled herself and Wren on the thick padded material.

Euriel stepped onto the carpet, and glanced at the two of them. "Ready?"

Wren took hold with both hands and leaned forward. Something told her this would not be fun.

Ziedra had both hands clamped white knuckle on the edges, body leaned forward.

"Here we go." Euriel made a gesture and a pulsation vibrated through the fabric. Sparkles shimmered on the surface of the golden threads woven through the rug, a faint rush of wind spiraled around them.

Wren's heart speeded as she felt the padded square beneath them stiffen and start to move.

Euriel raised a hand in front of her and as she did so the carpet surged underneath them, rising a short distance off the balcony.

Ziedra made an uncomfortable sound, eyes clenched tight.

The Baroness made an arcing gesture and the carpet swayed, nosed up, and hummed forward. Wren's stomach tightened and she felt the breeze kick against her face as the magic device accelerated forward out over the courtyard.

She looked down over the edge. Several figures were looking up to watch them leave.

One though made her heart freeze. She saw the flash of flaming red eyes, and a spark of recognition. A tall spidery figure dressed in dark cloak the color of a bone-bruise.

Wren felt the snarl sting the atmosphere at their backs.

Hethanon had seen them.

It didn't take me long to learn to like Euriel. In no time at all she was like a second mother. In all truth, I think I get along better with her than Wren does...

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 59

The Precincts of Meliekki

As the carpet hummed out over the city-scape, Wren felt a cold chill run through every limb. The frosty wind blowing in her face and hair didn't help, as she looked back to the courtyard dwindling behind them where Hethanon had been watching. In the instants that followed, she half expected a burst of lightning to follow them into the sky. None came.

"That was not good," Wren breathed. "Not good at all."

Hands raised as though holding invisible reins, her Mother looked back, heavy braid flipping in the wind. "What isn't?"

"Hethanon was in the courtyard," Wren explained. "He saw us leave."

Euriel shrugged. "So?"

Wren felt a twinge at her Mother's relaxed attitude. "So? Father is still in there! So is Azir probably."

"And a number of other good people you do not remember," Euriel added, blue eyes hard. Wren could tell then that it wasn't that she was unmoved, more that she was resigned. "He will tell Mishaka, and she will have a fit. She would be very unwise to try to take it out on Vanidaar, your father." She shook her head. "No, she has enough sense to dig in and try to use him against us. She may even make a duplicate of myself as she did with you." She drew a breath. "We will deal with it. No sense crying until we take stock of all our options." Her gaze locked on Wren's. "Have courage. Think of it this way--" She grinned. "You don't have to fight me again."

Wren had to smile. "Thank Gaea for that." Her brow furrowed. "How tough *is* my Father?"

Euriel pursed her lips. "Leave us say that he is not one to lightly brace."

"Well, neither are you," Wren remarked. "I have the broken bones to prove it."

"In physical battle, it would not be a contest. War magick is your father's bailiwick. In that realm, I am not his peer."

"Good thing we have a savant of magic with us. Right, Zee?" When the woman didn't answer, she looked over at her friend. "Zee--?"

The dancer clung to side of the carpet hands white-knuckled, dark hair whipping in the wind, teeth chattering, and eyes closed. Wren glanced down to the buildings hissing underneath them and out to the horizon. Cosmodarus when seen from high up like this was even more spectacular, a virtual sea of buildings and plazas seething with people, wagons, and animals. It was hard to believe that something so big and complex could even exist. She put a hand on Ziedra's arm. "Zee, come on, open your eyes, its beautiful. This is nothing. Try flying with Dorian, with the wind howling in your ears and your eyeballs pushed into the back of your head. Then go whip-lashing down the alleys between the buildings kissing the cornices and blowing the dresses off harlots."

"Nooo, *thank* you!" Ziedra gritted in response.

"Say not," Euriel said, brow furrowed. "You must be exaggerating, Child."

Wren shook her head. "Oh no. You would not believe how fast we were flying. We went from the ground to a thousand paces up in a couple snaps of your fingers. All the people in the hunt were crazy fast. A horse full out on a flat road--that's a *crawl*."

"The hunt?" Euriel looked back with surprise. "The Frielos hunt? You participated?"

"I did better than that--" She shook her fist. Feeling the first pride over that harrowing experience. "I won!"

"By Od!" Euriel let out. "And I missed it." She growled. "It pains my heart. Damn, Mishaka. Damn that bitch to the deepest abyss. She will pay for taking you from me." She shook her head. "I would fight an army to see my girl at such sport."

"If we survive this mess," Wren answered. "You may still get to see it. I think Ziedra has a memory stone of the whole game among the things we left with the Felspars." She touched Ziedra on the shoulder. "Zee?"

"Yes," the woman opened one eye, glanced at Wren, peeked toward the far away ground and shut it again. "Yes, I have one."

"Good," Euriel said. "I shall make that a goal to look forward to. To see my daughter's grand victory in the great hunt. What did you win by surmounting this massive challenge?"

Wren rolled her eyes. "Well... Aarlen offered some really nice prizes. Let's see one was, let me see if I can get this right: a set of Geldarin shape-shifting blades with sun-stone battle hilts and Talaturn stealth scabbards."

"Oooh." Her mother breathed, eyes wide.

"The other was the complete something-turgic works of Del-somebody or other."

Her mother looked back. "Deltarrn?"

"Yes, that's it."

"By Od, the complete thaumaturgic works of Deltarrn?" She gasped. "Incredible. Was there something else? Obviously, you didn't get either of those two."

"Yes, the Frielos family would pay off any debt owed to a single entity, no matter how large."

Euriel's brow furrowed. "Did you owe someone?"

"I owed the Ice Falcon. The pact between the Frielos family and Hecate was broken on my account. I asked that the grudge between us be cleared."

"By Yggdrasil, Child." Euriel said with a shake of her head. "It is like some epic of the scalds. So much has been happening to you, I suspect I shall be days hearing it all."

"And I'll be seasons recovering from it," Ziedra grumbled.

"Hey, you," Wren poked the dancer. "I told you to stay home. You refused to hear any such thing."

Ziedra snorted. "That's because you've had a death wish. Someone had to keep you from throwing your life away."

"Whaaat!?" Wren gasped. "Take that back."

The dancer shook her head. "I will not. You've been so crossed up, Wren. You were ready to die to keep from having to choose. Afraid you might succeed."

"I--" Wren sputtered.

Euriel focused on Ziedra. "Has she been so despondent?"

"She's been through a lot, she lost one family and is afraid of losing another--"

"Zee, hush--"

"Milady, there's more but I will have to tell you when she can't throw me off the carpet."

"Damn you, I may throw you off anyways," Wren growled.

"No worries, Ziedra," Euriel said. "We are almost down at any rate. I will be interested to hear what has my daughter so conflicted."

"Mother, please."

Euriel gestured and the carpet angled down. Below them was a large plaza divided into four squares by the intersection of two wide canals. Scalebark trees lined the

canals, and surrounded a park-like area that formed a low flat hill surrounded by hedges. The rise itself was crowned with a circle of white-barked trees whose boles and branches seemed to be braided together. A ring-shaped structure that seemed to be formed of earth and stone thrust up out of the hilltop, the high veined walls shrouded in vines. The stone gates of the courtyard were closed, but the yard itself still lay open to the sky. The Baroness steered the carpet toward the opening.

Her mother glanced back. "Child, I was teasing." She focused back on her flying. "However, your friend spoke with the voice of true concern." The woman sighed as they slowed over the courtyard and began to gradually drop down. "I have admired this place from without for many cycles. This shall be my first occasion to visit."

Inside the courtyard, fountains spilled into two deep cisterns. Half a dozen women dressed in different colors worked around the two pools, scrubbing clothes, sewing, and doing other chores.

As the carpet hushed into the yard kicking up eddies of dust, they all rose from their work to turn and watch them land. While the women did not appear alarmed, Wren saw a look of concern written in some of their faces. It wasn't until they were on the ground that the gasps of recognition filtered through the group, whispers of 'the Baroness', 'Dame Kergatha', and 'Mistress of the Manor'.

Ziedra stood next to Wren, stepping off the carpet as though her feet were on fire.

The area had the scent of fertile soil and growing things, mingled with a hint of herbal incense. Wind chimes tinkled faintly accompanying the frothing of fountains. A grassy area was set aside in one corner with tie-posts and water troughs for mounts. Near those accommodations was a small outdoor shrine with two voluptuous effigies to Meliekki.

Wren tried to get up, but found herself insufficient to the task. No matter how she shifted, her injured ribs shrieked with such intensity that she simply didn't have the will to move any more.

Dressed in a deep blue pull-up bustier, and a white open-front blouse with ruffled sleeves, a heavy bodied woman of middle age with deep auburn hair swayed forward from the further cistern. Her cherubic face with its large dark eyes and broad mouth had an inviting sincerity. Wren would not have taken much more note of the lady except for the extraordinary roll in her movements. The woman's bodice would have done credit to a pair of catapult slings.

The buxom woman bowed to Euriel, showing enough cleavage to hide a cat. Wren thought for sure she would topple over from sheer mammary mass. "The enclave of Meliekki welcomes you, Baroness," the auburn-haired lady said in a pleasant drawl. "I am maiden Linna, how may I serve your Excellency?"

"Maiden Linna is it?" Euriel responded. At the woman's nod, Euriel smiled. "I am honored by your reverent greeting, good priestess. If you would, please consider this visit a cordial homage to your patron." She made a sweeping bow that showed both style and respect. "We have great need of her august blessings and your kind forbearance."

Sitting on the carpet, Wren blinked. After her mother's rough demeanor and war-like ways, she would not have thought her capable of such silky diplomacy. The gentle words rolled off her tongue in what was obviously a practiced courtly decorum.

Priestess Linna was obviously just as surprised by Euriel's courtesy, cheeks flushing. "You do us honor, Honorable Lady," she said, touching her forehead and bowing again.

"Good Linna," Euriel said. "Might I request that this visit be kept in the strictest confidence. For our current needs, titles will be little more than an impediment. In any regard, are we not all sisters in the flesh in Her eyes?" She gave a reverent

glance skyward, using both hands to touch her forehead, then bringing them to her chest and abdomen with a flourish, and bending a knee toward the priestess.

Linna blinked, hand pressed to her chest in bewilderment. "Yes, yes--Dame Kergatha." She grinned in obvious relief and pleasure. "Indeed it is so. How may we assist?"

Ziedra bent down next to Wren and whispered in her ear. There was earnest respect in her voice. "Whoa, your mother is smooth."

Wren nodded.

"I apologize for not having any nectar from the vine to donate, but we were pressed for time." She turned and gestured to Wren. "My daughter has been seriously injured and is in need of curing. Her friend also has wounds that need mending."

"Of course," Linna answered with a nod. "We shall provide."

"Maiden Linna?" Wren said.

The priestess looked to her. "Yes, my Child?"

"We were directed to tell you that we serve with Sir Laramis De'Falcone, and that his courtesies would be ours."

Linna raised an eyebrow and glanced to Euriel who nodded. She pushed out her lower lip. "Indeed?" The woman nodded. "Well, he is a welcome guest within our walls and is only just returned with a plentitude of injuries himself." She frowned. "Strange, he had a girl with him that had much your semblance."

"Is that so?" Euriel growled. "We shall wish to see her as soon as we have attended to these other pressing matters. Now, if you could lead us to a place of curing, my daughter is in need of immediate care. She puts on a brave face, but is in a great deal of pain."

"Immediately, Dama," Linna said with nod, gesturing to two of the other priestesses. "Vindel and Uud will guide you."

Euriel and Ziedra crouched near Wren, getting her arms around their necks and hoisting her up.

"Argh," she grunted. Just that little movement made her vision flicker and dim. "Damn, it hurts just to breathe."

"The wounds are stiffening up, and you may have some internal bleeding," Euriel said. "They can fix you up here. I have heard good things about the healers of Meliekki."

Vindel was a chunky red-haired woman dressed in deep green, the other woman Uud, had shiny russet-brown skin that glistened in the sun-light. She too, while not exactly fat, would never be confused with being slender.

Though Vindel and Uud had been chosen to be their guides, the whole entourage from the courtyard escorted them through the main doors of the temple, and into the broad halls beyond. Living trees managed with great topiary skills made up much of the internal structure, growing up through the ceilings and giving the feeling that a viewer was beneath a dense forest canopy rather than in a building.

Trying to focus away from the pain burning in her sides, Wren looked around at the serene faces of the priestesses and their copious bodies. Most had flowers woven into their hair or in wreaths around their necks. They did not appear to be from any one specific region or culture, because some like Uud had dark skin, and others like Vindel were fair. The one thing they shared in common was they all looked extremely well fed and bouncy. It was obvious that the faith didn't involve much abstention from worldly pleasures.

She leaned close to whisper in Ziedra's ear. "What is Meliekki? The goddess of breast enlargement? Look at these girls! It sure explains why Laramis was so thrilled to come here."

"Shhh!" Ziedra hissed, speaking in a low whisper. "It's a fertility cult."

She stumbled and caught herself with a wince. She hoped they didn't have to go far. She needed to lie down. Lords she hurt. The pain was making her dizzy. Wren grimaced. "Fertility? So?"

"So? That's one sign of a woman's fertility, Silly. I hear they have some ritual, bathing in 'maiden's milk' or some such that is supposed to give them greater 'endowments'."

Wren looked around and shook her head. "Damn, it must work. I mean, how fertile does a girl have to be anyway?" She sighed. "Most men I've met, a smooth face, two eggs under your blouse and a hip wiggle will get you married."

"Yes, but is that the kind of man you want to marry?" her mother asked her.

"The kind of man I'd marry doesn't notice my breasts before the rest of me," Wren answered.

They turned a corner and their two guides opened a pair of double doors for them. Beyond, the passage opened into a sizeable hall that probably served as a temple commons. Relief carvings of Meliekki's worshippers with their arms raised in supplication gave character to the walls. Several more priestesses and the first men Wren had seen occupied some of the colorful cushions surrounding a dozen low circular tables. Yellow-barked trees stood sentinel over each table, lanterns and banners hanging from their branches.

The group passed through with many nods, greetings, and courtesies being exchanged between Meliekki's faithful.

"The infirmary is just down the hall," the one Linna had indicated as Uud said.

"Thank you," Euriel said.

"Anyways," Ziedra said, returning to their original topic. "Where men and chests are concerned. Show me a man who doesn't look down your blouse, and I'll show you a man who isn't interested in women."

Wren frowned at her. "Jharon never did that to me."

The dancer winced. "Oh. Well, a gentleman is a gentleman because they're sly about not getting caught at it."

"Jharon?" Euriel asked.

"A very dear--*friend*," Wren answered. Damn, it still hurt to even think about him that way. "I--" She swallowed. "Mishaka killed him."

Euriel closed her eyes and bit her lip. "Oh, I am so sorry, Baby. I did not know."

She nodded. "I have a lot to pay that witch back for--her and Hethanon both." Her foot caught in a crack on the floor, sending a jolt of agony through her body. She let out a yell that made the otherwise quiet group jump. With her arms around Euriel and Ziedra, she could only bow her head and grit her teeth. "Gah, could we hurry... I'm dying here."

"Apologies, Damsel," dark-skinned Uud said. "Just in here." She opened a large door, and gestured them inside.

They stepped into a circular chamber that reminded Wren of a miniature amphitheater. Standing adjacent one another were four massive caryatids fashioned into the likenesses of voluptuous Meliekki in her roles as maiden, mother, care giver, and conciliator all with their arms raised to the sky and supporting the high domed roof. Instead of beds, two levels of the five tiers were raised daises where the entire surface was covered with a thick watercloth mattress. There were moveable screens placed throughout the chamber to provide some minimal privacy, but it was obviously a secondary concern. The bottom two tiers appeared dedicated to supplies of curatives, various tools and other amenities.

"Place her there," Uud told them, pointing to down the ramp to the lowest level of bedding. "I will get her an anodyne for the pain."

Euriel and Ziedra placed her on the soft padding. She grunted and groaned as they helped her to lie back. Reclining lessened the pain somewhat. "Oh owwww." She murmured. "Last time I hurt this much you were toting me around with that glove, Zee."

The dancer put a hand on her shoulder and grinned. "I loved it to." She wiggled her eyebrows. "I had you totally under my power."

"You can have any power you like if you can make it stop hurting."

The dancer bit her lip. "Guess I need to learn healing magic next."

Linna who had brought up the rear of the procession swayed to a stop by Euriel. "Dama, if you don't mind, I will tend her myself."

Euriel nodded.

Linna rolled over and knelt by Wren. She touched Wren's brow, and brought her fingers to Wren's cheek. "Meliekki can provide for you, my Child, but I cannot promise it will be without pain."

Wren nodded.

"I must remove your upper garments, to do my work," she said.

"Urgh," Wren started to push herself up.

"No no, lie still," Linna said, pushing her back down. With deft fingers she unbuttoned the surcoat. Taking the shoulders of coat in her hands she bowed her head, then went into a sing-songy chant that sent ripples of light flickering down her arms and across her fingers into the cloth. With a sharp word and flourish, she heaved up on the material at the same time rising to her feet. Wren felt a strange tingling sensation as the silver and black heavy cloth surcoat rippled and glowed, then seemed to pass right through her. Over Wren's head, the priestess snapped the coat as though shaking out the wrinkles.

"Oooh," Ziedra breathed. "I like that."

"There's certain situations where getting out of your clothes quickly is desirable," the priestess said with a smile. "Obviously, it has its practical applications as well."

She pushed up Wren's slip, finger's immensely delicate on the surface of her skin. The woman's dark eyes narrowed. "Aie, this is serious indeed. There are multiple fractures." She nudged the jewels dotting the surface of Wren's skin with a long fingernail. "Pray, what are these?"

"War-web," Euriel told her. "It is a thin mesh that magically binds with the flesh for concealment."

"Hmmm," Linna pursed her lips. "The bones while broken have not slipped when they otherwise might. I dare that is all that kept her from some serious internal injury." She shook her head and looked to Euriel. "These kinds of injuries are tricky to treat even with magic."

"What do you suggest?"

"Well, it depends. I have a concoction called 'stonebones' that will fuse fractures. It is very harsh though."

"I'm familiar with it," Euriel said. "I have taken it on the battlefield. It is very effective, but as you say--*harsh*."

Wren looked up at her mother. "How harsh?"

The woman grimaced obviously thinking about the experience. "It feels like demons are eating your insides for at least a good quarter bell."

"What is the alternative?"

"I have several kinds of bone knitters most of which only involve some minor discomfort. The healing is slow however. Your bones would be soft for the better part of three days at least."

"Soft meaning what?"

"Meaning you'll break in a strong wind," Euriel said. "Bone softeners do just like it sounds." She put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Baby, you don't have to rush, I can move forward without your assistance. The die is already cast."

"Like Hades, I am not going to be lying here when Mishaka gets properly pounded."

"Mishaka?" Linna said going pale. "The avatar of Hecate?"

"Yes," Euriel said. "She has decided to make herself an unwelcome guest in the manor. She has also been keeping company with another vile creature, Hethanon of Set."

The priestess swallowed. "Dama, you speak of powerful evil, and we are but a small sect with little defensive capability. Please say you will be careful and not involve us in this conflict. We are more than happy to assist you in matters of healing and shelter, but we can provide little aide beyond that."

"I understand," Euriel responded with a nod. "Now you understand our need to keep our presence confidential."

"Indeed, Dama Kergatha," the buxom woman answered with a heavy sigh. "It is all painfully clear to me." She turned back to Wren. "How would you like me to proceed?"

"If it's a difference of three days," Wren grumbled. "Damn the pain. If my mother can handle it," she looked up at Euriel. "I can. Use the stonebones."

The Baroness raised an eyebrow. She ran a hand through Wren's hair and smiled. "How could anyone doubt that you're my daughter?"

Chapter 60

The Stonebones Ordeal

Wren lay back staring up at the domed roof of the infirmary. The place smelled of something caustic covered up with herbs and incense. She heard the bustle of the priestesses down in the infirmary core, fussing with herbs, minerals, and components. Uud was still working on an anodyne for her, and Linna was fashioning the stonebones compound for her to take. She concentrated on keeping her breathing shallow against the pain. It made her focus on the strength of the lady who reclined by her with a hand on her shoulder. Wren had been using every iota of her savant power to shield herself and Euriel still almost shattered her spine. Obviously, she needed a lot more practice with the nola, but the results of their fight testified more to Dame Kergatha's amazing qualities. Could she really be her mother?

Since they met, she had been calling her 'Mother'. Every time she said it, she felt self-conscious. Why though? Even Hethanon and Mishaka were witnesses to her being the child of the Baroness. There was more than a passing similarity between herself and the blonde woman sitting by her. Loric had true-spoke her as being the daughter of Euriel Idun-daughter. There was the phoenix amulet with the name Liandra engraved on it, and even the girl created to impersonate her. All of that pointed to it being true. She really was Liandra Kergatha, daughter of Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha. Why then did it not feel right? Shouldn't she be overjoyed? She had succeeded, at least in part. That was something nobody thought was possible. In fact, she had overcome in a situation, that in retrospect, amazed even herself. She had gotten out of that cell. It was a tribute to her own stubborn determination to succeed.

Euriel brushed the hair off Wren's forehead, her deep blue eyes expressing concern and curiosity. "What troubles you, Child? I know it is not the pain. I sense you are no stranger to that."

She sighed. "You have that right. I--" She paused. Best just to spit it out. "Do you really think I'm your daughter?"

Euriel's brow furrowed. The fingers playing on Wren's forehead stopped their idle movement. "If you did not think I was your Mother, didn't you take a horrible risk?"

Wren swallowed, she just continued to stare up at Euriel.

"You let me into your mind."

Wren nodded.

The woman pursed her lips. "Have I said anything to make you think I don't accept you as my daughter?"

"No. In fact, you fell into it..."

"Too easily, perhaps?" Euriel finished.

Wren nodded.

The older blonde woman sighed. "This is truth, I immediately felt at ease with you. Especially after you let me touch your thoughts. Only someone truly desperate for acceptance would do that."

She frowned. Her mother had a way of pinpointing sore spots.

"Aside from the fact you're older than the child I have been raising there are many things I notice: The way you hold your chin. The fierce glint in your eyes when you consider an enemy. The way you cover your discomfort and passion for your friends

with jests." Euriel looked down a smile playing across her features. "I'm old enough to recognize myself in the mirror."

"But you didn't raise me."

"For eight cycles I did. Li, you may not remember your childhood, but I do. Most of what you would become, you already are by that age." She rubbed Wren's cheek and leaned close and said in a conspiratorial voice. "You were already headstrong, stubborn, and picked on your older brother mercilessly. However you were raised did not keep you from being unmistakably my daughter. I guess what they say is true-- blood tells."

"Maybe," Wren said speculatively.

"What is this past that you are so afraid I will not approve of? Who are these other mothers you have come to accept in my stead?"

"Should we be talking about this now?"

"When better? If I am going to put my life in your hands, and you mine, shouldn't we know each other? You are not a baby anymore, though it is a mother's prerogative to call you that. You do not mind, do you?"

Wren shook her head. She smiled after a moment. "Actually, I kind of like it."

Euriel grinned. "Good." She drew a breath. "I know we are new to each other. You do not have to speak of it, if it is not your desire."

"I--" She stopped. What would Euriel think? Her thoughts flashed to the courtyard and the way she had mollified the priestess with courtesies.

"It must be this guild mark," Euriel said, rubbing a spot on Wren's neck. "You've worn it so long you've probably forgotten it's pretty obvious--especially when you don't have a blouse on."

"Uhhh," she didn't know what to say.

A movement caught her eye. She noticed Ziedra sitting beside her, unfastening her hair. The dancer was smiling, silently enjoying this conversation.

"An eight cycle old child is separated from her family and cast into a strange world to survive." Euriel shook her head. "You have the wrong impression of me if you think I would judge you based on your misfortunes. It's true that I would have been more *comfortable* knowing that you grew up in a more legitimate profession. I know the guild is no easy life either." She lowered her chin. "So, who was your patron?"

Her mother knew about guild life? Why would she know something like that?

"Sireth. She practically raised me. She taught me so much--" She stopped at the intent look of her mother. "Were you ever in a guild?"

Euriel smiled. "My dear, by the time you are my age, you will have done a great many things. Let us say I had an occasion to learn some things about the stealth arts, and a guild was the best place to become familiar with them."

"Mother, pardon my saying, but crushing the cobbles underfoot the way you do, you would make a terrible thief."

"Aye," Euriel chuckled. "I was a ground floor specialist to be certain. To be brutally honest, I was more thug than thief. Of course, it was never my intent to become a master footpad, but simply to know the guild."

"Know its vulnerabilities," Wren guessed. "So you would know how to fight them."

"Yes," Euriel admitted, a serious expression on her face. "Ah, it looks like Uud has finally finished your anodyne."

Wren looked over to see the dark-skinned priestess walking up the incline with a box of what looked like several different concoctions.

"Apologies for my tardiness," Uud told them with sincere regret, in her heavy voice. "We did not have any of these preparations already made, so I had to make fresh batches." She looked to Ziedra, and pulled a glowing phial of reddish liquid from the

box. "This should cure your burns, Milady, and deal with your other scrapes and minor injuries."

Ziedra took the glowing bottle from her. "Thank you." She held up the crystal container, studying it, and running her fingers across the smooth surface. "Troll blood? There's troll blood in this?"

Uud fixed a shocked expression on Ziedra. "You know alchemy?"

"Well, no, just magic. This is safe?"

"Of a certainty," Uud answered with a nod. "I have taken it myself on occasion. There is nothing to be done for the taste, but it is otherwise beneficial."

"I don't sense any bad magic," Ziedra said, more to herself than anyone else. She pulled the stopper from the container, sniffed it and grimaced. "It smells terrible."

"With curing potion, it usually tastes worse than it smells," Wren said.

"Thanks," Ziedra grumbled. A scowl twisting her features, she put the crystal to her lips with a shaking hand.

"It is best to down it all in one gulp," Uud advised.

Ziedra tossed her head back, upending the bottle and gulping down the contents. The woman's whole body convulsed and she shuddered. "Oh gah, that is foul." She stuck out her tongue, face scrunched up in distaste. Even as the woman sputtered and coughed, a blue illumination pulsed around the injured areas of her body. The reddish splotches of burns, the brownish streaks of scrapes faded to the normal color of her skin. She touched her neck and chest. "Oh, that's much better. Thank you."

The priestess nodded. She pulled a cup filled with what Wren recognized as wine from the box. "Here, this should rinse the taste from your mouth."

Ziedra gratefully accepted the cup and sipped it with a smile and nod.

Uud turned to Wren. "I have a few for you. Some are preparatory mixtures for the stonebones Linna is making for you. Let me help you sit up." She put down her box. Ziedra and Euriel also helped to get her into a sitting position with the least possible pain.

"This one is just a standard healing admixture," she said, pulling a bottle from her box, and handing it to Wren.

She made a face, knowing it would taste just as bad as the stuff that Ziedra just gulped down. She noticed that the dancer seemed pleased with the development. She shot her a frown, removed the stopper, put the bottle to her lips and tipped her head back.

The bitter swill made her tongue recoil and her whole body twitch. It tasted like she imagined sewer water might. She felt the magic roiling around in her body, flicking through stretched muscles and ligaments, closing the minor cuts and scratches from her tumbles. The nasty bruise caused by her mother's punch in the sternum faded. She drew a breath, the potion had made a noticeable difference in the level of her discomfort.

Uud handed her a cup of wine. She didn't much care for wine, but anything was better than the foul aftertaste of the healing potion. The sweet liquid had a subtle bite, and was much better than the other wines she had tasted. The heady warmth that spread through her middle was welcome as well.

Uud handed her a bottle of white liquid. "This one should have little if any taste."

Wren downed the mixture without hesitation. As the priestess said, it did not have much flavor, but it had a chalky texture that made her throat itch. Uud handed her another container of a whitish liquid with threads of gold swirling in its depths. This she tossed back without waiting for a warning. If it tasted bad, it couldn't be much worse than the healing potion. This mixture certainly didn't taste good, it had an oily

texture with a salty alkaline bitterness. As the substance slipped into her insides she felt an icy sensation spread through her body that made her skin prickle.

"This is the last of the potions I have for you," she said, holding up a flask of something dark brown in color.

Wren frowned at it. "It looks like--"

"It's not," Uud assured her. "The appearance is much worse than the taste. It's actually quite sweet."

She let out a breath, and took the container from her hand. Pulling off the lid, she put it to her lips and started to drink it down. The material was dense and syrupy, and did as Uud said, taste sweet--almost too sweet. It seemed to thicken her tongue. The concoction slipped down her throat like the coils of a snake, sluggishly worming its way down to her stomach.

"Lie back and give those a chance to work," Uud said. "You should be feeling better in a little bit."

"Thank you, Maiden Uud," Wren said with a nod.

"My pleasure," Uud responded with a wide grin, straight teeth brilliant white against her shiny dark complexion. She bowed and walked back down the ramp to Linna's side. The elder priestess was busy with a mortar and pestle, reading something from a large black book on the worktable next to her.

Euriel and Ziedra helped her lay back again.

"Feeling better?" Euriel asked.

"A little." She pressed her lips to a line and looked up at her mother. "So, really, how bad is this stonebones?"

Euriel looked at her through one eye. "Well, no worse than giving birth to you. I was nine bells with you, squirmy little dickens, refused to come when you were called."

Ziedra chuckled. "That's you."

She made a face at her friend. "Hush." She focused on her mother. "That doesn't sound like fun."

Euriel shook her head. "Indeed, not. More fool I..." She grinned at Wren. "You are my second, remember?"

She smiled sharing in her mother's joke. "Guess it's a good thing for me you have a high pain threshold." She looked down to where Linna continued working on the potion. "Damn, it's not like I'm in a hurry to feel incredible pain, but I hate waiting."

"I know precisely what you mean," Euriel remarked. "So, tell me, what was the plan when you came to the mansion?"

"Well, getting cornered by Hethanon and his goons was not part of it, I assure you." Wren said. "We accidentally ran into Liandra at a jewelry store--" She stopped. "Did you know she had a tab of more than a hundred thousand crowns?"

Euriel blinked. "A hundred thousand?" She let out a breath, eyes narrowing. "Damn her, I--" She stopped herself. "It doesn't matter now I guess. You don't have expensive taste like that do you?"

Wren pushed out her lip. "To pawn, yes, to wear--no."

"I hope you plan to curb that habit."

She raised her hand. "I quit the guild seasons ago."

"Oh?" Euriel frowned. "Why?"

"Hethanon gutted my guildhall in Corwin and killed everybody in it except for me and a handful of others. Later, when I tried to help take back the guild I was crippled by his jikartandak poison." She rocked her head back. "Since then, I lost my enthusiasm for guild work."

"By Od," Euriel breathed. "I don't understand. You're not crippled now."

"I ran up a sizeable debt to a mage; Lady Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri Felspar. She--she put me back together. Mmmm." The room had started getting fuzzy around the edges. The sharp sting in her ribs fading to a dull ache. "I think that pain killer is starting to work."

"That's the short version, Dama," Ziedra added putting a hand on Wren's knee. "Absent a lot of gory details."

Euriel pursed her lips. "I sensed that. Baby, it pains me to hear these things. I wish I could have been there to help you." She rubbed Wren's shoulder. "From now on--I will be."

"Thanks," Wren said with a smile. "I'm hoping we can draw a close on all the excitement. I'm--I'm worn out."

"We went up to the gates hoping Liandra could get us inside," Ziedra continued their story. "After that, we had the vague notion of carting you and the sirdom off. I know Wren was playing that by chance, we really had no idea what we would find inside."

Wren sighed. It took her a moment to catch up to her friend. The pain drugs had slowed her mind down. "Everything went sideways when we found the Cult of the Dagger watching the gates. It went down hill from there." She shook her head. "I wasn't worried about a dozen cultists. Then Hethanon showed up. Then cultists and minions of Set started pouring from every alley and orifice." Wren pointed a finger at Ziedra. "Zee, I didn't get to say, you were *amazing*." She looked up to her mother. "That girl sitting there has only been learning magick for a couple scoredays. She took out fifty of the cultists at least, and more than a dozen minions. For a little bit there, she even had Mishaka on her knees."

Euriel's eyes went wide. "*A couple scoredays?*" she said in an incredulous voice. "I mean, I have heard marvelous things of the savant of magic."

Ziedra waved her hand in demurral. "It sounds more amazing than it is. I know perhaps a dozen utility spells. Aarlen, let me cheat-learn some combat spells, and taught me to fast-cast that's all."

The Baroness' jaw dropped open. "You learned a dozen spells, picked up some combat magic, and learned fast casting--in a *couple score days?*"

Ziedra nodded.

"You really are a neophyte in magic. You must be."

The dancer frowned. "Huh?"

"Child, I have practiced magic for three centuries. I had been a master mage *decades* before I could fast-cast worth a damn. Right now, it still takes me a day or so to study and understand a new spell." She blew out her cheeks in a long exhale and shook her head in bewilderment. "Trust me, it is even more incredible than Wren knows. I can see why mages would envy and want to teach you."

"Three centuries?" Wren breathed. "Mother, how old *are* you?"

"Old enough to see a new fashion trend or two," Euriel said with a wry tone. She looked down the ramp. "It looks like Linna is bringing your potion. Are you ready, Baby?"

Wren drew a breath and winced at the sharp pricks of pain that stabbed through the effects of the anodyne "Is anybody really ready for something like this?"

Her mother gave her shoulder a squeeze.

Linna swayed up the incline to them carrying a large flask, and a small tray with some items on it. "I apologize for taking so long," the woman said in her breathy tone. "I wanted to make sure it was a good batch." She set the tray down and picked a thick piece of leather from among the items on it.

"What's this for?"

"To bite on."

Wren felt a cold shiver go through her. Maybe she had been too quick to say she could handle anything her mother could. Her mother was one tough lady.

Ziedra and Euriel helped her to sit up.

"You sure about this, Baby?" Euriel asked.

Wren glanced to the container in Linna's hand. A glowing greenish potion writhed and pulsed against the crystal walls of the flask. It looked almost alive. Her stomach tightened.

"Let's do it," she determined.

"All right," Linna said. "I know this is a big flask but you must drink it all for the magic to be effective. I have buffered the flavor some to make it easier to take, but just drinking it down will be a challenge. I cannot tell you how long it will take to run its course. That varies based on each person's recuperative powers. Suffice, when you can no longer see your bones through your skin, you will be healed."

Wren's eyes widened. "Pardon? What was that last part again?"

"Your bones glow," Euriel said. "You can see it through your skin."

"Scary," Ziedra murmured.

Linna put a hand on Wren's knee, her wide face and dark eyes serious and concerned. "It is crucial that if you fail to get all the potion down in the first try, that you endeavor to drink it all to before it starts to take affect. I guarantee you will not be able to focus to take any more potion once it has started its course. If you do not get it all, you will have gone through a lot of pain for incomplete healing." She woman set the flask down on the tray. She picked up a small canister and a cloth. Dipping the cloth in a clear liquid she daubed a little on Wren's forehead and rubbed it in. She did the same on her cheeks, and then on her neck. The material had a strange acrid scent to it.

"What's that stuff do?"

"Helps the blood flow." Linna said, continuing to rub the substance across Wren's shoulders and down her arms.

Wren felt a warmth spreading across her skin where Linna rubbed the material. The priestess continued swabbing the liquid across Wren's middle and her ribs. After she had covered all of Wren's exposed skin, she put the articles away and took out a hefty leather strap. She bent down and fastened it around Wren's ankles.

Wren frowned.

Linna answered without her asking. "I don't think your friend or your mother want to get kicked." She rubbed the top of Wren's thigh. "You have some formidable legs there."

She swallowed and nodded.

"Once you drink the potion, make sure to bite down on that leather," she indicated the material in Wren's hand. "Now, lay that on your leg." Wren put the leather down. "Take this in both hands." She picked up the big container of stonebones potion and held it out.

Wren took it, feeling the magical liquid pulsing and humming inside the crystal. This was powerful stuff.

"Last chance to change your mind," Linna said.

Wren's heart beat faster. Couldn't she wait? No, Mishaka might find this place anytime. Damn, wasn't there another way? That priestess didn't make all those preparations for nothing--this was going to hurt--a *lot*. Of course, so did the jikartandak, so did the magical backlash poisoning... so did losing Jharon. Leaving him had been like ripping out her own heart.

She looked to her mother. The blonde baroness gave her a reassuring smile of acceptance. She knew without her mother saying it, that she wouldn't think any less

of her if she didn't go through with it. She had to do it though. She had to be there for her mother, to help her father, and to confront Mishaka.

Wren blew out her air, took as deep a breath as she could, then pulled the container to her lips and tilted her head back. The substance hit her tongue raw and alkaline, a bitter saltiness that seemed to suck all the moisture from her mouth. It hit her throat and burned. Tears poured down her cheeks as the searing fluid pulsed and frothed in her mouth, and she convulsively forced herself to gulp it down. Euriel and Ziedra held her head and shoulders as she tried to scream and drink at the same time. Each swallow became progressively harder as her throat seemed to constrict and bind around the bitter acidic potion. It was like drinking liquid flames. When her hands loosened on the flask, her mother caught it and kept it to her lips. There seemed to be gallons of it, and she gagged. Spilling the searing fluid into her sinuses. With Ziedra's help they managed to struggle through the whole container. Green glowing liquid that felt strangely cold and icy was spilled over her lips and down her chin and neck.

She coughed and sputtered, already regretting her decision to brace this terrible ordeal.

"Get that in your mouth," Euriel snatched up the leather and forced it between her teeth. She flailed at her mother's hand until the first convulsion hit.

Wren made a sound that she did not recognize, a howl forced through gritted teeth clamped on a hunk of leather. The jolt of pain started in her abdomen and radiated outward with an intensity that, at first, sucked all the air from her lungs then pulsed with a ferocity that wrung the scream out of her like the jaws of a wolf crunching down on soft marrow.

Euriel and Ziedra pulled her onto her back on the bedding, her mother holding her arms and the dancer her legs. It was a kind of torture that defied any ability to hold still or brace against--it hit and all her mind could think to do was claw at her chest and rip out the horrible gnawing thing churning through her insides.

The agony did not remain constant, it ebbed and surged, almost vanishing then increasing until it felt like she was being shredded apart from the inside. Teeth gritted on the leather, she shrieked more than once, trying to hold in her yells only made the hurting worse.

She was vaguely aware of Euriel, Ziedra, and Linna hovering around her, saying soothing things that barely reached her ears through the pounding in her temples.

She didn't know how long it went on. Every moment seemed to last forever. Her heart thrashed and perspiration ran down her face. She couldn't focus to open her eyes, and behind her closed lids dots spun and whirled.

When the pain stopped an eternity later, it was like the sudden silence after a thunderclap, the echoes resounding off into the distance. Her arms and legs shook and she was drenched in perspiration. She felt exhausted in ways that there simply weren't words to describe.

"Gaea," she muttered. She tried to move her hand to wipe the perspiration from her face, but her arm just twitched, it felt like it weighed a ton.

Her mother daubed her face with a cloth, then kissed her on the forehead. "Lie still. Give your body a chance to recover. The worst is over."

She moaned. "Lords, I hope so."

Ziedra came and gave her hand a squeeze. The dancer's palms were damp and Wren saw beads of moisture glistening on her face. "Girl, you're crazy," she said. "That must be why I love you so much."

Linna came into Wren's view standing by Euriel. She handed the Baroness some clean cloths. "Your daughter is very strong," she remarked.

"Yes, she impressed me," her mother responded looking down at her. "Thank you for the healing and your care."

Linna bowed. "We are, as you said, all sisters in the flesh. You have guarded this city since I was little. It is a pleasure to serve a right and honorable lady who comes to our precincts and conducts herself in such a complementary and courteous fashion." She patted Wren on the shoulder. "You will want to sleep, but you should bathe first. The potion works its way through your system and a great deal is sweated out through your skin." She grimaced. "When it begins to congeal--sleeping is quite impossible."

Wren stuck out her tongue. "Bleh. I don't even like the sound of it."

"Your perspiration is yellow," Ziedra said. She leaned close and whispered in her ear. "We'll get to how you *smell* later."

"Get away you," she pushed Ziedra.

The dancer laughed.

The doors to the infirmary opened and two figures strode in. Because of her position, Wren couldn't immediately make out who it was.

The man's ringing baritone made it clear though. "My friends, you yet live, praise Ukko!" Wren heard the man's footsteps on the ramp and he came and knelt in front of her mother. "Your Excellency, a more unexpected and pleasant sight I have never witnessed. Your daughter goes in collared by the avatars, and comes out with you--it is truly a blessed miracle."

"Laramis," Euriel said, a smile in her voice. "When last I saw you, there was naught but fuzz on your face. You are welcome sight to me as well. Who is this formidable lady with you?"

Laramis stood up. "May I present, Lady Irodee Skyesteel, Myrmigyne clan sister of Jhandris'Kul."

"One of Beia Targallae's subjects," Euriel remarked. "Your clan matriarch sets a fine example for you all. If you are any indication, it is obvious that your clan remains healthy and prosperous."

Giant Irodee bent knee in a curtsy. "Thank you for your regards, your Excellency."

Ziedra helped Wren sit up. It still hurt to move, but now it was more from muscles stretched by the trauma of her ordeal with the stonebones. She shook her head. Those words sounded so strange coming from Irodee's lips; speaking with that proper accent, so polished and clean. Maybe there were two women in that giant body. She sat up. "You know Beia, Mother?"

"Oh yes, she was a regular competitor at the All-Worlds-Tournament, she and her sister Ess are both marvels of steel."

"Ess is my adopted mother," Irodee said with a grin.

"Then you have my regard," Euriel said, holding out a hand.

Irodee joined hands then clasped arms.

"Are you as good a fighter as your aunt?" Euriel asked with a smile.

"I aspire to it," Irodee answered with a serious expression.

"A worthy aspiration indeed," Euriel said with sincere admiration. "I trust she is still as good a trainer?"

"When she has the time," Irodee agreed. "I am oft blessed with the back of her sword."

The Baroness smiled. "A mixed blessing at best whilst we are being drubbed to learn our craft."

The Myrmigyne grinned and nodded.

Wren appreciated the easy way her mother had with people. The lady was fierce, but she had a warm cordial side that quickly put people at their ease. She was used

to being respected, but also was quick to express regard and appreciation for others. That was so different than the stiff arrogant nobles she had met in Corwin.

"Lady Wren," Laramis said, brow furrowed. "You appear so pale. I cannot help but feel that something else besides your escape hath transpired in our absence."

She drew a breath, relieved when it didn't send shrieks of pain lancing through her body. "A few things," she said with a wry smile, her voice still weak. "I think Ziedra and my Mother may have to catch you up." She glanced to Ziedra and rubbed the oiliness on her skin. "I need a bath and some sleep."

"She needs sleep, and I need food," Euriel said. The Baroness laughed. "I never save the world on an empty stomach..."

I've always been pretty much satisfied with my appearance. Oh, I've had a twinge or two of envy, especially in Loric's house. In all, I don't think Gaea slighted me all that much, except maybe where height is concerned. I wouldn't have minded being a hand or two taller...

--Wren

Chapter 61

Gaea's Endowments

Sleep. A simple word, easier to say than actually do, especially keyed up from the events of the day even totally exhausted. After taking another foul tasting healing potion to correct the injuries caused by the stonebones, she and the others were led to the temple bathing facilities. Being a cult that consisted mostly of women, particular attention had been paid to the comfortable stepped washing pools that were obviously designed for communal use. The high roofed chamber with its ceiling mural of a starry midnight sky was appointed to look like a rocky mountain clearing complete with trees, water courses and miniature waterfalls. The sounds, smells, and verdant greenery added to hot scented water pumped up through vents in the pool's bottom combined together to create an extraordinary washing experience.

Laramis and Irodee having already bathed, sat on a bench nearby chatting while herself, Euriel, and Ziedra cleaned up. Ziedra proved she did know how to get out of the Malanian war-webs which came as an extreme relief to Wren. Both Ziedra and she badly needed to clean up, especially after their battle and subsequent imprisonment. Her mother bathed with them saying that while she had washed that morning, that she did some of her best thinking in the bath.

The priestesses were attentive the whole time, especially Linna who seemed to have taken a great liking for her mother, Euriel. For Wren, the time in the pool was more time to get to know the lady she had been separated from for more than a decade. Euriel fit the myths of the legendary warrior lords, fierce and passionate, proud yet affably self-effacing, confident in her strength but using it to support rather than dominate. Wren knew there were more layers to her mother than those she immediately saw. She was smart enough to know that her mother was performing to a certain extent and on her best behavior to impress. In a way, she found that more endearing, because Euriel wanted her acceptance. Better yet, because she wanted to be able to like her mother. She hoped they could be best friends in that special way unique to parents and their children.

Euriel was not the only one *performing*. Ziedra was quick to search out common ground with the Baroness. As Wren had noted before, Ziedra had always been a people-person, and with the intense but otherwise easy-going Euriel, the dancer had no problems winning her smiles and nods. The thing they most shared was a concern for Wren herself, and that was no small thing to either of them.

Bathing time was used to catch everyone up with the events that had occurred in the last day. Wren had to tell her story of how she escaped the cell and subsequently freed Liandra, and Ziedra. Laramis and Irodee brought them up to date on what happened on the outside. Thrust together with Stark the guard captain and his men, there was little they could do other than regroup and try to figure out a course of action. Stark had brought to their attention that teleportation had been blocked into and out of the city. The guard had advised that the only way for Mishaka to get Wren and Ziedra to Hecate would be through the portal system outside the walls. Through Stark, they had acquired some flying carpets as it was likely that if Mishaka tried move them, it would be by air. They had been watching the mansion from above

when the alarms began ringing. They were able to swoop in and snatch Liandra with only a minor skirmish. Both expressed how disappointed they had been at grabbing the 'wrong blonde girl'.

For her part, Euriel asked surprisingly few tactical questions considering the situation. At one point, she did ask where Liandra was at. She also wanted to know what had become of Stark. The rest of her interest seemed focused on getting to know Wren, her friends, and what had been happening to them in recent months.

After eating a light meal of cheese, bread, and boiled vegetable stew, Wren and Ziedra were shown rooms where they could rest. The sleeping amenities amounted to a small chamber with a floor of reed-mats and needleleaf greens, and a large watercloth mattress stuffed with some kind of fragrant moss, and heavy pillows filled with smooth feeling seed husks. What the accommodations lacked in appearance were made up for in comfort, that lumpy looking sack compressed to fit the body perfectly.

Even though she was offered a room of her own, Ziedra preferred to stay with Wren, and truth be told, Wren didn't really feel like being alone in a strange place, no matter how amiable the tenants seemed to be.

Wren parted from Euriel with a hug and an admonishment not to do anything major without them. This the Baroness agreed to with smile, saying that she had a lot of thinking and planning to do before taking any action.

By that point, Wren was so exhausted that she could do little more than stumble into the tiny chamber, kneel down in the floor bed, and collapse into its softness. Ziedra fell in beside Wren silently, and gave her hug from behind pressing her face into the curve of her neck for a few moments before relaxing into the pillows.

She lay in the quiet dark listening Ziedra's breathing and the creak and moan of the ancient building settling around them. A soft hiss came from the grill where the heat-stones radiated warmth into the chamber. She felt the dancer's leg move against hers. She sighed. As much as the recent seasons had changed her, they had changed the gentle Silissian girl even more. The expression on her face as she threatened to throw Liandra down the stairs--that was the new Ziedra toughened by harsh realities and frightening necessity. Where did they go from here? It was plain that Ziedra didn't plan on letting go anytime soon. Of course, that would change if she became more deeply involved with Cassandra's golden son, Radian. With Ziedra a newly discovered savant of magic, that was one relationship certain to be encouraged. She was happy for her friend's turn of fortune. Well, at least she would have a turn of fortune if they survived this mess.

Sleep came while she was still wondering what the first step might be...

Wren's eyes cracked feeling her face pressed into a warm fleshy hollow. A strange tinkling sound caressed the edges of her hearing accompanied by what sounded like the rise and fall of distant voices raised in song. The air smelled pleasantly of strange herbs and a dark smoky odor of living flesh. The back of her head where she felt her savant power shuddered and pulsed. A powerful heartbeat thrummed against her cheek, and a tingling rushed across the surface of her skin. Strands of greenish-black hair fell across her eyes.

Her breath caught and her heart raced as she realized she was no longer in the temple of Meliekki. She pushed and flailed to escape the soft confines of whatever was holding her and fell back on her haunches into something silky and black.

Braced on her hands and bottom she looked up into an exquisite green face. Dark eyes swirling with stars focused on her.

Body riveted, Wren gasped. "Gaea!"

The green mother nodded, a smile widening her already copious mouth. She brushed at the dark cloak of her ebony hair, causing the strands to scintillate and sparkle like diamonds on perfect black velvet, the illumination traveled down Gaea's back and spread across the warm substance Wren was sitting on as well. She blinked, realizing that Gaea did not stand before her. The giant goddess seemed to be up to her waist in the sparkling obsidian-colored material. As she took in the scene further, she realized that they were alone in the middle of some vast dark plane with a starless sky of deep azure blue arcing overhead. She blinked, the dark substance that she was sitting on appeared to be a sea of the all-mother's hair.

She snatched glances around herself, in all directions there was nothing but the shimmering expanse out to the visible horizon.

<Confused, Daughter?> A resonant female voice rang in her mind. The thoughts themselves seemed to roll through Wren, immensely powerful yet soothing.

Wren looked around again. What was this place? How did she get here? Was this really Gaea?

Gaea chuckled, the ground under Wren trembled, even the wide-open sky seemed to hum with the goddess' mirth. The rumbling subsided after a moment. <I am laughing at your expense again. I really must break myself of that.> She bent and touched Wren's cheek, her fingers warm and soft.

She felt Gaea's essence, it was like honey on her lips and skin. She could swallow it down like fine nectar, a heady influx of life-blood that made her feel strong and vibrant. Like a woman dying of thirst she tried to drink it all in, but the more she drank, the more there seemed to be. Gaea was an infinite well of vitality swimming in her mind and body.

<No more, greedy girl,> Gaea admonished in a gentle boom, withdrawing her hand. <Else you will catch fire like a star.>

Breathing hard she looked up at the green-mother. "It really is you."

<Indeed,> Gaea responded. <Now, may I get a proper hug?>

Suddenly, Wren felt very strange in this vast open space talking to half a goddess. She felt the surface under her. It had the same silky texture as hair. She blinked, but it went on forever.

She looked around. "Is all of this, you?"

The corners of Gaea's eyes crinkled and she smiled. "What do you think, Daughter?"

"I--" She frowned. "I don't know. I know the body I saw in Starholme Prime was not your true form."

<Liandra, my heart, can any form be said to be *true*. Can you not shed an arm or leg and still be you? Does your body not subtly change every day?>

"Well, I suppose." She swallowed. "It still looks kind of strange."

Gaea raised an eyebrow. The smile on her face never wavered, she seemed vastly amused by this discourse. <Are you saying your mother looks strange?>

Wren cast her eyes down. She fingered the strands of hair beneath her body. "This feels nice."

Gaea made a coming gesture with her finger.

One thing about the all-mother, she was persistent. She stood up and moved closer. Even with only half a manifestation she towered over Wren, her plentiful body distorted yet beautiful.

She sighed. Why was she holding back? This creature was the mother of everything. She was the pure essence of stars, raw potential that dwarfed imagination. If Gaea wanted hurt her, it would be ridiculously trivial. No, Gaea wanted to protect her.

Wren spread her arms and let the green mother gather her in.

The experience was different this time, somehow more solid, more real than the previous time. She felt herself spread through the vastness around them, wrapped in layer after layer of warmth deeper than an ocean. Through it all, she felt Gaea's love, felt her concern, hope, and pride in the achievements of her child. The thought that Gaea was proud of her gave Wren a tremendous sense of satisfaction and well being, she drew back from the embrace trembling and giddy.

As she stepped back her legs wouldn't hold her up and she plunked down into the soft mass of the all-mother's hair. She sighed. "Whoa, I do love those hugs."

<As do I,> Gaea returned with a grin. <No doubt you wish to know why you are here; among other things.>

"Among many other things," Wren agreed.

<First, are you satisfied with your birth mother? Is she what you hoped?>

Wren's brow furrowed. "I think she's a great lady. I've only known her a short time and I admire her. She's so strong!" She folded her arms. "She almost killed me! What happened to your protection, hmmm?"

Gaea put a hand to her lips. Her rumbling thoughts echoed her dismay. <Oh my? Really? Your sister was supposed to teach you enough to handle that situation.>

Wren snorted. "My elder sister is afraid of me. She never got around to teaching me anything."

Gaea frowned. <Hmmm, that is not how the timewinds played. I will have to have a talk with her. Well, what about the weapon I gave to you and Sil'vaya. Was that satisfactory?>

"It was amazing," Wren said with a nod. "I even used the sword of Shiva, Mon'istiaga." She pointed a finger. "That's another thing, you never said anything about there being something wrong with my body. I almost died then too! Damn that hurt."

Gaea wore a contrite expression. <Daughter, I must apologize, when one lives out of time, probability is something less than an exacting science. Are you saying then that both uses of the weapon have been consumed?>

"And then some, Mother. Not to mention I'm lost in some forsaken corner of the universe where Desiray can't find me even if we wanted to use it. I have two avatars to deal with now--not one. It's all a mess!"

<I see,> Gaea said, dark eyes glimmering, brow furrowing. <This is unfortunate.>

"Really unfortunate," Wren agreed. "Hecate would have already eaten me up if someone hadn't blocked the teleportation into and out of the city."

The green mother sighed. <Well, at least something went according to plan.>

"You did that?"

<It was my intention for that to happen in your relative now,> Gaea admitted. <The other events tell me that I have much less control than I initially thought. I have grown weak.>

"You don't feel weak to me," Wren said.

Gaea dipped her head and patted Wren's cheek. <You give me strength, Daughter.>

She looked up at the sky. "Mother, am I really here in this place or am I dreaming?"

<You are between ticks in time, your body suspended between the ribbon realm and the shell of my body.> She looked up. <It so happened you passed close to one of my birth canals.>

"Birth canals?"

Gaea made a shrug of her giant shoulders. <That is the closest I can come in your understanding. My body... well, you already know my body is considerably more than this.> She ran a hand down her torso. <Obviously,> she looked around. <This configuration makes little sense.>

Wren smiled, finally understanding. "It makes sense if you want hugs from your daughter."

Gaea grinned. <You've found me out.> She touched Wren's face again and sighed. <I am at a loss, Daughter. Things are not within the parameters I had established.>

"You know, I was under the impression that the mother of everything was all-seeing and all-powerful," Wren said.

Gaea pressed her lips together. <Omniscience and omnipotence are over-rated. However, what I have attempted requires neither great power nor tremendous prescience. How irksome. Hmph.> Her brow furrowed.

"We're going to try to get Father and Azir free. I understand Mother well enough to know that she will go in regardless of the odds. I have to go with her. Zee, will follow me or die trying."

<A disturbingly accurate assessment,> Gaea rumbled. Wren felt echoes of the all-mother's frustration rumbling through everything around her. She did not look happy. <Did Ziedra work out at least? She was what you needed, correct?>

"She is marvelous. You know, you could have told me she was a savant."

<Daughter, I cannot tell you everything, lest it cause things not to happen. As it is, I fear by succumbing to my weakness for you, I have created a horrible snarl...> Her thought trailed off. The timbre of her voice verged on despair. This vast and potent entity was afraid.

Wren pushed herself up to her feet. She stepped forward and leaned into Gaea with a hug. The all-mother moaned and cuddled her closer.

"Mother, you had to convince me to believe in you. It's my fault not yours. I'm the stubborn one." She breathed deep of the smoky pleasant odor of Gaea. It made her feel strong, like she could do anything. "You know, we can still win."

Gaea's fingers rubbed her back. <Yes. Your plan to bring Loric and Aarlen was well conceived, especially with Laramis' contributions. It is all in the timing. Timing is critical. My terribly misled daughter Hecate is coming for you.>

Wren felt a cold chill, prickles running down her spine. "You mean Mishaka is coming for me."

<No, Daughter--*Hecate*. She has sensed my involvement in this somehow, and she has a great hatred of me.>

She banged her head against Gaea's soft middle. "We can't fight her! It's just the five of us, and we don't have anything!"

The arms encircling Wren pulled firm. <Hush, Daughter, I am thinking.>

"Mother, Desiray and I combined probably couldn't handle her. Maybe with Mon'istiaga, but then we might just destroy her and everything else too!"

Gaea growled. Wren felt the vibration in her bones, and saw ripples surging through the dark sea around them. <Daughter, your protests are well understood, and you are *not* helping.>

Wren subsided. She was yelling at the living essence of creation. She drew a breath. "Why does she hate you?" Wren couldn't imagine a reason why any creature would dislike, much less hate, this gentle being.

<Because I refused to favor her,> Gaea answered, a distant regret and bitterness in her voice. <Because I refused to overlook her selfishness, arrogance, and vanity.> She looked down at Wren, and lifted her chin with a delicate finger. <You have in abundance that which she most urgently desired.> She kissed Wren's forehead. <My love.>

Wren felt a twist in her stomach. She felt a flash of heat in her face. Was all the pain and torment she had gone through because of one creature's whimsical jealousy? She

looked up at Gaea. "Does Hecate know that? Is that why she's done this to my family?"

The goddess' features tightened, and she pursed her thick lips. She sighed and nodded. <I would have to say that it played a significant part of it. Of course, in the interim you've given her plenty of other reasons.>

"Frell the other reasons, the witch started it! How can some creature so old and powerful be so damn petty and cruel?"

<She is a child.>

Wren stared at the goddess. "She *needs* a spanking."

Gaea returned Wren's look for a moment. Finally, she laughed. The all-mother's mirth shook the entire realm around them. <Aye, Daughter, indeed!> She looked at Wren down her nose. <And Daughter, what would you do if you had a large enough paddle suitable for the task?>

She rolled her eyes. "Get crushed under it, what else? Cassandra tried that trick with me and her silly metaphor about the fangs of a dragon." Wren rubbed her face. "That is the big difference between me and all these creatures. I break easily--they don't. My own birthmother gives me a hug and I have a dozen broken ribs. She's made out of rocks and I'm made out of parchment. Whose lame idea was that?!"

Gaea raised an eyebrow, a smile quirking up the corner of her mouth. <Don't look at me. I tried to convince them *not* to do it. Far be it for children to listen to their mother.>

"I listen to you."

<Yes, you do.> She ran her large hand through Wren's hair. <Such a good baby--ahhh...> She paused. <I believe I have a solution.>

"A solution?"

<A way to have a chance. Though I suspect you are going to be uncomfortable with it.>

Wren felt a twinge of unease. "What do I have to do?"

<Drink my milk.>

She blinked. "Pardon?"

Mild amusement flickered in Gaea's expression. <You must consume my lactate.>

"That's what I thought you said. Uhhh... *why*?"

<All that talk of rock and paper. You must know the difference between you and someone like Hecate or your mother is my milk.>

Wren's brow furrowed. "Mother, that makes no sense."

Gaea brought both hands up and patted Wren's cheeks. <That's because you're so literal. Trust that the difference between all creatures is a *pattern*. Having two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs... that is a *template* to that pattern. You carry that template in the smallest bits of your flesh and hair.>

"That's how Dorian made a copy of me."

<Exactly. In you and your beta cousins there are special hidden templates that when they come in contact with one another, they fuse, causing a shift in the entire pattern. They become another creature.>

"Like me and Desiray."

<That was only a partial fusion, but it is in essence what happens.>

"Okay, and what does *milk* have to do with it?"

<I'm your mother, silly. I am the reference template that made all of you.>

"I thought Alpha had something to do with that?"

<He's a part of me too.>

Wren blinked, she started to open her mouth then closed it. She wasn't going to understand, why was she even trying? She drew a breath. "All right, what will drinking the milk do?"

<It will enhance you--you'll be less *breakable*. The benefits have a limited duration though. The key thing will be sharing the milk. The real potential is in the sharing, the ability to combine alpha and beta strengths, and even alpha and alpha strengths.>

"So, it's essentially like a savant enhancing power potion?"

Gaea nodded.

"You mentioned sharing. Where do I get this milk?"

The goddess drew a breath, swelling her massive chest. She looked down, taking particular care to smooth the wrinkles in the silken material stretched over her bosom.

Wren shook her head. "No..." She drew the word out. "Now, I mean you're a god, make it appear in a glass or something."

<It doesn't work that way, it has to be drawn from me. One of my children must do it.>

"Mother, I can't--" She looked at her hands, then back up to her Mother. "I mean those aren't--" She stopped, face growing hot.

Gaea looked at her with one eye. <I am not a bovine, I had no intention of letting you milk me. That's demeaning.>

Wren stared. "Then what--"

Gaea raised an eyebrow.

"Oh please..." She swallowed. Her brow furrowed. "Now wait... if that's the only way to get it out of you--how do I share it?"

<Daughter, there is only one vessel that can keep my milk fresh in the real realm.>

"Wait, are you saying...???" Wren threw herself in a circle, hands on her face. "You can't be..." She peeked through her fingers up at Gaea. The goddess only fixed her with a straight face. "Serious..." Hands outspread she met Gaea's gaze. "You mean, to share it, I'd have to..." She looked down to her blouse.

The goddess nodded.

Wren rolled her eyes and slapped her sides. "Oh, no wayyy..."

Gaea tilted her head to one side. <Ziedra is a problem?> she asked in wry tone.

She pointed a finger. "That's not funny--you know...!" She stopped, voice slowing down. "You knew."

<Of course I did, she's as much my daughter as you are.>

"Okay, maybe she isn't a problem... but my birth-mother... I would die... *she* would die." She shook her head. "No."

<Daughter, you are weighing a temporary embarrassment against your continued existence.>

"A *forever* embarrassment," Wren let out. "How would I even mention it... 'oh by the way... I have something here in my blouse for you...'" She raised her hands in a pleading gesture. "Please. Something else. Anything else. Can't you get Loric and Aarlen there faster? Get word to my grandmother? Hades, just get me Damay... we might be able to swing it."

Gaea shook her head. <I will attempt those things as well, but I am outside of time. When I reach out of this realm, there is no guaranteed time of delivery. When I sensed you and reached out... it could have happened while you were in the cell, or when you were entering the city, or bells from your now. As strong as I am, that is my weakness and my strength. The only certain things are those things which bridge the gap between that realm and here. That is why I suggest this method. It allows

you to take my essence into your world. To share my strength with those close to you.>

"But it's so... isn't there..."

<No, Daughter, it must go directly from the vessel to the recipient.>

Wren gripped her hair. Hecate was coming and they were all going to die. If the pantheon lord came down in Cosmodarus, thousands might die. Gaea's prediction was absolute, it wasn't a might or a possibility. This was stupid. It wasn't as if Euriel and Ziedra hadn't seen her bare torso. If letting them *touch* her would save everyone... The thought alone made her face burn.

This was so strange. She had to try again. "Mother, please tell me this is just a joke. I know you have strange sense of humor..."

Gaea just looked at her. <I know how much you're struggling with it, Daughter. It is the most *certain* assistance I can provide. I promise to try to speed up the other things. However, that is a gamble.> She sighed. <I leave the choice to you. I will not force you to take that boon from me. You can go back without it.>

She drew a breath. "Can you at least give me something to help convince my mother? She is a serious lady, and there's just..."

<You have a point,> Gaea admitted. She leaned forward and took Wren's hand, she pressed her fingers into her palm and a jeweled green ring appeared. <This should help convince her.>

"Now you're talking! While you're at it, do you have any rings of Hecate spanking?"

The green mother smiled. <Would that I did. Here--> She gestured over Wren's hand and a glassy black ring appeared next to the first. <This is for Ziedra, a little convincing and something that will be of use in the future.>

She put the rings in a pocket and looked up at Gaea. She swallowed and shuddered. "I feel so weird about this. I am not an infant you know."

<You could be a thousand times as old and still be an infant to me.>

Wren brushed back her hair. Damn. It wasn't like it was going to hurt. Nothing with Gaea ever did. Best to just get it over with. "What do I do?"

<It doesn't get any simpler, Daughter.>

"What about the other part?"

<That will take care of itself. Just make sure you drink enough.>

"Ummm, what about too much?"

The corner of Gaea's mouth curled up. <I predict you'll have a sense of when you've had enough.>

She closed her eyes. Steeling herself. She really didn't want to be a part of this. If it would save Ziedra and her mother it was worth it. Damn, did it have to be so embarrassing though? Her heart speeded and she drew a breath. She looked up. "Okay, I think I'm ready."

<Such reticence to share with your Mother,> Gaea thought with a shake of her head. <I wonder if I should feel hurt.>

"Mother, I love you," Wren said in a firm tone.

The green mother smiled. <All right my baby.> She reached down and pulled back the filmy cloth covering her breast.

Given the all-mother's giant size, her aureole and nipple seemed disproportionately small. However, it was still large enough to immediately make Wren pause in self-consciousness--that was a lot to put in her mouth. She shook in indecision. With Gaea staring down at her expectantly, she closed her eyes and reached up with her hands to guide herself. It was like putting her arms around a large ale keg. She felt queasy inside.

After a few moments of probing, her nose and mouth found Gaea's nipple. She immediately flinched back tasting something sweet on her lips. Lords this was so strange.

<Do you need help?> Gaea asked, amused.

Wren felt a flush heat her cheeks. She smelled the smoky odor of Gaea's flesh and tried to relax. She moved her lips close again, tentatively touching the surface of Gaea's nipple. It *was* sweet. It took a few attempts to finally nerve herself and draw the nipple into her mouth.

Gaea made a sighing sound.

She started to pull back and forced herself to stop. Breathing through her nose, she let the air out of her lungs, and worked her cheeks to create suction.

At first, nothing happened, then she felt a syrupy sweetness hit her tongue. The flavor tasted rich like milk candy, it took effort simply to gulp down the first mouthful. The thick elixir pulsed in her mouth and throat, causing tremors of warmth to shoot through her limbs. She drew more in, forcing the dense substance past her tongue. With each intake, the sensations grew more intense. It was like when she had joined with Desiray, each breath making her stronger and more alive.

Gaea cuddled Wren closer as she lost herself in the rapture of the energy filling her form. She felt herself changing, drawing both substance and vigor from the bounty of the all-mother's body.

She drank and drank, her stomach never seeming to fill, but her throat starting to rebel at the incredible sweetness. Once started it was almost impossible to stop. Her body shuddered with the pleasure. Her mind lived in Gaea and the goddess in her. The all-mother gave her strength; giving and giving, it seemed unending.

Wren didn't know how long the embrace lasted, but a change in the feelings brought her awake. The riveting sense of pleasure and vitality slowly faded, replaced by a strange itchiness over her ribs. She gulped another swallow of milk and experienced a strange surge in her middle and a hot tingling in her breasts.

Her eyes widened and she started to recoil at the odd sensation.

Gaea put a hand behind her head. <More, Daughter, or you won't have enough to share.>

Even though she was no longer sucking, more of the potent magical elixir had filled her mouth. Wincing, she swallowed. The thick substance seeped down into her middle. Warmth spread behind her ribs. The skin around her chest grew hot, and an odd quivering-pushing feeling radiated through her breasts.

She tried to stop, but Gaea held her in place, the all-mother's milk continued to flow, forcing her to draw it in. Each gulp made that weird heat and tingling rush through her breasts.

They began to swell.

Oh please, Mother, no.

Gaea held her tight. The process was not quick, several swallows amounting to a small change, but she could feel her blouse beginning to peak.

She tried not to think about it, just letting the transformation happen as her body filled with her mother's essence. How much did she need? She didn't have to look like Gaea did she? She wouldn't be able to walk!

Her slip began to grow tight. She felt a gentle pressure pulling down on her shoulders.

Lords, mother, stop. She was going to look ridiculous.

Gaea held her for a while longer, not letting go until Wren had felt several more surges of growth.

Wren pulled back with a gasp, flopping back on her haunches with a grunt. She blinked and shook her head. She would be tasting that ultra-sweet substance for days. She didn't think she'd ever drink milk again.

She didn't look down. She couldn't look down. She didn't have to see it. She could *feel* it. "Mother, what did you *do*?!"

<Daughter, be calm, it's not permanent.> The goddess smiled down at her, pulling her dark garment back into place. <Think of it as incentive to share.>

A flash of heat surged in her face. "That's not funny."

The goddess sighed. <It's not that bad. There are women in the temple far larger than you.>

"They're *fat*." Self-consciously she reached up to cup herself. Her fingers didn't reach all the way around. "Oh my lord!" She couldn't help herself. She looked down. Her waist was only visible through a deep crevice between her breasts. She rolled her eyes. "Frell."

<What is the matter with you? That's an ideal size.>

"Mother I'm a professional stealth artist--not a harlot."

<Stop complaining. You know how to get back to normal. I should let you finish resting. We could sit here and listen to you groan for the next century, but I don't suppose anything would be gained.>

Wren looked down. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't yell at you, you're trying to help me."

<I enjoy our times together, Daughter, even your shrieks and protests. I know you love me.> She turned her head to one side. <Another hug before I send you back?>

She sighed, heaved herself to her feet, and moved into Gaea's arms.

Wren enjoyed the warmth and tenderness. She held the all-mother for a while. "Will I see you again?"

<Actually, I didn't expect to see you this soon. So it's possible.> She grinned.

<Perhaps next time I'll give you a bigger bottom instead.>

Wren let out a breath and shook her head. "Perish the thought."

Gaea chuckled and kissed her on the forehead.

She felt a sensation of dizziness. She blinked her eyes and something thumped down across her face.

Ziedra's arm.

She was back in the temple.

She reached up and felt her chest. Nothing had been left behind.

Wren pushed Ziedra's arm away.

The ordeal had begun. First she had to tell everyone about Hecate. Then she had that other chore.

She dreaded that more than fighting Hecate.

Lady Wren, I find her to be something of a challenge. She has a noble heart, but has had harsh youth that made her cynical and callous. I make allowances for this. Still, there are times I want to spank her... and other times I can only be astonished at her bravery and tenacity...

--Laramis De'Falcone

Chapter 62

Liandra's Reckoning and Hecate's Approach

Hecate was coming. Heart beating fast, Wren sat up in the darkness of the tiny chamber she shared with Ziedra. They had to prepare. She reached out to wake the dancer when a cool sense of calm wrapped itself around her. The matter was urgent, but they needed their strength more--they had time. Yes, Mother, but how *much* time? Enough to rest. Damn, she hated answers like those. *Rest*, give your strength time to mature.

Mature?

How could she sleep with thoughts of confronting Hecate herself pinging around in her head? Her mind was in turmoil enough over what Gaea had done to her. However would she broach that without dying of embarrassment and being thought insane?

Mind churning, she lay back on the soft mattress next to Ziedra's warmth. The air was heavy with the scent of needleleaf. The moss mattress cradled her back. Rest might be essential, but she didn't see how she could. Not with 'what ifs', possibilities, and consequences blasting through her consciousness like holiday fireworks. She closed her eyes.

Ziedra moved and stretched next to her. Wren's eyes flickered open. She felt a distinct disconnection. What had that last thought been? When did she doze off? She blinked. Her eyes didn't feel heavy with sleep, but she felt the lethargy from having lain in one place for a long time.

The dancer shuffled in the sheets, her shoulder brushing Wren's. Her hand crept out and touched Wren's side as though verifying she was still there.

Wren lay still a moment more. She felt better--refreshed. She realized her body didn't ache. Not even the muscle aches she was used to from all the training. She had meant to mention to Gaea that after guzzling down all that milk, that she really didn't feel all that different. Maybe she *did* feel different. She sat up easily. She rolled her shoulders. They didn't feel tight, her joints moved smooth and supple. She rocked her head side-to-side. That wasn't normal, her neck always felt a little stiff. She sighed. No, moving felt good.

She reached up to her breasts with her fingertips. She shook her head. It hadn't been a dream. Maybe no one would notice.

"Mmmm," Ziedra hummed in the darkness next to her. "That was a lovely bed. How are your ribs?"

"I feel great," Wren responded. She rolled onto her knees and leaned forward to open the curtains.

Her balance shifted and she had to catch herself on a hand. That felt weird. She was trying not to think about the new *appendages*, and they kept drawing attention to themselves. Gaea must be laughing at her. She had to be.

She pushed the heavy leather curtain back a crack to let a slice of priest-light in from the corridor. Wren sat back to pull on her hose and boots.

"What's the matter?" Ziedra asked, sitting up, and brushing back her long black hair.

How did she know anything was wrong? "Nothing--well, not *nothing*... I'm okay."

Wren pushed up her breeches, and rolled the hose up her legs. She paused. Her skin seemed different. She pressed her thumb against her calf, rubbing the pad along the surface. She didn't detect any differences in texture. The flesh didn't seem harder or tougher. Gaea said she'd be less *breakable*. Something had changed, she just couldn't pinpoint what her senses were telling her.

"You seem preoccupied," Ziedra said behind her, also busying herself with dressing.

"Well, I guess that's because I am." She finished pulling up her hose, and fitted her foot in the boot, kicking her heel down into the soft pocket. She drew a breath. Might as well start the news someplace. "Gaea spoke with me while we were sleeping."

"Gaea?" Ziedra asked, looking around. "I hear you swear by her. You mentioned you met her once. You haven't said much about her otherwise. Who is she?"

She pressed her lips to a line. "I know it will sound presumptuous, so bare with me." She paused. "Gaea is the all-mother. The creator force. Your and my mother."

Ziedra's brow furrowed. "*Our* mother? Like we're sisters?"

"In the larger sense, yes. All savants are brothers and sisters. That's why we feel so close to each other. Why we've always understood one another at the gut level."

"Uhhh hmmm." She made an incredulous sound. "And you saw her in your sleep?"

"Well, I was awake and--never mind--it's complicated." She already sounded crazy. She reached into her pocket, relieved to find the two rings. She picked the black one out of her palm and held it out. "Gaea gave me a present for you."

"A present?" Ziedra's brow furrowed as she picked the ring out of Wren's fingers. She pushed the curtain further open and turned it over in the light. "Black diamonds, the patterns... it's beautiful. Where did you--?"

"I just said. Gaea gave it to me for you."

The dancer swallowed, continuing to turn the ring over in her hand a mystified expression on her face. "The magic in this is incredible."

"What does it do?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I--have--no--idea." She shook her head. "Whoa."

"Maybe if you put it on, instead of just staring at it," Wren suggested.

Ziedra rolled her eyes. "Oh--right." She started to put it on stopped with the dark circle hovering over the tip of her second finger. "This is safe?"

"Trust me." She had no idea what it did either. Gaea seemed to like surprises. The only thing she was certain of was that the all-mother would never do anything to harm them.

The dancer slid the ring onto her finger. Sparks spun up out of the dark material, spiraling up her arm and around her body. Ziedra made an 'ooohing' sound, she fell back catching herself on her palms. A tremble went through her arms and legs and her eyes fluttered.

She didn't know how, but she knew that Zee and Gaea were talking. Talking was a loose term--joined was closer. She could feel the green mother's presence. Wren's nola stirred in back of her head, tingling with the proximity of the goddess. A broad gamut of expressions crossed Ziedra's face like clouds streaking across the disk of the sun on a windy day; surprise, shock, concern, puzzlement, and wonder.

Still watching Ziedra, she pulled on her other hose, and kicked her foot into the other boot. She pushed her fingers through her hair until it was smooth. She was debating whether to leave Ziedra to her 'conversation' when the dancer's eyes opened.

Pure bewilderment was written in the woman's face, dark eyes glassy, jaw slack, and lips parted. She let herself fall back on the mattress. "Gaea," she mumbled.

"Yes, she has that effect on people."

Ziedra's head jerked, wide eyes fixed on her. She fumbled around pushing up on an elbow. "Gaea, she--she--I--"

"She wanted a hug. I bet she said you hug better than I do."

The dancer's jaw dropped.

Wren shook her head. "Don't drool on yourself. You should know by now I don't make stuff up."

Ziedra sat up and scrubbed her face with both hands. "But I--she--we--you--urhmm."

Wren stopped Ziedra by putting a hand over her mouth. "Take a deep breath." Ziedra swallowed, closed her eyes and inhaled. "Now, take your time, and speak in complete sentences."

Wren withdrew her hand.

The dancer took a moment to compose herself, eyes fluttering. "Whoa." She gasped, a sudden realization coming to her. "Hecate! Hecate is coming!"

Wren lurched forward and clamped her palm over the woman's mouth again. "Shhh." She rolled her eyes. "Zeee..." She drew the name out. "Did you just lose your mind? The priestesses are scared enough already. You go blurting that out and we'll be on our butts in the street. We have to keep it between the five of us until we have somewhere else to go. Now, let's just get dressed and find the others."

Ziedra drew back, putting her own hand over her mouth. "Sorry. It's just there was so much..." Her voice trailed off.

"No worries. I understand. It's pretty overwhelming."

The dancer was quiet for a while, pulling on her hose and boots. She looked over at Wren. Her eyes were filled with wonder and her voice husky with awe. "Gaea loves me."

Wren smiled. "Yes--yes she does. It's a nice feeling isn't it?"

Ziedra nodded, a distant expression still on her face. After a moment, she snapped out of it, and started pulling on the new blouse the priestesses had found for her. The previous one had been shredded and burned by Euriel's lightning bolt.

"Hand me my coat will you?" Wren held out a hand.

The dancer passed it over. Wren slipped her arms into the close fitting uniform jacket, settled it on her shoulders, then pulled the flap across to button it. She stopped after two of the five buttons, frowning down at herself. She pulled the jacket tighter trying to compress or otherwise push the extra mass around so the buttons would meet their holes. She could do it, but barely. Not only did it not feel right, the stressed fabric just drew even more attention to it. She didn't recall being that firm before.

Growling, she finished the bottom three buttons and left the top two undone.

"What's the matter?"

Wren rose, pushed the curtains aside, and ducked into the passage. "Nothing," she muttered.

Ziedra followed her out wearing a perplexed expression. Wren guided them back toward the common room she had seen. That seemed the best place to find anybody.

As they rounded a corner, dark-skinned Uud was coming the other way. The plump priestess was in a robe, her hair wrapped in cloth, and a bucket in her hand.

She smiled at them and nodded. "Miladies," she greeted. "Looking for someone? It is late."

"Have you seen my mother recently?"

"Quite recently," Uud responded. "Linna and I were bathing, and she came in to speak with us. She asked about the other girl. The one that looks like you." She

pointed back the way she had come. "I assume she'll be going there. Second hall on the right, the doors at the end."

Wren bowed. "Thank you, Maiden."

Uud dipped her head, bright smile flashing against her dark complexion.

They followed the priestess' directions. Half way down the hall, they saw her mother emerge from a doorway. The Baroness was dressed in deep-blue leather hauberk and leggings that showed her powerful physique. She wore a sword over her back, and daggers in thigh sheaths. She carried a jeweled staff slung over her shoulder. There was a stiff determined set to her shoulders, and she moved with swift decisive steps.

"Mother, going somewhere?"

The Baroness froze mid-step, and glanced back. A guilty expression clouded her features for an instant. "Li!" She rubbed the back of her neck. "I did not expect you up so soon."

"I'm feeling great," she answered. "Feeling sharp." She eyed the staff. "I thought you promised not to leave me out of anything."

Euriel seemed to realize the staff was on her shoulder. She canted her head to one side with a grimace. "Aye...I did." She winced. "Li, you were really hurt... I did not think..."

"Mother..." She sighed. What did she expect? This was her mother. Of course they thought alike! "Never mind, we need to talk in private. It's important. Do you know where Laramis and Irodee are?"

"Certainly," she answered pointing off to the center of the temple. "Laramis went back to the commons to feed that tower of a girlfriend."

"Good, let's go get them." Wren turned but her mother caught her arm.

"Li, I have business in that room," she hooked a thumb over her shoulder to the door at the end of the hall.

Wren glanced that way and pressed her lips to a line. She shook her head. "Mother, you won't get any satisfaction out of it. Trust me."

"Daughter, I think I'm the best judge of that."

Wren bowed her head and gestured her mother toward the door. She knew they were both too stubborn to get anywhere, best just to acquiesce.

Euriel turned back to her original path. Wren hung back a bit.

"Wren, she's going to pulp that girl," Ziedra said in a low voice.

She gestured to her mother who had just reached the door. "You want to try to stop her?"

Ziedra fixed her with a stern gaze, putting hands on hips. "She's *your* mother."

"Sure, and how many broken ribs did I get from our last disagreement?"

Ziedra scowled at her.

They followed as Euriel unbolted the door. The priestesses had been keeping Liandra locked up? Inside, Liandra who had been lying in a cot threw off the blankets.

"Mother?!" the girl cried.

Wren winced. Liandra couldn't see them standing in the hall past the Baroness.

The young blonde girl came and threw her arms around Euriel, chin in the curve of her neck. "Mother, I've been so worried." There was catch in her voice as her eyes opened. Over Euriel's shoulder her gaze settled on Wren. The girl's eyes widened and she stiffened. "I--"

Wren raised her hand in a finger-wiggle wave.

"I thought--" Liandra's voice cracked.

"You thought?" Euriel prompted, pushing Liandra back. "Perhaps you thought you could continue the charade?"

Liandra's lip trembled. A terrified look came into her eyes. Wren could not see her Mother's face, but she knew it would have to be a frightening sight. The Baroness was not happy, and she had the power to destroy whatever displeased her. "But Mother..."

"Do *not*--!" Euriel boomed, her voice resounding down the passage.

Liandra jerked and lurched back holding up her hands to shield herself.

"*Ever*--call me 'Mother' again." Euriel seethed. Her hands were clenched. Wren braced. Liandra was the last person in the world she would want to save, but she just couldn't let her get hammered. Her Mother did not know her own strength and she was *angry*.

"M--m--m--*nooo!*" Liandra wailed, tears pouring down her face. She crumpled up like a doll made of rags, falling to her knees, a trembling hand pawing at the Baroness' boot. "I--I--" Liandra choked with deep wracking sobs, totally shattered by Euriel's rejection.

Euriel's hand was balled up and ready to strike. Wren tensed, ready to forestall what was certain to be a lethal blow.

"--love--you," the girl blubbered out.

Hand poised, Euriel rocked her head back. With a snort, she jerked her foot away from Liandra's fingers. She whirled around, putting her back to the girl, and slammed the metal-shod butt of her staff against the stone flagging. Rock splintered and cracked with the force of the impact.

Tears trickled down the Baroness' face.

Wren went to Euriel, and put her arms around her. The Baroness clutched her tight, making choked sounds. "I'm so sorry, Baby. So sorry." She muttered, rocking her face in the curve of Wren's neck, spilling hot tears on her skin. "She's not you. She tried to be you." She bumped her head against Wren's shoulder. "I can't--can't--" She rocked back and forth, shuddering. "She wasn't mine, but she acted like my daughter--" She swallowed hard. "She loved us. I can't forget that."

"I never asked you to," Wren said. "You don't have to choose. She may look like me--but she isn't me. She'll never *be* me. She'll never have the love for you I do." She hugged her tight. "Mother, I know this makes you sad and angry, but we don't have time for it. I've learned something important, something frightening... and we have to act soon."

The tone of Wren's voice and the urgency in it seemed to reach Euriel. She pushed back from her, and wiped at her face. "What?"

Wren glanced at the collapsed form of Liandra. The girl was pathetic. "I can't tell you here. This needs to be shared with Laramis and Irodee too."

Euriel drew a breath and nodded. She turned and focused on Liandra. "You," she pointed a finger. "I am not done with you. You are free to come and go, but make sure you are where I can find you. If I have to search for you--" She sizzled through a pause. "There will be *dire* consequences."

Still sitting on the floor, rubbing an arm across her face Liandra nodded.

Euriel turned away.

Wren gestured Ziedra ahead of them, so she could walk her with her mother.

They headed toward the commons.

Euriel put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Thank you."

Wren looked up at her mother. "For what? Being your daughter?"

The Baroness was serious. "You did not have to be a good daughter. You probably hated me..."

She felt a catch in her heart and it made her suck a breath. "I did. For a long time I thought you abandoned me. I learned different." She put her arm around her

Mother's waist. "After I met you, it dispelled any doubts. You never would have left me." She looked over her shoulder to Liandra. "You're even reticent to give up on her."

Euriel growled. "I spent a fortune on the little snip." She squeezed Wren's shoulder. Her brow furrowed. "You know that rest really must have helped. You seem so much stronger."

Wren's eyes widened. "I do?" She pushed out her lip. "I *feel* better, but I don't feel any *different*."

"Perhaps stronger is the wrong word. More *solid* perhaps?" She shrugged. "So, can you at least tell me the nature of this important news?"

Wren glanced to Ziedra ahead of them. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the other ring, and held it up. The green metal winked in the priest light of the corridor. "It's about this."

"A ring?" Her mother reached out. When her fingers touched the surface, it seemed to shock her. She bobbled the ring and had to catch it. "Od, this thing is powerful!"

Wren nodded. "It's not so much about the ring, but where it came from, and what the person who gave it to me had to say."

Ziedra who was walking ahead of them glanced back.

Euriel was studying the ring. She looked at Wren with a raised eyebrow. "A mystery?" She held up the ring in her palm. "When did you get this?"

"While I was resting."

Her mother frowned. "Someone came to you in the temple?"

"Not exactly."

"Li, you are being very evasive."

"That's because it's going to sound crazy."

The three of them turned a corner, and descended several steps into what Wren called the main 'hall of trees'. It was a central corridor that ran the length of the structure, both sides flanked by huge trees whose branches had been coaxed into forming arches over the passage. After several tendays spent with the Myrmigynes, Wren had gained an appreciation for 'living art'. While the followers of Meliekki did not appear to have the flair and skills of the Myrmigynes, their works remained impressive.

"After what you have survived, Child," Euriel told her with a pained expression. "It would take quite a flight of fancy to make me think you were crazy."

Ziedra glanced back at them again. Wren knew the dancer was listening. She really was a good friend, giving her space to get to know her mother, even when she herself needed support.

Wren made a little shake of her head. "That will be put to the test, I'm sure."

They came to the temple 'core' where they had come in from the courtyard several bells before. Ziedra turned down the main connecting corridor toward the commons, passing through another 'grove' of trees before coming to the double doors of the main communal chamber.

Ziedra opened the portal, and the three of them stepped inside. The large hall with its circular tables overlooked by trees appeared largely empty. Two priestesses were cleaning up in one corner, stacking the sitting pillows atop the tables and sweeping the reed mats. Another pair of women tended the trees sprinkling something shiny at the bases of the trees and wiping them down with damp cloth. Laramis and Irodee sat alone on the far side with a large bounty of bread and other foodstuffs arrayed on the wood in front of them. The huge Myrmigyne seemed to be investing considerable energy in catching up on missed meals.

Euriel turned her head to one side. "Well, at least there's no question of where she puts it."

"Irodee is sweet," Ziedra said. "People shouldn't pick on her. She can't help being big."

They followed a weaving path around the tables to the back where the Justicar and Irodee sat. Laramis was involved in some tale that involved trekking across a desert. He was describing some strange creatures like horses that could go for days without water that were particularly mean and would spit at passersby. Irodee was listening raptly between bites, wrapping slices of bread around hunks of cheese, and washing it down with something in a large decanter.

The Justicar noticed them and immediately rose to his feet. He came to Euriel and bowed over her hand. "Milady."

He did the same with Ziedra. "Dama."

The Justicar turned to her. "Lady Wren, you are back with us!" He bowed over her hand. "You look so much bigger--" He winced. "So much--*better*--now." The handsome man smiled, tinges of red coloring his cheeks.

Wren raised an eyebrow. Ziedra's theory about gentlemen had just been proven. She never saw him look, but his attention to that detail was patently obvious. Neither Euriel or Ziedra had said a thing. She sighed. Men.

"So--ladies," Laramis said straightening up. Apparently, he was eager to fill the silence. "Are we off to something?"

"I believe we are," Euriel said. She looked at the ring in her hand and glanced at Wren. "If Li will grace us with the details."

Wren looked around, gauging how much privacy they had. The priestesses cleaning up in the chamber were intent on their tasks but still might overhear. "I think we need some place where no-one will overhear."

"Secrecy is a concern, Lady Wren?"

She leaned close and whisper. "The information would cause a panic."

"A panic?" the justicar's brow furrowed. "Well, I know an isolated chamber with thick walls that nobody will be in at this time."

"Perfect." Wren looked past him toward the Myrmigyne. "Bring your food..."

Laramis led them out toward the infirmary, but took an adjoining corridor and a set of steps down. The huge scalewood door creaked open. Laramis reached out and passed his hand over an activation jewel. Glowglobes around the chamber flickered with a dim red illumination that brightened to a soft golden light that revealed a chamber much like the infirmary only smaller. Instead of the massive carvings of Meliekki, this room was decorated with landscape murals that wrapped around the circumference. Instead of beds, there were cushions cast around the different terraces. Wren guessed from the configuration it was a lecture hall. From the dust on the railings, it didn't get much use.

Laramis closed and locked the door behind them and their group descended to the lowest level and sat down.

Everyone settled on the lowest step and then all eyes were turned on Wren.

She drew a breath. "Now, I want you to put aside how I found this out, and just pretend you believe. It's going to be hard to take."

"Milady, you have our utmost confidence," Laramis assured.

Wren glanced at Ziedra. The dancer looked back and nodded. She looked down, and then met her mother's eyes, and then those of Laramis and Irodee. "Hecate is coming to Cosmodarus."

The justicar's jaw dropped. "Excuse?"

Chin perched on fist, Euriel slipped forward with a gasp. "What?"

Irodee didn't say anything, her cheeks full of bread and cheese. She just stared with wide eyes.

"It's true," Ziedra added for emphasis. "The goddess herself. I saw it."

Laramis held up a hand. "Wait." He looked at Ziedra. "You *saw* it? Dama, it hasn't happened yet!"

"It will," Wren said. "Hecate is tired of the delay. She's going to come get us *personally*." She pointed to herself and Ziedra. She focused on Euriel. "I don't know what it is about you and Father, but she wants it horribly bad. When I was working with the Felspars, she spited them every iota of information. It has something to do with the fact that Azir and I are both savants. That does *not* happen. Gaea told me that every child you and father have will be a savant."

"Gaea?" Laramis said in a bewildered voice. "You saw this in a revelation from your goddess?"

Wren nodded and looked to Ziedra. "Both of us did."

The justicar dragged a hand through his hair. "Then--then I must believe you. I have received communications from Ukko, have stood in his presence in visions. How can I be messenger of his word, and deny that such a thing could happen to you?" He let out a breath. "I cannot say that I am fond of the tidings you bring though."

"I am not pleased either," Euriel remarked. Her brow furrowed. "*Gaea?*"

Wren pointed to the ring forgotten in the Baroness' fist. "Put the ring on." Euriel looked down and opened her hand. The dark green metal glinted in the priestlight. "That is Gaea's gift to you."

"I don't know how this will help," Euriel remarked, sliding the metal circle onto her finger.

Sparks whirled up out of the ring, the same way they had with Ziedra's. The Baroness made an incoherent sound and shuddered. Her face echoed the same dismay and wonder Wren had seen come over her friend. Slowly, the older blonde woman slipped back into the cushions and lay there, eyelids fluttering.

"Lady Wren?" Laramis asked in a concerned voice.

She held up a hand. "She's okay." She looked to Ziedra. "Right?"

The dancer swallowed and nodded. She stared at Euriel. "Is that what I looked like?" Wren nodded.

"Am I to take it, that she is having a vision now?" Laramis asked.

Wren nodded again. She looked to Irodee. "You've been quiet. Are you okay?"

The Myrmigyne ran a hand through her hair. "I--" She paused. "This is..." Her voice trailed off.

"A lot more than you were prepared for when you decided to follow us out into the jungle?" She sighed. "That's what happens when you follow me around."

Irodee rubbed the back of her neck. The food in her hand didn't seem to appeal to her anymore. "I will remember that in the future."

Laramis was studying Euriel. "Will she be that way long?"

She shrugged. "Depends on how much they talk." She turned to Ziedra. "Did it seem like much time passed to you?"

The dancer pulled at her ear in thought. "A lot actually. We discussed so many things. She knew everything about me--every thought..." Her cheeks colored and her voice trailed off in memory.

"Ah, it is as it was with me," Laramis said.

Irodee focused on him. "You've stood before Ukko?"

Laramis bowed his head. "Aye. Whether in the flesh, or only in my mind, I cannot say. I know only that afterward, his blessings were upon me. They were very real and tangible things." He clasped the hilt of the sword on his side. "Unmistakably divine in

nature." He leaned forward eyes on Wren. "You'll pardon milady, is it my imagination, or did you perhaps bring back more than rings as gifts from your goddess?"

Wren rolled her eyes. "Yesss..." She drew the word out.

Ziedra folded her arms and looked at Wren with narrowed eyes. "No, I guess it's not his imagination. What *is* wrong with your buttons? All this time I was thinking you'd stuffed something in there to fit in with the priestesses."

"Zee!" Wren stamped her foot.

The dancer flinched back, putting up her arms as though to ward off a smack. "Just joking." She covered a giggle with her hand. "They--ahhh, look good on you. Really."

Wren rolled her eyes and folded her arms--or tried to--forced to try again to complete the gesture. She let out a breath, cheeks hot. "You should talk," she grumbled.

Ziedra looked down at herself. Small, she had never been. The trait had only been exaggerated by putting on three stone of weight. The recent tendays of intense diet and exercise had slimmed out the rest of her. "Could you possibly be referring to my 'man catchers'? I'm not embarrassed by them."

Laramis' face flushed scarlet. "Ladies, I am certain there is a more appropriate time to compare anatomy..." He stopped when Euriel began to twitch.

Wren knelt by her mother. "Okay?"

The Baroness pushed herself up to a sitting position rubbing her forehead. Her features were slack with the same awe that had been written on Ziedra's face. She took deep breaths, slowly regaining her orientation.

She swallowed, looking from Laramis to Irodee, then to Ziedra and finally Wren. She started to talk and her voice caught. She cleared her throat. "Hecate is coming."

Chapter 63

Difficult Sharing

"Hecate is coming." Euriel's words rang through the circular stone lecture hall to the wide eyed expressions of Laramis and Irodee. Though it was only a confirmation of what Wren already knew, it still made her stomach tighten. Sitting on the tier by her mother, she gave Baroness' shoulder a squeeze of reassurance. The justicar, sitting on her other side, had stiffened his features pulling down into frown. Giant Irodee just looked scared--as well she should--the girl hadn't even seen twenty summers yet.

Wren studied Euriel's bewildered expression. Her words confirmed that she and Gaea had communicated. What would the green mother have said? Euriel had been submerged in the joining for so long. Ziedra had only been unconscious for a few long breaths. To the dancer, it had seemed as if they spent a great deal of time together. Her mother had been under double or even triple that duration. Was she simply harder to convince? On second thought, perhaps she didn't want to know. The possibilities of what Gaea might have told her mother boggled. In the back of her head, she felt a sliver of resentment, having to share something so exclusively hers (Gaea). Of course, after what Gaea had forced her to do, Ziedra and her mother were welcome to her.

"Well," Ziedra spoke into the silence. "Now that everyone's convinced. Is it okay for me to panic?"

"Panicking w-would," the justicar's normally stolid voice cracked. "Avail us naught."

"She is not invincible," Euriel growled. "In fact, my mother could probably defeat her."

"Great," Ziedra said, raising her hands. "Then why not give her a call."

"Two reasons. First, inter-pantheon wars are ugly things not lightly entered into. Second, Gaea told me communication with my mother has been stopped close to the destination."

"True," Wren said. "Ziedra's boyfriend Radian found evidence that somebody called the--Blood-something were involved in intercepting your messages. They and some pantheon lord worked him over something fierce."

"The *Bloodguard*?" Euriel thundered.

Wren winced at the volume of her voice and nodded.

"Odin. Rip out his beard and piss in his eye. He's been cooperating with Hecate!" Euriel snarled with such vehemence that everyone swayed back. Her whole body shook. "Damn." She slammed a fist into the stone, sending pieces skittering across the floor. Her jaw worked. Brow furrowing. Wren could see her mustering her control, putting her intellect to work. "Here Hecate will be far from her prime sources of power. She will be relatively weak."

"Compared to what?" Ziedra gasped. "Her damn avatar almost fried me."

"Hush, girl," Euriel fumed. "I hurt you more than that bitch Mishaka did."

"Hey, that's right..." Ziedra frowned. "But still..."

"I had not been over-worried about Mishaka," the Baroness rubbed her forehead. Her tone dropped to a dangerous rasp. "Without her magic she is a mewling sow without any teeth. While she was trying to take Wren away, I caught her... I almost made an end of her then." The blonde woman frowned. "Hethanon intervened. *He* is

the problem. For whatever reason, he is protecting her. They have very different powers, very different strengths."

"Mother, I don't understand, you're talking about the avatars... Hecate is the problem."

"Daughter, fighting Hecate is pointless--she has no reason to stand her ground and be destroyed. Besides, a battle of that magnitude would devastate the city around us--thousands, perhaps tens of thousands could die. No, we need to get your father and brother before she gets here and *run*. That way if she catches us, she will do so away from innocents she could use as fuel for her magic. To do that, we have to go through Hethanon and Mishaka."

"But, Milady," Laramis said. "Hecate may be waiting until you are on hand to manifest through Mishaka. That would leave us in a totally untenable position."

"Even manifestation takes time," Euriel insisted. "Much as I would prefer a stand up fight--this is not the time for it. My husband and son are in there. We need to strike fast and draw the battle out of the city if possible. Once outside, even a pantheon lord will have a hard time tracking us through the bowels of the ribbon realms."

"Mother, I don't think Gaea would have given me a weapon if she thought such a plan would work,"

"Weapon?" Ziedra murmured.

"Weapon?" Euriel echoed. "She didn't mention anything about a weapon."

"Damn her," Wren growled. What did they talk about in there--the *weather*? "We have a weapon, a strong one; a way to join our powers. Desiray and I did it when we fought Hecate's avatars... It's just difficult to explain." She growled. "It would be so much easier if could show you."

"You can," Ziedra said.

She looked over. "I can?"

The dancer nodded. She held up her hand and pointed to the black ring.

"How..." She rolled her eyes. Stupid question--it was Gaea. "Never mind. What do I do?"

"Come over here and give me your brain."

Shaking her head at Ziedra's choice of words she rose and went to sit by the dancer. Ziedra reached up and brushed the hair away from Wren's temple. She gently placed her hand so the ring was touching Wren's skin.

"Now," Ziedra said. "Show us. Think back to that time."

Wren closed her eyes and thought back to the battle. She remembered Riverback village, people screaming and fleeing in a panic. She recalled the awful stench of burned flesh and decay, and the roar of flames. The central square was a morass of blood and sundered demon bodies. The warriors of the great game were braced for the next wave of attacks while around them the circle of avatars chanted the spell of destruction. Splattered in ichor, Desiray slid to stop by Wren as the battle raged around them. 'We need Gaea's weapon,' she had said.

As Desiray said it in her mind, Wren heard the words echoing through the room. Her eyes snapped open. Ziedra held out her free hand, and from the tips of her fingers streamers of light shot out to form a sphere several paces across. In that globe, it was as if the battle existed right there in the room. Blasts of lightning flared and crashed. Demons bellowed, and the warriors of the great game let out war cries. Wren glanced to the others, seeing Ziedra cringe and Laramis wince. Euriel's eyes were wide with fascination. Irodee leaned forward, gritting her teeth at the sounds and narrowing her eyes at the sprays of blood.

Though she was thinking of the event, the image that Ziedra showed was not from her memory. The view was from some other vantage.

Having already conjured the scene through Ziedra, she no longer had to concentrate on it. Together with the others she watched in amazement as she and Desiray became the Mistress of Forces; fending away demons as if they were children.

"Whoa," Wren murmured, amazed by the glowing entity she had once become.

The group watched the battle play out, no-one even seeming to take a breath, until she and Desiray smashed Yolagg with his own demons.

Her mother shook a fist. Laramis gripped the top of his head.

The scene continued through the appearance of Damay, and her desperate act of agreeing to be launched at the avatar. Even her mother clutched her throat as the star brilliant explosion of magic drove her forward into the wall of demons. Then the mad scramble after destroying Yolagg, avatars falling to her dagger.

Then came the most frightening part. Loric brought out Mon'istiaga, the sword of Shiva, and the world destroyer lit up with spirals of power. They watched as she took the weapon from Loric, a dead black aura surrounding her body, her hair flying as though she were standing in a strong wind. Her eyes glowed with a crimson light.

Wren swallowed. She heard the others drawing breaths, eyes wide. The image frightened even her, and it had *been* her. The sight of her ripping into the demons made her swallow and cringe. She had been so close to being out of control, so consumed with the desire to destroy Hecate's creatures and her influence.

She swallowed hard as the carnage continued through to its conclusion and she fell to her knees in front of a stunned group of the adventurers.

The image Ziedra was projecting faded from view. Leaving the watchers staring at the empty space with slack jaws.

"Astounding," Laramis finally said.

Ziedra shook her head. "The memory crystal didn't do it justice."

"You killed nearly every one of Hecate's avatars," her mother breathed.

"No wonder the elders treat you with respect," Irodee said, awe in her voice.

"That wasn't to impress you," Wren said. "Just to show you what the combining can do--what it's like. Also, to show multiple avatars can be defeated. The three of us," she gestured to Ziedra and to her mother. "We can do something very similar."

"We can?" Ziedra said.

She nodded.

"Incredible," Euriel said, shaking her head. "However, it vividly reinforces my position. Did you see what was left of that village? Nothing. It was a smoking char hole. A fight with Hecate herself would be an even *larger* fracas." She pointed a finger at the floor. "I--we--cannot allow that to happen in this city. If Hecate shows, no matter what our chances, you must all agree that we do not attempt to fight her within the walls of Cosmodarus."

"Milady," Laramis said. "What if Hecate refuses to pursue, and instead uses the whole city as slaughter-bait to force us to engage her?"

Euriel gritted her teeth. "We have to *try*, Laramis. If that happens--then we have to try to confine the battle as much as possible." She looked to Wren. "So, this weapon. What is it actually?"

"It's a kind of potion that will temporarily make us compatible with one another. Give us a synergy like Desiray and I had. For instance," she nodded to her mother. "You're a lot tougher than Des. Imagine what you and I could do together. I can only begin to guess what Zee could do with a beta body."

"Gaea did explain about alphas and betas," Ziedra said.

"To I as well," Euriel added.

"Pardon my saying," Laramis said. "If you three are going to become Gaea's avatars, what role will I and Irodee fill?"

"You will get my son and husband out of the avatar's control," Euriel said.

Laramis raised an eyebrow. "Milady, how would we do that? How would we even find them?"

The Baroness raised her chin, eyes narrow. "I know you are holding back. That would be an appropriate time to *cut loose*, would it not?"

The justicar stared at her. After a moment, he nodded. "You speak sooth, milady. It would indeed."

"What?" Wren looked between them. "Did I miss something?"

"Pay it no mind," Euriel said. "Laramis will do his part, correct Sir?"

Pulling on his moustache the justicar bowed at the waist. "I will endeavor to be worthy of the faith you entrust to me."

Irodee stared at him, dark eyes intent. She put a hand on his arm. The justicar looked over and grinned. He patted her knee. "It will be all right, my Dear. I believe I know how you may assist in this as well."

She glanced between the Euriel and Laramis again. After a moment she sighed knowing she wouldn't get a straight answer. Why would they want to keep it a secret?

"So," Ziedra said. "Where do we get this potion you're talking about?"

"Yes," Euriel added. "Do you have it with you?"

Wren blinked looking between her mother and Ziedra. "Uh, yes, in a manner of speaking."

Her mother's brow furrowed. "And?"

She scrubbed her face. "It's *complicated*. It's not like a potion you put in a bottle. Gaea insisted that the only container that would keep it potent was a--*living* one."

Ziedra canted her head to one side. "A living container being...???"

Wren winced. "Uh--that would be me."

"You?" Euriel pointed a finger at her. "Where would you--" She halted in mid-sentence, finger bending as though having lost its stiffness. She closed one eye. "Li--what's wrong with your jacket?"

She swallowed, warmth flooding her cheeks.

The dancer's head dipped and she focused on Wren. She looked down. She reached toward the lapel of Wren's jacket. "Is that why--?"

Frowning, Wren smacked her hand away. "Zee!" she growled.

Laramis had turned red again, he looked away rubbing the back of his head.

The Baroness was frowning. "The potion is--actually--*in*..." Her voice trailed off and she made a cupping motion with her hands in front of herself. Grimacing, Wren nodded. Euriel's voice took on a bewildered tone. "Then how are we..." Her eyes widened. "Gah! That mean old green witch! What is she thinking?!"

"It gets worse," Wren said, face still hot. "Gaea said it must go directly from the vessel to the recipient."

The Baroness stared at her dumbfounded. Perhaps self-consciously her hand pointed toward her mouth.

Wren nodded.

Her mother rolled her eyes and slapped her sides. "Why?"

"Something about maturing or some such, I don't know," Wren shook her head.

"You think I was happy? They had to get that way somehow, remember?"

Ziedra wore a tiny smile. "I kinda like it," she said in a whisper.

Euriel glared at her.

Wren smacked her shoulder.

"This is unacceptable," Euriel snapped.

"You know," Ziedra said nodding. "We really could use that potion..."

"You hush," the Baroness pointed a finger at her.

She sighed. "You know we have to do it. Father and Azir are going to die if we don't have that extra power." She shuddered. "It's Gaea's bizarre way of..."

"What?" Euriel demanded. "Demeaning us? Embarrassing us? Taking advantage of our need? No. I will not go along with it. I will get the mage's guild..."

"The avatars will annihilate them," Wren said. "They're prepared. They're waiting for us. If we bring up any kind of force, they are going to rain death from above. You know they will. You know Mishaka would love nothing more than an excuse to start lobbing fireballs into the city. She *lives* for slaughter. I've seen it."

Her mother growled, but it was the gruff sound of someone acknowledging the truth.

"It's one time. Let's just--" She swallowed. "Do it, and get it behind us."

"Li, you cannot... I cannot--"

"Mother, as I started to say, it's a test. It won't hurt me. What will hurt is if we lose Father or Azir because we don't do it. Gaea did this on purpose, I'm fairly certain she wasn't telling the truth when I asked her for alternatives--but what could I do? What could any creature do? I had thought she would be above games, but in this, apparently she feels like she can get away with it."

"Li, you are being too understanding..."

She looked at Euriel. "Am I? Aren't I supposed to forgive my mother her flaws?" She leaned close, looking at the Baroness through her lashes. "Like when she tries to run off without me."

Euriel frowned at her. "That's different."

She kept her gaze steady. "It always is."

The Baroness let out a breath. "What a difference between you and the Liandra I'm used to."

"I should hope so. She's a spoiled brat. I went moons at a time with cobblestones for a bed and merchant scraps for food."

"We spoiled her because we loved the girl we thought was *you*."

She nudged her Mother and leaned close. "Feel free to spoil me any time you want." She smiled. "Cobblestones--*bad*. Down mattress--*good*."

Euriel grinned at her. "Now, we wouldn't want you to become a brat..."

"Too late," Ziedra chimed in.

She thumped her shoulder against her friend. Ziedra pushed back.

Wren sobered. "I'm not eager to do this, but we need to get ready. We need to find someplace--*quiet*."

The Baroness straightened up and stood. She made a show of adjusting her leather outfit before turning to the justicar. "Laramis, please get your equipment, and make whatever preparations you need to assault the mansion. After the debacle at the gate, if I know Captain Stark, he will have been spending his time rounding up some of his friends from the All-worlds. He left instructions on how to contact him, did he not?" At Laramis' nod she continued. "Please, see to getting him and his people to the temple courtyard. I sent word to some friends at the mage's guild," she glanced at Wren. "Because I had plans of my own. They should be arriving shortly. Coordinate with them, we shall be out directly as soon as we take care of this--" She paused, studying Wren with a thoughtful expression. "This *family* matter."

The justicar stood up and bowed to her. "Consider it done, Milady. We will proceed to it directly." He held out a hand to Irodee. The Myrmigyne took it and rose to stand with him. She nodded to them, and turned to follow Laramis as he headed for the door.

When the portal had shut behind them, Wren shook her head. "I don't know where to start..."

"The infirmary is probably unlocked," Ziedra offered. "It's just down the hall. Let's go there and lock the door."

"How is that any better than here?"

"It's not dusty and smelly," the dancer responded. "And there's a place to get-- uhhh-- *comfortable*."

Euriel gestured to the door. "Let's go." She headed that way.

Ziedra followed the Baroness with Wren bringing up the rear. This was by far the strangest thing she had ever considered being a part of. She couldn't even think of a reason that would justify Gaea subjecting the three of them to it. As they walked up the steps and down the hall she tried to just stop thinking about it. Trying to think past it, to what they would do to save her father and Azir. What had happened in their absence? They weren't even sure what had happened to Azir. Liandra said she hadn't seen *either* Azir in more than a tenday.

Euriel turned the ring and pushed open the infirmary door, proving it was unlocked. She stepped into the darkened area and passed her hand over the sensor jewel, causing the circular chamber to illuminate in the soft glow of priest light. She turned and looked at the dancer. "Zee, you wait outside for a bit, would you?"

Eyes wide, Ziedra blinked and nodded. She stepped back through the portal. Euriel closed the door in the dancer's face while she was still staring at them. The older-blond woman threw the bolt on the door. She put her hands flat to the wooden surface, leaning into the wood and thumping her forehead against it with a clunk. "This is preposterous," the woman rumbled. "I cannot believe that... If I had not seen Gaea myself I would think it all a grand jest..."

Wren rocked her head back. "Mother we're wasting time."

She turned. "Li, this is *slightly* different for me. For Od's sake, I gave birth to you."

"Let's just forget who we are for a little bit." She went to one of the cushioned mattresses and sat down. She licked her lips and drew a breath. Closing her eyes, she unbuttoned her jacket and slowly slipped it off her shoulders. She let the garment fall to the floor. "Struggling with it, trying to justify it and make it rational just makes it worse. Gaea already knows I'd sacrifice my life to save you. She just wants to know if I'd put aside my dignity too." She drew a breath, and began pulling her slip loose from the confines of her breeches.

Her mother came closer. "But Li, you should not have to."

Wren continued loosening the silk fabric. "One thing I've learned recently is that life isn't fair. There's a price for power--even power I didn't ask for. There's a price for everything." She pulled the last of the slip free. She opened her eyes and looked back to her mother. "Especially happiness." She bowed her head. "Gaea set a price for you to get your real daughter back, and for me to reclaim my family. It's strange, but that doesn't make the test any less hard." Swallowing, she crossed her arms and lifted the slip off over her head. The chilly air made her tremble, a prickling sensation rushed along the surface of her skin. She drew a breath, heart beating fast despite the composure in her mind. "I've made my decision," she said, slowly lying back on the mattress, eyes closed. "The rest is up to you."

There was a sob in her mother's voice. "Baby, I do not want to hurt you."

"Losing you would hurt me a thousand times more than some silly lurid moment of indecency that we both came to with great reluctance. You're my mother. I know you don't want to do it. That's enough."

The last of her words resonated into silence in the big room. Wren felt her mother's tension and indecision. She could actually feel the beating of the woman's powerful heart. Euriel drew a few steps closer. "Are you sure about this?"

She kept her eyes tightly shut. "As sure as I can be."

Her mother came closer, her fingers playing through Wren's hair. The touch made Wren twitch, causing her mother to flinch back. "Sorry. I'm just--" She didn't finish her words.

"You are so brave," her mother said, running her fingers through her hair again. Wren swallowed. "Please," her voice came out a raw whisper. "Just do it."

Her mother didn't say anything but she knelt next to the raised dais hands near but not quite touching Wren.

Wren's heart was humming in her chest like it did before a life or death battle. She could barely breathe. She already wanted to sink into the mattress and vanish forever for what she had already done. She just wanted it to be over.

"What do I need to do?"

The words made her whole body tingle. She pushed a lump down in her throat. She saw Gaea's grinning face in the back of her mind. "It doesn't get any simpler."

She could sense her mother shaking her head, considering what a strange scene this was to be a part of.

The silence went on for what seemed like forever. Wren held herself still, fighting the urge to twitch even when she felt Euriel's breath on her skin.

"How--" Euriel's voice cracked. "How much?"

It took all her effort to simply talk. She wanted to run away screaming. "Until you feel the sensation change."

There was another long silence. She swallowed. The long silences and Euriel's hesitation only made it worse.

She opened her eyes, and found herself staring into her mother's face. The blonde elder woman was beautiful, every bit as miraculous as a daughter of a goddess should be; timeless, graceful, and unique. Wren forced a smile. Euriel smiled back. She bit her lip and made a tiny nod.

Euriel bowed over her. She closed her eyes.

Wren felt the hot moisture close around her nipple, and couldn't restrain the shudder that reflexively made her knees pull up. Her hands came up to push the woman away but she forced herself to hook her arms around Euriel's neck instead.

A strange unfamiliar pulling sensation made a tingle go through her breast and behind her ribs. Her heart raced and her stomach tightened. She felt Euriel shudder, and sensed the woman's body quivering. She heard the gulping sound as she tried to force down the honey thick elixir.

Wren focused on blocking out what was happening. However, she couldn't help but gasp when after a few long breaths she experienced a riveting jolt of energy that swept down her spine from the place where she felt her Nola. Huddled over her, Euriel flinched, her hand thumping down on the pad next to Wren.

Euriel withdrew, breathing hard.

She pulled on her. They had to finish this.

With obvious reluctance, Euriel dipped again. Wren closed her eyes, trying to barricade the sensations out of her mind. Despite her resolve and concentration, several more times the spikes of energy wrung gasps from her. With each one, she felt a strange humming in her bones grow more pronounced.

Wren wasn't sure how long it went on. Euriel finally drew back. She stood up hastily, grabbing Wren's slip and drawing it across her.

She sat up holding the silk across herself, as Euriel staggered back a step holding her head. "That--" The woman blinked and drew a breath. "That--*stuff*--is no joke. It's like the juice of my mother's fruit of immortality."

Wren was breathing fast, her heart thumping hard. "So strange, the more you--" She blinked. "You took--the stronger I felt."

Self-consciously, Wren touched her breasts relieved to find she wasn't lopsided now. She didn't know how that was, she didn't care, but was glad that Gaea had at least saved her some dignity.

Euriel picked up Wren's jacket and put it on the bedding dais. She sat down heavily put a hand to her chest as though to calm her heart. "That must be the combining; a kind of two way avatarism." She looked over at Wren. "Are you going to be able to handle this with Ziedra?"

"I'll get through it--she won't have any problems."

Her mother frowned. "Is she--?"

Wren nodded.

"And you--?"

Wren shook her head.

There was a long pause as the two of them just sat there trying not to look at one another.

"I should not have asked you that," Euriel said scrubbing a hand through her blonde hair.

Wren didn't want her nerve to collapse. "Let her in."

The Baroness nodded and walked up the ramp to the door. She slapped the bolt aside, and pulled the door open.

Euriel turned away not meeting the dancer's eyes and retreated into the chamber several steps. Ziedra stood in the hall arms folded, looking uncomfortable and out of place. She straightened and moved into the room a few steps. With a sheepish expression on her face she glanced from Euriel to Wren. "Uhhh, are you okay?"

Still holding the slip across herself, Wren nodded.

The dancer bit her lip and rubbed the back of her head. She obviously felt the strangeness of the situation. "Sooo, now what?"

Euriel stepped forward and closed the door behind Ziedra, sliding the bolt home with a clunk. She folded her arms.

Wren drew a breath. "I guess it's your turn."

Ziedra raised an eyebrow and turned her head toward the baroness. "Is she going to watch?"

The elder blonde woman went down the ramp past Ziedra and followed the third tier around to the far side of the room. Brushing back her hair, she stepped behind one of the privacy screens.

The dancer moved closer and looked to Wren. "Are you two okay?"

"Zee, it wasn't easy for us, all right?"

Nodding, Ziedra stepped down the ramp and slipped onto the mattress next to where Wren sat. Feeling vulnerable, she pulled the slip closer around herself.

The gesture wasn't lost on the dancer. Rubbing her neck, she drew a breath. "Was it worth the trouble?"

"I think so," Wren said in a small voice. "I'd feel great if I didn't feel so creepy."

"I'm sorry," Ziedra said. "You know, making you feel uncomfortable is the last thing I want to do."

"You *love* making me feel uncomfortable," Wren grumbled.

"I like *teasing* you because you're so easily shocked..."

Ziedra's words trailed off. She glanced toward the screen that hid Euriel from view. She looked back to Wren. "I'll go without the weapon. You don't have to do this. That was hard enough."

She made as though to rise. Wren reached out and took hold of her arm.

The dark-haired woman stared at her, a mixture of emotions playing in her face. Wren met her gaze. "I wish this part were easier for me." She gulped down a dryness

in her throat. "I promised to take care of you no matter what it took. This--" She paused. "This included."

Ziedra put a hand on Wren's cheek. Eyes filled with obvious longing, she shook her head. She leaned close and bumped her forehead against Wren's. "I don't want to hurt you. Don't do something you're not ready to do."

"I--" She choked. "I don't want you to die." She looked down, summoning her strength. "I--want--you to do it."

Ziedra reached out and pulled Wren's face so their eyes met. The dancer's face had a serious expression now. "Look at me and say it."

Wren drew a breath. "Zee--I love you--if it will save you--save us--I--I want you to do it." She rocked her head back. "Please. Please, don't make it harder."

The Silissian woman nodded, dark eyes intense. "Come on, lie down, close your eyes." She helped Wren settle back. Ziedra played her fingers across Wren's forehead. "Shhh." She rubbed Wren's shoulder, and with gentle pressure coaxed her fingers off the silk slip. She drew the fabric away. "Shhh."

Despite the woman's soothing sounds and manner, Wren's heart beat fast. Her body tense like a bowstring. Ziedra began to hum some slow melody, the sound faint but distinct to Wren's hearing. The woman took Wren's balled up hand and kissed it. With marvelous care she unclenched Wren's fist and pushed her hand into Wren's, lacing their fingers together. She brushed at Wren's hair again.

The woman was so delicate that she didn't even know that Ziedra had begun until she felt that pulling behind her ribs. She tensed, her legs coming up. The dancer applied a steadying pressure to Wren's hand.

Wren felt that pulling again and the warmth of Ziedra's breath on her skin. Her breasts tingled. The dancer drew back for a moment, her breathing now more forced. After a few more moments, the pulling came again a third time. She heard Ziedra's quiet struggles to swallow.

Though she was prepared for the possibility she might feel jolts like she had with Euriel, she still jumped when a hot rush pinged through her body. At the same instant, a cry came from where her mother was sitting across the chamber behind the partisan. This time the sensation was stronger and rocked her whole body with its force. Sparks seemed to glow under her skin.

Euriel's noise had startled Ziedra and the woman stopped to look over her shoulder, obviously not comfortable with a potential witness making sounds.

Wren reached up with her free hand and pulled Ziedra back. The woman's dusky skin was flushed. Well, at least something could make the brazen woman blush.

The dancer returned to her task. Four more times the surges of power struck them making them both twitch, each time the intensity of the effect grew. Perspiration had beaded on Wren's face. After the fourth time, Ziedra had lost her composure and was visibly reticent to continue. Wincing, Wren nodded to her. They had come this far.

Ziedra started again after a few moments. Fortunately, there wasn't another blast of magic. However, as the dancer drew near to completion, Wren felt a dizziness come over her. It made dots swim behind her closed eyelids. The humming in her bones had become a crackling, like she had fire licking through her insides that didn't hurt.

The dancer drew back, and pulled Wren's slip over her again. She started to rise, staggered, and was forced to thump down on the bench next to Wren.

"Oh whoa," the woman let out. "Are you okay?"

Wren couldn't answer, not with words. She only squeezed the dancer's hand. She tried to sit up and failed. Ziedra pulled her to a sitting position and helped her settle the silk undergarment over her shoulders.

"Damn," the dark-haired woman muttered. "My whole body is shaking." She looked down at her hands. "I feel good though."

Euriel came from behind the partition and joined them. Her face was red. "That-- that was disconcerting. Are you all right, Baby?"

She nodded. "Just a little dizzy. My arms and legs feel like they're ready to float away."

"Me too," Ziedra agreed. She raised her hand and tiny tendrils of energy snapped and fizzled between her fingers. "I don't know where the power is coming from, but it feels good."

"I don't feel stronger exactly," Euriel said. "But the magic and the energies are like shadows I can see. That must be something of how you two see."

Wren took deep breaths, reaching into the core of her power like when she had joined with Desiray. As her lungs filled with air, she felt the riveting strength of the joining start to swim through her body. The sensations peaked quickly. This combining wasn't as strong as the body union but it was still potent.

She pulled on the surcoat and buttoned it, actually finding herself somewhat disappointed that a little something extra hadn't been left behind. By the time she finished the last button she felt fully recovered. She bounced off the mattress. Now, she felt different. Now, she felt like they stood a chance. She pulled Ziedra off the bench, and put her arm through hers. She reached out and took her mother's hand. She looked between them.

"Are we ready?"

They both gave her the clenched fist go signal.

"All right, time to drop in on our avatar friends."

My gifts are sometimes what you want, and sometimes what you fervently object to, but in the end they will be what you need. They are my love, and that passion takes many forms...

--Gaea

Chapter 64

Surprise Visitors

Wren stepped fast as they headed out of the infirmary back to the courtyard. As they moved back through the darkened commons threading around the tables, she realized the magic of the combining was still evolving, she could feel energies boiling through her body. Gaea was right, it would give them a chance. Now, she just had to get past what they'd been forced to do to acquire it. She called to Azimuth and the dagger obediently appeared in her fist. Damn she owed Cassandra. Giving her the weapon had been a small gesture on the mage's part, but she had relied on it so much since. It was just another relationship she had to work out--provided they lived.

"Nice trick," Euriel remarked, nodding to the dagger.

"Cassandra makes great weapons. I'll tell you about Corona some time." She opened the common room doors and stepped into the main grove, and strode down the colonnade of trees.

"I think Gaea mentioned that," Euriel remarked. She looked at Wren from the corner of her eye. "She told me a lot about you. Filled in the gaps my memory magicks just touched on."

She drew a breath. She thought that might be what had been taking so long. If she survived, she would never get another moment's piece. One strong-willed independent all-knowing mother was bad enough, but she had *four*; Gaea, Damay, Desiray, and now Euriel. She wouldn't lack for guidance, that much was certain.

"Wren," Ziedra said. "We're marching off to make war on the avatars and we don't even know how this new 'combining' thing works. Shouldn't we practice or experiment or something?"

Euriel looked over. "Ziedra has a point. I feel the potential but I'm not intuiting how it's used."

"You're both trying too hard," Wren told them as they turned a corner and started into the main entrance hall. "It took me a while, but I finally learned the secret. Damay frustrated me over and over with one simple instruction for understanding my nola. She just told me to let myself 'be'. How could such a ridiculously simple instruction mean anything? The simplicity is what made the secret so elusive. The ability to control our powers, the instincts that govern them, is crafted into the tao essence that makes us savants, and into the physicality of immorts." She looked at Ziedra. "Our nola abilities, evolved in much sturdier bodies--ones like hers." She gestured to her mother. "Because we have these weak little breakable bodies, there's a kind of limiting instinct that keeps us from even being aware of all of our capabilities. That's so we don't get reckless and vaporize ourselves. However, when we merge with a butt-stompingly powerful body like I did with Desiray--Darling, let the show begin--you just let the instincts take over and you are ready to deal out some severe arse admonishment."

"Arse admonishment?" Euriel asked.

"Turn of phrase I picked up at Loric's dinner table," Wren responded. She opened the door and stepped into the frosty air of the temple courtyard.

Wren got her first real view of the Cosmodarian night from the open cobbled yard outside the main doors. Wren inhaled, feeling the raw cold sting her nostrils. Long

curls of vapor trailed out from her exhale. No stars shone in the sky, only faint strands of color like dollops of milk floating in water. Without a moon or other strong illumination, the empty parts of the sky were stunningly black, like swaths of glistening pitch.

Priestlights set in sconces cast stark shadows in the courtyard, the light hitting the cascades of water made splinters of light dance across the cisterns and walls. The wind chimes made a morose clinking in the icy stillness.

Several figures were gathered around the further cistern, some sitting on the lip others standing in a small circle rubbing their hands. There were two distinct groups standing in separate circles. One obviously fighter types from their weaponry and the way they moved and shifted with a nervous energy, bobbing on the balls of their feet and stretching their arms. The other group were likely the mages her mother enlisted, they stood leaning on staves or with their arms folded or behind their backs.

"This looks promising," Wren remarked. She looked to her mother. "Is that whole team just for Father and Azir?"

"It will take them and then some, if your father starts fighting," Euriel responded. "That's doesn't take into account the swarms of minions and cultists we will probably have to engage."

The dust in the courtyard began swirling and a carpet bearing Laramis, Irodee, Stark, and a fourth hooded and cloaked figure circled the yard. Another carpet with three more figures followed them down out of the sky.

The carpet piloted by Laramis settled down with a hush and a ripple of sparkling fabric. The second carpet made another circuit before fluttering in to land next to the first, tassels flicking in the frosty air. As they hit the ground, Wren recognized Chalmers and Reginald the two retainers. The third figure also wore hooded cloak.

"Wonder who those other two are," Ziedra said. "What's with the cloaks?"

"It *is* cold," Wren murmured, more teasing than serious. "The one with Laramis is a man. The other is a woman." She nodded toward them. "Let's go see."

They walked across the yard toward the gathering.

"You know," Ziedra said coming close. "You didn't really explain anything. You told us that everything hinged on us having bodies that you and I *don't* have."

"Do you feel stronger or not?" she asked.

"Well, yes."

"Then perhaps your body changed."

"But I don't feel anything special going on!"

She gave her friend's shoulder a squeeze. "You will--I'll help you."

"Milady," Laramis bowed to Euriel stepping off the carpet. "Good fortune smiles on us."

"I am eager to hear of any good fortune," Euriel said.

"Your Excellency," Stark stepped forward and bowed.

The Baroness put a hand on his shoulder. "Good to see you with clear eyes again my friend."

"Good to have you back on our side," Stark said, bringing his hand up to clasp hers. Euriel met his hand with hers in a clap, thumbs intertwined and hands interlocked.

"You met my daughter, correct? My *real* one?" Euriel asked gesturing to Wren.

"Only briefly," Stark admitted. "We spent most of that time fighting. She is quite a combatant--" He glanced to Wren with a nod. "She is by far the best shot with a knife I have seen." He shook his head holding up a tiny space between his fingers. "Dead into the eye-slots of the enemy helmets... over and over... and over."

Wren held up Azimuth with a grin. "Signature move."

Euriel put an arm around Stark and turned to Laramis. "So, what is this good news?"

Laramis gestured to the cloaked figure on the carpet. The man stepped forward, pulling his hood back to reveal a craggy bearded face with sun darkened skin and eyes like blue jewels. "Good evening, Ri," the man said in strong voice that sounded familiar to Wren.

Euriel's face lit up. "D'Shar! The 'edge' returns. I haven't seen you at tournament for ages!" She stepped forward and clasped arms, dropped her staff and gave him a hug.

He hugged her back. "You haven't been *at* the tournament for ages."

Wren blinked, was it... could it be? She stepped closer to see in the poor light. "Lords, T'Gor is that you?"

He looked over. "Hey, Wren, just the gal I was looking for." He grinned. "You wouldn't happen to have lost somebody would you?"

"Damn, I lost everybody."

The other cloaked figure stepped forward and pulled back her hood, revealing dark hair pulled into a conservative braid. Knowing dark eyes fixed on Wren. "I am not everybody, just myself."

She felt her heart leap. "Damay! I thought you were lost forever!" She rushed forward and gave the elder a hug.

The older woman returned the embrace with a grin. "Well, Child, I was fast on the heels of doing just that when this courteous young man caught up with me." She nodded to T'Gor.

"Problem was," he added in. "She was so lost, I couldn't get us back. She was so deep in the ribbon realms even calling with my shaladen didn't work."

"How did you get here then?" Wren asked.

"Well, that's the strange part," T'Gor said. "I'm used to being able to reach anywhere with the magic communication in this." He reached up and touched the handle of large two-handed sword sheathed over his back. "So I tracked you four without really worrying how I would get back. I found the spot where three of you went through that portal henge, and saw that one had stayed behind. Since it was the only trail... that's the one I followed. When I caught up to her, we were both stuck." He shook his head. "We wandered around not doing much but get ourselves more lost. I kept calling out with the sword--someone eventually answered--but not one of my friends in the Shael Dal."

"Gaea," Wren guessed.

His eyes widened. "You heard this story before?"

"No, we kind of put in a request with her."

Damay frowned. "You've spoken with her again?"

"Spoken?" Wren blew out her cheeks. "Check out my 'being' sister. We did a lot more than talk."

Damay's brow furrowed and she pushed Wren back. "I had thought your aura was..." Her eyes narrowed, then her jaw dropped. She stomped her foot. "Sister, I am jealous. Why is it you get all her favors?"

"Damay," Wren leaned close. "Next time there's favors being handed out, you can have mine--okay?" She put her arm around the elder. "Damay, I'd like you to meet my mother, Euriel. Mother this is Damay Alostara, my mentor in savant skills."

The Baroness nodded to Damay and held out a hand.

The elder savant clasped hands with her. "Greetings and regards," Damay said bowing over Euriel's hand. "Your daughter is a gift to us all."

"So, this means there isn't a rescue party trailing after you," Ziedra said.

T'Gor shook his head. "When the three of you went missing, we started combing. Algernon, I, and my wife all have shaladen swords... nothing was going to see us, much less bother us so we each went separate ways. Loric--well, you know Loric, not much is going to bother him either. It never occurred to any of us that we could get so deep in the dimensions that we would lose contact."

"So, essentially you're 'lost' too."

"Nah, there are gateways outside the city. There's guards, but nothing I can't handle. I can get to where I can call for reinforcements. Inside this city though," he gestured to the sky overhead. "I don't know how, but it is sealed up like a cask... teleportation, telepathy...nothing works. So, is it true you have major badness on the way?"

"We do," Euriel agreed.

He folded his arms. "Way I see it, I can help one of two ways. Go get my friends, or go in with you."

"Mother, he is insanely good," Wren put in.

"I know he is," Euriel said. "I have fought him before. That's been quite some seasons back, so I imagine he has improved."

T'Gor grinned.

Wren stared at him. "You never said you knew my mother."

He shrugged. "Sorry, didn't know she was your mother. At the All-worlds we just call her Ri. How could I put that together with Wren Kergatha?"

She frowned knowing he was right. "So, how did you hook up with Laramis? This city is gigantic."

"Gaea's instructions were pretty specific, where to go and who to talk to."

If only the green mother would give her directions like that!

"Since you have your mother with you, I take it you were at least partially successful in your quest," Damay said.

"More by accident than intent," she admitted. "But yes. We still have big trouble."

"If you wish assistance, I am willing to help." She dipped her head and smiled. "I have nothing better to do since I cannot seem to find my way home."

"Thank you."

Damay nodded.

Euriel thumped T'Gor on the shoulder. "If you'll put your strength with ours, I would be blessed. I have to think a sword in the fist is better than ten in the armory. We already sent messages to the Felspar clan by various routes. If they get here before this encounter is over, then it will be that much harder for the enemy."

"I'm all yours, Ri. I just hope you have enough enemies to go around. I need a good workout. Ever since your daughter there stole the win in the great game I've been feeling rusty." He grinned at Wren.

"Hey now!" Wren she responded. "It was a fair win. Besides everyone got their chance to beat me up. You included."

He gestured to Wren, and looked in Euriel's eyes. "She's got your spirit, Ri. She's good." He laced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. "I'm ready, what's the plan?"

Laramis, Irodee, and Stark stepped up on either side of the warrior.

"Aye," Laramis said. "What *is* the plan, Milady?"

Euriel drew a breath. "Here it is in the broad strokes. We engage the avatars and their minions to draw their attention so that a team can get my husband and son out of the mansion. The problem is, both of them may be under Mishaka's spell and may fight us. We have good information that says that Hecate plans to come here, we want to get them out before that happens."

"Laramis said Hecate was coming here," T'Gor remarked. "But I didn't quite believe. Isn't that a little out of character for a pantheon lord to wander so far from their power?"

"Wren did kill ten of her avatars," Damay put in.

T'Gor rubbed the back of his head and grimaced. "There's that I suppose. Well, okay, two avatars and a pantheon lord--we wouldn't want it to be too easy."

"Mister D'Shar," Ziedra said. Wren noticed she had a pale cast to her features.

The warrior looked to the dancer. "Yes?"

"That sword on your back, you called it a shaladen, right?"

He nodded again.

"Pardon my asking, but couldn't you slay Hecate all by yourself with that sword. I mean it's more powerful than all of us here put together."

Everyone glanced from Ziedra to T'Gor with bewildered expressions.

His hand crept to the weapon on his shoulder. His eyes narrowed. "I saw you a lot at the citadel didn't I? We never spoke, Lady--?"

"Ziedra."

"Ziedra," he repeated. "I'm not sure how you can see the magic in Korvel, but this blade can only be used on my patron Sroth's orders."

Wren pulled on Ziedra's sleeve. "Zee, what are you talking about?"

"That blade there--Mon'istiaga is a poor second to that thing."

Wren's stomach twisted. "Nooo..."

"Yes." She nodded.

"The Protectorate shaladens have unfathomable power," Damay said. "However, the Shael Dal took an oath not to take sides in the war of light and dark."

"It looks like he's choosing a side to me," Wren said.

"I'm off duty and the sword is sheathed," T'Gor said, rubbing the back of his neck. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Just because I can't whip this thing out and cut Hecate's head off doesn't mean it won't help us, if you take my meaning." He looked around.

"I guess," Wren murmured.

"Lady Damay," Ziedra said. "I have something for you."

The elder savant looked over. "Pardon? What is it, child?"

The dancer reached into a pouch on her belt and held out the beautiful Frielos earrings. "I saw from your expression that you haven't understood everything that's been said. These translator items will help."

"Is that what those are about?" Euriel wondered aloud. "I wondered why you two were wearing those into a battle."

Damay's eyes widened and she smiled. Wren knew from seeing all her rings, that the elder savant had a sincere love of jewelry, especially something as elegant as those earrings. "Ziedra, you are too precious, thank you." She took them from her and began fastening them on.

Wren frowned. "I just realized. T'Gor, you've been speaking Cosmodarian... how...???"

Ziedra pointed to the sword.

"Right," T'Gor nodded. "Actually, it's been translating for me and Damay. Those will save me the trouble."

Damay finished fastening on the earrings, and swung her head side to side experimentally, making the many jewels flash and sparkle. Seeing her relatively young appearance, and the expression on her face, it was hard to imagine she was one of the most powerful savants ever to live.

"That better?" Ziedra asked.

"*Unth, damantag!*" Damay replied in Silissian. "Marvelous magic."

"So," T'Gor said. "Teams? Tasks?"

"I'm puzzling over that," Euriel said. "My husband is a very powerful mage, if he's under control, he will give you a lot of problems. His savant talents give him a wilder's ability with magic."

"If you wish, I believe I can assist with that," Damay said. "It's something I have a great deal of practice at."

"Stark."

The captain of the guard bowed. "Excellency."

"Since we have you, you're going to lead the team. Laramis, Irodee, and Lady Damay will be your main assets. I fear the toughest part will be finding my son Azir. I'm fairly certain now that Mishaka has him tied up in the mansion someplace."

"He wasn't in the four main dungeons," Wren added. "I searched them all looking for Ziedra."

Euriel looked back to Stark. "Mishaka was using a duplicate for Azir, but he disappeared a tenday or so ago as you well know. I think the timing coincides with her acquiring the real Azir."

The guard captain scrubbed his forehead. "This business with impersonators and originals is quite odd. How will we know your birth son?"

"He'll be older. Mishaka may make this task easier by sending him against us. In which case, Laramis tells me he's developed some rather formidable skills."

"How formidable?" Stark asked, looking to Laramis.

"He was stroke for stroke with me when we practiced, and he was not struggling. He has magic skills as well."

"He's a savant," Wren added. "I don't know what type though."

"A Sil'Kar Nola, a savant of light," Euriel confirmed. "Gaea told me."

Damay scowled and looked at Wren. "She talked to your mother too?"

"I am going to arrange a meeting just so you'll hush," Wren grouched. "Besides, she wanted to yell at you for not *teaching* me." She looked to Ziedra. "Think that ring will contact Gaea twice?"

Grinning, Ziedra looked down at the black diamond ring Gaea gave her. She pulled it off and held it out. "I don't know, but Damay is welcome to try."

The elder savant stared at the ring. Her face went pale. "You are toying with me."

"No, Gaea, is physically close to this place at the moment. She's been holding conferences with everybody--well, except for *you*."

"I--"

"Go ahead, maybe she'll favor you with a gift or two," Wren looked to Ziedra.

The dancer rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, great big ones." She made a cupping gesture with both hands.

The elder savant stared between the two of them, features hardening. "I fear you two are having a jest at my expense. Gaea is my patron. She is not a subject for humor."

"Damay, pay their lame attempts at teasing no mind." Euriel said frowning at them. "It is true. You can speak with Gaea."

Coming from Euriel it obviously carried more weight. "I can?" Damay asked, astonishment on her face.

"Indeed. I believe these rings," she held up hers. "Can function in that capacity more than once. Perhaps you wish to do so before we do this."

The elder gulped. "Now?"

"You might not get another opportunity," Euriel said. "Why not go over to the grass there and sit down. When you're comfortable, put on the ring." Euriel took the ring

from Ziedra and held it out. Wren got the feeling that Gaea had directed her Mother to do this very thing.

"Y-yes," Damay said. "That seems prudent." She reached out with a shaking hand and took the ring. She stared at it in her palm, throat muscles working.

Seeing the reverent look on Damay's face, Wren regretted teasing her. Damay had striven for millennia to do what she had already done twice in less than a turn of the seasons. The elder closed her fist around the ring, and stumbled off toward the grass like a person intoxicated.

"Is she going to be all right?" T'Gor asked. "We could really use her."

"She will be okay," Euriel said, watching the woman. "It's been her lifelong dream to meet the green mother in the flesh."

"I hope it's not a disappointment," Wren murmured following the older woman with her eyes and feeling a pang in her heart. "It would crush her."

"How could it be a disappointment?" Euriel wanted to know.

Wren could think of a lot of ways. The goddess that Damay idealized was not the creature that Wren met. Gaea was grand, immense, and awe-inspiring but from there expectations and reality diverged radically.

They watched Damay sit down in the grass. She stared at the ring for a long time, as though summoning up her courage. Wren could tell from the woman's expression how terribly much it meant to her.

She slipped the ring on. Lights played up out of the metal circle and surrounded the greatest of the Kel'Varans. Unlike the previous two times Wren had seen it, the light continued to grow brighter until Wren and the others were forced to shield their eyes. In a flair of blue-white color, the illumination vanished.

Wren's heart started pounding and her breath caught. The spot where Damay had been sitting was empty.

Euriel Kergatha, or Ri as I knew her for many summers, is not the kind of girl you get cozy with. She's the kind of girl you have a drinking contest with, and usually lose. The kind of woman any man with even a shred of doubt as to their masculinity would go three leagues out of their way to avoid...
--T'Gor D'Shar

Chapter 65

Damay's Disillusionment and Gaea's Gift

The group stared into the empty space where the great Kel'Varan Damay had been sitting instants ago. The courtyard went silent except for the gurgle of water and the forlorn clunk of the wind-chimes. Trails of vapor left from Damay's last breath faded into the air above the spot where she'd been sitting. That empty spot hit Wren like a punch in chest.

"She took my ring!" Ziedra said.

"Spit," Wren muttered.

"Errr, was that supposed to happen?" T'Gor asked with wide eyes.

"Gaea didn't say anything about this!" Euriel said.

"It thought we needed her," Stark said, looking uncomfortable.

"We sure as Hades did," Wren said. "She was the big difference we needed for a fair shot at winning this thing. Damn it!" She looked to Euriel. "Mother, give me your ring."

"What? Why?"

"To go after her, of course,"

"No wait," Ziedra said. "Let's not get hasty. If we lose both of you we are stuck for sure." She looked to where Damay had been narrowing her eyes. "Give it a moment, maybe she'll be back."

"How many moments?" Wren let out.

"Long enough for Gaea to yell at her," Ziedra said. "Maybe the big green lady wanted her all the way in that 'other' place to apply proper admonishment. When she spoke to me, she mentioned not being happy with Damay."

Wren scrubbed her face. "Damn, this could ruin everything."

"Hey, a little bit ago you were ready to do it without her."

"Yeah, but it would be so much easier *with* her."

"Don't I make a difference?" T'Gor grumbled.

She went and put a hand on the man's burly shoulder. "With you we are set for anything we can crunch with a sword, you'll probably kill a million of Hethanon's thugs. Our problem is someone to handle the magic. If Damay can't help, Zee or I will have to do that part, and the three of us will be split up and that will really weaken us."

"Speaking of weak," Ziedra said. "You still haven't coached us on how the new stuff works."

Wren looked at her with wide eyes. "You still don't feel it? It's been getting stronger since we left the infirmary." She looked to her mother. Euriel shrugged looking perplexed.

She didn't understand. Had she advanced that much in her abilities that things were obvious to her and not to others?

"Pardon my mage-wary eye," T'Gor said. "But you three do have a lot of magic, and as Wren says, it's been getting stronger since I first landed."

"Why can't I see it?" Ziedra fumed. "I mean, that's what I do."

"See nor feel," Euriel added.

"All right," Wren said. "Simple easy test." She looked to the dancer. "How many spells do you know?"

Ziedra frowned. "I mentioned before, a half dozen war spells, and maybe a dozen utility spells."

Wren stared at her. "Think again. Take a breath and close your eyes." The dark-haired woman did so. "Just make your mind a blank. Don't worry about what you *think* you know. Toss it away. 'Be'ing is about letting your tao free, not confining it in some box of preconceptions. You with me?" Ziedra nodded. Wren put a hand on her shoulder. "Now, slowly, one at time, go through each spell you know."

"I don't undermmmf--"

Wren stepped over and put a hand over the woman's mouth. "As Vera told me, you don't think with your mouth. Focus, they're there... I *know* they are. The moment you *know* it too, it'll be obvious."

Shaking her head the dancer kept her eyes closed, her brow furrowed and she bit her lip.

Wren allowed herself to think about Damay. Her impromptu lesson was simply to get her mind off it. Things would have been so much better with the elder's stable influence and capabilities.

She looked to Euriel. "Mother this will work for you too."

"Daughter, I'm no apprentice, I know how to think."

Wren looked at her with a raised eye-brow. "Are you too wise to learn something new?"

"Of course not," the woman answered with a frown.

"Then find that difference, with all your experience, you should be able to find it faster than Ziedra."

The Baroness snorted and closed her eyes.

"Is this the best time for this, Lady Wren?" Laramis asked.

"Well," Wren answered. "It could make the difference between us winning and losing, so I think it's pretty important we know it before we light out of here."

"Ah," he replied with a sheepish expression.

"I don't see, feel, taste, smell, or hear anything," Ziedra grumbled.

"Zee, nobody tells birds how to fly, they just do it. That's what 'be'ing is. It's flying without knowing how."

The dancer let out an exasperated sigh. "Flying without knowing how. Knowing spells without knowing them."

"Have you forgotten so soon? The first time you cast a spell. Did you know how to do that?"

Ziedra stiffened her brow relaxing. "No, I didn't."

"You just did what I told you, and it happened. That was your first time 'be'ing. You flew without knowing how."

"Li?" her mother asked, eyes still closed.

"Yes?"

"Give me your hand."

Wren stepped over and took her mother's hand. She felt the cool dryness of Euriel's soft skin and its feverish warmth.

In the same way she perceived wards, Wren saw her mother's aura flicker and grow brighter. The daughter of Idun's life force was powerful to begin with, seeing its strength increase made her heart beat faster. No wonder this lady wasn't afraid of Mishaka.

"Why do I feel myself in you?" Euriel asked.

"Right focus, wrong direction. What you need is to find is *me* in you."

"But I don't know what--"

"Mother that's the simple part--anything that isn't you, is either me or Ziedra."

"Li, you are oversimplifying!"

"Look, Mother, you know exactly how strong I am, right? You've been hit by me."

Euriel grimaced and nodded.

Wren reversed her grip so their hands were clasped wrestling style. She started pushing her mother's arm over, until the woman instinctively began to resist and pushed back. Before, she wouldn't have slowed her mother down at all, now the Baroness had to focus to overcome Wren's resistance.

Euriel let go, looking at Wren. "How did you get so strong?"

Wren leaned forward, eyes staring into her mother's, hands held up in a 'get it?' gesture.

"There it is!" Ziedra burst out, making both of them jump. She drew a pattern in the air, chanted a few words then brought her arms up to her shoulders cross-wise. As her fingers touched her body a gold light filtered around her and became glistening illumination on the surface of her skin.

Euriel's eyes widened. "Energy protection."

"It's all there," Ziedra breathed. "I don't know why it was so hard."

Off in the grass where Damay had been sitting, a pinpoint of light flared into being, lengthened into a line, then split apart with a flash. Damay staggered out of the light dressed in her jungle camouflage clothing, the hooded cloak nowhere in sight. Her tightly braided hair now hung loose over her shoulders, and she wore a dazed expression on her young-appearing face.

"Damay!" Wren ran over to her. "Are you all right?"

The woman continued to walk, taking stiff irregular steps as Wren took her arm. Eyes fluttering, the elder savant continued until she came to Ziedra. She worked Gaea's ring off her finger, took Ziedra's hand and pressed the ring into it.

She turned away and ran a hand through her hair, wavering as though she might fall over.

"Damay?" Wren asked again.

The woman blinked, seeming to have a hard time focusing. "Oh, you." She swallowed and drew a breath. "I--we--" She pointed off to the place where she had disappeared from. "She--you--" The elder put a hand to her head. "That could have--gone better." Her knees started to buckle and Wren caught her around the waist.

"Damay, what's wrong?"

"She's disappointed in me."

"Did she hurt you?" Ziedra asked.

It took a moment for her to focus on Ziedra, eyes narrowing as though the limited light in the courtyard were too bright. "No..." Her voice trailed off.

"She's out of it," T'Gor said.

"Leave us sit her at the cistern and get her some water," Laramis put in.

Ziedra and Wren walked the stupefied savant over to the cistern and sat her down on the lip amid the looks of all the gathered warriors and mages who'd been following their strategy meeting. Wren spied a dipper hanging on the wall, grabbed it, and scooped up a cupful of water. She pushed ladle of icy water into Damay's hands.

Fingers trembling around the cup, she sipped the water.

Wren sat down next to her and put a hand on the woman's back. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you into trouble. I shouldn't have said anything. I didn't think she would really reprimand you."

Damay took another deep gulp of water. Wren took the dipper from her and fished out another cup. She looked up at the audience gathered around them. She made a shooing motion. "Go. Go plan an attack or something. I need to talk to her."

"Can we include her in the plans?" Euriel asked.

She looked into Damay's glassy eyes. Whatever had gone on between Damay and Gaea had struck her hard. She focused on her mother. "Make allowances for her, but don't count on her being able to go."

That seemed to get the elder savant's attention. "No. I'll be ready," She croaked. She seemed to be struggling to simply speak. "I--If I let Wren down--again--she'll be--very angry."

Wren nodded to her mother.

"Come on," Euriel said, gathering the others. "They need to talk."

The other members of the group nodded to her and headed back toward the center of the courtyard.

"I'm so sorry," Wren said rubbing Damay's back.

"For what?" Damay said in a blurry voice. "For being a better savant than me? For being her favorite?"

"She loves us all."

"Think I don't know that?" Damay choked, raising her head. Tears were coming down her face. "I--I really was jealous. Did you know that? She arranged to have me come into your possession as a present." She rubbed her eyes. "I never said--I resented it. You shouldn't have summoned me out of the amulet... I was a failure hiding behind excuses."

"Would you stop this?" Wren said. "Why all this self pity all of sudden? You're not perfect--nobody is--not even Gaea."

Damay glared at her.

Wren drew a breath and continued. "Look, I never blamed you for the way things turned out. You came out of that amulet and the first thing you did was get me out of an impossible situation. That's what matters. You gave me the chance to go on and learn things for myself." She took her hand. "Damay, you gave me that one simple secret and it's taken me a long way."

The elder savant just shook her head.

"What did Gaea tell you?"

"That she loved me."

"That's all? Come on."

"Wren, it's not what she said. It's what she didn't say." She looked up at her. "She never said she was proud of me." She paused, dark eyes intent on Wren. "Did she say she was proud of you?"

Wren blinked. "Hey, this isn't a competition, we're sisters. We're *friends*."

Damay looked down. "You don't understand. Five millennia of life. Gaea only knows how many more in Aarlen's spirit prison. The only thing I ever wanted to hear our mother say was that she was proud of me." She rubbed her face. "I practiced my serenity. I honed my strength. I helped my sisters and brothers... I tried to be the *best*." She trained glistening eyes on Wren. "Damn it. I *was* the best."

"Damay, for someone so wise, I can't believe you can be this dumb."

The elder scowled. "Don't mock me."

"Mock you? Damay you dunce, I'm no genius and I know that love is unconditional acceptance. Was there ever a mother who loved her children and wasn't proud of them?" She pushed the elder savant's shoulder. "She took you all the way into her realm to get your hug. She didn't do that with me."

"She didn't?"

"No. And just because she didn't tell you to your face she was proud of you doesn't mean she doesn't sing your praises. You're the standard by which all of the rest of us are judged. If that's not pride, what is?"

"I am not the standard, you are. Liandra this, Liandra that..."

"If she says anything about me Damay, it might be about my stubbornness... that I'm a quick study maybe... but I am *not* your equal. Power and capability are different things. Back at Beia's tree there's a little dark-haired cook. I watched a bruiser of a Myrmigyne hammer her over and over. She never got angry, never showed pain, not even resentment. She didn't lift a finger to hurt the other girl because in her mind she knew there was no point. That same cook, who has no magical powers, if she put her mind to it, could probably pound the stuffing out of both of us even if we were working together. We're more powerful than she is, but that doesn't make us better than her. Quality is a complete package. I don't have her discipline, or your patience. I have a lot to learn. As long as Vera is willing to punish me with her workouts and teach me, I'll be at her feet showing respect. The same respect I have for you."

"You respect me?"

"Oh come on, is your confidence so shaken? You know I *respect* you. Damn, woman I *have* to respect you. First, you're so damn old. Second, you bloody walk on water! Now, come here." Wren put her arms around the elder savant. "Damn it, we're sisters. Sisters take care of each other."

Damay seemed taken aback, but after a few moments returned her hug. She bumped her head against Wren's shoulder. It was several long breaths before she moved or said anything. She sighed. "Wasn't I supposed to teach *you*?"

"Part of teaching is learning from your students."

Damay finally pushed back from her, fixing dark eyes on Wren. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not *old*. I'm *seasoned*."

"Whatever you say. Now, do you feel up to helping us? It will be dangerous. I'd understand if you decided not to."

The elder savant swallowed. "I will go with you." She stood up and put a hand against Wren's cheek. "You were right. Sisters take care of each other. I was wrong to envy your closeness to our mother. Especially wrong since you gave me *exactly* what I wanted." She pulled Wren to her feet. "Come on, you have to finish teaching our sisters how to 'be'."

"Hey, you're head sister on 'be'ing around here."

"What you are doing is as new to me as you." She gave the back of Wren's neck a squeeze. "Best to follow the path you started."

Wren nodded and the two of them walked back to the group.

Euriel had already organized their resources into teams. Laramis, Irodee, Stark, the entire contingent of ten warriors and four of the eight mages were prepared to recover baron Kergatha and Wren's brother Azir. Euriel, Ziedra, Wren and T'Gor, and the remaining mages were the avatar strike group. Since Damay was willing to help, she would go with Laramis' group to handle the magic.

"This is a decent arrangement," T'Gor remarked. "So, I assume we stick together to breech any peripheral defenses?"

"Correct," Euriel said looking around at the twenty-six other people in the yard. "Also, please remember that the mansion guards don't know what's going on--they'll defend themselves and the master. Subdue them if they threaten you. That's why your team is biggest. Use any force necessary against the cultists and any of the avatar's allies."

"A word about the cultists and minions," Wren added stepping up. "Many may be using weapons tainted with jikartandak or karagal, both *very* powerful poisons."

Expect them to double up on you, one ties up your defense so the other can get a shot at you with the poison. So the best solution is to keep them at a distance and watch for flying weapons. This is where I hope our friends from the mage guild can help you. Keep them safe, and they'll keep you safe."

"Good information," Stark remarked. "Euriel tells me Bellonn and Velosse here," he indicated the two burly looking mages who wore their hair in topknots. "Are our strongest mages. Damon, Talis, Gehreg, you cover Bellonn. Khalan, Quig, Nolan you watch Velosse. Harad, Jhamis you are with Xemen. Darris, Wilson you will have Rezo's back."

"Let me add something here," T'Gor said stepping forward. "Has anyone here fought an avatar before?"

The mages and warriors all looked at one another. Nobody spoke up.

"Okay," T'Gor continued. "Just in case we have any heroes. Point one. You need strong magic to even hurt an avatar. I see some weapons there among you that could do it--but it's still a bad idea. Point two. God magic holds them together, so unless you kill them outright, it just makes them angry. Point three. Do *not* make the avatars angry. Let Euriel, Wren, Ziedra and I keep their attention, you just keep all the underlings off us so we can focus on them. If we stick to that plan, we can get through this without anyone dying."

"Euriel," the mage Stark had pointed out as Bellonn raised a hand. He was powerfully built and obviously engaged in regular martial training. His broad round face was heavily tattooed, and he had a deep scar in his upper lip from what must have been a near fatal sword strike. "There was mention that Hecate herself might get involved. What do we do then?"

"Run," Euriel said. "Don't even hesitate. Get out of there." She looked around. "I want this clear. Nobody is here to fight a god. The same goes for if one of the avatars starts to manifest. We aren't equipped to protect all of you from that kind of resistance."

"Manifest?" One of the warriors asked, scratching his head.

"It's when they call their god into themselves," Wren told the group. "Trust me, you'll recognize it when you see it. The whole mansion will light up if one of them starts to do it. Do like my mother says--*run*."

"Question is, what do *we* do?" Ziedra asked.

"I have to go with what mother says, if they manifest or Hecate shows, we have to retreat. We don't want everyone and everything around the mansion blown flat."

"Manifestation can be prevented," Damay said. "In fact, an avatar can be slain if you can get enough silver into them. A silver bolt into the heart will disrupt manifestation. It will not kill them but..."

"But it keeps you from having to deal with a god."

"Right."

"Nice information, wish we could do something with it. Big sharp hunks of silver aren't something you generally find lying around."

"Alas no."

Euriel looked around. "Any other questions?"

No one said anything.

"All right, everyone get your gear adjusted and ready to go. We head out as soon as everyone is set." She looked to Wren and whispered. "That will give you a few more moments to explain what I'm missing about this combining."

She drew Wren and Ziedra away from the main group as the warriors and mages began adjusting armor, checking weapons, and doing preparatory rituals. Laramis and Irodee knelt down together by themselves. T'Gor went over to the cistern and got

himself a drink. The lean battle-hardened warrior seemed completely unphased by the idea of what they were preparing to do. Stark went over to stand beside him, and the two started talking. With her customary composure regained, Damay, hands behind her back strolled over to join Wren.

Euriel eyed Ziedra. "Did you really figure it out?"

The dancer winced. She brushed a hand through her dark hair. "Sort of. I found your spells."

"You two are thinking too specifically," Wren said. "I used the spells as an example. I mean what does a 'power' look like?"

"I don't know." Euriel said.

"And neither do I. Maybe it's just that I've been doing all this training, and Vera has been teaching me to become familiar with myself. I know what things aren't me, and through that, I can embrace the new aspects and make them a part of myself."

Ziedra stared at Wren, then glanced to Euriel. "Was she speaking common? That made absolutely no sense."

Wren rolled her eyes. "Like this." She closed her eyes and focused within herself, feeling the Ziedra part of her that was there. She raised her hands, channeling her desire and letting the Ziedra part of her 'be'. The gestures were simple and natural, and the odd words easy on her tongue. She flipped her hand up and a ball of light floated into the air.

She felt a marvelous sense of elation. It worked. She had cast her first spell and she hadn't trained an instant in her life.

The dancer stared. "You cast a spell."

"I cast the first spell you learned."

"But--"

"I could have cast one of Mother's spells but it would probably destroy a wall or something. They feel pretty 'energetic'."

"Yes..." Euriel said, drawing out the words. "Most of them are war spells." She looked down at her hands. "Recognize my *self*."

"Your true name," Damay said leaning forward. "In mage training, it is the sigil for your life force. Wren's problem is she has intuited this understanding, so it doesn't translate well. If I understand what has happened with the three of you, you will perceive it as patterns overlaid on top of your own. The challenge is to accept those patterns as aspects of yourself."

Wren scratched her head. "That sounds good. Mother, if Ziedra, I, and you were to use a magical shape merge like Desiray and I did... We would 'be' like you cannot imagine. The union Desiray and I did would be a weakling compared to it. In fact, the only thing that would concern me is that it might be *too* powerful. We'd have two taos in a beta body."

"I can't do what I saw Desiray do in the image you showed us," Euriel said. "That was some sort of powerful metamagic talent."

"I know, and I think in this case it's too dangerous to try. Gaea worked some special magic on Desiray so we could do it, and even then we could only do it twice without becoming permanently merged." She sighed. "Damn, that would have been nice--for me anyway. For us, Ziedra and I just need to give you about half our power and it should be more than enough."

"Give it to me?"

"Easier to show you." She stepped around behind her mother, and put her forehead against the back of her neck. The woman's immortal skin felt good and warm. She wrapped her arms around Euriel's waist. "If I try to push the energy *through* myself it'll hurt. However if I do this..." She drew a breath, concentrating her climbing power

and pushing it into the aspect of Euriel that she sensed within. The copy of her mother was like a gateway she could pass through. Beyond was the liquid vastness of her mother's body. She insinuated herself into it, made herself a part of it, feeling that body come alive with potential. As a part of that vastly superior flesh, the power of her nola was a tool, not a threat. It was like being inside of Desiray again, only better... stronger. She urged herself to simply breathe. Calling the myriad forces swirling around her into their body, energizing flesh, reinforcing bone and muscle, surrounding their skin in layers of elemental armor.

Euriel shuddered. "Oh my..." she gasped. She stared at her glowing hands opening and closing them.

<This is nothing,> Wren said into their mind. <Reach up, take hold of the stars, Mother.>

Her mother reached up and Wren pushed through the Kel'Varan grasping for the distant resources of Starholme Prime. In Desiray's body, it had been hairs out of reach. Not this time, she felt their shared body take hold of the magic of the First-ones in a riveting surge that was like drinking down the essence of a star.

The daughter of Idun let out an incoherent sound, spreading her arms to the torrent. It was as if someone had filled her with liquid light, shafts of illumination poured out of her. The stone beneath her feet cracked and groaned. The air in the courtyard began to whip around them. Tongues of energy sparked and crackled off her skin.

Damay stared wide-eyed at the transformation with both hands pressed to her face. Ziedra gawked with her jaw hanging down.

"***Pretty impressive, isn't it?***" Wren said with her Mother's voice, hearing the sound echo and resonate. "***This isn't all. It can go higher. Much higher.***"

"Enough Li, you are scaring me."

A little disappointed, Wren withdrew her influence. Inside of her there was a part that had wanted to go further--to make the sky itself shake with the sound of her voice. That was power. Not the paltry abilities of the gods squabbling over the life-urge of mortals. It was the limitless caress of the wellspring of eternity.

She drew a breath, synchronizing with her body again, and refocusing her consciousness. She opened her eyes and pushed back.

"Whew," she said, feeling winded. Suddenly, one leg buckled and she had to catch herself on her mother's sturdy shoulder. "Ack, took more out of me than I thought."

Euriel caught her up in her arms. She was still glowing. "By Od, what did you do?"

She let out a breath. "Just did what comes natural to a First-one. Just 'be'ing me." She sighed, eyes suddenly heavy lidded. "Your hands are warm. You feel good."

"That was impressive," Damay said. "She used tao-travel to superimpose herself over your body. Outside of her flesh and inside of yours, she could access the full extent of her Nola."

"Damn..." Ziedra breathed.

"She looked like an eternal there for a moment," T'Gor called from over by the cistern.

Wren sighed again, still feeling the resonance of that tremendous spike of power pinging through her body. "Mother, you've got to feel it now. I lit myself up like holiday fireworks."

Her mother frowned. "I--wait..." She reached out.

"Good, you--*omph!*" Her knees gave out again as it felt like her insides were being sucked out.

Dust spiraled and spun around the baroness' hand.

"*M-ma n-n-no!*"

Euriel stopped with a gasp. "Oh, Baby, I'm sorry."

"G-good," Wren gasped patting her mother's shoulder and holding a hand to her chest. "You found it. Now," She puffed for breath. "We have to work on the aim... use my nola... and--" She coughed. "Not my life--life force."

"Life force?" the Baroness said, concerned. "Are you okay?"

Wren nodded, drawing a tremulous breath. "Okay, now you and Ziedra practice for a few moments while I get my strength back. Try finding each other--just be careful." When the dancer looked perplexed. "Come on, focus, time is short, we have to get this soon if we're going to use it."

Damay came and held out an arm for Wren to support herself. Wren took it gratefully watching as her mother and Ziedra began to take their first tentative steps toward mastering the combining.

"What you did with Euriel was extremely impressive. Perhaps I can be your student to learn that technique."

"It's easy if you have an immortal body to work through. That and a feel for Starholme Prime."

"The home of the First-ones?"

Wren nodded. "There is a power source there designed for our use, if we can push our abilities far enough to touch it. Once you get a grip on that, I don't think there's anything you couldn't do."

"Truly?" Damay said with wide eyes.

"There were sixteen shafts there for transmitting magical energy. Hyperion told me that each one was capable of sustaining an output of more than five hundred trillion psions."

"What is a psion?"

"It's a fairly large chunk of energy. Think of a hefty five log bonfire, all the light and heat it radiates might equal a tenth of psion. So, it doesn't take much imagination to envision what trillions of times that is capable of."

"Even dozens of stars in the void do not create that kind of energy,"

"Nope. Scary, huh?"

Damay frowned. "Frightening indeed."

"Do you know what's more frightening? Aarlen said that if I would work for her, she'd make a body like that for me to live in." She nodded to her mother. She leaned close to Damay. "I wonder if she would have offered if she knew I could do that?"

Damay let out a breath. "One never knows with that one."

Wren closed her eyes, spread her hands and pulled some biophase into herself--letting the charge race through her body, dispelling fatigue, and replacing the energy her mother had accidentally borrowed.

"Ah." She sighed. "Better."

Damay stared at her. "Another new technique? Child, soon there will be nothing for me to teach you."

"Hey, teacher, all the better for you. You teach me, I teach you, more worthwhile for us both. Most of the stuff I've learned is G'yaki mind discipline and mage tricks." She turned to Euriel. "You and Zee getting this worked out, I feel both of you getting stronger."

"Yes, getting there," Ziedra agreed. "I can feel her strength now, and the spells are easy."

"Ziedra's ability is very different from yours," Euriel said. "I'm not sure where the power comes from."

"That's because stingy Aarlen probably didn't teach her how to hook herself up."

Ziedra put her hands on her hips. "Pardon?"

"You see magic right?"

"Right."

"Ever wonder what those big lines in the sky were?"

"Lines, where?"

"Oh Zee, look that way," she pointed toward the mansion. "My father built the mansion right on top of huge intersection of magic convergences. This whole city is right on top of whole web of those convergences."

"I don't--" She blinked, and slapped her sides. "Were those there before?"

"Yesss."

Ziedra rolled her eyes. "Okay, what does a big line of magic in the sky mean to me?"

"Mages call them flux lines. To you, it's the juice that makes you go. It's your talent--just reach out to it with your mind and pull that flow into yourself--but be *gentle*--very gentle. That's a lot of power."

"Pull it *into* myself?"

"*Carefully*," Wren stressed. "Feel the tingle in the back of your head."

"Mmmm," Ziedra nodded.

"Concentrate on the tingle, push against it, raise the level of the tingling. Imagine reaching through it toward those lines. Let your nola understand your desire, it knows the rest. Reach out toward the line, really *want* it."

Ziedra reached out.

"*Gently*," Wren urged putting a hand on the back of her neck. "Just the tiniest touch."

In her nola sight, Wren saw tendrils of Ziedra's aura flicking out.

"Good," she said in a soothing voice. "Close your eyes. You don't need them to see the magic. You know it's there."

Ziedra was trembling against Wren's hand.

"Relax, you're okay, I'm here. You own this, Girl. You *are* the savant of magic. The best. Come on."

Bit by bit, she watched Ziedra's nola expanding as the dancer began to explore its reach. As she watched her friend struggling, she realized how her experiences had prepared her for this moment. Magic. In their short time cooperating, Dorian taught her a tremendous amount about her own potential. In the aftermath, she had been so angered by the mage's manipulations that only now could she really appreciate the value of what she learned. Having worked with her mother now, she realized the true extent of Dorian's genius. The sneaky mage had grasped in instants what Euriel was still reaching for after several long breaths of coaching. Her mother was extremely smart--she just didn't have Dorian's amazing intuition for magic. Perhaps some day she would try to mend her bridges with Dorian. She felt certain the mage would have her back.

"Almost there," Wren told Ziedra, giving her neck squeeze. "Imagine your nola wrapped around yourself, like you did to keep yourself anchored."

"Come here," Ziedra said, pulling Wren's hand off the back of her neck and lacing their fingers together. "Do it with me, I learn better that way."

Wren smiled at her friend. "Cheater, always wanting to do it the easy way. Okay, follow. Reach up." She stretched her hand out the distant flux lines. She pushed through the Ziedra part of herself toward the magic, willing the magic to be hers. "*Gently now*." Remembering Desiray's admonishments that even a tiny thread of magic could shatter a mountain, she ever-so-delicately wrapped the Ziedra part of their combined nola around the line. Instantly, she felt a flood of potential racing through her body and Ziedra's.

The dancer let out grunt like she had been punched in the stomach, sparks spun around her limbs in brighter and brighter spirals. Beside them Euriel drew a breath, stiffening as the same effect whirled around her as well.

"Ease off," Wren said. "Easy. There." She released the magic. "See?" She looked over to her mother. "Notice how it's starting to affect Mother too? That's good, that's exactly what should happen. We just provide her with whatever she needs. I can shield her, you can give her magic."

Ziedra was breathing hard. "Damn Wren, you can do it all. How did you figure this out so fast?"

"Experience, I've done my share of combining." She looked at her Mother. "You okay?"

The Baroness drew a breath and nodded. "Starting to feel good." She came and put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "Starting to get Zee's learning talent."

"Excellent. All right, you two I'm taking you for a ride." She closed her eyes, and focused back through her nola. She found the Euriel and Ziedra parts of herself and reached through each of them into each woman's body searching for her own essence. At the same time, she opened her mind feeling for her savant kinship to her 'sisters' feeling for the Gaea-given link they shared. She could feel each of their thoughts whirling and spinning. Step by step, she stitched the three of them together, minds and body. She guided each of them to thread themselves through her and each other. As the connections grew denser and more complex, she began pulling more magic and more force into the union, feeling her own body tighten and vibrate.

With deliberate care, she used Ziedra's learning talent to explore their capacities, sharing with her sisters the discoveries as they drew closer and closer to a union. With each incremental improvement, she gained more and more awareness of her mother and Ziedra, feeling their breathing, feeling their hearts beat and blood flow. As they approached true synchronization, she felt the energies snapping faster through them with less resistance, Euriel's innate adaptations balancing, channeling, and redistributing.

She drew a deep breath, feeling her sisters do the same. She inhaled again, letting herself 'be' with the combined resources of their three bodies. Magic and force rushed into them in a hot jolt of pure strength.

"Oh yes," Ziedra breathed.

"Ummm," her mother murmured.

Wren relaxed her mental grip, raised her consciousness and opened her eyes. The world was glowing blue. She looked her hands and noticed a blue sheen on her skin. Her heart raced. She had managed to get it working.

"Now *this* is combining," she said out loud.

Next to her Euriel opened her eyes and looked at the glow around her body. "Oh, Baby, it's marvelous I can feel both of you. It's like I'm in your bodies, I can do anything you can do."

Ziedra made a fist. "Awesome. Wren, you are just too wizard for words."

"I try."

Hands behind her back, Damay looked around at the three of them. "No trying, Child, only doing."

Wren grinned. "I agree. Let's light out, and get some doing done!"

Chapter 66

Battle Plan

Wren poised on the pinnacle of a high tower beneath the color threaded coal black of the Cosmodarian sky. Her breath left trails of vapor in the icy air, but she didn't feel cold. Instead, she felt the vibrant caress of her mother's immortal energies flicking across the surface of her skin. The still air carried a hint of the sulfurous taint of brimstone and ash.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her mother, Ziedra, T'Gor, and Damay they stared at the mansion some two furlongs off. The huge structure with its outbuildings and imposing shield wall hunched beneath the dome of the sky every roof and parapet boiling with bodies. There were enough minions, demons, and cultists to drown an army. As she scanned the defenses, her attention was drawn to the top of the more distant of the mansion's towers. Demons hovered and spiraled around the summit like dancers in a holiday celebration. A dark aura, blacker than the surrounding night pulsed and swayed, tendrils of energy reaching up into the sky like torn cloth blowing in a strong wind. She didn't know what that was, but instinct said it wasn't good.

Her attention went to streets of Cosmodarus itself. She saw the silhouettes of a few night revelers, focusing on the horde of abominations swarming over the mansion. An awareness of the evil seed that had blossomed in the heart of the city was beginning to spread. By the time the populous organized to do anything, it would be too late.

She sucked a breath. She never thought this would be easy, even with help, but there were limits, even with a team as strong as the one they had assembled. "I guess I shouldn't have been worried that Mishaka would come after us," Wren said. "The witch just dug in. They know we have to come back to get Father."

T'Gor growled. "Still, it takes a special kind bastard to tie up innocents in amongst the guards."

"They know who they face," Euriel murmured. "They know we won't blast the guardians indiscriminately if it will kill people who aren't the enemy."

"I'm more concerned about what's happening on that tower," Ziedra said pointing. "I have a bad feeling."

"I have the same bad feeling," Wren said.

"The opposite tower seems the most vulnerable," Damay remarked. "There are less surfaces to station guards, and access from the bottom will be limited."

"That is assuming Mishaka hasn't foiled all my wards, it would be the perfect place to station a gauntlet of beasts that could keep us tied up until they summon Hecate."

"That tower isn't as vulnerable as it appears," Ziedra said. "There's some pretty powerful magic shielding the top."

T'Gor shook his head. "Forget the tower, forget the windows, forget the doors too. Every portal will be reinforced with guards that we don't want to fight. Let me introduce you to making an entrance Protectorate style. We scout a location that has the least defenses, and is closest to our objective, and we make our own door."

Euriel folded her arms. "D'Shar, I do not build a fragile houses. The main buttresses are steel and lead reinforced blocks of solid granite more than a pace thick. You cannot just make a door through that. In fact, it's enchanted so you cannot phase, teleport, or dimension door through it either. I designed them that way on *purpose*."

"Pace thick, steel and granite," T'Gor mused pulling his beard. "That's nothing. These two," he gestured to Wren and Damay. "They can get through."

Euriel raised an eyebrow. She glanced to Damay.

Damay nodded. "We would need a weapon to sacrifice though. It cannot be anything common because it would be destroyed by the force of the attack."

T'Gor reached up to the sword on his shoulder. "You can use Korvel."

"But you said you couldn't use the shaladen!"

"I can't." He paused. "And I won't be. You'll be using it like a door knocker. The blade has a vorpul edge and it can't be broken. Can you think of a better projectile?"

"Aren't you afraid it might get lost or captured or something?"

"Wren, it would be a happy day for us all if Hethanon or Mishaka were stupid enough to go near it." He narrowed his eyes. "The question is, where's the best place to go in."

"One of our objectives is my husband," Euriel said. "I have a terrible feeling he will be among those on the top of that tower."

"I wouldn't bet against you," T'Gor concurred. "But from a tactical standpoint that is the worst place for this team to attack. It is the most heavily defended point, and all but a couple of these fighters need solid ground under their feet to be effective. Also, exposed to the outside like that, every flying creature could converge on us." He pointed to the numerous winged creatures now making circles over many of the parapets. "It would get out-of-hand fast. We need to go into the main building and use the confines to limit the number of battle fronts. If the baron is indeed on the top, then we have to run the gauntlet of going up the inside of that tower, because the other way just isn't doable without a flying team."

"You can fly though, right?" Wren asked.

"Sure," T'Gor shrugged.

"Can you do that blending trick I saw you use during the game, to sneak over there and see if my father is there? That would help a lot. It would also help if we know for sure what they're doing."

The man grinned. "That sounds like a plan." A humming sound vibrated around him, and burst of warm air swirled up around his feet as he rose up off the platform.

"Wait," Euriel said. "Can you be certain you won't be detected?"

T'Gor winked at her. "Trust me." He pivoted and in a gust of hot wind shot away toward the tower. As he headed away from them he faded from view.

"Whoa," Ziedra said, "he vanished; no magic, no life-force, no disrupted air... nothing. How did...???"

Heart tight in her chest, Wren watched the distant spire, searching for any evidence of T'Gor being detected. There was certain to be an explosion of activity if he was detected.

"He's a Protectorate enforcer," Damay said. "He told me Korvel's specific power is stealth. He's hedging the rules for our sake. He's not really using the weapon *against* Mishaka and Hethanon, but he *is* utilizing its powers."

"Think they'll sense him?" Ziedra asked.

"If you can't, they can't," Damay said. "He has the power of eternity."

The statement made Wren wonder. "If Gaea is the mother of all, isn't eternity her child? If so, doesn't T'Gor really have the power of Gaea like we do?"

Damay looked over at her with a raised eyebrow. "That is more of a philosophical question. One better posed to Her, not me."

"At the moment, the only thing that matters is that the magic does what we need it to do," Euriel said. "He has to be over there by now. No sign he's been detected."

"So, what do we do if Father *is* up there?" Wren asked.

"Do like T'Gor says," Euriel responded with a sigh. "Mishaka did not have to do that ritual up there. She is daring us to try it. We locate Azir then try for your father."

Boots on the steps behind them made Wren look back. Laramis, Stark, and Irodee climbed up to the platform behind them.

"The remaining preparations are ready, Milady," Laramis said. He looked around. "Where is Lord D'Shar?"

"Scouting."

He stepped onto the parapet, his shoulder brushing Wren's. His eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. Stark and Irodee came to the edge as well, both drawing breaths at the sight of the mansion awash in creatures.

"This is not good," Laramis said.

"My god," Stark let out. "There's like fifty for every one of us."

"I think Hethanon did nothing but summon creatures since seeing us fly out. Bastard. They must think the whole Felspar clan is coming at them."

Irodee muttered something in Myrmigyne.

Laramis rubbed the back of his neck. Wren saw the man's confidence shaken for the first time. "You cannot be thinking to engage them in the open, Milady."

"No," Euriel said. "Penetrate the inner perimeter and fight a corridor to corridor fight."

The man relaxed a little. "That engagement has long odds of its own."

"I'm thinking because they believe that the Felspars are coming, they may hold back some assets thinking our attack is a feint." She looked at Wren. "What do you think? Would Loric go for the tower if he were here?"

Wren thought of the carnage she saw outside Mishaka's treasure vault, and the way that the group had destroyed Set's avatar in instants.

"If he had the whole clan with him, you bet. Even if it were just him and Damay, he might have tried it."

"She is right, with me he is very confident," Damay said with a smile. "We work well together. If it were him and I, he would indeed attack the strongest spot, thinking that if the head of the snake dies, the body dies with it."

"Not a bad plan if you have enough power," Euriel remarked.

"So tell me, Damay," Wren asked. "When you and he worked together, I mean, how did you enhance him? When Dorian and I did it, we had to stand still."

"A tao merger like you did with your mother. He has a spell for it, as he does for practically everything else. That's why I recognized the technique."

"Whoa," Ziedra breathed. "Wish I could have seen it."

"Me too, I only saw the results, a couple dozen adamant golems smashed to bits."

Euriel looked over at her with wide eyes.

"Bad news," a deep male voice said from directly above.

The sound made everyone jerk and lurch, hands reaching for weapons.

Wren was clutching her chest and staring up when T'Gor faded into view.

The lanky man looked around at the surprised faces, his brow furrowed. He floated down to stand on the battlement. "The whole crew is up there, Mishaka, Hethanon, and some other creep I don't recognize. They have the Baron drugged and trussed up to a wall, and a young blond kid chained out in some kind of summoning circle. He looks enough like Wren that he's probably your boy." He paused. "It gets worse. I scouted down that tower, they've brought up casks of oil and stuffed half the levels from the top down full of them. If we try to fight our way up from the bottom..."

Euriel bowed her head and slammed a fist into her palm.

Wren's heart thudded in her chest. "Mother, they're going to succorund Azir!"

"I know!" she shouted.

"How tough are the defenders?" Euriel wanted to know.

"Greater pit fiends, at least a dozen of them," T'Gor responded. "Around two score lesser fiends, a bunch of the dagger cult vermin, probably a couple score of those armored minions. There's also some priests and mages performing the ritual. That roof is packed." He hooked a thumb down the stairs. "Your group is good but that mess is out of their league, even on flat ground at best they would be a distraction."

"So much for strategy," Ziedra said. "Even if we break through that defense, everything else we bypassed will come jump on us."

"Damn," Wren said. "There has to be a way!"

"I believe I may be able to keep the other creatures from joining the fray," Laramis said in a solemn tone. "However, it will require so much of my strength I probably will not be able to assist in the battle."

"What? How?" Wren asked.

"A boon from my patron, Ukko," the justicar answered. "I can think of no other way to shift the balance of this conflict. I have conferred with my lord and he is willing to participate in this conflict."

"Do we have a way to get over there?" Wren said. "We are just targets on those slow carpets. Just asking to get knocked off. Mother, do you know a spell?"

"If I did, do you think I would use a carpet? I was never able to learn the spell."

"I can learn the spell," Ziedra said. "I--wait--" She looked to T'Gor. "How do you fly? I mean what does the magic for you?"

The warrior reached into his tunic and pulled out a gleaming circular amulet.

"Hey, Desiray, has one of those," Wren said. "Cassandra made it for her."

"Dorian and Cassandra teamed up to make these," T'Gor said holding it in his palm. "Most of the Band have them. What good does this do? This is only a minor amulet, it won't carry passengers like the master items."

"Can I see it?" Ziedra asked. "I promise not to damage it."

"How will this help?" Laramis asked as T'Gor pulled the amulet off over his head.

"She's a savant of magic," Wren said nodding, willing her friend success.

Ziedra took the item from T'Gor reverently, holding it in her palm and caressing the jeweled metallic surface with delicate fingers. Rows of complex runes ran in circles around a central spherical gem that pulsed with magical power. Wren felt Ziedra drawing on her energy, and she felt the dancer's heart quicken.

She felt Ziedra's awareness spark through their union. She could see through the dancer's eyes layer after layer of elemental magicks, bindings, and complex interplays of force. It appeared the magic tapped into the mind of the wearer somehow and enabled some kind of specialized magical talent. Through Ziedra's perception it was beautiful, clever, and potent.

"Impressive magic for such young mages," Euriel said, staring at the amulet. "The design is brilliant."

"Mother, Dorian is almost a hundred, that's not young."

"Babies," Damay remarked.

"Babies," Euriel agreed, "but powerful ones."

"Ladies, what are we doing here?" Laramis asked. "Time is of the essence it appears."

Irodee put a hand on his shoulder. "Learning magic."

"Better than that," Ziedra said, pressing her hands together around the amulet, leaning her head back, and closing her eyes.

The blue aura on her skin brightened. Wren felt Ziedra reaching into her power and Euriel's, drawing strength from them. A greenish radiance shimmered around her hands, the illumination growing brighter. Golden threads of magic crawled up Ziedra's

arms from the amulet--the woman grunted and gritted her teeth. "My word these two are thorough," Ziedra muttered. "They actually put copy protection in it." She growled. "We need this magic. You *will* recognize me as your mistress and give me your secrets."

The golden threads wound around Ziedra's arms turned a greenish hue. It was as if the petals of a flower unfolded around the dancer's clenched hands, tongues of energy licking and crackling around her hands.

"Please don't destroy it," T'Gor said through gritted teeth. "It cost me a fortune."

The bluish glow around the dancer's body darkened and she pushed even harder against Wren's energy, forcing her to renew herself with biophase.

Runes appeared in the air around Ziedra, spinning and orbiting her like a swarm of insects. All across the surfaces of the dancer's skin glowing symbols appeared as though carved into her flesh.

She brought the amulet up to her chest. Gritting her teeth she pressed down with a sizzling sound. Wren sucked a breath as searing pain radiated through her body. Euriel too grunted.

Ziedra groaned as smoke rose from her burning flesh, and fire seemed to leap around her arms. Wren staggered against the battlement, tears pouring down her face from the intense pain radiating through all their bodies.

Euriel began pounding the battlement with her fist, teeth gritted.

The glow around Ziedra's hands winked out and her knees gave way. Damay caught her before she fell. The dancer's hands fell away. Burned and etched into the skin around her collar bone was an impression of the amulet.

The device fell from her scorched hands, clinking to the stone.

"Child, are you hurt?" Damay asked.

"Ow," Ziedra muttered. "That thing was even more powerful than I realized. Ohhh." She put a hand to her head and winced.

"Laramis," Damay said. "Perhaps a little healing."

"Certainly." The justicar stepped forward, kneeling and taking Ziedra's wrist. He held his fingers over her burned hand. A soft white glow spread across the burned palm and fingers, slowly fading the red to the dusky color of Ziedra's skin. He repeated the process with her other hand. With very delicate care he reached toward the burn on Ziedra's chest. "This will scar milady, it will not mend with my touch."

Ziedra nodded. "I know. Please, seal it."

Dark eyes intense, the justicar nodded. His hand glowed, and Ziedra gritted her teeth again. Tears streaked down her cheeks. She gulped for air. She let out a breath when it was done. Her skin remained etched in a pattern resembling the face of the amulet.

"I still don't understand what this accomplished," Laramis said. "You injured yourself and wasted a great deal of energy. For what?"

Ziedra picked up the amulet, and with Damay's help rose to her feet. She handed the device back to T'Gor. "Thank you. I didn't break it."

T'Gor put the amulet back on, tucking it under his tunic. He drifted up off the battlement a short distance, obviously testing the veracity of Ziedra's statement.

The dancer turned back to Laramis. "For what? For this." She made a rising gesture with her hands.

Wren felt a stirring in her Nola, and a rush of energy through her body. Her pulse quickened. Dust spiraled around Ziedra's feet and there was a puff of warm air as she rose to the tips of her toes and drifted a hand-span off the battlement.

"You can fly now," Laramis breathed.

"Not just any flight," Ziedra responded, doing a slow pirouette in the air. "The flight granted by the amulets used in the great game." She looked to Wren, dark eyes wide and a grin splitting her features. "Gal, it hurt like blazes, but damn it, I can fly! Join me." She held out a hand.

"How--oh..." She realized it wasn't just a spell. Ziedra had made the amulet's magic a part of herself, etching its abilities into the magical part of her tao. It was an ability like any of her other abilities--something that could be shared. Wren found that aspect of her sister, absorbing and cherishing its newness. She pulled on her nola channeling its power to work the magic.

Wren felt a tingle spread through her scalp, down her spine, and across her arms and legs. Her heart speeded and her breath caught. A hum went through her bones, and then a subtle pushing sensation. Dust swirled around her boots, a warmth pulsed out from her skin. She felt all the weight leave her feet. With a sense of elation that she had never experienced before, she drifted up a hand span from the roof.

"Gaea," she breathed. "I can fly." She reached out and clasped Ziedra's hand. "Oh this is sweet. Zee, you are *the* lady. Now, you're a cloud-dancer like your mother!"

The dancer's face still flushed from her exertions, lit up. "Hey, that's true!"

After a moment's concentration, Euriel floated up off the battlement in a swirl of dust and heated air. "Excellent."

"All right," Laramis said. "Marvelous. How does that help the rest of us?"

"I absorbed more than the magic of the amulet," Ziedra said. "I learned more about flying magic than I care to think about." She held her hand toward the justicar fingers outspread. She closed her eyes. Threads of magic twined out from Ziedra, spinning around the man's arms and legs. A golden teardrop shape appeared on his forehead, and sparks whirled around his body. In a swirl of dust he rose into the air.

"By my oath!" he let out. "I--I--fly."

"How long will that last?" Wren asked.

"A little more than two bells before that magic lapses." She repeated the spell again on Irodee and Stark. Both made appreciative noises at being granted the ability of flight.

She turned to Damay.

The savant raised her hand. "No need." She closed her eyes, balled her hands into fists. Wren felt a hum resonate in the place where she felt her nola. A glow radiated from elder savant's eyes closed eyelids. The stone of the rooftop vibrated. Damay drew a breath and tilted her head back, relaxing her body. As she did so, a pulsing resonance thumped through the stone, a glow surrounded her body and she rose into the air.

"You *can* fly," Wren let out amazed.

Damay snorted. "Good to know there is something I can do that you cannot."

"I *will* learn how to do that," Wren promised.

"I shall enjoy trying to teach it to you," Damay said. "The number of indignities I suffered to achieve any kind of grace should not go unshared." She flipped higher into the air above the parapet with a fluid sweep of her arms and legs. She looked like a sea nymph darting through the water.

"Okay, we have a means to get at them," Wren said, hovering next to Ziedra.

"What's the plan? Mishaka and Hethanon know most of the Felspar folks can fly, they must have to taken that into account."

"You mean like the anti-magic field around that tower top?" Ziedra remarked, shielding her eyes and looking toward their objective.

"Then how are those demons flying?" Euriel remarked. "They cannot stay aloft without magic."

"It is likely just a shell. Notice the creatures do not stray beyond the edges of the roof." Damay said.

"T'Gor," Wren said. "You didn't mention anything about the magic."

"Oh," he scrubbed the back of his head and grimaced. "Well, it probably didn't affect me because I don't trip traps or anything when Korvel is protecting me."

"He just made our plan for us," Euriel said. "T'Gor can you cover someone else with your stealth?"

"One or two, no more than that."

"You only need to do one, my son. We have to get him out of that circle. First, we have to make them think he is already gone."

His face sobered. "I start cutting those chains they're going to know what's up."

"They will be busy," Euriel said. "Really busy." She rose a little higher, arms folded and eyes intent on the distant tower. "See it makes sense to me now. Mishaka put the shell around the roof to keep us from blasting them from a distance. The fact that it would disrupt flying is just a bonus. However, killing our flight ability when we're directly above the roof doesn't help them at all."

"Uhhh, am I the only one who can't drop thirty paces and not break both legs?" Stark said.

"That is not needed," Irodee said. "You can enter at angle and if you are moving fast enough, the speed will carry you the remaining distance."

"Get it wrong though and you'll be blood pie," Stark said with a frown.

"The spell I cast on each of you is a diadem enchantment," Ziedra said. "That is why you see the golden diamonds on each other's foreheads. These spells are more resilient than ordinary enchantments, when denied energy, like going through the shell, the spell will temporarily attach itself to another power source such as a magic weapon. That should allow the spells to regenerate themselves. What I don't know, is how long the regeneration will take."

"Are we talking heartbeats or breaths here?" Stark asked.

Ziedra winced. "In theory, only a few heartbeats, but there are factors I can't account for. The strength of that shield for instance."

"Zee, will our flight be affected?" Euriel asked.

"Not as much as theirs, because we are powering the magic, but it will still get cut off. Only Damay and T'Gor will be completely unaffected, him because of the shaladen and her because she is flying through the power of her nola."

"All right, here's the new plan," Euriel said. "We put fly spells on the warriors that can wield bows and crossbows and assemble them up here. T'Gor will go in first. When the guardians on the roof respond to his cloaking Azir, we all move out enmass. Our allies will break off just outside the shield, and start shooting into the defenders to provide some confusion and covering fire, they will break off and try to draw away any hostiles they can. In the meantime, the rest of us punch in. Wren, Zee, Stark, you three will provide protection for T'Gor, the rest of us go for my husband. As soon as your goal is accomplished light out at best speed." She pointed out toward the nearest of city walls. "Head out over river wall, about a three furlongs past the perimeter there is a little used gate henge down in the ravine that Mishaka and Hethanon may not know about. It's marked by three rings of trees. That's our regroup point. If we have to, we head through the gate and try to draw the enemy with us."

"That's a good plan," Stark said. "Except we didn't resolve the part about the flying magic cutting off. In fact, now I'm more worried about getting off the damn tower than I am getting *on*."

"Well, I suggest taking a little bit to learn what you're doing with the flying to make sure you can gauge a good landing. On the way out, I recommend staying close to T'Gor as he is the only one unaffected by Mishaka's anti-magic."

"I really don't like leaving Mishaka at our backs, Mother," Wren said.

"If you have a better plan, I'm willing to listen," Euriel responded.

"Given our numbers and our resources, it is a well conceived strategy," Laramis put in. "While hit-and-run is not my preferred mode of combat, it is the only tactic open to us with much chance of success."

"I'm for it," T'Gor said with a nod. "It'll work."

Stark grunted. "This flying stuff has my tail in a knot, but I'm up to try."

"Soundly constructed," Damay said. "It can succeed."

Ziedra raised a fist. "We'll make it work. Let's do it."

Wren stared at their target, feeling a knot in her chest. Something in her said it was more of a trap than anyone realized. Still, there was no more time left for delays. They had to move now or Azir would become another host body for Hecate. She pushed down her misgivings. Whatever Mishaka threw at them, they would find a way to counter it.

She rose a little higher above the battlement, feeling the surge of Ziedra's magic flowing through her body. It gave her strength, and lent confidence.

"Time to fly."

Flying is harder than it looks. What did someone say? It's like throwing yourself at the ground and missing...

--Wren

Chapter 67

Aerial Assault

Learning to fly. Huddling beneath Hecate's growing shadow, it was dream turned nightmare. So much to discover and so little time to explore. The succorounding ritual of her brother Azir was commencing, and while Damay assured them that it took some time to complete, she still felt an urgent need to hurry. The possibility that Mishaka was performing the ritual simply to draw them into the open only made it worse. With their strike team making their final preparations literally a stone's throw from the manor only added to the tension. For Wren, it was horrific scenario, the life of her brother and father counted on her being able to surmount the physical and mental challenges of a whole new vista of reckoning and body control.

To merely half hover, half flail from one location to another was easy--there was no precision and little if any control. That wasn't flying. It was falling horizontally, pushing off objects to attain and maintain balance and direction. For what they needed to do it was horribly inadequate. As she endeavored to simply learn how to do an orderly turn, she flashed on the flight she had taken through Ivaneth's alleys with Dorian. She recalled their arrow fast zigzag around obstacles, shooting through gaps with deadeye accuracy. How many bells of practice had it taken to master flight to that level; hundreds, *thousands*? It gave her a new appreciation for the woman. Not only had she created an amulet that enabled impressive flight capabilities, but she had refined the skill itself to the point it was powerful tool of offense and defense.

Flight was governed by the mind and she was a savant of forces. Given time she could develop skills that surpassed Dorian's--but that was likely several turns of the seasons away. The pressure to excel in such a short span made an otherwise fantastic experience into a curse-ridden torture trial as she struggled to learn the fundamentals of stopping, banking, angling, acceleration and deceleration.

Studying the tower and the problem with Mishaka's anti-magic shield, she knew the maneuver to get onto that roof in one piece would be a non-trivial effort. Her savant talent gave her an innate grasp of the angles and speeds to hit a target. They would need to be going at little faster than a horse at full gallop twenty paces off the ground, and then pull up sharply twenty-five paces from the tower aiming at a point five paces above the battlement. Done precisely, maintaining the proper speed when the shield blocked out their levitation, the momentum would carry them up and over the merlons with only a short drop on the other side to worry about.

Calculation was one thing. Execution was another. She could verify her estimates by tossing stones and watching the arc. Using nola control, after a only a few tries, she could stand at the base of a three story manor-house and arc a rock into a chimney less than a pace across. More than enough accuracy for what they needed to do. However, throwing a rock is somewhat different than launching one's *entire body*.

She soon discovered the indignities that Damay referred to. As the group of them practiced what Damay called a 'catapult landing'. Being a force savant herself and several millennia Wren's senior, the trajectory problem was trivial to the elder woman. Being expert with her flying, Damay even demonstrated the feat, skimming along close to the ground, pulling up hard, turning off her flight aura and arcing onto

a rooftop. T'Gor, with his seasons of flight practice for the game and the Protectorate, helped illustrate the maneuver. They made it look easy.

It wasn't. Wren likened the experience to swinging on a rope over a riverside, being launched up into the air and cresting over into a dive. Only they wouldn't be diving into a nice broad stream, but onto a platform of solid stone occupied by scores of murderous creatures wielding weapons and claws. Getting the right speed, the right timing, and simply focusing the flight energies to perform the maneuver took exacting precision. An error on that approach would have perilous results. Too shallow or slow and they would collide with a wall sixty paces above the ground, too fast and they might overshoot the roof or loft too high and come down so hard they injured themselves.

Getting it right gave new meaning to the words 'performance anxiety'...

The group of them stood on a low grassy hill in a park area a short distance from the mansion. Stark was frowning and gripping his head from the latest less-than-happy flight experience. All of them had experienced more embarrassments in the last few long breaths than they probably had in the ten seasons previous. Euriel was rubbing the back of her neck looking sheepish. Laramis was red-faced and upset with his performance. Irodee was frowning, a stoic set to her features. Ziedra stood with arms folded, a pained look of empathy on her face. She was the only one actually able to do the maneuver with any measure of trustworthy success, but that was because she had used her nola to copy Damay. Through their links to Ziedra, Wren and Euriel had put in better attempts than the others, but it was still far from perfect.

Damay shook her head. "We don't have time to learn it. Here's what we'll do. T'Gor can cover a person with his stealth ability. He can take Stark in with him. Since my flight won't be affected I'll guide-tow Laramis and Irodee to the roof. Wren, you and your mother can make it if Ziedra tows you and she stays in sync with me. This way we can get everybody up there with the least risk. The battle itself will be risky enough."

Stark shook his head. "Count me in on that plan. So far, I stink at this faerie flying doo. I will keep T'Gor's back covered."

"Aye, though it pains me to seem so uncoordinated, I believe Lady Damay has the right solution with our limited time," Laramis said.

Euriel nodded to Damay and T'Gor. "My thanks, this would have been another magnitude harder without you two."

T'Gor bowed to her. "That's what friends do."

"I can do no less for my sister, and her family," Damay responded.

"Okay," T'Gor said. "Damay, how much time do you need to make your run from when I signal we're in position?"

"I shall have to swing out over that further wall and skim the courtyard to get us going fast enough. I estimate no more than a ten count from the lookout to the downwind turn. Then five to eight to launch up over the wall."

"All right," T'Gor said. "Ri, Stark, lets get our harassers and go for it."

Euriel led the way as the group of them flew back to the warehouse where their support people, the 'harassers' as T'Gor called them, were waiting to start the engagement. Early into their hasty flight training, it had been decided that the few mages who could fly would stay with the warriors to deal with any flying adversaries that flew out from the battlements to engage them.

Six of Stark's friends had bows and shafts effective against demons. Bellonn and Velosse, the two burly mages could cast fly spells, and with their assistance the bowmen had been made 'flight ready'. While Wren and the others were training for their maneuvers, the warriors had been tasked with learning how to simply stay

steady in the air and shoot. Their goal would be to cause as much chaos on the rooftop as possible. They had already been counseled not to try to fight a losing battle. If the opposition was too tough to manage, they were to simply head out at best speed and try to draw the enemy away.

The eight of them swooped into the old warehouse where the warriors and mages had been training and preparing. The decrepit building had been abandoned for seasons and served as little more than a refuge for the derelicts during bad weather. The interior was littered with destroyed crates and refuse. The area smelled of rotting wood, stagnant water, and decaying refuse. A few staves with magelights on them had been set around the closed in space to give light to the men doing their final checks and conferrals.

"Are we ready?" Euriel asked of the group.

"Ready as they'll be in this short time, your Excellency," Bellonn answered, stroking the long tail of his hair. He wiped the perspiration from his broad face. "I wish there was more we could do, but the magic shield you describe makes us all but useless."

"We will make do," Euriel said. "I still want the others on standby on the lookout. Anything that isn't us that comes in range, blow it out of the sky."

The other mages all nodded in understanding.

"The rest of you not going aloft," Stark said. "Be good guys and guard them. I have a feeling you'll get some action."

"All right," Euriel said. "Everyone lift their gear, we convene on the lookout tower in a ten score-counts."

Wren drew a breath. Feeling her heart thump in her chest. The preparations were over. They were ready to turn the fight back on Mishaka.

As they started to drift out of the warehouse she caught up to T'Gor, and put a hand on his arm. "Hey, T'Gor?"

The man looked back at her. "Something wrong?"

She felt her face flush a little. "In all these preparations I seem to have forgotten one tiny--little detail." She held up a small space between her fingers.

"You don't have any demon bane, do you?"

She shook her head. "I have Azimuth, but uhhh, that's it."

The bearded warrior grinned. "Having seen you with a dagger, I have no doubt you'll do more damage with this than I will." He reached down and unbuckled a knife sheath from his boot. He grinned at her. "His name is Eyespite which means you using him must be fated. Don't lose him, he and I have fought over a thousand battles together." He pushed the weapon toward her.

"Eyespite," Wren said taking hold of the worn handle feeling a tingle go up her arm. She pulled the blade out spun it on her fingertip, flipping it around her hand then grabbing it in throwing position. "Beautiful balance, T'Gor. He returns right?" When T'Gor nodded she felt a surge of relief. "Great. Eyespite," she smiled. "I like that. Huge thanks, I owe you." She slid the weapon into its sheath and fastened the scabbard around her thigh, and tied it down.

He patted her on the back as they turned and drifted toward the lookout tower behind Euriel and Ziedra. "You can pay me back--be my partner in the next great game." He winked at her.

"Oh." She drew a breath. "If we live through this--I'll give it serious consideration. I have a lot to learn to fight at the level of you Crescent Mooners."

"Forget fighting... I can do that. You just snag the hits and peg people with those daggers. A little training and you and I could win."

She chuckled. They were about to face two avatars and potentially a goddess and they were talking about games. She really was crazy. She glanced up to the black

radiance on the tower and felt her stomach tighten. "Maybe we ought to think about this fight."

He gripped her shoulder, his bearded face turning serious. His voice turned hard. "This isn't a fight. It's only a skirmish. We go in, and get out. You just cover me and stay on my tail--that's your job and Ziedra's--keep the magic and enemies off me. I'll have my hands full. Let's get your family out of harm's way before trying to lay out the hurt--okay?"

Wren felt a chill. She hoped they could do like he said. She gave him a raised fist in acknowledgement.

The man nodded and bumped his knuckles against hers. "Come on, we're lagging, let's catch up to the others."

The entire strike force piled up through the hilltop tower belonging to Velosse, the other one of the burly topknot wearing mages. He had been the one who offered the use of his estate because of its proximity to the baronial manse. They had used the warehouse set back on the side of the hill to do their brief training maneuvers to lower the chance of being observed by one of the flying guardians now patrolling the mansion perimeter.

T'Gor and Wren floated around the backside of the tower and wafted up over the railings to set their feet on the stone roof as the others were forming up.

"You know, for having only been flying for half a bell, you *are* doing good," T'Gor remarked. "After seeing everyone else struggle, your friend Ziedra amazed me being able to do that precision catapult landing at all. I remember practicing that maneuver for *days*. It is used to sneak up on an opponent in such a way that the flight magic doesn't give you away. I've flown for so long I forgot how hard it was." He leaned close and whispered. "Your mentor lady, Damay," He made a 'too hot' shaking gesture with his hand and shook his head. "Whoa. She flies on pure brain power--and she's *good*. That just breaks my teeth, I tell you."

"Yes, she impresses me too. I'm sure grateful you found her." She turned her attention to the tower. She felt the energies building. She put a hand on his shoulder. "I won't forget how you helped us. Please be careful."

T'Gor chuckled. "I've always had a weakness for girls who kick me in the face and step on my chest."

Despite the tension of the moment she felt her face redden.

"I'll be on my best game," he added. He poked her in the shoulder. "You make sure you are on yours. Remember, it's you they're after, don't let them focus on you. Play it like you did in the game--keep moving, attack when you can make it count, and pace yourself."

She felt her insides knot up. This was the ultimate game, and the prize was her father and brother. Losing meant a lot more than getting a few bruises and breaks. She gave him another clenched fist acknowledgement. This man knew war, his words were heavy with the weight of experience.

Wren floated over and put an arm around her mother and Ziedra who were both staring at the glowing tower, silhouetted against the night sky, creatures making circuits above the roof. Both of them put their arms around her. "We ready?" she asked.

Euriel drew a breath. She gripped the staff in her hands. "Feeling good, feeling strong, ready to make this happen."

"With you all the way, gal-friend," Ziedra said, holding up a red bladed sword that had been loaned to her by one of the warriors. "It won't be fun, but it's what we have to do."

"I am prepared," Damay reported, pulling her attention away from the tower.

"Aye, Irodee and I are ready as well," Laramis said.

Stark stepped out the group of men he had been giving last moment instructions to. He rubbed the dark shadow of his beard stubble. "Got my war face on."

"Okay," T'Gor said. "Time to head out." He unsheathed the great shaladen sword Korvel off his back. The weapon came free of the sheath with an eerie hiss, sparks and energy crackled down the length of the long single-edged weapon. The metal seemed to pulse and shimmer like the surface of water. Wren felt a humming in her nola as T'Gor raised the weapon with his left hand between himself and Stark. It was the same vibration in the power of eternity she had felt with Mon'istiaga, only this was stronger. Ziedra had not been exaggerating. It *was* even more powerful than blade of the destroyer! "Take hold of the hilt below my hand."

Stark hesitated a moment, eyes large. That weapon had a power a person could feel like needles on their face and skin. He reached out and closed his fingers one at a time around it, from his gritted teeth he obviously half-expected to be turned to ash for even trying to touch it.

T'Gor bowed his head for a moment. The weapon shimmered and hummed. "It's safe now. He recognizes you."

Stark blew out his cheeks and relaxed.

"Here we go." T'Gor tightened his fist around the blade. His chin dropped as he seemed to focus his concentration.

In a shimmer and a crackle, both men vanished. All the men watching the process flinched, drew breaths, and murmured amongst each other.

"*We'll call you when we're in position,*" they heard T'Gor's metallic sounding voice resonate from the air all around them. The powerful magic of the sword even kept speech from giving away the location of the wielder. "Victory to you all. Wren, Zee, I'll be looking for you." The sound of his voice guttered out and went silent.

"That was most disturbing," Laramis said with wide eyes.

"That sword scares me," Wren murmured.

"Indeed," her mother said next to her.

"Let us set ourselves," Damay said rising up out of their group. She held a hand out to Laramis and another to Irodee.

The justicar raised his chin, floated up and took her hand. Irodee tightened her braid, bowed her head for a moment and rose to take the elder savant's other hand.

Ziedra rocked her head back. Composed herself and lunged gracefully into the air with a sweep of her arms. She held her hands out to Wren and Euriel.

Wren took a tremulous breath and stretched out into the sky to join her friend. A moment later the Baroness drifted up to be with her.

"I love you, Baby," Euriel said.

"I love you too," she responded.

Ziedra squeezed Wren's hand and smiled. "Friends forever."

"Forever," she agreed, squeezing back.

< ***We're in!*** > T'Gor's thought rang sharply. < ***Hustle it. The preparations for the ceremony are done, the priests are taking their spots!*** >

"*Veeg!*" Damay yelled. A dark radiance flared around her body and she shot off toward the mansion.

"Lords, here we go!" Ziedra cried, diving after the elder savant and towing Wren and Euriel behind her.

Damay accelerated with amazing speed considering she was dragging Laramis and Irodee behind her. Ziedra gritted her teeth, eyes narrowed in concentration to match her velocity. Wren pushed along in her wake to stay in formation.

The six of them shrieked along at a speed double or even triple that of a horse at full gallop as Damay angled up steeply into the night sky above the mansion grounds. Several hundred paces above and past the walls she turned and streaked down into a dive.

"Ohhh lords, this wasn't the way we practiced iiit!" Ziedra gritted.

The wind became an icy roar in their faces as the crowded battlements of the perimeter wall swelled in their vision. Wren's heart was thunder in her chest, and blood pounded in her ears.

The cries of beasts and men stung the atmosphere suddenly muted behind them in the trail of swirling courtyard dust and debris kicked up in the wake of their arrow fast passage.

Damay pulled out of the dive, barely a pace above the cobbled yard and angled up at the tower. Ziedra followed the woman, her voice a constant stream of curses.

Damn, damn, damn, damn!

They shot across the yard like bolts out of a crossbow. It seemed like they would hit the tower.

"Up!" Damay cried, sliding into a steep climb.

"Arrrgh!" Ziedra dragged the three of them along in the elder savant's trail.

The tower top loomed over them. Wren didn't have time to focus to see the shield until she felt them hit it with a stinging splash as though they had struck a puddle of water.

Wren felt the support of the flight magic cut out, but their momentum carried them forward.

As they arced well above the merlons, Wren let go of Ziedra's hand and pulled out her daggers and descended into chaos...

The sharpest blade in the universe has no power to mete justice without a warrior to wield it.

--*Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha*

Chapter 68

Maelstrom Of Blood

For instants in time as the energy of their approach dissipated and they began to fall, Wren pushed away from Ziedra to find a landing spot in a forest of weapons, claws, and armor. For a frozen moment, she caught a view of the paved roof filled with cultists, minions, and fiends with the six members of their strike team hurtling into the fray. Creatures were already battling in the confines of a giant silver pentagram at the center of the roof. A raised stairwell stood off to her left, it too a center of violent activity. The tempo of her already racing heart increased, and her body hummed with a euphoric elation in anticipation of the conflict. The battle-lust became a strength that grew instant by instant as she dropped, a riveting drive spilling over from her mother's part of their Gaea-shared psyche.

Wren came down feet first on the back of a plate-armored minion and slammed it into the stone, then sprang forward to dodge a sword attack. Buoyed by her mother's Aesir strength she could bound like a mountain blackhorn. She drove her heel into the face of a cultist turning to face her, even as that opponent was dropping she flipped her daggers into two sets of eyes and plunged deeper into chaos.

Azimuth and Eyespite reappeared in her hands at her call, their tips describing bloody arcs as she raced at top speed through the press, leaping, dodging, and ricocheting past an array of masks, scarred visages, and distorted demonic facades. No time for fear, no time for doubt, no thoughts save her brother and driving instinct to survive. Move. Never stop moving. Attack when you can make it count. Pace yourself.

The pace was insane; the great game accelerated two-fold, where the players fought not to win but to maim and destroy. The melee resolved to a writhing miasma of enemies contorting on themselves. T'Gor had drawn their attention by hiding Azir and with the avatar's minions focused on the center of the tower, their force attacked during the distraction.

Wren didn't see Mishaka or Hethanon, but she could *feel* them. She was moving too fast, and dealing with too many enemies. She tried not to think, instead simply letting herself 'be', opening herself to her mother's savage Aesir blood and Ziedra's Silissian magic mastery, letting their passion and determination be the fuel of a fire that burned ever hotter. She heard the roar of demons, the crack of lightning, the whoops of war cries, and the clang of steel. The charnel stench was eye-wateringly powerful, the humid air thick with the fetid odor of death. Gasping and cursing, she dodged and attacked, never slowing in her drive to reach the center of the tower, her brother and T'Gor. Around her arrows fired from the support warriors were pelting into the defenders, sprouting from the chests and bodies of creatures around her.

Chaos. Blood. Instinct. Aggression. Power.

Without her mother's elder resolve ringing in her head, the carnage would have made her falter. Instead, the Aesirian bloodlust sung through her, wringing every iota of performance from her. Like a dozen G'yaki battle forms at once, attack and counter, defense and inertia; leaping demon, striking snake, slashing dragon, rushing boar, diving talon, soaring cloudshriek. She strove with her entire being, pushing through their foes in a hammering rhythm that launched her from opponent to opponent, driving home bone-shattering kicks and punches, her daggers arrow-fast

sprites of violence. A warning screamed in the back of her head that she would exhaust herself before she reached her goal, but the clashes, the crunch of bone on flesh and steel on steel were like raw fuel stoking her momentum.

Lost in the screaming velocity of bloodshed, she didn't see Hethanon until she was on top of him. The black-eyed avatar had his hand raised as though to send a blast of magic toward the stairwell and chained figure of her father. Wren came down on his shoulder and side, driving him sideways and causing his attack to veer and blast through the ranks of his own demons.

The avatar snarled in rage, swinging and stabbing. His blade licked out as fast as the vile creature had ever moved, but she was her mother, she was Ziedra, she was Gaea, she was Vera, she was vengeance. She spun outside the attack, her hand finding his wrist and her forearm focusing through his elbow with cry and crack that resounded across the tower top.

Hethanon howled as his arm shattered and Wren ripped the jikartandak coated blade from his hand, and plunged it through his exposed back into his rotted heart. Her follow up stroke raked through his hamstrings and a punishing kick drove him skidding to the cobbles to be trampled by his own creations.

She had barely an eye-blink to exult in her victory as a giant winged fiend swung a fiery sword down on her. She leaped and rolled, thrusting both daggers in front of her.

"Hellseeker!" The knowledge and will spun up out of the Euriel and Ziedra parts of her, drawing on all their energies in a surge of eldritch power that jagged out with a thunderous crash, stabbing through the monster, and a dozen more beyond.

The savage power tore into the beast gouging out hunks of green scaly flesh, causing it to topple, howling and ripping at itself.

She swung around, Hethanon lay on the cobbles howling in frustration and pain, he clawed and pounded the stone with his one good hand, dragging his ruined legs behind him. In instants, she had worked that evil bastard over in a way he would not soon forget. Satisfying as it might be, that brief drubbing would have dealt Hethanon's ego more damage than anything else, like Mishaka, he would heal--but it would take a few moments. Ones they would use.

Wren charged the remaining distance to the center, cutting a bloody path through everything that got in the way. She leaped over an armored minion that tried to tackle her and swooped forward in a glide.

The flight magic had finally regenerated. Ziedra's estimate of a few heartbeats was horribly wrong. There would be no flying off the roof.

She thrust out a hand and screamed another Hellseeker into the knot of creatures snarling and tearing around T'Gor and Stark. This time she felt a jolt that felt like a punch in her heart. She stumbled in the air clutching her chest. She had just hurt herself worse than all of the myriad opponents she had reaped.

<Damn, Wren, you trying to kill yourself!> Ziedra cried into her mind, diving in a gripping her around the waist. <That spell is too powerful to fastcast!>

<Urgh, I'm--I'm figuring that out.>

With their opponents weakened, T'Gor and Stark quickly eliminated those immediately threatening them. At least, Wren guessed it was T'Gor and Stark, they weren't visible. Only the gouts of blood and distorted war cries gave any indication they were on the roof.

On the other side of the tower, her mother, Damay, Laramis and Irodee were the center of a whirlwind of magical attacks, swords and demon bodies. She saw Laramis reach up to the sky and scream a single word.

"Ukko!"

Golden bolts of energy struck down around the paladin and a hot wind spun up around the tower. The man seemed to grow and a silver armor incased his body. The demons immediately around him melted away like wax before a flame.

Mishaka who was raising her hands to start another spell shrieked in anger and dismay at the brilliant golden thing confronting her.

<Oh my lord, he's an avatar!> Ziedra breathed.

<Dammit Wren! No time to gawk, get Azir out of there!> Her mother yelled in her mind.

Wren shook her head, and focused back on her own task. She couldn't see her brother because he too was cloaked by T'Gor's magic. She could tell that his chains had not yet been released though.

<Keep the demons back. I'll remove the chains,> Wren told her friend.

Ziedra nodded and Wren dove to the rooftop and the first of the shackles.

As her feet touched down in the pentagram, a flare of light flashed along metal inlay, shooting around the circle and tracing the lines of the five-pointed star. The rooftop trembled. Dark clouds spun out of nowhere overhead and thunder cracked the night.

A dark radiance exploded up out of the cardinal point of the summoning circle. A tornado of wind and dust spun up into a silhouette that grew large like a pitch black shadow cast against a wall.

Wren's heart seized as she felt a jolt of pain shoot through her nola, and pair of glowing red eyes glared down out of the image.

Dark laughter rolled over the battlement and a huge figure unfolded into view as though tossing off a black cloak made of pieces of the night sky. A clawed hand thrust out, fingers trailing smoke and fire.

A deep female voice made the stones tremble. "Now, you are mine."

That insane bitch Hecate attacked my children. I will see her destroyed. I want to be there to rip out her demiurge myself...

--Idun

Chapter 69

Enter: Hecate

Wren stared up at the massive entity looming over her, burning red eyes blazing with malice, jealousy, and hunger. A creature of perfect beauty that made the eyes ache. Hate incarnate that made the soul shrivel. An exquisite monstrosity, white hair and blood colored robes flicking in the storm winds. Wren's knees, already weak from the intense battle, turned rubbery. Her heart, already racing as fast as it could go, kicked in her chest like a crazed animal. The charnel smell of the roof had been replaced by the murky scent of dying flowers. The sounds of the demons, minions, and cultists had been cut through like a knife. Many of the cultists and minions now lay on the cobbles twitching and writhing, smoke trailing from their eyes and helmets. A coppery taste like blood filled Wren's mouth. Feeling and seeing the massive power of the being before her, she tightened her hands on Azimuth and Eyespite. She stared at the creature, not daring to name her.

Eyes fixed on Wren, the beast made a slash with her arm. The cultists, minions, priests, mages and demons alike were blasted aside clearing a path to Wren.

As Hecate took her first step, Wren remembered her brother and father. She remembered the city. Flashing on a plan of retreat, she realized there wasn't one. Outlined in the magic sight she shared with Ziedra she noticed the edge of the pentagram had become the perimeter of a powerful ward. The silver summoning circle had been the trap all along, and her chained brother the bait. Like a damned journeyman green she had put her foot square in the middle of the snare.

Oh spit. She took a dragon stance, calling her nola around her body like armor.

<Damn you! Get out of there!> her mother screamed in her mind.

<When you see a way--you tell me!> She growled back.

<We're in trouble,> Ziedra's voice echoed in the back of her head.

<Noticed that did you. Get Azir free, now!>

The goddess was in no hurry, taking thunderous steps that made the tower tremble. She surveyed the bloody carnage with a half-smile, nodding to herself as though confirming some preconceived notion.

Euriel and the others seemingly forgotten, white silks flying and boots clacking, Mishaka hurried forward and knelt before the goddess, head bowed.

Hecate stopped beside the avatar and put a hand on her head.

"You almost disappointed me," Hecate rumbled in an echoing voice.

Mishaka trembled.

There was no doubt in Wren's mind what the consequences for failure were. She swallowed. Behind her she heard the clank of chains being freed.

Hecate trained her gaze back on Wren.

"Approach no further," the gleaming form of Laramis blared.

Hecate's attention snapped to him. She growled a sound that made the pooled blood on the stone ripple and froth. **"Begone meddler."**

A figure flashed down in front of Wren with a thud and straightened. **"Stay away from my daughter."** The scion of Idun gleamed with a bright aura, the blue leather sheathing her body stained red with the blood of her enemies. Her braids had come loose and her hair flew. A battlestaff in one hand and a sword steeped in crimson the

other. For the first time, Wren saw her mother as the half-god she was. Towering over her, body ignited with divine power and primal love.

The moon goddess paused. She smiled showing fangs. "**Euriel. So, how is thy mother?**"

Euriel snarled, slamming the butt of her staff into the tower top with a crash that sent sparks flying. "*You would know, snake. Get thee back.*"

Wren heard more chains clank behind her.

The glowing figure of avatar Laramis dropped down next to Euriel, sword aflame, white halos of power shimmering around him.

Mishaka leaped up, clattering back a few steps on her high heels to glare at them, her whip clenched in both hands.

Hecate also recoiled, making a hissing sound, her face twisted in distaste. She narrowed flaming eyes, smoking hands curling into fists. "**Have you no ears, Meddler? Make thyself absent, or I shall make thee so.**"

Avatar Laramis raised his chin. "**The blood of our ancestors is naught you should tamper with. The Over-council has dubbed thee rogue. The Pact no longer shields you.**" He drew himself up and made two slashes in the air, leaving flaming traces to drift away in the wind. "**Thus I may interfere with impunity.**"

The last chain clanked. Wren knew that Azir was finally freed. She wished she could have seen him at least once. She didn't even know what he looked like.

Hecate smirked. "**Impunity. Faugh. You are a fangless beast.**" Her attention focused back on the pentagram. "**The boy-child stays. Do not attempt to--**"

As the goddess spoke, a titanic blare of sound made Wren clutch her ears. A brilliant flare of light, and a burst of flash heat and shock made her stagger forward. A cone-shaped blast emanating from the center of the pentagram rocked the tower, tearing through the stone structure, splattering a host of fiends, cultists, and minions, and exploding out through the perimeter battlement. Chunks of rock, pieces of bodies, and a fine mist of blood came down in a grisly rain.

Ears still ringing, dots still dancing in her vision, Wren sensed the blast had not only shattered Hecate's trap, but it had destroyed Mishaka's anti-magic shell as well. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Irodee leap off the roof with something large over her shoulder, Damay following. She felt a shock of triumph and pumped her fist. Thank Gaea for T'Gor!

The goddess' eyes widened. A snarl curled her lips. "**No!**" She raised her hands.

The magnified apparition of her mother crackling with divine energy lashed forward in an eye-blink, sword and staff a blur, Wren felt a titanic yank on her nola that wrenched a gasp from her lips and drove her onto her knees.

Euriel Idun-daughter struck with a ferocity and strength that made the air and stone quiver, causing the rock itself under the goddess' feet to explode into dust. Layers of defensive magic a dozen deep erupted into incandescent rainbows.

Hecate aborted her attack to avoid the sword, only to have Euriel's staff pound down on her shoulder. The weapon shattered under the impact. The stored magic in the device retributed with a thunderous eruption adding to the already brutal power of the assault. The dark goddess let out a cry of pain and reeled backward.

"Mother!" Mishaka rushed at Euriel's back.

Before Wren could move, avatar Laramis lunged forward, the tip of his sword impaling the avatar like a fish on a spear. The avatar let out a howl, her diaphanous robes igniting into flames, arms and legs flailing, her body blackening around the blade. He tossed her aside with a contemptuous flip of his wrist. Mishaka hit the cobbles, and bounced to a stop groaning and writhing.

Breathing hard, Hecate bent at the waist, clutching her shoulder, glaring at them with eyes of flame. She glanced at her avatar lying prone mewling and knotted around her injuries. With a sniff, she straightened and brushed back her hair.

Panting, Euriel nodded to avatar Laramis then focused back on Hecate. She braced with sword poised. She glanced at her smoking hand and the shattered stub of her staff as if surprised by her own strength. She tossed the melted ashen remains away with a clatter. *"You will not touch them."* A wind gusted across the tower top stirring her hair. *"I will kill you if you try again."*

"Half-breed, you do not dictate to me," Hecate boomed. "You are quite strong, but it is not enough."

Ziedra landed next to Wren and helped her up. The dancer's dark eyes were narrow and her face composed. Not so long ago the woman would have been terrified beyond rational thought, but she had since found her inner strength and had done nothing but grow stronger every day. Wren slid Eyespite away, then reached down and laced her fingers with those of her friend. Together they moved forward to stand by her mother and look up at Hecate.

<Irodee, Damay, T'Gor, and Stark are long gone by now,> Ziedra said in her mind.

<Yeah, good job. You sure got good at telepathy fast.>

<I had an awesome teacher,> she gave Wren's fingers a squeeze. She drew a breath, eyes probing the carnage. <Where did Hethanon go? I saw you do him over like a raw mark.>

Wren snatched around. <Spit.> She scanned the area, Mishaka was still down, but Hethanon was not visible.

"We waste time here," Euriel said. "Back up your bravado. There is just the four of us."

Hecate laughed and folded her arms. ***"Silly girl, you and your child are no good to me destroyed. Your womb and the seed of your sirdom hold the keys to Gaea's birthright. In fact, you have brought me something even more precious. The pure essence of our stinking mother."***

Euriel snarled and started forward.

Hecate covered an exaggerated yawn, she raised her free hand, her palm aimed toward the heart of the city. ***"Now now."***

The daughter of Idun froze hand clenching and unclenching. Wren felt her heart start pounding again. She felt the heat of the enormous energies that Hecate had marshaled in that brief instant.

Brushing back her white hair, the moon goddess pushed out her lower lip and turned her head to one side. She glanced out to the vast metropolis still swathed in darkness. Torches and lamp light made the massive city glow like some gigantic jewel. ***"All asleep in their beds. How many could I kill at once? A hundred thousand? A million? Such a sweet feast of souls that would be. Please, come ahead if you want to find out."***

"Soulless crone," avatar Laramis snarled. ***"Is nothing beneath you?"***

Hecate waved a hand in front of her face as though she smelled something bad. ***"I refuse to listen to your boorish code-of-conduct blather. Meddler, you will be gone now else I think I shall experiment with the canal quarter and those other pests."*** She pointed her hand toward where the temple of Meliekki lay.

Avatar Laramis glanced toward where she pointed, he gritted his teeth, the flaming sword shook in his grip and sparks crackled around his body. ***"Damn you."***

Hecate blew him a kiss. ***"Tah."***

The justicar turned avatar stood there, throat muscles working, body tense, the anger so fierce it was like heat waves rising off a summer road.

"Go," Euriel told him. "*We'll be okay.*"

His head jerked, eyes meeting hers. Euriel nodded. He looked back to Hecate, eyes narrowed to slits. He snatched his gaze away. A glow spread up around him, dust swirled, and he coasted into the air. He kept his gaze on Hecate until he was gone over the battlements.

Wren felt a hitch in her chest. It was just the three of them now, against the goddess.

Off to their right, Mishaka had climbed to her knees and was picking herself up. Her white robes were still smoldering and stained with black blood.

The goddess shook her head. "***You children have no concept of patience. No idea of real planning and strategy.***" She put a hand to her chest. "***Much as I loathe it, I am as much a part of Her as any of you. I know her weaknesses.***" Hecate's gaze fixed on Wren. "***I just had to keep pushing things in the right direction. I knew she would eventually grow desperate and give me what I wanted. Her bounty, her self.***" She bit her lip and shuddered. "***So marvelous.***" She pursed her lips and seemed to come to a decision. "***Now that I think about it. I only need the one.***" She snapped her fingers. "***Hethanon.***"

Wren felt the malignant presence too late as he appeared from nowhere, she leaped for him even as he drove two blades frothing with jikartandak into the backs of Euriel and Ziedra. The two women screamed, clutching their wounds.

She hit him hard, driving her elbow into his face knocking out several of his rotted yellow teeth. "You--*bastard!*" He raised his knives a moment too late, she plunged Azimuth into his throat. "***Hellseeker!***" She looked away as the ferocious blast of energy channeled outward with a roar. She felt the burn as his stinking black blood splashed on her cheek. She heard his body thud onto the cobbles as she wiped away the searing goo. "Heal *that*."

Tears already streaming down her face, body like ice, she dropped to her knees by Euriel and Ziedra. Their wounds had already turned black, and they clutched themselves and twitched. The new poison must be many times as strong as what had been used on herself and Desiray.

"***I'm sorry, Little sister,***" Hecate said, looming closer, a sincere look of regret on her face as she leaned over them. She sighed. "***They were too dangerous combined with you.***" She rubbed her hands together. She grinned showing gleaming white fangs. "***Time to shed a savant's blood. Time for a snack...***"

Chapter 70

Mistress of Starholme Prime

Staring up into Hecate's gloating countenance clutching her mother's trembling body, Wren felt an icy fingers grip her mind, a flesh-rending hatred that dwarfed any emotion that she had ever felt. This monster and her black minions had striven to do nothing less than enslave her family, destroy her, and benefit from that destruction. She had to fight back. She had to deny her, even if it meant killing herself.

She needed a weapon. She needed Mon'istiaga, she needed Korvel, she needed something. She threw Azimuth down. Hands hardened into talons, ready to drive a nola braced hand into the evil witch's eye. She needed strength, beyond what her mortal body could do, power beyond what her mother could tap, she needed something like--*Hyperion*.

A desperate thought sparked through her as Hecate reached toward her. Wren threw her arms around her Mother and plunged herself through the already faint connection in their combining. Pain ravaged Euriel Kergatha's body, spasms of agony that made the torment of the stonebones seem small in comparison. Wren wanted to scream, but a tao-force could not scream--it could only feel, it could only experience and suffer. The jikartandak was like black acid eating away at her immortal flesh, disintegrating Gaea's combining, and paralyzing her mind. Wren cried ephemeral tears for the terrible unfairness and wrongness. Somewhere in that haze of indescribable anguish there was enough of her mother left to recognize and welcome her.

I love you.

No. She refused to let those be her last words.

Forgive me mother for what I am about to do.

She wrapped her mind and tao around her mother, permeating her spirit, threading into her flesh. Through a scalding haze of Euriel's disintegrating body she called out with her nola to Starholme Prime. She forced an arm of melting clay to reach out to the immeasurably distant source of their life.

Reach. She peeled back all the limiters on her nola. Calling on the master template to remember her, to make her whole. So hard to focus. She just wanted to die and end the torment. Push. Strive.

Be.

"What are you doing, Child?" Hecate's voice rumbled through her.

The master reference thrummed in her mind, a sentient thing awakening from eons of slumber. That far-away intellect acknowledged her, its probes flicking across time and space and spearing into Euriel's ravaged form.

For Wren, it was as if a star were born in her mother's body. A tidal wave of creation sung through every iota of her being. The creator-force of Starholme grappled with the ravaging maw of liquid death coursing through her veins. She drew on the limitless potential and pushed it through Euriel's body, letting it burn ever hotter. Starholme's attention was trained on her, remaking her disintegrating form as fast as it was destroyed. The pain soared beyond any imaginable threshold, she was a phoenix, dying and being reborn from instant to instant, her failing body gaining ground against the magical annihilation.

With a final shove, the last of the blight was driven out and her body renewed in a blaze of creation.

She opened her eyes. Hecate held Wren's limp body in her hands, studying it the way someone might examine a dead bird.

She drew a breath. In all the previous awakenings, it had been the breath of life and pleasure. Not this time. Galvanizing agony rushed through her trembling limbs, she had embraced the cradle of the stars and it *burned*. The overdrive of Starholme's infinite potential was destroying her, but it wouldn't let her die. Ten thousand master templates were trying to 'be' within her at the same time, elemental might and cosmic perception vied for supremacy in a storm of constant evolution.

With a single poignant scream for attention, she hugged them all to herself, loved them all, *became* them all. She was body and memory, spirit and kin; ten thousand spent lives that wanted nothing more than to be again.

In the burning crucible of Euriel's body, she gathered the plurality into unity, letting them all 'be' together. As the lost essence of Starholme synchronized within her, it was like a chorus of voices all hitting a single note that gained in volume until she felt the very vaults of reality tremble with its potency.

Wren pushed up to her knees. Her skin flickered and glowed, shimmering like a heat image. She blinked with eyes that saw through the world, through life, magic, and time--knowing where, how, and what without focusing.

Infinite potential seethed through her. Memories of Mon'istiaga and being hairs from absolute destruction drifted through her consciousness. Danger. Starholme was alive for the first time in eons, and it had been so easy to insinuate herself into it. No creature, including herself, should have such power. She had to fix that.

As she started to focus on closing Starholme, she realized Ziedra still lived. She put a hand on her friend and pushed the creator force into her, protecting the vital mind and spirit, then sent a burst of purging fire scorching through her body.

The dancer screamed.

The sound shocked the goddess out of her study. Her flaming eyes widened as Wren looked back at her through the eyes of her Mother. She rose.

"That does not belong to you," she whispered.

Though she said it with no force, her anger and will made her voice like a knife. Hecate staggered, blood trailing from slashes cut into her face and neck.

The goddess swiped at her cheek with her hand, horrified at the sight of her own blood. "***Why are you not dead? I made that jikartandak myself!***"

Wren stared at her. "You cannot have my body. You cannot have my blood. I deny you even my spite. The only thing you are entitled to is pity--pity for your wretched loveless twisted meaningless existence."

"***You dare!***"

Hecate tossed aside Wren's body and drew back. Wren turned her head as the goddess' fist slammed into her cheek with enough force to make the rocks crush underfoot.

She raised her chin and turned her eyes to the rag-doll of her body lying on the tower roof.

"That wasn't nice. You should be more careful with my body."

Hecate's eyes widened, she glanced at the crumpled form on the stones, then back to Euriel. "What is this power? This is not eternity's energies!"

"No. It is a power..." She paused. Her massed psyche focused on Starholme for a brief moment, willing its shields and security to full strength and isolation. "It is a power," she continued. "That I have now sealed away from the likes of you forever."

Words were wasted on this creature. Better to educate her in the only language she understood. She stepped forward and slammed an elbow in the monster's sternum.

Possessed by Starholme's master templates, a step was no longer a step, but a skip across ticks in time and space. The bone that met Hecate's super-mortal flesh was traveling faster than a thunderclap and hit harder than the blast of a volcano.

The evil creature exploded backward, knocking giant divots out of the rooftop before she crashed through the pace thick granite tower battlement.

That had felt good even through the agony suffusing her body.

"Mother!" Wren heard Mishaka shriek off to her left. "You bitch I know your secret."

In Euriel's body, Wren snatched around to see Mishaka kneeling over her with one of Hethanon's jikartandak coated knives plunging it toward the throat of her body.

"**Stop.**" It was desire and will at once, and she stabbed it into Mishaka.

The avatar froze, the blade hovering hairs from her body's jugular. She saw a drop of the powerful acid drip from the blade, and land sizzling on her body's skin. She felt a burning in her neck and frowned.

She stepped forward, gathered Ziedra under one arm and her untenanted body in the other.

Mishaka still knelt poised with the weapon, eyes blinking, throat muscles quivering. Wren felt her fear, sensed the wild panic as she struggled with all her will to simply twitch. Now the witch knew how it felt.

"You know, at the moment, I should be above it, but I *still* despise you. You just tried to hurt me *again*." She sent her boot hissing into the avatar, punting her across the blood slick roof to skip, tumble, then slam into the battlement.

Ziedra needed healing. Both of them did. She flashed out with her senses. As planned, the others had gathered in the ravine by the ancient gates.

She willed herself there.

In a single space-bending step, she flashed out of null-time right beside T'Gor. The man startled forward and the others lurched at her appearance. He oriented the shaladen on her. The warrior was a blood-stained mess. There was no doubt he had done his share in the battle.

She turned to Laramis, who had returned to his normal self. She pushed Ziedra's body into his arms. "She was hit with jikartandak. Take care of her." She turned to giant Irodee, also bloody and raked with scratches. She handed her body to the big woman.

She turned back to the city.

T'Gor put a hand on her shoulder. "Ri? What--"

She shook her head. "I should have paced myself." She flashed away.

She reappeared on top of one of the tower merlons bordering the massive wall Hecate had shattered. The goddess was only now picking herself out of a crater of destroyed outbuildings, and the demolished outer battlements of the mansion.

Damn, she'd been thinking with her fists. What if Hecate had landed in the city? The urge to destroy was so strong. It sung to her like Mon'istiaga's crooning. She wanted--she needed--*annihilation*. Standing there looking at the damage she had caused she determined it was in the basic nature of the First-ones. No matter how great their abilities at creation, it was always surpassed by their innate desire for conflict and destruction. No matter how much they evolved, they never overcame that inherent defect. The betas were the living embodiment of that fundamental flaw. Such a grand error. They divorced their intellects from their beastly aspect, hoping to purify the flesh and defeat the instinct. Fools. Instincts were not overcome that way. The perfect body was no more free of instinct than a flawed one. In fact, perfection probably meant an even stronger drive to sate the baser nature.

She stared down at Hecate. There she was, a product of stale evolution, a thing of pure instinct without conscience.

The moon goddess stared up at her. Burning eyes narrowed in anger and confusion. *What had she missed?*

Wren felt a twinge shoot through her shared body. Euriel's form was beginning to shut down. Despite constant renewal, the components of this body were burning out.

Wren leaned aside as a massive bolt of lightning flared past her shoulder from behind. She looked back at the dirt and blood covered avatar. "Do you really want to die so bad?"

The pale creature stared at her.

"Don't you understand? Can't you understand? You are *nothing*." She hopped off the merlon to the tower top, balancing feather light on a single toe. She strolled toward the avatar, picking her way around the blood and corpses. "You are less than a puppet; a poor and abysmally flawed reflection of the original, a psychotic splinter of a mind long broken."

"Shut up!" Mishaka gripped her skull with blood-soaked hands.

"You are the daughter of the iron-queen, lady Karn Taath, an atrocity born from the womb of abominations; a malicious *thing* incapable of individual thought with a soul so black that you drank the blood of your own children. You were a fool drawn by promises of power and now you have nothing--not even death. I pity you. You are only a broken toy soon to be cast away with the husks of the others. Really, it's pretty sad."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Mishaka screamed, charging forward with Hethanon's knife.

Wren stuffed a hand in creature's face and slammed her to the cobbles and knocked away the knife.

"What you need is a conscience."

With the power of a thousand First-one mind-benders shining behind her eyes, she gave her one.

Mishaka's dark eyes widened, her body jerked and she let out a howl of ravaged pain and torment. Wren drew back as the creature tore at itself, flailing and writhing before finally going still, a trickle of drool running from the corner of her mouth.

"That was cruel."

She looked around to see Hecate standing on the tower merlons, arms folded. She wore not her massive battle form, but the magnified and hardened shell of an immortal's 'court body'.

"You would know."

The goddess drew a breath. She bowed her head with a smile. ***"Indeed I would."*** She looked up, flaming eyes fixed on her. ***"Can I not persuade you to die?"***

Wren blinked at her. "I don't think so."

Hecate sighed. ***"I find it tempting to simply wait thee out. That state is not perpetual. Without that power I will crush you."***

Wren raised her chin. "I am entire race, I am your mother, I am your father, I am Ptah, I am Ra, Indra, Varuna, Chronos, Anum, Enlil, and so many others. You are a child to them. How long will you last if I come after you? I might have only a few heartbeats left--or I might have a bell."

Hecate turned her head to one side. ***"An intriguing gambit. If indeed you are that powerful, it wouldn't take long."***

She drew a breath, reaching deep into the well of Starholme Prime, feeling Euriel's body disintegrating around her. She didn't have the time or the physical integrity to

exert herself through a prolonged battle. She twisted reality around her fists, taking a grip on time and space. Clouds writhed and twisted overhead.

Hecate looked up. The wind blew through her hair and robes. Her throat muscles worked. "***That is an impressive amount of energy.***"

"If you try to run, there won't be enough of you left for your followers to dab up with a sponge."

Hecate ran a pink tongue across her crimson lips. "***I see.***" She tilted her head back, and spread her arms. "***Then kill me.***"

Damn, she wasn't afraid of dying. She wasn't afraid of pain. Wren turned her attention to the drooling, mentally shattered Mishaka. She drew a breath and looked back to Hecate with a raised eyebrow. She rubbed her hands together. "All right, if that's the way you want it." She started forward.

Hecate broke out of her pose, gaze flicking to Mishaka. Her brow furrowed. She licked her lips and looked toward Wren as she approached, hands shimmering with the power of Starholme Prime.

She thrust out a hand. "***Wait. Perhaps I spoke in haste.***"

"I better hear something I like, or I'll stuff you so full of conscience you won't be able to step on a bug without weeping. Don't even *try* to lie."

The super-collected Hecate blanched. She opened her mouth, then shut it. She narrowed her eyes. "***What do you want?***"

She gathered energies into her fist hardening them in to a jewel. She blew on it, and the crystal began to glow and pulse. She impressed her words and will on the object as she spoke. "You will swear on this memstone, it will bear witness to your promise to never bother my family, our ancestors, or descendants again either in person or by proxy. Further you will guarantee that none of your creatures, your allies or assigns will *ever* to step foot in Cosmodarus, or any other settlement where my family or our descendants live again."

"***What if I break this vow?***"

"If there is even a hint of unfaithfulness, you are going to have a conscience that even *saints* will envy."

Come on. Hurry. She felt herself withering inside. She had to stand firm and not show weakness. She had to loosen her grip soon or both she and her mother would both die.

Hecate swallowed. It was clear that the threat truly frightened her. As a diabolical creature hundreds of millennia old, the torture of having such conscience would be beyond description.

"***I--***" She paused, lips pursing. Wren could see in the vile creature's eyes that maybe she suspected the deception.

"All right, damn you, come here! You'll make a beautiful saint." She rushed forward.

Hecate squawked and tried to phase shift away but Wren had long since prepared for that. She snatched the evil creature out of transition space with a crash of colliding realities that made lightning crack across the tower top. She slammed the goddess into the stone at her feet.

Dropping the memstone, she gripped Hecate's throat and raised her hand. Magic licked around her fingers. "While I'm at it, might as well give you those cute little deva wings." She reached toward Hecate's face.

Burning eyes wide, Hecate snatched up the memstone. "***By the Pact, I swear to abide by all the conditions stipulated!***"

Wren shook her head. "You aren't bound by the Pact anymore."

She let the will of ten thousand ancestors flow through her, not knowing if she had the strength left to blast through all of Hecate's mental and physical protections.

Better to die trying that to let this monster squirm free. She had to have complete compliance or her family would never be safe.

Wren drilled into Hecate with the power of Starholme Prime. The goddess shrieked and writhed, clawing at the hand gripping her throat. "**No! I promise. I bind myself!**" Her eyes rolled in sheer terror. "**Blood oath! Do not spite me with that hideous curse!**"

She felt a shock of victory, the shared minds of her psyche reading truth of intent in Hecate's words.

Wren drew back, snatching the jewel from Hecate's hand. "Our ancestors have born witness to this, to them oaths were life." She brushed herself off. "Begone and never return."

Hecate stared up at her.

Wren opened her hand, taking aim at the evil creature's spirit essence and summoning the last dregs of her dwindling power. The body had broken down to the point that the limiters of her nola were starting to kick in.

The threat was enough. Hecate vanished in a thump of intrushing air.

She stared at the empty spot where Hecate had laid. A gust of wind sent spirals of dust staggering through the spot. She felt tears streak down her cheeks. It was as if a weight bigger than a dozen mountains had been lifted off her shoulders.

Wren let go of Starholme's power and collapsed to her knees. She stared at the jewel. She would make sure every pantheon bore witness to Hecate's promise--or would if she ever moved again. She didn't know how to get out of this body--and she had thrashed her mother good. She did to her, what she had done to herself with Mon'istiaga. She, *they*, needed immediate care. Problem was she didn't have enough energy left to twitch a pinky. She didn't even know how to unentangle her tao. What if she couldn't get loose? Was her mother even alive? She had wrapped herself so tightly around her. The knots had been jerked tighter with each successive exertion. Would they both die then?

With an effort that made every muscle shriek, she fell on her back and stared up at the color threaded Cosmodarian night. Funny, it looked so much more beautiful now.

Mother, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to kill us both. You know me, always reaching too far...

She heard clapping come from across the roof. Footsteps approached.

A broad masculine face poked into her view, intense gray eyes glinted in the poor light. He pulled at his mustache and turned his head so their gaze matched. Loric blew out his cheeks. "Amazing." He shook his head. "Child, we really have to stop meeting like this..."

I've seen some pretty amazing things in my long long life, but this girl just keeps tacking on new experiences for me. It's really quite taxing...

--Loric Felspar

Chapter 71

Consequence of Victory

With the appearance of Loric, events went from chaos to mayhem. The powerful elder had brought with him a force equivalent to any kingdom's army. There were the ultra-elite, the Band of the Crescent Moon and their allies, the players of the great game. There was the Felspar family itself, and their great elder acquaintances, Gabriella and Aarlen. To add numbers to the mix, Beia had brought with her a large contingent of Myrmigyne honored elders.

While the main threat of Hecate herself and the avatars had been abated, there was the not so trivial matter of hundreds fiends, cultists, and minions now without direction, but still capable of great harm.

It was to that grisly task that the late arriving strike force applied themselves, while Wren, Euriel, Ziedra, baron Kergatha and his son were hurried to a location where they could get medicinal attention.

Fortunately, Stark was available to take authority in matters of the manor, and guide the group to appropriate healing facilities.

Dorian, who was put in charge of the hasty triage, wordlessly separated Wren from her father and brother, having Darin'kel and Everia shoulder carry her into the waiting chamber outside the infirmary. In the abrupt commotion, she only caught a glimpse of Vanidaar Kergatha as he was rushed off, long face set in a grimace, his forehead blackened and long red hair in a disarray. Her lanky brother seemed in no better shape, his angular face which was a masculine blend of her mother and father, whip-marked and bruised. Tears trickled down her face as they disappeared through the doors and out of sight.

Loric put a hand to Wren's neck and looked into her eyes for a moment. He drew a breath and pushed a surge of healing magic into her. Wren felt her body tingle, and the pain lessened. He turned and put a hand on the stomach of her untenanted body that had been laid on a couch. He muttered a spell of some kind and touched the forehead of her body. A million tiny glowing insects seemed to appear on its skin, the specks began frantically tracing patterns around one another leaving glossy sheen on her flesh before winking out.

"You stay put," Loric told her. "I'll take care of Ziedra. A healer will be with you shortly to do a little better fix on you."

He turned and disappeared through a door, rushing to join Brin and Cassandra in the infirmary. Leaving Wren to stare at the featureless portal, throat tight and stomach churning. Had she been too slow in purging the jikartandak? She had been acting purely on instinct, guided by minds as far above her understanding as she was above the animals. It *seemed* the right thing to do. Beyond she heard the commotion and the race to administer to the dark-haired dancer's injuries. It was perhaps two long breaths before the door opened again and Cassandra shouldered Radian out.

The stern gold-skinned mage didn't say anything, she simply pointed and closed the door behind him. The pale yellow of the young man's features, the wideness of his starry solid-black eyes, and the muscles working in his throat told a story that Wren did not want to see much less hear.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the chamber. Distantly, she heard the echoes of the battle being fought outside, blasts of magic going off, the shriek of demons and the hew and cry of warriors tilting in pitched combat.

Breathing hard, the young man looked from her back to the door from which he had been so recently ejected. He was dressed in a smoke-black carapace that gleamed in the dim priestlight, this he unbuckled with a snort and tossed it on the floor with clatter. He kicked the wall and spun around fists clenched.

"Damn, I loathe this," he growled.

Wren blinked. She felt a warmth inside realizing that he really did care about her friend. It made her smile despite her worry. "Trust me, I can relate." She licked her lips, still surprised at having a voice that didn't sound like her own. Euriel's tone was so much deeper and resonant.

"Milady?" His shadowy eyes met hers. "My pardon." His attention went to Wren's body gleaming on the couch. His brow furrowed. "Is Wren..?"

She looked over. Her body was still dressed in the black and silver uniform she wore into the battle, the cloth stained and torn from the fight, face bruised and cut from being tossed down on the hard rocks. It was such an odd feeling to see her slack face composed as though in slumber. It reminded her of the time she had been looking at her simulacrum. Only now she knew it was the *real* her. What made it truly surreal was knowing she was looking out of her mother's eyes. How did she get herself into these messes?

"Is *she* okay?" Wren asked. "Radian, I guess that depends on how you define *okay*." She didn't want to talk about herself. She was more concerned about Ziedra. She looked to the door. "Is it--is it, bad?"

Radian blinked. He glanced over his shoulder and then back to her. "I--I am afraid to speculate. Milady--do I know you?"

Wren couldn't help but smile at the absurdity of the situation. Obviously, he had not gotten wind of her peculiar predicament. She mirrored all too well the frustration that Radian expressed when he said loathed this situation. In desperation, she had done something spectacularly chancy without thought of the consequences. Even with Gaea's ring, there had been a chance of permanent fusion with Desiray. She pushed through Gaea's combining into a body not meant for her tao, and then used Starholme's massive power to bring it into sync. She had wound herself all through her mother's mind and spirit in order to protect her, but at the same time had tied knots she had no inkling of how to undo. For all she knew, every instant she sat here in this body like a dolt, her mother might be slipping further from possible recovery. As it was, she'd done her damndest to kill this form, putting it through a workout that made her battle with Mon'istiaga seem calm by comparison. Damn it. Some savant prodigy she was. Idiot. Who was she now? Wren Idun-daughter? Wuriel? Eurwren? The last thought clawed a painful snort from her. She felt tears leaving burning streaks down her cheek.

The perplexed expression on Radian's face became concern. He knelt and took her hand. "Milady?"

She swiped at the wetness on her face. She drew a breath. "Radian, I did something really dumb. This body--this is Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha--Wren's--*my*--mother."

His expression went back to perplexed.

"I merged with my mother, Radian. I took over my mother's body to fight Hecate. That's why my body is lying over there like a sack of tubers."

His eyes widened. He glanced at Wren's body. "By Isis, and what of your mother? A tao force is so overwhelming..."

"I honestly don't know," Wren choked back a sob, trying to stop the tears. "She was weak already when I did it. I can't feel her, but then I'm so tangled up in her. I can't tell us apart..."

"Hey, this isn't how winning is supposed to look." Desiray said behind her, walking in from an adjacent chamber. The woman was dressed in the armor of liquid shadow she wore into battle, a gold kerchief tied back over her white hair. She was splashed with blood. Strapped over her shoulder, the great sword Khairhavkul's leather wrapped hilt was dark with perspiration and dried blood. She walked to Radian and put an arm around his neck and pulled him to her. "Hey, golden boy, how you holding up? Hmmm." She cocked her head and looked into his eyes. He nodded without saying anything. Desiray turned to Wren. "Damn, you're leaking again, we must be in trouble."

Wren had not been sure how to react when Desiray first entered. Her recognition sent a rush of relief and happiness through her. "Des!" She leaped up and threw her arms around her in a hug.

"*Whoof!*" the powerful woman staggered back. She thumped Wren's back desperately. "Ease up, Girl! Ease up. I need to *breathe!*"

Surprised, she let go, feeling embarrassed. It had been so good to hear her voice and know that she recognized her.

"Damn, you're strong," Desiray said, wincing and rubbing her ribs. "Or I should say, your mother is." She blinked at her. "This is so weird. I know it has to be you in there. Nobody else would react like that."

Wren clenched her fists and rocked her head back. She bit her lip. "Des, I have so messed this up."

The white-haired woman brushed back her hair, green eyes wide. "Do tell. Mishaka is a slobbering heap on the roof. Hethanon doesn't have a head, and Loric tells me you had Hecate simpering like a green in a room full of city guards. Shreds, what I would have given to see *that!*"

Wren held out her hands and gestured to the thick sturdy body she was now clothed in. "Look what I did! I won the damn battle and--and--*killed* my own mother--"

Desiray held up a hand. "Wren--"

"Even if she's not already dead, I'm just *sitting* here while--"

"Wren!" Desiray blared gripping her shoulders.

Wren subsided feeling the tears on her face again.

"Girl, take a breath." Her green eyes bored into hers. "You don't know your mother is dead. You don't know she's dying."

"But--"

"Hush." Desiray ordered. "Did Loric look at you?"

She nodded.

"Do you think he would leave you sitting in here if it would kill your mother?"

Wren swallowed and stared at her. "No, but it wouldn't matter if she--"

The guild mistress smacked her. "Stop it."

She gripped her cheek. The strike hadn't hurt. In fact, not a lot could hurt this tough body. It was the mistress' frustration that hurt more than anything. "Des, I can't feel her! I can't find her!" She cupped her hands and looked down at herself. "She was so strong. How could I not feel her?"

The mistress put fists on hips. "Maybe you don't know your *own* strength. Remember, I've had you inside of me." She held up her hand with Gaea's ring and pointed to it. "Even with this thing on it was hard to make myself felt." The woman drew a breath. "She might be lost in that 'be'ing thing of yours, soaking up eternity's kiss."

"I don't know," Wren said. "I'm afraid to find out, but I can't stand not knowing."

"It occurred to me," Radian said. "That what we need is someone who knows Lady Euriel well, has some power with spirits, and understands immortals. From that, the choice is obvious. Wren's grandmother Idun."

"My--" Wren felt herself grow cold.

"That's an awesome idea, Rad!" Desiray enthused.

"It is *not!*" Wren shouted. "You want my--my--mother's mother to see what I did? No--oh *no*--she..." Wren's mind flicked over past conversations, Euriel saying how her mother could defeat Hecate. Defeat. As an avatar of Starholme, she had struck Hecate with enough force to smash a city. She fell fifty paces onto solid rock and the creature had got up and simply dusted herself off! They wanted to call up someone even more powerful than that and tell her that her daughter was now a puppet walking around on her grand-daughter's strings. She couldn't say what the response would be, but it was nothing she wanted to experience! "Uh *uh*." She shook her head. "We don't even know what kind of relationship they have."

Desiray turned her head. "Is your mother a nice person?"

"I--" She paused. She knew for certain her mother was not 'nice'--not in a cozy sort of way. She did have compassion--she had seen it. She was personable. She knew how to get along with people and earn their respect. She was what a leader should be. Actually, her mother had a number of good qualities. She must have inherited those merits from somewhere. "Not exactly. She reminds me of--well kind of how an older female Tal would be."

"Oh, now there's a picture!" Desiray laughed.

"No, I mean, she's a scrapper first ahead of anything. She's not *nice*--she'll do anything in honor's grasp to win a fight. She likes people--people respond to her. I--I don't know how to describe it."

"So, if your mother is this forthright grounded pillar of personality. Why do you think mother Idun will be such a terror?"

"First, kids don't always turn out like their parents. Look at you and Everia. In fact, Everia has a lot in common with my mother. I have some idea of the fire and brimstone that we'd see if you found out someone clunked your baby in the head and took over her body." She drew a breath. "Oh, you might calm down and be rational *later*..."

Radian winced. "You know, she has a point, Mother."

"Yeah..." Desiray's voice trailed off. She blew out her cheeks. "But being a mother, I know one thing. What you're not told makes you twice as mad. Can you imagine the furor there'll be if she gets wind of this and we haven't consulted her...???"

Wren thought about it, and it made her grow cold inside...

Only Wren can get in predicaments like these. I hang around her now just to see what will happen next...

--Desiray Illkaren Felspar

Chapter 72

Assessing the Damage

The infirmary waiting room with its plain rock walls and simple furnishings had begun to close in on Wren. Occasionally, she'd catch a word or phrase as the mages and healers toiled in the infirmary, but none of it gave her a picture of what was going on. A scent suspiciously like that of burned flesh had crept into the air, making her stomach twist. Her mouth was dry with worry, and she didn't know what to do with her hands. She could sit still for a little while but then would have to throw herself up and move around. She hated waiting. She despised not knowing. From the little bits and pieces she had picked up, the problem was that here in Cosmodarus they were isolated from the advanced tools located at the citadel. Apparently, Ziedra was in too precarious a condition to survive the shock of teleportation. A runner had been sent to bring back for the necessary items, but the etherlock that was blocking transport into and out of the city continued to be a hindrance, adding extra time to an already nail-bitingly long experience.

Radian shared her impatience, periodically shuffling around the room with one hand behind his back.

Desiray reclined on one of the divans, one leg and an arm over the back, watching Wren pace with a concerned expression. The woman sighed with a roll of her eyes, stretched and put her hands behind her head. "You two need to have faith."

Both of them looked at her.

"Come on," she said. "That girl has the best there is working on her. They'll pull her through."

"Des, that stuff was bad. Way worse than what was used on us."

"And Cassandra learned a lot about it since, and Dorian made that prevention stuff which Zee was smart enough to use. I bet you still have yours in your pocket."

"I--" She glanced over at her body. She felt her cheeks get hot.

The guild mistress sighed and shook her head. "I know Sireth taught you better than that. Do I have to go back to the basics and teach you again?"

Wren rubbed a fist against her temple. "Maybe you do."

"I swear girl, I like a risk or two, but you're just reckless. Worse than I ever was."

"I'm not reckless," Wren said, stung by the accusation. "I plan a heist down to a bug's hind end. Remember the gem?"

The mistress snorted. "Remember the stunt with Sindra and Drucilla? Getting bit by Gabriella? The phoenix?"

She looked down feeling a pang of guilt. "That was--that was because of Jharon and my family."

"Yeah, I know. Girl, I hope I have you pulling for me next time I get in trouble."

"You know I will be," Wren answered.

Desiray grinned. "I sleep better thinking about it too."

There was a clack of boots in the outer hall, and broad silhouette appeared in the entrance. The man stepped into the light swinging a cloak off his shoulders and removing his gloves, these he folded into a neat bundle stuffed into a pouch on his

side. Wren recognized the man's broad, open face with its heavy mustache, sharp nose, and guileless blue eyes. The man's polished silver hauberk and the huge hammer on his hip were both spattered with blood. He frowned down at his polished black boots upon which some sticky green substance still clung.

"Gads, I'll have to burn them," he muttered in quiet voice. "Ladies, Radian," he said in a louder voice, nodding to them with a bow. "I'm sorry it took me so long. There were a few hangers on that decided to be stubborn." He walked over to Desiray and kissed her.

The mistress cooed pulled him back down for a second peck.

"Thanks for coming, Trammy. I know you were out there having fun."

He folded his arms and sniffed. "Darling, the smiting of evil is not *fun*. It is serious business and my duty to our lord Ukko."

"Yes, Dear," Desiray replied doing a fair job of pretending to be chastened.

Wren glanced between them. She could see the physical attraction, but he was such a--a--*paladin*. It still boggled her mind. How could this fiercely independent, totally *lawless*, woman hook up with someone who so completely the opposite.

"So," the man asked. "What was so important?"

"Well--" Desiray started.

As she begun, more boots came clacking down the passage, quickly resolving into the brawny form of Laramis, trailed by the towering figure of Irodee who ducked to enter the room.

Laramis stopped, thumped a heel on the floor, put a fist over his heart and bowed his head to Bertram. "Sir, the perimeter is secure."

The high justicar nodded to him. "Very good, Lord De'Falcone. Have search teams been deployed?"

Laramis put his hands behind his back. Irodee loomed over him, watching the man with dark and curious eyes.

"Sir, indeed they have, Sir," the justicar answered. "I rallied four teams of six to sweep the grounds, I recruited the mage reservists from our earlier assault to assist."

"Excellent," Bertram complemented.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Take a seat, Laramis." Bertram said, gesturing to an empty couch. "You as well, Lady Irodee, you've earned a rest. You've had quite a day--or a night as it were."

"Indeed, Sir, we have," Laramis said. He looked to Radian. "Good Sir, I do not believe we've been introduced. I am Laramis De'Falcone, my companion," He held out a hand for Irodee who stepped up and laced her fingers in his. "This is Irodee Skyesteel Ki'Targallae."

Radian bowed. "I am Radian Felspar. Pleased to make your acquaintance." He covered his heart with a fist and bowed his head. "May the flame of your lord's sword always guide you." He held out his open hand.

"Ah, just so!" Laramis said, obviously greatly pleased to be greeted in accordance with his church. "Well met, Lad! Well met!" He shook hands vigorously. "I had no idea your family followed the *way*."

Radian raised an eyebrow. He gestured to Bertram who grinned. "Lord Tarrantil is my father. Why wouldn't I?"

Laramis looked as though he had been hit in the forehead with a brick. "Ah." He clicked his tongue and wiped his brow. "Does it seem hot in here to you?"

Radian smiled. Wren thought the Felspars took altogether too much pleasure in shocking normal people with their convoluted family tree.

Laramis stepped to the couch, gesturing Irodee ahead of him and taking her hand as she was seated. The tall Myrmigyne settled down with grunt, her long body going

lax with exhaustion. Laramis eased himself into the cushions with a wince. Though he put on a show of being untouched by the battle, it was obvious that he too had taken his share of hits. The man glanced to Wren's body and then to Euriel. His throat muscles worked as he met her eyes. "Milady," he asked tentatively. "Is it true what we have heard?"

Wren swallowed. "I don't know. What have you heard?"

The man rubbed the back of his head, looking uncomfortable. "That there was some sort of mishap with yourself and Wren."

She raised an eyebrow. "If you were talking to Wren right now, would that constitute a 'mishap'?"

The man blinked. He opened his mouth then shut it. He was obviously too tired to fathom her roundabout explanation. "Pardon, Milady?"

"I *am* Wren, Laramis," she said. "I joined with my mother in a way similar to what I showed you in the temple."

Laramis' jaw dropped.

Irodee turned her head. "Were you supposed to stay joined?"

She clicked her tongue. "No--I *wasn't*." She let out a breath. "I'm *stuck*."

Bertram blew out his cheeks. "*That* would be a problem." He looked to Desiray. "Is that what you called me for, Darling?"

"In a manner of speaking," Desiray said. "Since Laramis is here, we can ask both of you."

"What is it, my dear? I am no magician, and while I am knowledgeable in matters of the spirit, this is far beyond my meager skills."

Desiray sat up and patted him on the shoulder. "Oh, it's nothing like that. You see, Wren and I were having a discussion. We were speculating how Euriel's mother, the pantheon lady Idun, would feel about this current situation."

Irodee who was sitting back straightened up eyes wide.

Laramis blinked. "Gads, she would not be pleased at all. Especially, when she discovers about how all the communications to her have been being intercepted. She will already be in an ill temper. This would--" He swallowed. "She would be very cross indeed."

"That's what we were thinking," Desiray agreed with a nod. "We were thinking about how much more annoyed she will be if she finds out and we didn't try to get word to her."

"Pardon, Darling," Bertram said. "I understand this train of thought, but what does it have to do with myself and Laramis?"

"Well," Desiray glanced at Laramis. "I understand Laramis is an avatar."

Bertram raised an eyebrow. He glanced at the justicar. The man stared at them, his cheeks coloring a little.

"And?" Bertram prompted.

"Trammy, Ukko manifested during the battle and Hecate made a big thing of backing him down and embarrassing him." She narrowed her eyes. "I'm just wondering how quickly word of her caving in to a mortal is going to get spread around. I'm right aren't I? Ukko will rub this in for everything its worth."

Laramis jerked to his feet. "Of course not! Our lord of sky and heavens would never be so petty. He--!"

The paladin subsided instantly as Bertram threw up a hand for him to stop. The high justicar pinched the bridge of his nose. He shook his head. "You're right, Des my Darling. It will be in the courts of every pantheon by late morning. I am certain it will be well publicized, embellishments and all."

Laramis was stunned. "Milord, how can you say such a thing?!"

Bertram sighed. He looked to the younger man. "Laramis, have you ever been in Ukko's court? I mean besides in visions?"

The justicar stared at him wide-eyed. "No, Milord, I hope to some day."

"Well, my friend, I have—many, many times. I spend more time there than I would like in fact."

Laramis clutched his throat as though he had been punched in the heart. "Milord!"

Bertram held up his hands. "Zounds, man, don't act so scandalized. When it is your job to administrate rather than lead. See if the shine doesn't wear off." He shook his head and clenched his fist. "Tonight is the first action I have seen for more than three fortnights." He turned to Desiray. "I do not think there is time to head that off. Those who are barricading Euriel's communications will not be able to keep this from Idun's ears. It will be in too many places at once. She will want to know why she has not gotten word from her daughter. She *will* come. Idun's temper is known among my lord's Vanir. Idun was once Vanir herself."

"Damn," Wren said. "What do we do? It's not like we can stop her."

Desiray scrubbed a hand through her hair. "Damn, Wren, how do you get into these messes?"

"That's what I keep asking!" She shook her head. "If we can't avoid it, then I guess we just have to get everybody under cover for the explosion."

"What explosion?" a woman asked from the doorway.

Laramis stood up. "Lady Damay, please join us."

Bertram bowed. "Milady, yes. Please."

Damay entered still dressed in the camouflage togs she had worn into the battle. Her dark hair had been freed from its coif and ran free over her shoulders, and she was wearing all of her customary jewelry. She moved slowly as she entered the room. She looked tired.

She nodded to everyone and plunked down on a couch next to Radian with a great sigh. "Any word on how Ziedra is?"

Radian shook his head.

The elder savant sighed. She looked to Euriel and her eyes narrowed. "Wren, why are you still in that body?"

"Because I can't bloody get out. Why do you think?"

"Nonsense, of course you can get out."

"Yeah?"

"Child, don't be impertinent."

"Damay, you haven't checked me out. I know I'm just a plebe at this savant stuff, but I know a seam when I see one. You don't realize how much power I put through this body. It scrambled us up really good."

The elder savant rubbed her forehead. "Did Loric look at you?"

"Yes, but he had to go take care of Ziedra."

Damay rocked back on the divan putting her arms behind the chair back and stretching. "That explosion you were mentioning. Does that mean you think mother Idun is on her way?"

"Late tomorrow at the outside," Desiray predicted.

"I'm too exhausted to deal with this right now," she said. "My advice is to not be stuck like that when she gets here, or a lot of people are going to get pounded."

"Any suggestions how?"

Damay shook her head. "My brain is numb. Between getting lost, the audience with Gaea, flying all night, and the battle... I just don't have anything left. I need sleep. In fact," She leaned forward and stood up. "I'm going to find an empty bed and use it. Give me a call if there's word about Zee." She nodded to everyone and trudged out.

"But--"

Damay didn't stop or look back. She disappeared into the hall.

"Whoa," Desiray breathed. "She's human after all. Who would have thought?"

She frowned at the guild mistress. "That reeked. She didn't help at all. Some mentor she is. Just chastises me, gives me obvious advise, and leaves."

Bertram chuckled. "Every teacher has a bad day. She's obviously been through a lot."

Wren stood up hands clenched. "You *think*? What about me? You think I'm having a good day?"

"Peace be," Bertram raised a calming hand. "I am only saying we must be understanding. Even elders can grow weary."

Desiray rose from the couch and put a hand on Wren's fist and pushed it down. She put an arm around her and rubbed her back. "Claws in girl, I know this is hard. I know you're worried about Ziedra." She looked in her eyes. "You know, Damay may not have the wrong idea. How long has it been since you really slept?"

"I can't sleep, not in this body. It--I--"

"Are you tired?"

"Of course, I just fought a god..."

"Well, go to sleep, I'll call you as soon as there's word about Zee. Maybe some rest will loosen those knots."

"Lady Wren," Radian said. "There is something to what she says. Part of your problem with the unbinding may simply be you are too tired. It is possible that both your tao and your mother's body are simply too exhausted to let go."

"You think so?"

"I agree with Radian," Bertram said. "Both this body and your tao need time to heal themselves."

"Go on, Wren," Desiray said. "I promise to call you the instant we hear anything."

Wren was about to comply when the door to the infirmary opened and Dorian stepped out. The youthful-looking mage closed the door and put her back to it. She relaxed against the wood with a sigh and wiped the perspiration from her face. The woman's normally orderly hair hung loose and her red surcoat was half undone.

Dorian blew out a breath and slowly smoothed back her dark hair. She raised her eyes to everyone. "Hello." She folded her arms. "I think your Father and brother will be okay now."

Wren's brow furrowed. "They were in danger?"

Dorian rolled her eyes. "Let's just say what you did to Mishaka was well justified. It's a good thing you didn't kill her. Her last spite was a death-trigger to the last two control-diadems she had placed on them. Killing her would have destroyed their minds. So, even if you won, you would have lost." The woman shook her head. "She didn't have much sanity left to begin with, but you broke her mind like a pane of glass. That shock fed back through her control spell. The trauma it caused was not trivial." She pinched the bridge of her nose looking weary. "I think I've stitched things up well enough for the nonce." She rocked her head back against the door.

"When can I see them?"

Dorian straightened. "Well, *now* wouldn't be a good time. I don't think either of them are in the proper state of mind to understand your--*condition*."

"Oh." She looked down.

Radian pushed forward next to her. "What about Zee? How is she? Is she safe?"

Wren looked up.

Dorian bit her lip. She rubbed the back of her neck and crossed her legs. "I--" She paused. "It's tough. That black bile of Hecate's was vicious stuff. She was lucky Wren did what she did."

"But will she be all right?" Radian insisted.

"Loric has her stable," Dorian said. "But at best, she'll need extensive reconstruction--" She hung her head. "She may never work magic again."

Wren felt an icy shaft hit her in the heart. "No, oh no, Dorian. That's--" She didn't have words for it. It would kill Ziedra as certainly as if her heart had been ripped out. She felt Desiray grip her shoulder. "Why can't you fix her like you did me?"

Dorian frowned, hands balling into fists. "This wicked stuff of Hecate's attacks the whole body at once. It is designed to corrupt *everything*, it was made that way precisely to prevent that kind of healing. We don't have any part of her that's not tainted to use as a template."

Beside her Radian was blinking. He laced his fingers as though pleading with her. "Please, Mother, I know you, there's nothing you can't find a way around."

She found herself breathing hard, mirroring Radian's desperation. "There must be something."

The mage pressed her lips to a line. "We haven't given up. We can patch her together, but it won't be her. Understand? Remember how angry you were that first time--and that was *you* just minus some scars and calluses."

Wren swallowed hard, feeling the lump in her throat.

"Just don't despair," Dorian said. "She's a savant. That opens up avenues that aren't available to mortals. Normal people can't do--" She flicked a hand toward Euriel. "That."

Wren felt a little stab in her chest, like it was an accusation.

Dorian's brow furrowed. "How long do you plan on staying in there, anyway?"

The tone she used made heat flare in her face. "I just finished explaining to Damay. I *can't* get out."

The woman pursed her lips, and cocked her head to one side. "Can't or won't?"

"Are you insane?! You think I like being in my mother's body?!"

The woman's expression remained flat. "Do you?"

"You and your damned questions. Of course I don't."

"Then why don't you get out?"

"Aren't you listening? I don't know *how*! I'm all tangled up and I can't see how to undo the knots."

"Mother, I don't see the point of antagonizing her. I think she just needs to rest."

Dorian narrowed her eyes, the lines of her face drawing down in concentration. "Maybe that would be wisest. I really would prefer we resolve this before Euriel's mother shows up."

Desiray straightened up. "How did you know about that? Did you hear us talking?"

The mage laughed. "Paladins. They can't help themselves. They just have to crow about conquests of good over evil. Ukko may not have been responsible for the win, but he had two paladins here. You just know it was their bright shining light showed the way to victory. At least, that's how the story will read when it's plastered over every pantheon court from Elysium to Olympus."

"Milady, we have not been introduced," Laramis said frowning. His voice was powerful and hard, more serious than Wren had ever heard it. The tone was so sharp that Irodee put an arm across his chest. "But I find your insinuation both insulting and cynical. We train and school hard to lead by example and provide inspiration to others. I will not sit by and listen to our faith debased and our chivalry reduced to mere propaganda."

"Ease down, Laramis," Bertram said in a firm voice. "She is entitled to her opinion. It's just that she and Ukko have something of a history." His voice darkened with a hint of warning. "That history blinds her to the good and noble qualities of our faith, and sometimes she just can't help but let some of her bitterness slip out."

Dorian snorted. "My apologies, Laramis." She nodded to Bertram with a sour expression. "I shouldn't let my *bitterness* show." She paused and fixed Wren with her gaze. "At any rate, that flood of--" She raised an eyebrow and glanced at the still glowering Laramis. "*News*--will get the ear of Idun. With telepathy and teleportation not working through the barrier, she will come herself to assess the situation. From there... it's bound to get stormy. A storm that may become a hurricane if she finds her whole family broken and tied up in--*knots*. Just so it doesn't escape your notice, she'll have to take that frustration out on something--or *somebody*."

"I get it," Wren answered. "I got it before. I am not purposely hanging on. Honest."

Desiray rubbed her throat. "Is there any chance Euriel is the one hanging on? Can she even do that?"

Dorian put her hands behind her head and rocked her head back. "Well, even subjugated by Wren's tao, the basic instincts would still be there. Motherhood is a very powerful motivation."

"Okay," Wren said. "But what would keeping me inside of her do? It doesn't make sense."

Radian put a hand on her shoulder. "Mmmm, maybe it does. If you think at a really basic level. It's where you started after all."

"Huh?"

Desiray rolled her eyes. She poked Wren in the stomach. "She gave birth to you, Silly. That's where you started life. Probably, to a really basic part of her--that's where you belong."

"It's a little more than that," Dorian said. "The maternal instinct is to protect our children. Truthfully, the safest place for you *is* in that body after all."

"But we'd both die when my original body expired."

"Oh? How did Damay live in that amulet for four millennia then?"

"Uh."

"Right. No, when your old body dies you're just good and stuck that's all." She licked her lips. "I hadn't considered it, but it is logical. Perhaps her desire to protect and hold on to you is contributing to your entanglement."

"How does it help us?"

Dorian shrugged. "It doesn't. Get some sleep. When everyone has settled down, and relaxed a little, we can bring some elder brainpower to bear on it. Don't worry, you can't kill your mother's spirit, okay? Part of what a tao does is to cradle and hold lesser spirits." She let out a breath. "Meanwhile, we'll be doing what we can for Ziedra."

The woman turned and opened the door.

Wren stepped forward and took the mage's arm. The woman looked at her.

"Dorian, anything it takes--my blood, whatever, she can have it. No matter how wild the idea is, just tell me, and I'll find a way to make it happen. Just as long as Ziedra gets better."

The mage forced a smile and gave Wren's shoulder a squeeze. "We'll do our best. I promise."

Wren let go, and watching the door numbly as it closed behind the mage.

The sound of boots on sliding on stone came from the corridor and a figure emerged out of the dim light resolving into lanky form of T'Gor. Rocking his neck side-to-side

and grinning he ambled in. The bearded man was scratched, bloody, and dirty, but still exuded a cheerful weariness.

"Hey, Ri, sorry I took so long getting back with you folks. Koass called me back to the Protectorate to yell at--me." His brow furrowed as he looked around at the expressions around the room. "Uhhh, did I miss something...?"

Despite the immensity of my accomplishment, for more than a scoreday I could only view it as a failure. My success came from luck, not from any brilliance on my part.

--Wren

Chapter 73

Picking Up the Pieces

Wren left Desiray to explain the situation to T'Gor, she really did need to sleep or at least some solitude to think about things. As usual, Dorian could get into her head with those pointy little questions and pick away. Damn, she hated that. Even when she knew what the woman was doing, it still worked. That was some power. Was she deliberately clinging in this body, refusing to see the way out? Did some part of her envy and lust after having a form like this? While connected to Starholme, she had synchronized Euriel and her Nola. When this body healed it would be like that time with Desiray--every breath a pleasure and little beyond her reach.

"Excellency?"

Wren stopped in the hall and looked back. The stone floors were paneled with wood. Pastoral scenes decorated the walls, and the chamber doors themselves were decorated. Further on it looked like an open atrium and bathing area. Lost in her thoughts, she had just been wandering at random. This did look like an area for quarters though. How had she known to come here?

A young woman dressed in a simple gray blouse and skirt stood in the hall, her hands clasped before her and body trembling. Wren walked back to her. She looked down at the girl who was probably in her middle teens, twiggy, with curly brown hair. Her dark eyes were wide with fear.

The girl knelt and took Wren's hand. "Excellency." She gulped. "Are the creatures gone?"

Wren guessed this girl was probably a chamber maid or some other menial in the house. She was obviously terrified, which was understandable.

She bent down and put a hand on her shoulder. The girl cringed as though the contact hurt her, or that perhaps she expected it to.

Wren frowned. "They are gone. We have many warriors here now, helping to secure the house." She paused. "Is everyone okay?"

The girl looked up at her with wide eyes. Wren read the girl's perplexity, probably because she didn't sound like 'herself'. "Yes, Excellency. The guards kept them at bay. So, is it permissible for us to come out?"

She nodded.

The girl stood up and looked around. "Was there something you needed, Excellency?"

Wren blinked at her, realizing that she must be in the servant's quarters. It was probably a rare occasion that her mother would come here. "Uh--yes, we're--we're going to have a lot of guests." She drew a breath. "The Baron has taken ill, so Captain Stark will be running things."

The girl's eyes grew round. "Are you going away, Milady?"

Wren winced. "Ah, I'm going to be very busy. Uh, do we have accommodations for three score?"

The girl stared at her as though stunned. Obviously that was a question she should know the answer to. "Of course, Excellency, if it is all right to give them chambers on the terrace level."

"That will be fine, tell everyone to make our guests welcome." Wren paused. "Make sure all the staff knows that if there are any injuries, to report to the infirmary. We have healers there now. Have everyone check in with Captain Stark to get further instructions."

The young woman bowed. "Yes, ma'am." She turned and ran off.

That felt so weird. She wasn't used to having someone call her 'ma'am'. She turned around. She shouldn't stay here. It would likely cause confusion and unease. That girl had been more terrified of her than the minions of the avatars. When she touched the girl, the poor thing almost jumped out of her skin. Her mother was too honorable to pick on the servants. Euriel couldn't help but be what she was, a mage *and* the daughter of a god. To that maid, she might as well be Gaea herself. Wren had met people who enjoyed the fear they inspired. Experiencing even this small taste for herself, she didn't care for it at all.

When she was younger, she remembered dreaming of wealth and power. She envied the men and women who commanded hordes of servants to cater to their every whim. Half a decade later, living in Loric's citadel had taught her what it was like to be truly served and pampered--and the irony was it made her uncomfortable. She accepted Vera's ministrations only because it would hurt the woman's feelings if she didn't. It only got worse as her respect for the little woman grew. How did one accept servitude from someone who was such a good friend and mentor? It made her head hurt.

As she turned yet another corner, she wondered where Vera was. Of all the people she knew, the G'Yaki turned cook was the one who could cut to the heart of things without even trying.

Had Vera come with Loric? She hadn't seen her, but then nobody saw Vera unless she wanted to be seen. As she thought about it, she felt certain Vera *would* come. They were close. Why didn't Vera come to see her then? Perhaps because everyone else had been around her. She sighed, more of that silly honor thing.

So, where would Vera be? She felt a prickling sensation rush up her back. Of course! She looked over her shoulder into the dark hall.

If she was wrong, she would feel really silly.

She stopped and turned around. The dark stone hall opened into several adjacent corridors, archways opening into meeting chambers, cloak rooms, and waiting areas. There were a thousand places someone with skill could stand or crouch unobserved.

"Vera, I'd rather talk to you than have you follow me around."

There was no answer, but a prickling sensation made it feel right. She had to be right. She knew Vera.

"Vera, please."

There was a long silence. She felt like an idiot for talking to an empty hall. She stared into the darkness a bit longer. Maybe she wasn't as smart as she thought.

She turned to continue up the passage, only to find herself looking into a pair of dark eyes. Heart pounding, she staggered back clutching her chest. Dressed in the loose fitting smoke-colored robes was Vera. She had her hood down and her hair pulled into a tight bun held with long pins.

She gasped. "Gah, you scared me."

There was the barest hint of a smile on the G'Yaki's face. "Still much for Wren-friend to learn. Did Wren-friend sense Vera?"

"Obviously not. I thought you were following me."

"Was."

"Then how--? Oh, never mind." She looked down. "Even though I didn't look like myself, you knew it was me."

The little woman nodded. "Vera know Wren-friend with more than her eyes."

"Vera, you are amazing." She gave her a hug, and Vera hugged her back.

"Is Wren-friend lost?"

She sighed. "Physically and *spiritually*." She looked down at herself. "I did this to my mother."

Vera looked at her. "Wren-mother very strong."

"Oh yeah, she's scary strong."

The dark-haired cook turned her head. "Why Wren-friend still in Wren's mother? She not want leave?"

"Everyone asks me that. No one believes I just don't know how!"

Vera stared at her.

"Really."

The woman dropped her gaze.

"Honest."

The cook sighed. She looked around. "Wren's family have nice house. Vera has looked around. Wren look for place to sleep like lady Desiray say, yes?"

How did she know about that? She sighed, why did she bother to ask silly questions? That look in Vera's eyes stung her. It was disappointment. That was Vera's way of disagreeing; change the subject.

Wren sighed. "Do you know a good place to sleep?"

"I show."

She followed the G'yaki as she went up an adjacent hall and turned a corner. For someone who had been here less than a bell, she sure knew her way around.

Wren closed the gap between them. "Vera, do you really think I'm doing it on purpose?"

Vera focused on her with dark eyes. Her face so serene and calm. "Wren feel close to mother. Like being in mother again." She rubbed her abdomen. "When it time, baby never want come. It dark. It warm. It *safe*."

"Vera, I'm not an infant. I'm not in my mother's womb."

"When we sleep, we all infants here," Vera tapped her temple. She stopped at a door and opened it. Inside was a chamber not unlike the rooms back at Loric's citadel. It was bit larger with two large canopy beds instead of one. The wooden posts were some kind of dark hardwood carved into ornate shapes. The canopies and tassels were made of polished silk. The chairs, vanity, and wardrobe were all extremely fancy with intricate carvings and inlays.

Wren gestured Vera in ahead of her. The cook nodded and walked in. She found a sensor crystal and activated some magelights. Wren came in and closed the door and locked it.

She went and sat on the bed. The wood groaned and creaked and she sunk far down into the mattress. "Whoa."

"Wren-mother very heavy."

"Yes. She must need a special bed. That must be a bother." She looked up at Vera. "Does Desiray need a special bed?"

"She have," Vera confirmed. She pulled off her boots, hopped up on the other bed, and crossed her legs. She looked at Wren, her face unreadable.

"Vera, do you sleep? I've never seen you sleep."

The woman turned her head to one side. "Vera do." She frowned. "Not often. Sleeping not--" She paused, something unusual for her. "I not like."

"Do you have bad dreams?"

The woman stared at her for a moment then looked down. "Wren-friend, I not speak of these things. Not yet."

"Aren't we good enough friends?"

Vera frowned. "Wren good friend. Wren cares. Vera know." She swallowed and put a hand on her heart. "It Vera's weakness."

There was nothing weak about this woman. The only person able to hurt Vera was Vera. She understood the frustration that everyone in Loric's family felt, they all wanted to help. All those decades of training gave Vera a focus that Gaea herself couldn't sway. She accepted nothing but perfection in herself, and she had made a life choice that--to her--was a mistake. Wren had learned enough to know that for a G'Yaki grand master, mistakes were not tolerated--or forgiven. If only she could forgive herself. This woman's simple words and tremendous patience had saved her life over and over. She would never give up trying to help Vera find respect for herself again.

"Vera, I owe you my life. If ever there is anything I can do for you--no matter what. I'll be there for you. Okay?"

For the first time, the little woman did not demur or look away, she only nodded.

Wren looked at the bed with the frilly lace pillows. She *was* tired. She just didn't see how she could sleep. She was in this alien body...

She realized that it really *didn't* feel alien. It felt comfortable. She wasn't used to it--but it felt natural--it felt *good*. She looked at her hand. It wasn't her hand but she admired it--the way she admired her mother.

Damn, she had to get out of this body soon. Like Desiray, Euriel healed amazingly fast. The incredible strain of the battle, channeling enough energy to split a continent in half and it only *weakened* her. She would soon be at full strength and fully synchronized again. Remembering how it was to be combined with Desiray, she realized that she really needed to do the transfer before then. It would be like eating Vera's apple pie--you just couldn't make yourself stop.

She should try to get herself out now, but she was simply too tired.

She pulled off her boots and unlaced the leather hauberk.

Vera rolled off the bed and padded over to the wardrobe. She looked inside and thumbed through the garments inside. She picked out something and brought it back to Wren. It was a man's nightshirt, and would drape to her knees. Of course, anything would be better than the blood splattered leather she was wearing.

Wren changed into the soft velvety fabric and smoothed it over her body. Damn, it just boggled her to imagine that she was born from this form. There was something horribly wrong about what she had done in her necessity, but somehow she knew submerged within this body her mother forgave her.

She sighed and looked up at Vera who had returned to her sitting position on the adjacent bed. "Do you think I should try again to get out, now?"

Vera shook her head. "Wren-friend rest some, then try."

"Are you going to stay?"

The G'yaki woman nodded. She went to the wall and turned down the magelights.

Wren sat back on the bed and lowered herself into blankets. She adjusted the pillows, let out a long breath, and relaxed her head into the softness.

Vera came and put a hand on her brow. "Wren-friend did good today. She save her family. Protect her friend. I happy my dancing help."

Though she anticipated not being able to sleep, she found just being able to take the weight off her feet and lay horizontal had her slipping away. She drew another deep breath.

"Vera?" she murmured.

"Mmmm?"

"I want to help you someday."

"You will," she responded. "Rest." She smoothed Wren's brow again.

It felt as if her breathing and the beating of her heart all seemed to drift into a tranquil stillness. The feelings of her body, smells, and taste all grew muted and distant...

* * *

Wren became aware of a soft blue glow around her. She felt strange as if she were floating in thick syrup. It didn't feel as if she had any arms or legs, or any kind of body at all. Around her, colorful threads seemed to sweep and dive.

<Daughter, what are you doing?> Gaea's deep tranquil voice rolled through her essence.

Even in this strange state she could find enough energy to be annoyed. <Not you too?!> She paused. <I swear I'm not doing it on purpose.>

<Do you know you scared about ten eons off my lifespan?>

<If there was another way to stop Hecate, I'd sure like to know what it was. I knew you'd be unhappy if I killed her.>

<I said that you scared me, not that you didn't do a good job. I feel your concern for Ziedra. I'm sorry.>

<The poison worked too fast. I couldn't stop it quickly enough. She may not be a savant anymore.>

<I know.>

<Is it my fault I can't get out of my mother's body?>

<Alphas and betas were designed to blend. It's comfortable. It's part of the mechanism. She's your birthmother. You feel safe with her.>

<But by staying this way, I deny her life.>

<True.>

<We seem to be talking more often now.>

<You've grown a lot.>

<Did you and Damay talk like this?>

<We talked, but Damay's relationship with me is different from yours.>

<She was crushed you know. She didn't think you were proud of her.>

<I know. Everyone has to grow up some time.>

<I never imagined it would be me setting her straight.>

<I had faith.>

<I'm still mad about the milk thing, you know.>

<You'll forgive me.>

<That's not fair.>

<Few things in life are.>

<That's my line.>

<It's a good one.>

She paused.

<I can get back in my body can't I?>

<You've done harder things.>

<You're awfully brief with me. Are you upset?>

<I save the pontificating for when we're in person.>

<What about Ziedra?>

<I have faith.>

<In me?>

There was a pause while the threads whirled around her in silence.

<In your love.>

<I love you, Mother.>
<And I you, Daughter. Enjoy your family.>

* * *

Wren opened her eyes feeling different. She raised her arm. She was still in her mother's body. She took a deeper breath feeling and tasting the candy sweet inrush of magic and life force. Damn that felt good. Hades, this was bad. She healed even faster than she thought she would. In fact, all this energy was speeding everything up. She felt dizzy.

She sat up feeling strong and light. Her body no longer felt ponderous and slow. She swung her feet out of the bed.

Vera sat in the middle of the other bed, head down, hands in her lap, and legs twisted up in that strange meditating position. The G'yaki did not move.

She noticed that Vera had brought her a new slip and a sleeveless white velvet shift with gold stitching, designed to play down Euriel's wide shoulders and broad hips. There was gold sash, some pale hose, and some low flat shoes. She ran her hand across the items. Damn Vera was good, these were obviously Euriel's favorites. They had a soft lived-in feel to them.

Wren slipped out of the nightshirt, and pulled the slip on over her head. She winced. She was tingling all over. She swallowed. Damn, this was going to make it hard. She looked up to the ceiling. *Gaea, you rat, you always like to test me don't you?* She settled the shift onto her body, pulled on the hose and shoes. She rose slowly.

She held out her hands. She felt so light, like she would float away. Both times when she had been combined with Desiray, she'd been in the middle of a crisis, weighed down with a threat of death and violence. It was so different to wake up like this. Imagine waking up like this every day.

Wren gritted her teeth. That was exactly the kind of thought she needed to avoid.

Vera sighed. She unfolded her legs and looked up at Wren. The little woman smiled. "You talk with Mother?"

She blinked. "Uh, yes."

"Good. Your mother wise."

Wren narrowed her eyes. "Which one?"

The dark-haired woman grinned and there was a glint in her eye. "All of them."

She shook her head. "Some day I'm going to figure out how you do that."

The little woman nodded, face serious. "Vera wait." She hopped off the bed and slipped her feet into her boots. "We go?"

Wren nodded.

They went back into the hall, and Wren retraced her steps back toward the infirmary. As she walked, she caught herself sighing two or three times. Being a completed savant sure was a fine feeling. She didn't need her mother's body to feel it though. Aarlen had offered to give her a body like this--provided she joined her of course.

As she turned a corner, she saw a towering figure with platinum-white hair, and wearing a cloak of feathers standing in the hall. Aarlen, what a coincidence, think of her and there she was.

The tall elder turned as she approached. She wore a shimmering black blouse of silk and leg-hugging pants of the same material. Necklaces, broaches, pins, belts and other items sparkled and flashed against the shiny fabric. The woman trained silver eyes on Wren, her dark-painted lips pulled into a smile.

She stopped in front of her. "Greetings, Magestrix. I hope you've been in to help your niece."

Aarlen raised an eyebrow. "I have been in to see her. Thank you for saving her life."

"She's my best friend, that's what friends do."

The woman nodded. "I have been into your city. I never knew this place existed. It is spectacular. You have a home to be proud of."

"Thank you. I also have a contract I don't need to sign. I beat you to the anchor stone, and you didn't lift a finger to defeat Hecate."

Aarlen frowned. "You should work for me anyway."

"You don't need me, you have Ziedra."

The woman narrowed silver eyes. "She's good, but you're better--provided that you get back to normal. I checked on your body, it was pretty torn up, I made sure Cassandra took care of you." She paused and turned her head. "That reminds me. Both you and Ziedra were wearing the same Frielos earrings. Where did you get those?"

"They're very nice. A fence here in town gave them to us when Ziedra threatened to bring you over to his shop for a visit."

Aarlen folded her arms and the corner of her mouth quirked up. "So, what is this with being in your mother's body?"

"I'm going to get out of it now," she glanced to Vera who looked up at her.

"Ah," Aarlen responded. "That's quite an aura you have."

"It feels pretty fabulous. Starholme put this body in sync with my Nola, so I'm 'be'ing at full power. So, can you help Ziedra? Dorian told me that without a proper template she might never work magic again."

Aarlen nodded. "That's true. I'm wondering what her template material is worth."

Wren felt her heart speed up. "Worth? She's your niece, it's not *worth* anything." Her hands clenched and subconsciously she pulled power to herself. Her hands began to glow. "You better not be trifling with me. Now, would be a really bad time."

The silver-eyed elder looked down at Wren's hands. "Yes, I'm thinking I agree. You're not even pushing your power right now are you?"

She shook her head. "Just scratching the surface. Aarlen, I don't want to fight with you. Like I said, I will be more than happy to sign a non-aggression pact. I can probably persuade my mother to sign as well. Our families can be allies. Don't forget who my grand-mother is."

"Your parents run this city as well."

"They sure do."

"All right, you've convinced me. I will have the appropriate papers drawn up."

"What about Ziedra?"

Aarlen stared at her.

Damn this woman. Threatening her did absolutely no good. She wasn't afraid of anything. She couldn't even be threatened with a conscience--it had already been done to her! The only way to deal with Aarlen was to offer her something she didn't already have. Problem was she already had *everything*.

What did Aarlen value? Power. She couldn't give her that. It wasn't actually power though was it? She liked to make people squirm. Like right now, the witch. In the game, Beia had said Aarlen really enjoyed the striving of the players. She enjoyed drama, she liked to see people strive and struggle. That was it. She did have something to bargain with, something worth a lot to Ice Falcon.

"Aarlen, if you help Zee, I can make it worth your while."

The white-haired woman raised an eye-brow. "You'll work for me?"

She shook her head. "No, but I have something you'll really like."

The woman dipped her head. "Go on."

"I have two things. I have Hecate's confession on memstone *and* I can provide a very vivid and recordable record of the battle." She leaned close. "Severely highlight worthy stuff."

The elder stared at her for a moment. She drew a breath and leaned back. "Can you now?" Wren saw visions of gold flashing in the woman's silver eyes.

Hooked.

"Honest, you just help Ziedra. You can watch Hecate grovel and kiss boot leather."

Aarlen closed her eyes. "Mmmm." She smacked her lips. "You mean an actual visual record of Hecate being defeated?"

Wren nodded. "Complete with sounds, smells, blood and gore."

The corners of the woman's mouth twitched. A grin spread across her face and a glint came into her eyes. She was practically salivating. "Damn this will piss her off." She pumped her fist. "Oh yes." She looked at Wren, brow furrowing and lips pursing. "Good quality?"

"Amazing. Just like being there."

Aarlen brightened, her evil smile in full blossom. "All right, deal."

"You have some of Zee's blood don't you?"

The white-haired woman snorted. "The silly girl hangs around you. Of course I preserved something from her. I knew it was only a matter of time before you got her killed."

Wren frowned. *Witch*. "Thank you."

Aarlen raised her chin. "There is one other matter. A matter of a phoenix you promised."

She rocked back on her heels and sighed. "I'll make good on it. On my oath. Things need to be settled here first though."

"Your promise is good enough," Aarlen said with a smile. "I'm just reminding you of your responsibility, in case it slipped your mind in the excitement."

"You will have to get the key back from Gabriella."

"Yes," Aarlen made a sour face. "Silly girls. I taught them better than that. Ah well." She paused and held out her hand. "Deal?"

Wren looked at her hand. She took it. "Deal."

"I'll see to Ziedra right away."

Wren nodded to her.

Aarlen turned and strode off.

She drew a breath. She hoped Ziedra's ring still worked.

"Wren-friend not need to do that," Vera said. "Master Loric would make her help."

"She'd never admit to having the blood. This way Aarlen is happier, she'll cooperate more."

Vera frowned and nodded.

The two of them wandered back into the waiting area. She frowned. Someone had moved her body.

Cassin, Annawen, Cassandra, Cassandra's grandmother, and another gold lady Wren had not seen before were sitting in the waiting area. All five of them were dressed in the same skin-tight material like the symbiote Wren had worn once, the only difference being in the colors and patterns. The twins had on that red uniform she had seen on a couple of occasions. Cassandra wore a dark mottled blue, while her grandmother was in gray. The newcomer wore deep violet. Her hair was exceptionally long, the strands glittering and gleaming.

Wren felt a little pang in her chest. This new person reminded her a lot of Gaea, except her skin was gold. Unlike the other four, the woman's eyes were not black, they glowed with a soft green radiance.

"Ah," Cassandra said. "There she is."

Wren nodded to them.

Vera went and bowed over Cassandra's hand, and did the same with the Dame, and the new woman. The elder goldskins seemed delighted at this. Vera went to an unoccupied couch, sat down and pulled her legs up into that meditating position.

"Expressing pleasure at our intersection Sara Wren," Dame Techstar said with a nod. "Demonstrating courtesy, Sara, this personage," She gestured to the female next to her. "Is our most exceptional colleague Dama-prime Marna Solaris."

She bowed. "Milady."

"Hello, Wren, Dominique has told me many things about you," Marna said in a clear voice that made the skin tingle. The way she spoke, it sounded like music. "I recently saw a recording of Aarlen's game and was truly impressed."

This lady talked nothing like Dame Techstar. In fact, her voice was mesmerizing. The accent made her ears tingle. With her powers 'be'ing so strongly right now, she could see the shielded energies flicking through this person's body. The refinement and sophistication again reminded her of Gaea--or someone as ancient as Gaea. That wasn't possible though. She had to be mistaken in that assessment.

"Thank you. Welcome to our home, I hope the servants have been making everyone comfortable."

"You are too gracious. They have indeed."

"Pardon me, Milady," she looked around at the five of them together. "Is there something wrong?"

"Sara Wren, Dama-prime and ourselves made journey here to enjoin your knowledge of the first race."

"The First-ones?"

"Yes," Marna agreed. "We asked Cassandra, but she deferred to your experience."

"Me? What do I know?"

Marna's glowing green eyes narrowed. "We were under the impression that you had some familiarity with the instrumentality created by the First-ones."

Wren looked to Cassandra. "You told them that?"

The mage winced. "She's my grandmother."

"Ah. Well. This is not a really good time... I'm not exactly myself and we have a rather important--*guest*--coming soon." She leaned forward staring hard at Cassandra. "And I seem to have *misplaced* my real body."

"I had to do some work on it," Cassandra said. "You know, the warranty does not cover abuse like those huge spikes of backlash, even after the upgrade you got."

She shrugged. "Just as long as I can get back into it." She paused. "How's Ziedra?"

Cassandra rubbed the side of her face looking uncomfortable. "She's out of immediate danger." She swallowed. "But she was even more chewed up than you. She's crippled..." She paused. "And other things."

"Aarlen saved some of her blood. I talked her into sharing."

"Really," Cassandra brightened. "That's fabulous Wren." She paused and frowned. "What did you have to give the witch--your soul?"

"No." She smiled. "Hecate's."

"Hmmm?" Cassandra raised an eyebrow. "What did you do?"

She put hands on hips. "Can this wait? I apologize for being rude, but I'm in a bit of pinch. I'm not supposed to be in this body--and--I--*really*--need to get out of it before I just can't make myself."

The mage raised an eyebrow. "You are rather powered up. Are you okay?"

"I feel *fantastic*." She responded. "Wrong feeling, wrong sentiment. Where's my body?"

Cassandra rose. "I'll take you to it."

Wren looked to Marna. "I sense this is important. Can I plead your forbearance?"

"Of course," Marna said with a dip of her head. The glow in her green eyes brightened. "You are in the middle of a family crisis. We understand completely. We have some rather advanced tools for healing. It sounds as if your friend could benefit from some experience. On my world I am quite proficient in medical matters. Would you permit me to assist?"

She looked to Cassandra.

The mage's eyes were wide. She nodded vigorously.

"That's very gracious of you," Wren answered. "Please, that would help a lot. My friend is very dear to me."

Marna dipped her head. "Very well then. I will get my things and attend to it immediately." She put a hand on Dame Techstar's shoulder and nodded to Cassandra, Cassin and Annawen. She looked back to Wren, smiled, and vanished in flash of blue color.

Wren's eyes widened. "Whoa, she can go through the etherlock?"

Cassandra nodded.

She sensed the woman was powerful, she guessed that was a confirmation. So far the only creature able to get through the etherlock had been Hecate.

Cassandra rose and nodded to her grandmother. "Dama, I'll be right back."

The elder goldskin nodded to her.

Vera hopped up from the couch.

Wren followed Cassandra as the mage went back out into the hall and turned a different direction. Vera padded silently after her.

She sped up to walk at Cassandra's shoulder. "That new lady is someone really major isn't she?"

Cassandra didn't look over. "She's the mother of the Kriar race."

"Kriar? You mean the goldskins? Well, that's my name for you."

Cassandra grinned. "Yes, the mother of the goldskins. The proper name is Kriar."

"Whoa." Amazement making her heart rush. "Mother, you mean like Gaea was to the First-ones?"

"Exactly like that."

"Damn, I looked at her and knew..." She drew a breath and shuddered.

Cassandra opened a door into a small suite with nothing other than a low flat bed and a large comfortable looking couch, with a single occupant--Damay. The elder wore a blue shift, her dark hair tied in a tail. She reclined on her side reading a book. She looked up as they entered.

Wren's body lay on the bed, its skin still giving off a yellowish glow. Her clothes had been changed to a green shift. It appeared all of her scratches, cuts, and bruises had been healed.

Damay put a mark in the book, closed it and sat up. When her gaze fixed on Wren, her eyes widened. "My word, Child, every time I see you, your 'be'ing is stronger."

She let out a breath. "I'm 'be'ing too strong, it's making me dizzy. I think I synchronized my mother too well. There's no limiter at all. Magic and force are just bleeding into me." She turned her head. "You seem in a better mood. You were a grouch earlier."

The elder frowned and rubbed the back of her neck. "I had a terrible head ache."

She smiled. "So did I." She looked over at her body. "Damn, I am never going to be able to look at my mother again without severe envy." She turned to Cassandra. "Can I do this through that preserving spell?"

"Let me remove it," the mage said. She stepped over to Wren's body and touched its forehead. The glow around Wren's body withdrew.

Wren swallowed. "All right, you two tao experts, what's the best way for me to do this?"

Damay glanced at Vera. Vera returned her look.

"It's easiest with physical contact of course," Damay said. "Why not sit on the floor next to the bed. Bring your body's hand to your forehead."

Wren moved forward and situated herself next to the bed. She reached out and touched the hand of her body. For a long moment she held the fingers of that body in her hand. It seemed so fragile. It wasn't just her intellect that preferred Euriel's body- it was her tao itself.

Tough. Not everybody gets what they want. Life is like that sometimes. She drew a breath and pulled the warm flesh of her body against her forehead and closed her eyes. She detected hints of some kind of fruity scent in the soap that had been used to wash her body. She wondered who had done that. It sent a twinge of unease through her. Anything could have gone on while she wasn't minding her body. She had to stop distracting herself and focus.

She no longer had Gaea's combining to focus through, no direct tie between herself and her mother like before. As she had been telling everyone, she didn't see a path. Damay, Vera, Dorian, Gaea, they all seemed to think it was obvious. Well, she was terrible at obvious things. Obvious would be she didn't need a path.

Okay. No path. Then how did she guide herself? She reached out with a hand and touched the chest of her body. With her savant senses, she felt the steady slow rhythm of that far off heart. That would be her beacon.

Hades, she really wasn't looking forward to this. She was going to feel so damned inferior. Wren growled at herself, stop complaining, shut up and do it.

"Are you okay?" Cassandra asked.

"Letting go, is--rough."

"Do you need a push?" Damay asked. "You swore last night that you didn't know how."

"I still don't, but that never stopped me before. I'm going to do this myself."

She forgot about her body and just focused down into Euriel. *Mother, you have to be in here someplace. Help me. Want your body back. Want to be.*

Wren turned the incredible 'be'ing of her body on herself, shining light all through herself.

Wake up, Mother. It's your turn to 'be'. Push. Put me in my place. Come on. You have to be mad at me for almost getting both of us killed. Angry for sparing Hecate. At least a little annoyed for destroying your tower.

She listened with all her nola and heard only silence.

Mother, what will your mother say? Come on, do not leave me in that predicament. Mother, I love you. I can't love you, if you won't come out. You aren't hiding are you?

Wren continued probing the darkness of Euriel's psyche. Her mother's memories, her *self*, couldn't have just vanished.

Stop hiding, damn you.

She pulled on her energies, making the light within herself continually brighter. After what seemed a long time, she finally sensed something back in a corner flinch away. There. She *was* hiding.

Come here, You.

In the same way Wren's physical body looked and felt fragile, her mother's spirit seemed terribly small and vulnerable. Wren's tao had flooded into Euriel and blocked out everything, and like a flower denied light Euriel's spirit had grown steadily weaker. Wren's drawing on Starholme's power had only made it worse, increasing her strength and diminishing Euriel's.

I'm sorry.

She wrapped herself around her mother's spirit again, warming, soothing, and willing Gaea's light and strength into it. It didn't respond but she persisted anyway, coaxing with her love and appreciation, nurturing with the potency of her tao.

The strength of Euriel's spirit began to grow.

She continued to pour the strength of her tao and the forces of her 'be'ing into Euriel's essence, urging, guiding, *insisting*.

Take back your body--become your self again.

How strong was an immort's spirit *supposed* to be? She didn't know, but Euriel's needed to be potent enough to push her out. Otherwise, there was simply no way her tao would let go of this body.

Wren felt Euriel's consciousness begin to kick, parts of her memories and personality coming alive.

Come on, grow, be.

Focused inward, Wren didn't have much awareness of what was going on around her. An outer part of herself began to perceive how much power they were channeling. Euriel's body was growing hot, her heart racing and her breaths were coming in gasps. Two powerful spirits were wrestling in her flesh.

Kick me out, you can do it. Fight. It's what an Aesir does. Come on, you can beat your daughter. I'm not that powerful. She fed more spirit-force into Euriel, then shoved her. *Come on, weakling.*

The draw on Gaea's essence was constant now. *Drink up, Mother. Fight me.* She shoved again.

This time Euriel pushed back. It was tentative though, and half-hearted. *Oh please, where's the arse-admonishing great warrior?*

I'm going to keep force-feeding you spirit energy until either you explode or you fight me. What's the matter with you? You probably never turned from a fight in your life.

Like a scholar's-hostel bully she continued to shove and taunt Euriel, all the while feeding her every bit biophase and spirit-essence she could attract to herself.

Stop it! That hurts! Wren felt a hard retaliatory shove.

There you are. Really? It hurts? What about if I do this instead?

** Shove. **

Euriel snarled. This time the thrust slammed into Wren, sending a shriek of pain through her essence. Ow. Well, she knew it would get rough eventually.

You call that a push? This is a push. She slammed Euriel back.

Her mother's essence reeled back, still flourishing, growing denser and harder in the constant influx of Gaea's light.

Wren felt the anger swell, felt that warrior spirit find its center. She tried not to brace, but part of her did anyway when Euriel smashed into her, pushing and hammering.

Get out.

Make me.

As strong as she had made Euriel, her mother was still struggling. Though she had been focused on boosting her mother's spirit, her own greedy tao had been soaking up the left-over energy and it's potential to grow was enormous.

Come on, Mother. You have to have a stronger affinity for this body than me.

They wrestled, but each time Wren managed to repel her. Euriel's strength seemed to have peaked, no matter how much spirit essence she poured into her.

Wren let go of the energy, she was just swaying the odds in her favor now.

Euriel was still furiously trying to shove her out, but not getting anywhere.

For a few beats in time, as she weathered her mother's assault, she realized that she had lost track of the goal. Her mother didn't need to be able to overpower her, just push her out.

Let go, Silly.

She focused to do just that. But, I don't *want* to let go. Damn it. This is her body. Let her *have* it. We can get another body... one that doesn't belong to somebody *else*. **No**. Why am I arguing with myself? Do what I tell you. Let *go*.

That quiet voice deep down in Wren growled. **No**. Look you. You might be my Nola, but I can live without you. **No you can't**. Yes, I can. I will if you force me. Let *GO!*

With a burst of resentment, that other part of her let go.

Suddenly, Euriel was having much more success. Spurred on by apparent victory she began shoving even harder. The sudden lost ground made Wren reflexively grab hold again.

She searched around for her heartbeat, hanging on all the while her mother slammed and battered at her. She found her heart, focused herself, and let go again.

This time it was like being ejected from a doorway, the boot firmly applying thrust to her backside. She heard the door crash shut behind her. *Get out, and stay out*.

She planned to.

Wren found herself in the cold, without a body. How very strange. She looked around. She could see the room with her body on the bed, Euriel at the bedside. Her mother was glowing like a beacon, the floor, couch and linens all scorched. Vera, Damay, and Cassandra, and now Dame Techstar, and Cassin and Annawen were all watching her from several steps back.

This isn't right.

She looked at herself. She had a form of sorts, like a chalk outline, and she was floating above her body. She felt strange. There were sensations but they were muted and distant.

Euriel had begun shaking her head and drawing a breath. Good. At least *that* part worked.

Damay stared straight at her. "Well?"

She focused on the elder savant, and drifted toward her. She noticed this state was like flying. She could rise and move by willing it. <Well what?>

The elder savant put hands on hips. "Get back in your body."

<Uh, *how*?>

Cassandra let out a giggle. It was a hysterical sound. She held her hands close to her chest. "How is she doing that?"

Vera was smiling. "Wren's tao strong."

"Autonomous life spark," Dame Techstar marveled.

"That's a pretty wizard trick," Cassin remarked.

With a final shake of her head, Euriel opened her eyes and looked around. "What's--" Her gaze fixed on Wren's essence floating over her. Her voice took on an awestruck tone. "Going on?"

<Hello, Mother. Are you okay?>

"I--" She turned her head. "Am I okay? What's the matter with you?!"

Wren looked around herself and glanced at Damay. This was a really strange state to be in. Odd that she didn't feel more uncomfortable. She felt free, not burdened by

anything. She realized that there was the barest perceptible tugging back toward her body, as though she were a kite at the end of long string.

<I guess when we were wrestling, you booted me pretty hard. I missed my body.>

"Wrestling?" Damay said. "What were you doing in there, Wren?"

<I needed Mother's help to get out. She wasn't strong enough. So I boosted her up on spirit energy until she was strong enough to kick me out.>

"That's what she was doing," Cassandra breathed. "I thought she was going to burn down the mansion!"

Euriel looked around. "Wren, who are these other strange people. How did I get here?"

<That's a bit complicated, Mother.>

"I'm not surprised. Nothing with you is ever simple."

<Never,> Wren agreed.

"You beat Hecate," Damay offered.

"I--I gathered that." She looked down at her clothing. "This is all so strange. I remember sleeping. It was dark and comfortable, and I felt warm. Then somebody started pulling and pushing on me."

Wren waved.

Euriel looked up at her with a frown. "They kept pushing until it made me mad. They were so much more powerful... but I kept getting stronger..."

<Do you feel okay, Mother? Did I hurt you? That was a lot of power.>

"No. I feel--" She opened and closed her hands. Euriel pushed herself to her feet. She drew a breath and her whole body seemed to light up. "Whoa, I feel splendid."

<Good, as long as you're okay.>

"What about you?"

Wren looked around again. She flitted around the room. She moved toward Vera. She reached out and touched the G'yaki's shoulder. There was a faint crackling as her hand passed through her friend.

The G'yaki looked down, and back up. "Is Wren having fun?"

Cassandra's brow furrowed. "Can you feel it?"

Vera nodded.

The mage reached out tentatively. Cassandra's hand passed through the arm of Wren's tao-body making it feel as though a breeze were blowing across her skin. The mage drew her hand back, obviously fascinated, rubbing her fingers together. "I heard savants could do this, but I never quite believed it."

"Checha," Cassandra's grandmother said. "Expressing recognition of this phenomena. Informing called self-animate psyche-force. Relating that Kriar have encountered races possessing a similar trait."

"No wonder they can be such powerful mages and manipulate such tremendous energy. Her tao must be thousands of times more dense than a human spirit."

"Even in this state, savants can affect the physical when they wish," Damay said.

"Baby?" Euriel reached out delicately and touched her.

Wren moved toward her mother. There was a crackling as her tao-form moved around her arm. It felt good. She could feel her mother inside her.

"I can feel you," Her mother said in wonder.

<I can feel you too. It's nice.>

Damay frowned. "Wren, I know this is new and interesting, but you really have spent a long time outside of your body. You should return to it."

<Okay, and like *how*?>

"You should feel a tugging, very faint, like a thread attached to your back."

<Hey, I do.>

"Follow that thread back. You will find a kind of connection. You push into that, and for lack of a better words--turn yourself inside out."

<Like we did to etherlock ourselves.>

"Very much like that."

If she had lungs to breathe with she would have sucked a breath. She did as Damay said, following that tentative pull back to her body. As the elder instructed there was indeed a kind of connection, much like what she shared with her mother and Ziedra in the combining.

Gathering her strength she pushed into it, feeling herself grow steadily heavier. Once through she did as she had done with her mother, threading her essence all around and through her body.

She felt a sharp twisting sensation, then seemed to fall into a sea of blackness. Without a perceptible pause she was pushing up through layers cotton, hearing sounds, and feeling hot.

Wren blinked her eyes. Her heart rushed and her breath caught. She had a body again.

Euriel leaned down, broad face smiling, and pressed a warm hand against her cheek.

She pressed her face against Euriel's palm. "Hi. Guess I'm home."

It's fortunate to wake up. It's nice to be alive, and better yet to not be crippled. It is a great gift to have friends with you, and simply extraordinary to feel their love.

--Ziedra Skyedoom

Chapter 74

Recuperation

It took a little while for Wren to be stable on her feet again. After being in Euriel's body, she felt so puny and weak, even though she knew that wasn't the case. Vera's training had made her strong in ways she never imagined back in her days in the guild. Even so, she still had a long way to go. She introduced her mother to Cassandra, Cassin, Annawen, Vera, and Dame Techstar, and explained about the Felspar army that had repelled all of Hethanon and Mishaka's creatures.

"So, your daughter has been keeping life interesting for us," Cassandra was saying as they walked down the hall back toward the infirmary.

Euriel was holding Wren's hand. She looked into Wren's eyes and gave it a squeeze. "I thank you for watching over Liandra, and assisting us in our need."

Cassandra put her hands behind her back. "Actually, we have learned quite a bit from her."

Wren's mother came to an abrupt stop in the hallway. She let go of Wren's hand and turned to Cassandra. "It just occurred to me. When I probed her memories--you--" Her voice hardened. "You're the one who tried to send her against Hethanon by herself."

This sudden change in Euriel caught Cassandra flat footed. She back-pedaled. "I--" She gritted her teeth. "It was a *mistake* on my part."

Euriel glared at her hands balling into fists. "Damn right it was."

Vera stepped in front of Cassandra. The little woman did not raise her hands, but Wren knew she was ready.

She gripped her mother's shoulder, trying to pull her back. "Shhh, Mother, it's okay."

"No, it is *not* okay. I wonder if she would feel any different if I had done that to one of *her* children."

Cassandra's face hardened, her starry eyes narrowed. She bowed her head. "No, you are correct, I would be incensed. I--I apologize; it should not have been done. I have tried to make amends since."

Euriel drew a breath, visibly cooling. "If not for what your family means to Liandra, and what you have done for her, I would not accept your apology." Her chin dipped. "I trust there will never be a repeat."

The gold mage swallowed. She obviously knew the level of opponent standing across the hall from her. "You have my utmost assurances."

"Good. Then we can be friends." She held out her hand and smiled.

Cassandra blinked at Euriel's sudden change in demeanor.

Vera too seemed caught by surprise. She stepped out of the way.

It took Cassandra only a moment to get over her shock. She stepped forward and took Euriel's hand. "Friends."

"A good friend to have," Damay said to Cassandra.

"Think I don't know?" Cassandra said with a smile. "Finally someone who can make Wren behave."

As they entered the waiting area of the infirmary, they began catching the sounds of a confrontation and voices rising to violence. Cassandra's eyes widened and she picked up the pace, hurrying across the room to the door.

The arguers were Aarlen and Loric, their voices not so much loud as penetrating. Great elder will-force was making the stones of the mansion tremble.

"--cannot make decisions like this concerning my niece," Aarlen snarled.

"Lady Frielos," Loric growled. "Your *niece* has been in a sad state for quite a number of bells, with a nary a bit of interest or assistance on your part. To feign concern now, is--" The ground shook from a heavy foot stomp. "*Bah!* Just get out."

They went through the door, and up a short hall into a large operating theatre. The chamber was a well-appointed treatment area much like the one at the temple of Meliekki with cabinets for curatives and tools along one wall. There were eight broad bottom daises with drawers and other apparatus built into them. At the front of the room were large granite basins filled with water, sinks, and benches. Ziedra, with blankets pulled over her lay on the nearest of operating beds. The skin of her pale face had a gold sheen to it. Apparently, she was in that magical timeless state as had been done with Wren's body.

As they stepped completely into the room, it became apparent the argument was three ways and not two. Aarlen stood with her back to the entrance. Loric stood between her and Ziedra's bed. The Kriar Dama-prime Marna stood midpoint between them, arms folded.

"I will not get out," Aarlen rumbled.

Not slow to jump into something. Euriel snorted and marched to a position opposite Marna so she could eye both Loric and Aarlen.

"Excuse me," she said hands on hips. "I think I shall take this opportunity to step in here. This is my house." She focused a hard look at Loric. "*/* say who comes or goes." She turned to Aarlen. "Ziedra is not a territory you can dispute with violence-- especially in *my* home."

Aarlen pointed a finger at Euriel. "You--"

Wren stepped forward and took a position next to her mother arms folded. Cassandra, the twins and Dame Techstar filed through to stand with Marna. Bringing up the rear, Damay and Vera took a position with Wren.

The silver-eyed elder gritted her teeth. She glared at Wren. "Is my assistance not good enough for you, that you enlist *their* help?" She gestured to Marna.

Wren looked at Dame Techstar and Marna. Even though she was no longer 'be'ing with the strength she had while in her mother's body, her nola perceptions were significantly broader now. She could feel and sense Marna. The ancient Kriar's mind possessed a power that exerted force on the environment itself. Even Hecate and her avatars did not have such strength of will. As she looked at the placid expressions of Dame Techstar and Marna, she felt absolutely nothing negative from them.

She looked up at Aarlen. "Magestrix, Dama-prime Marna offered to assist out of *compassion*. I accepted on Ziedra's behalf because I have good instincts about people and feel that she can help. Since I've known Ziedra *longest*, I felt qualified to make such a decision concerning her welfare. So, specifically, what is your objection to lady Marna's participation? Is it that her skills are not sufficient?"

At the last of Wren's words, Marna raised her chin and gave Aarlen a direct stare. Wren knew then that the two of them obviously knew one another and had some negative history.

"Feh," Aarlen made a disgusted sound, shaking her head and returning Marna's stare. "Be off with those superior airs." She focused on Wren. "These outlanders should not be involved."

Euriel eyed everyone. "I would like introductions in a moment, so I know for certain who I am dealing with. Magestrix, I believe my daughter asked a pertinent question. What is your actual objection? Can Lady... Marna was it, assist Ziedra or not?"

Aarlen growled. "Her capabilities are not the issue. The Kriar should not be involved."

"Why?"

The white-haired elder rolled her eyes. "Because." She stared at Marna. "They do *not* belong here. They are not born from Eternity."

Not born from Eternity. What did she mean? The Kriar were from outside of Gaea? She looked at Marna. She did sense something incredibly ancient about her. Cassandra said she was the mother of the Kriar race. She wasn't even sure if that made sense.

Damay raised an eyebrow.

Cassandra sighed.

Dame Techstar and Marna merely blinked, their expressions neutral.

Loric folded his arms.

Vera leaned against the wall, dark eyes intent.

Euriel looked around at the host of responses to this statement. "Magestrix you seem to be the only person present who cares."

"That's because they're fools," Aarlen growled.

Loric frowned and took a step forward. "I've had enough from you."

Euriel held up her hand. "*Sir*." It was said in a warning tone.

Loric stopped.

"Excellency," Marna said in her soothing tones. "My apologies. It was never my intention to be a source of conflict." She pressed her golden hands together, beautiful jewelry flashing on her fingers. "As is evident, Magestrix Frielos and I differ in certain *philosophies*. She is concerned about the motives of my people." She nodded to Dame Techstar. "Aarlen *assumes* that if our agendas are not understood by her that they must be sinister in nature."

In her typical straightforward fashion Wren's mother asked, "So, are your agendas sinister?"

The corner of Marna's mouth quirked. Many people would have been put off by Euriel's directness. The gold woman seemed to like it. "I assure you, our only desire as a people is to live peacefully and prosper."

"Knowing Magestrix Frielos' history," Euriel remarked. "I could see why such a desire would seem alien to her."

Aarlen scowled at her.

Euriel ignored her. She turned to Loric and held out her hand. "Sir?"

Loric stepped forward and bowed over her hand. "Loric Felspar, your Excellency." He gestured to Cassandra. "You've met my first wife, Cassandra. Somewhere hereabouts is my second wife, Desiray."

"Here," Desiray dressed in one her skin-tight blue workout outfits waved from the doorway. "I felt the walls shaking and thought I should investigate." She came in, briefly touching Vera's arm and putting a hand on Wren's shoulder. She noticed Marna, raised an eyebrow, and waved. "Oh, hello Marna."

The Dama-prime nodded to Desiray with a smile.

Euriel raised her chin, noting the exchange. "Ah, Wren's surrogate mother, I hope we can speak when we're at our leisure."

The room was already starting to fill up. It was at that time Sindra and Drucilla, both dressed in deep black wraps decided to appear. At first, Wren feared they were going to take sides. Instead each twin wordlessly went to their mate. The two took up

positions behind Cassin and Annawen. Brilliant red outfits silhouetted against the huge shadowy bodies of their counterparts.

Aarlen frowned at them. Apparently their appearance was more of a side-taking than Wren realized. She knew the twins were selfish and greedy, but she felt pretty certain that they would never obstruct Ziedra getting better.

The white-haired woman brushed back her hair. She glared at Marna and then focused on Euriel and Loric. "You would do best not to accept their help. The savants and First-ones are something unique and close to Eternity. They are not a topic for Kriar research." She pulled a vial from her pocket and tossed it to Loric who caught it. "Just make sure the restoration is done properly." She turned in a rustle of feathers and stormed out.

Euriel looked after her with a frown. "What a thoroughly unpleasant woman."

"Mother's not having a good day," Sindra said from where she stood with her arms around Cassin.

"Lord Loric, perhaps you can explain what Aarlen was ranting about?" Euriel asked.

"I think I can explain it," Cassandra said. She drew a breath, focusing briefly on Dame Techstar and Marna. "The Kriar are--librarians of a sort--they have moved through the universes compiling information. Aarlen feels rather strongly that no more power should be concentrated in their hands."

Euriel's brow furrowed. "Universes? Do you mean dimensions?"

Cassandra glanced again to the elder Kriar. "Beyond time, beyond the boundaries of Eternity itself. Marna's people are very old. In the distant past, there was a *disagreement* between the Kriar and the Protectorate... that has since been rectified. At any rate, you have probably seen the creations of the Kriar. The great henges of Olinar, Baltizaar, Grolin and Kevik... and others."

"I know of Grolin," Euriel said. "That place dates back to eons before even the Numinorians."

"Indeed," Loric said. "Though from the outside, the Kriar have been a part of Eternity for a very long time. It is Marna's position that by simple time of residency, that they have as much right to be here as any other race born in Eternity."

"Thus the great divergence in my philosophy with Aarlen's," Marna finished. "Among other things. She also tends to dislike things she cannot crush, influence, or control."

"This is all very well," Wren said. "We're talking when we should be helping Ziedra."

"Yes," Euriel said, turning to Ziedra. "Our family owes this one a great deal. Without her, our confrontation with Hecate's creatures would have gone much differently."

Wren went to her friend's bedside.

"Wren..." Cassandra warned. "You..."

She lifted the corner of the blanket. She stepped back with a gasp, and put a hand over her mouth, stomach twisting and heart thudding. "Oh Gaea."

Ziedra's beautiful arms and legs looked like nothing but desiccated husks, the veins and connecting tissue like swollen black cords running through dried meat.

Turning away, she closed her eyes and shuddered. "I should have killed that witch, Hecate. I should have made her so dead..."

Loric put a hand on her shoulder.

She got herself under control and looked over to Cassandra. "That's what happened to me, wasn't it?"

The woman nodded with a solemn expression.

Even that brief glimpse was enough to harden the faces of those who had yet to see the aftermath of Hecate's jikartandak poison.

She looked up at Loric. "You can heal her, right?"

He held up the vial of blood. "If this template checks out. I'm not certain I completely trust Aarlen not to do a little--*modification*."

"What do you mean?"

"Aarlen is clever." He glanced at Sindra and Drucilla. "Come in here, make a big noise, and toss the template at us. Just to distract us from checking it for controls."

"Controls?"

"A way to manipulate a person through their physical makeup."

Wren looked to Sindra and Drucilla, the two dark-haired elders had chosen that moment to be looking elsewhere. The same kind of controls she put in those two. The same kind Aarlen would put in her if she were foolish enough to agree.

"So, when it's okay, do you have everything you need to heal her?"

Loric turned to the Kriar. "It will be some time before we can assemble our own equipment to do the procedure. However, Lady Marna tells me she has portable devices that can be retrieved immediately; providing you don't mind some strange apparatus being set up in here."

"You have our leave to do so," Euriel said to Loric and Marna. "Ziedra is Wren's dear friend and I would not have her in torment an instant longer than necessary... regardless of Magestrix Frielos' reservations." She bowed to the Kriar woman. "I am Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha, Baroness of Cosmodarus and leader of the twelve armies. Let me officially welcome you and Dame Techstar to our city. I have heard you speak with both courtesy and aplomb, and I can do no less than respond in kind." She pressed her hands together and bowed her head.

Marna bowed deeply, her extremely long hair like a shimmering cloak. She pressed her hands together and rose slowly. "Your Excellency, we accept and value your hospitality, we will endeavor to be model and worthy guests."

"Well said, and well met," Euriel said with a nod. She looked to Loric. "As we have greeted our new Kriar friends, you and your kin are equally welcome. I know my daughter has already opened the doors to you, but allow me to make it official."

"Your Excellency," Loric bowed. "Only the breath of flowers is sweeter than your courtesy. If there is anything we may do to repay your hospitality, you have only to name it."

Euriel nodded to him with a smile.

Cassandra elbowed her husband. "Breath of flowers?" she whispered.

He grinned.

"There is one thing, Lord Loric," Euriel said.

"If I may."

"My husband and son. Were you caring for them as well?"

"I oversaw their care. Cassandra's sister wife, Dorian, has been handling their treatment. Their injuries were of a much different nature than Ziedra's, not life threatening, but definitely life affecting."

"Dorian told me that Mishaka had some nasty curse tied to her life-force," Wren told her mother. "Fortunately, I didn't kill her."

Euriel frowned. "You didn't?"

"Her punishment was very fitting in my estimation," Loric said. "If you will excuse me, Marna and I can prepare to treat Ziedra. Baroness, you will find your husband and son in the theatre at the end of the quad."

Wren put a hand on his arm. "Thank you."

"Of course, Wren, it's the least I can do after stirring things up and then leaving you alone to fight Hecate."

Wren nodded to Marna. "My thanks again."

Marna dipped her head her glowing blue eyes seeming to penetrate into her. "I sense how dear she is to you. I will take extra special care."

Wren pressed her hands together and dipped her head in a mimicking of the Kriar's gesture.

Marna returned it with a smile. "I look forward to our discussion after I have returned your friend to health."

"As do I." Wren went and put an arm around her mother. "Dorian is an amazing mage. She'll have taken good care of Father and Azir." She looked to Desiray. "Des, you want to come with?" She waved to Vera and Damay, and they came forward to follow.

The white-haired guild mistress put her elbow through Wren's other arm. "Sure." She leaned close. "By the way, when are we going to hear the story how you pulled this all off anyway?"

"I've actually given that some thought," Wren said, as they stepped into the hall. "When everybody is better, with my mother's permission, I'd like to do a story night. Then everyone can get to know each other and we can swap tales."

"Story night?" Euriel repeated.

"It's a ritual they do at Loric's house. We sit around the hearth and folks take turns telling stories about something they've done or seen." She sighed at the memory, it seemed a long time ago already. "Add some mulled wine, and Vera's hot sweetened milk and it's a great experience."

"Skalding," Euriel said.

Wren looked at her. "No, the milk isn't that hot."

Her mother laughed. "No that's our name for the ritual, 'skalding'. It is a very respected and time honored pastime among the Aesir and Vanir. Definitely, Wren, I would much like to do a skalding festival with our new friends. I think it's a great idea. Mother will wish to sit in as well."

Desiray looked at Euriel. "You know she's coming?"

"An avatar of Ukko was in the fight, Hecate's defeat would be shouted from the rooftops of every pantheon."

They opened the door to the theatre at the end of the hall. The chamber was identical to the one they had just left except that afternoon light streamed in through an open window, and a pleasant flowery scent filled the air. Wren's Father and Azir lay on two of the tables, both appeared to be sleeping. Dorian, Darin'kel, and Everia sat on a mattress on the floor. Darin was propped against the wall dozing. Backs against one another, knees up, Everia and her mother both had tomes in their laps and seemed completely absorbed in their literature.

"Guess there's no question where your girl gets her booksnoot," Wren said to Desiray with a grin.

Dorian looked up, from her book and pushed the spectacles she was wearing up on her nose. She saw Euriel and rose hastily, adjusting her surcoat, and coming to bow before them. "Your Excellency," she greeted, blinking her green eyes.

"Greetings," Euriel said uncertainly.

She looked toward Everia and then back to Dorian. "I was under the impression we were going to meet Dorian."

Wren smiled. "This is her, Lady Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku."

Euriel's brow furrowed as Dorian smiled at her. The dark-haired mage was taller than Wren's mother, but she looked barely into her teens. However, she was a little too well developed to pass for a teenager. "You look so young."

"Youth magic," Dorian shrugged. "What can you do? Cassandra says if I get any younger, she'll make me wear a diaper."

Euriel laughed.

Dorian turned back to Everia who had stood up behind her. "Wake up your lazy brother."

Everia bent down and shook Darin'kel. The young man blinked and roused. He stood up rubbing the back of his neck. Everia kicked him in the shin. He frowned, realized Euriel was standing there, and quickly bowed. "Your Excellency."

Euriel's eyes widened, and her head listed to one side.

She nudged her mother and whispered in her ear. "Pretty nice, isn't he?"

The Baroness nodded and sighed.

Dorian held out a hand to Euriel. "Please, your Excellency. Your husband and son are only sleeping. I've kept them asleep until your situation was resolved."

Euriel went to the bedside of her husband. She drew a breath, blue eyes round and face open. Her fingers went immediately to his brow tracing the now unblemished flesh, brushing away strands of his reddish-brown hair. She moved her hand to a cheek rough with a few days unshaved beard. He was not what Wren would call handsome, but he had a good face, soft eyes, a narrow nose, and sharp jaw with a red mustache carefully trimmed to a thick line down to his chin. Watching the delicacy of her mother's movements she could tell the depth of feeling she had for him. Though she had focused elsewhere at times, her thoughts had never strayed far from him.

The Baroness ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him.

Wren felt her heart catch as his eyes flickered open. He made a muddled sound, brow furrowing. He blinked, seemed to recognize Euriel and smiled. He put his arms around her. Euriel murmured and returned the embrace.

Wren laced her fingers and pulled them to her mouth. She started to tremble and tears welled in her eyes. Her chest felt ready to burst with emotion, she couldn't breathe. She had saved them. They could be a family again.

Desiray leaned close and patted her on the back, Dorian put a hand on her shoulder as the three of them watched the couple embrace. Her mother's shoulders were heaving, and Vanidaar was patting her on the back and murmuring to her. The Baroness was crying too.

Dorian rubbed Wren's shoulder and whispered. "You did it."

"Good job," Desiray murmured.

Euriel finally drew a shuddering breath, drew back, and helped her husband to sit up. He was not wearing a shirt, which showed the thickness in his shoulders, and his well-muscled torso replete with hair-line scars from what must be dozens of battles. Euriel sniffed, wiped at her eyes, and adjusted her white shift.

"Daar," she said, putting an arm around him, and drawing a breath. "We owe our lives to this girl." She gestured to Wren.

The man blinked, deep gray eyes fixing on her. Wren felt an itchiness in her nola as one savant recognized another. She smiled and stepped away from Dorian and Desiray to stand a little closer to him.

"She looks just like our Liandra," he said in an awed voice. He had a deep voice, rich and vibrant with the coached perfection that came from mage training. "And--" His voice caught. His eyes searched Wren's face.

Wren bit her lip, unsure what to do. Her mother had not told him she was their real daughter. Vanidaar still thought that Mishaka's imposter was his daughter. Her father was no common man though. Did she dare hope that without Mishaka's curse fogging his senses, that he could recognize his daughter many long summers gone?

He gestured her closer, holding his hands out palms up.

She came and took his hands. Her father had sinewy working-man's hands, long fingers with strength in them and the ability to be gentle too. His brow knit and his mouth pressed to a line as he met Wren's gaze.

"I--" He looked up at his wife. "It is more than appearance--she feels--*savant*?"

Wren nodded.

"We thought at one time our daughter was a savant but--" He swallowed. "I sometimes wondered that..."

"Something had changed about our Liandra," Euriel said.

His gaze snapped to Euriel. "I never said such a thing."

"Nor I, but I know we both felt it," Euriel told him. She drew a breath. "I didn't know the truth of what had transpired until..." She nodded to Wren. "She opened her mind to me."

Vanidaar's gaze tracked back to Wren. "What are you saying?"

"Daar, I'm not saying anything. Learn what I learned, Wren willing."

She swallowed and nodded. Her heart was thrashing now, and she felt dizzy.

"This is all so peculiar." His chin dropped and he focused on Wren. "Shall I?"

"Please," she said. She closed her eyes.

She twitched a little when her father's hands brushed her temples. His strong fingers guided her gently forward, and their foreheads touched. She relaxed, knowing this was her father and brother savant, he would not hurt her. She felt her nola tingle, as his intellect probed not only her mind but her savant ability itself. A red haze filled her perceptions, sounds, smells, sights, tastes, and feelings concentrated into thousands of threads spinning through her psyche, orbiting around her 'self'. She felt her father dip into that pool of memories, navigating through her 'times before'.

Wren shuddered, feeling him skim across her pain, fear, and doubt, hearing the words of Mishaka and Hethanon, experiencing the battles and striving that had brought her here.

She heard him swallow. His hands trembled on the sides of her face. He pushed away from her, wide gray eyes staring into hers, face flushing. His mouth worked, apparently unable to form words. His hands traveled down her neck to her shoulders, then he pulled her close.

Wren pressed against her father, putting her arms behind his back and pulling tight.

"My daughter," he choked out.

Hearing his words made a new flood of tears well in her eyes, her whole body shook. She couldn't think other than to hold on tight. Not wanting to let go in case it was a dream.

Her mother joined the hug and the three of them just reveled in the moment of being together.

After a little while she looked up. Desiray was leaning on Dorian. The two women had their arms around Darin'kel and Everia--sharing with *their* children. Damay and Vera stood beside them with smiles on their faces. Damay gave her a raised fist of encouragement and a nod. Vera pressed her hands together dark-eyes wide.

Wren bowed her head again to dip into the sharing. They were like that for a while longer before Euriel pulled away. Drawing a breath, she straightened her shift again. "There is one more thing. Did you see?"

All this time Vanidaar's attention had been focused away from the other dais. Euriel walked to the other bed and the sleeping form of her son. Obviously, Dorian's magical sleep was deeper than ordinary rest otherwise he would have awakened at all the commotion only one bed away.

Wren found her father's breeches folded on a shelf and handed them to him. She went to her brother's side opposite her mother. Having seen herself through her

mother's eyes, she immediately recognized the traits they shared in common from their mother's nose and her father's angular chin. Azir's face was longer than hers and his brow higher. His cheekbones were more pronounced and his skin smooth. The blending of her parents' traits had made a handsome man, he looked a little older than her. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the fine scars on his face and neck showed that he, like her, was no stranger to adversity.

Having stepped into his breeches Vanidaar joined his wife to look at their son. His brow furrowed. His already deep voice dropped a notch. "Why do they have him under sleep magic?"

"F-father--it's kind of complicated," Wren said. She drew a breath. She said 'father'. The word felt so odd on her lips, she almost didn't say it. She wanted to try it out. It would take a while to get used to it.

"Indeed," he said. "I touched only the surface of what has been going on... there is quite a tale we must hear."

"You will, I promise," Wren answered. "Mother said we could have a scalding festival soon."

He looked to Euriel who nodded. Vanidaar smiled. "Bully that, an excellent idea," He looked back to Dorian and Desiray, who waved at him. "It is apparent there are a number of things I must be apprized of." He reached up and touched Euriel's cheek. "I trust you will assist in that, my Sweet."

The Baroness smiled at him. "I shall learn it with you, Lover. I am still a bit behind myself." She looked down to her son, running a hand across his cheek, fingertip tracing the scars. "Laramis told me Azir has been through Hades and back for us."

"If his luck is anything like mine..." Wren's voice trailed off. She reached under the blanket and took his fingers in hers. His hand told a story, toughened with calluses and fine scars. As she touched the tips of his fingers she paused, feeling the soft pliability of the skin. There were only a few reasons for maintaining sensitive pads of the fingers that way. What was this--a little occupational similarity? She reached out and touched his neck, turning his head slightly. He didn't have a lifer mark, but he did have a moonstone stud in the ear high up. Interesting, he'd apparently had more than a passing association with guild folk.

Euriel kissed her son's cheek and blew across his eyes lightly. He made a mumbling sound. Wren squeezed his fingers. The pressure seemed to rouse him. His eyelids fluttered. The Baroness put her hand on his chest. "Azzy," she whispered.

That made his eyes open. He looked around in obvious confusion, brow furrowing and throat working. He appeared to focus on Euriel. "Mother?"

She nodded.

"I'm here too, Son," Vanidaar said.

"And me," Wren added waving at him.

Azir made a choking sound. "Li? You're the real Li?!" He had strong voice, not as deep or trained as their father, but potent none-the-less.

"Your not so little sister, back from a long vacation in Corwin."

That brought him up out of the covers. He looked around frantically, apparently unsure who to tackle first. He ended up throwing his arms around Euriel.

"Mother," he said in a husky voice.

She hugged her son back, rubbing his broad back. Azir was bigger than his father, his body trained and trim. Wren felt an icy chill seeing burn scars along his spine and shoulder blades. Those were injuries inflicted by brushes with battle magic. People had tried more than once to kill him.

Azir finished hugging his mother and switched to his father all the while shaking his head. "How?" He murmured more than once.

After a long while he pushed back from his father and looked at Wren, not seeming to know what to do. They were essentially strangers. She didn't remember him. He was doubly her brother though, in their blood and in their ties to Gaea. She could feel his savant talent, felt it tingling at the edges of her perception as the light coming through the windows bathed his bare skin.

She put hands on hips. "Well, don't I get a hug too?"

He blinked. He leaned forward and threw his arms around her, and pulled her tight. He put his head on her shoulder. "Damn," he mumbled. "I looked so hard for you."

She rubbed his back, enjoying his warmth and strength. She liked him already. "I know you did. It's done now. I got us back together."

He pulled back. "You did?"

"Damn right, I did. Got bashed up doing it too."

"I was scouting for a way in and I ran into that bastard, Hethanon."

"I blew his head off for you," she growled. "I wish I could have made him more dead, but we'll have to take what we can get."

"Blew--his--head--off?" He said eyes wide. His brow furrowed and his hand came up to right side of Wren's neck. "What's this..."

"That's a sign that a pebble-kicking short timer like you should obey me and keep hugging your big sister."

"All right, Sis," he pulled her close. "You don't look so big to me," he whispered.

She thumped his hard back. "Don't make me poke you," she whispered in response.

They held each other for a bit more and then the whole mansion shook. Greenish light flooded through the windows as the ground continued to tremble. Wren broke away from Azir, her heart beating fast. A huge force had appeared nearby.

Desiray and others were looking around with concern as the rumbling stopped and the light faded.

"Shreds," Desiray murmured. "What--"

Euriel drew a breath. "No worries--that is how my Mother knocks..."

Chapter 75

Grandmother Idun and the Skalding Festival

Grandmother? Wren didn't think so soon after reviving her father and brother she was ready to deal with her goddess grandmother. Without taking a step from where she stood by her brother, she could feel Idun bending all the elemental forces around the manor. Damn she was powerful.

"Uhhh, *grandmother?*" Azir voiced her concerns.

"Your mother?" Wren's father said, glancing toward the source of the commotion. He had the same trapped look that Wren felt. What it had to be like--having a goddess for a mother-in-law.

"I better go meet her," Euriel said. "Cool her off. Her feathers seem ruffled."

Wren felt the tremendous energy swirling out there. "Mother I don't know if it's safe even for you."

"Nonsense," Euriel said. "You two," she indicated her husband and Azir. "Dress." She looked at Wren. "Li, you keep your friends under control and come when I call." She sighed. "I better have the servants start getting an early dinner ready. That's the best way to calm Mother down."

Wren nodded numbly. Dinner with a goddess; the first night with her family sure was going to be interesting.

"I better go spread the word," Dorian said. She bowed to Euriel and Vanidaar. "By your leave, Excellencies."

Euriel waved her off.

Dorian rushed out with Everia and Darin'kel chasing after her, leaving Damay, Desiray, and Vera watching after her.

"I must go quickly, Lover," Euriel kissed her husband firmly and rushed out.

"We have about sixty or seventy guests right now," Wren told her father. "All members and friends of the Felspar family."

Vanidaar straightened. "Loric Felspar Vilesilencer is *here?*"

Wren frowned. "I don't know about the 'vilesilencer' part. I just know he's a great elder. Desiray here," She held out a hand to the guild mistress. "Is his wife. Lady Damay here was his friend some time ago."

Vanidaar blinked, looking down at his shirtless chest. "Ladies, my sincerest apologies."

Desiray waved a hand. "It is your house, Excellency." She looked around. "Vera and I should let you attend to your private affairs. We'll spread the word that we have a goddess walking around. I'll check with you later."

"Okay," Wren nodded to her.

Desiray strode out, followed by Vera. Damay followed Desiray's exit with her eyes.

"Father, this is Damay Alostara, my mentor in savant skills."

A puzzled look crossed her father's face. "Kel'Varan Damay?"

Wren nodded. Damay smiled.

"How can that be? I mean didn't she," he looked to Damay. "Didn't you--*die?*"

The elder savant smiled. "About four millennia or so ago I left the face of Ring Realms, yes. Your daughter brought me out of my forced retirement."

"How have you been doing all these things?" Vanidaar wanted to know.

"I promise to tell it all, Father. It's just going to take a while. Right now though, I think you two ought to do what mother says."

Vanidaar stroked the side of his mouth along his mustache looking at Azir. "I believe I have some things that will fit you."

"Good," Wren said. "Can I meet you two? I want to check on my friend."

"Your friend? Is something the matter? I saw in your thoughts that someone was hurt in the battle."

"That bastard Hethanon stabbed her in the back with a jikartandak covered knife." She looked to Azir. "That's why I blew his head off."

Azir shrugged. "I wouldn't have needed even that much excuse."

"Well, actually--neither would I."

"And your friend survived?" Vanidaar said. "I've heard there's no antidote."

"Well, there isn't really. I was hit with it too." She drew a breath. "The only way to cure it is to burn it out of the body."

"But that would--destroy--you."

"Uhhh hmmm," Wren nodded. "Like I said, a *long* story. Come on, you can look in with me. Damay are you joining us?"

The elder savant nodded. "I am interested in these new creatures. The Kriar--that elder woman..." Her voice trailed off.

"Marna," Wren put in. "She feels like Gaea, yes?"

Damay focused on her. "Yes, it was familiar but I hadn't yet put a name to it... but now that you mention it, yes. I'm not sure how that can be."

"I'm not sure why either," Wren agreed. "Except that she's obviously ancient."

Wren and Damay headed out of the room, her father and brother following. They went to the main operating theatre and looked in. In only the short time they'd been occupied, a large amount of equipment had been set up. There was a cylinder on a pedestal that looked very much like the one used to treat her backlash sickness. Ziedra had already been placed inside, and a modesty cloth had been pulled over the clear lid to obscure everything but her face.

There were a half dozen other devices hooked to the apparatus, connected by long crystalline filaments that pulsed with a reddish light. One of the devices was positioned on a nearby dais. The object gave off light. Loric, Dama-prime Marna, and Dame Techstar were studying it intently, the illumination casting shadows and reflections on their faces. Hands behind their backs, Sindra and Drucilla looked on over their shoulders. Occasionally, the big D'klace women would point to something on the tablet-like device the others were studying. Cassin and Annawen sat together on one of the beds, observing the work from further away. There seemed to be some issue that all the parties were speculating about.

Her father came and put an arm around her and whispered. "What is all this?"

"A way to fix a body damaged like we just discussed," Wren answered.

He straightened up, eyes wide.

Cassin and Annawen floated off the bed where they were sitting and walked over to greet them.

"Your Excellency," Cassin said with a bow. "Cassin Kel'Ishtauri Felspar Frielos at your service. This is my sister, Annawen."

The Baron just stared at her for a moment. "I--" He paused. "Apologies. Pleased to meet you. Welcome to our home." He tilted his head. "Pardon my saying it, Lady Cassin. You have the most unique and beautiful eyes, I have never seen their like before."

Wren noticed her brother was staring too, not only at the twins, but at the other Kriar and the two huge voluptuous D'klace women.

Cassin dimpled at Vanidaar's praise. "Thank you, Milord," she responded with a dip of her head. "It is a trait of the Kriar." She held up her hands. "Along with our gold skin."

"It is very fetching," he said. "Quite striking." He gave Wren a squeeze and indicated the group with his chin. "What are they doing over there?"

She shrugged. "They're probably looking at Ziedra's physical template." She looked to Cassin for confirmation. The Kriar woman nodded. "By looking at your blood and hair, I don't know how exactly, they can remake parts of you."

"A simulacrum," he said.

"Simulacrum are fairly primitive," Cassin told him. "This is a bit more precise than that. With that equipment you can adjust virtually everything--eye or hair color, muscle and skin tone."

"Amazing."

Wren walked closer. "Master Loric, is there a problem?"

The elder looked back. "Hello Wren--it's not exactly a problem--more of a decision of how to proceed."

"Did Aarlen tamper?"

He shrugged. "Of course, Marna found it immediately." He tapped the glowing tablet in front of him, which Wren noticed that pictures were moving and changing, and some kind of writing was appearing and disappearing. "Our problem is that Marna has discovered an imbalance in what we believe to be the components that make Ziedra a savant."

Wren felt a shock. "Really? Is that a problem?"

"Not exactly, it has the potential for problems should she be put under too much stress or get exposed to a large amount of energy."

"Savant luck runs that direction all the time."

"Precisely my thinking," he said with a nod. "Hence our difficulty."

Wren's father came forward to stand with her. She looked up at him. "Lord Loric, I'd like to introduce my father Baron Vanidaar Kergatha." She turned and pulled her brother forward. "This is my brother Azir."

Loric bowed. "Your Excellency, Sir Azir. Good to finally meet you. Since Wren has been with us, we have been looking forward to reuniting her family. It pleases me to no end to have finally succeeded in that endeavor."

"I am as much pleased to have my children back," her father said with regard ringing in his deep voice, looking to Wren and then Azir. "I am much indebted to you. I must say it is a particular honor to meet you. I am a student of your work, especially in regards to life magic. It is a *diversion* of mine."

"A diversion is it?" Loric said grinning. "With the enchantments around you good sir, I would say it's considerably more than a *diversion*."

Vanidaar dipped his head. "Thank you."

Wren looked between them. "Loric, I believe I can help with that savant trait problem. When I was in Starholme, my savant traits were purified. That sounds a lot like what you're talking about."

The elder narrowed his gray eyes and rubbed his chin. "It does indeed. Are you suggesting that we can borrow that trait from you?"

"Yes," she answered. "Sindra and Drucilla borrowed a trait from Zee to fix me. Turnabout that I should give something back." She looked around. "Do I have to get in one of those cylinders again?"

"No," he shook his head. He turned back to the Kriar. "Lady Solaris, Wren may be our solution."

Marna stepped back from where she was studying the viewing tablet and came back to Wren and her father. She had a strange looking black object affixed to her arm.

Marna pressed her fingers together, and dipped her head to Vanidaar. She looked up the glowing circular jewel on her forehead flashing. "Your Excellency, I am Prime Counsel Marna Solaris of the Kriar dasta Fabrista."

Vanidaar rubbed his still bare chest obviously wishing he'd gone for clothes first. He dipped his head and duplicated her gesture. "Our greetings and well met. Lady Marna, can you explain what it is that my daughter is agreeing to?"

The Kriar dama-prime smiled. "Certainly. You are an accomplished mage, Sir, are you not? You have that feel to you."

He dipped his head in acknowledgement.

"At the most advanced stages of learning, most mages begin to dabble in magic that allows them to alter their bodies; to increase their viable lifespan, enhance desirable traits, or engineer away liabilities." She looked to Damay. "This practice is not isolated to mages of course, but it is their lore--I believe mages call it 'transmutation'."

Wren's father nodded. "Yes."

"Our people have nothing analogous to magic," Marna explained. "We do with artifices what your people accomplish with rituals and mental discipline. Transmutation is an extraordinary example of that." She paused. "Are you familiar with the concept of heredity?"

"The traits inherited from ones parents," Vanidaar answered.

"Precisely," Marna nodded. "Within the tiniest bit of your tissue is a hereditary record of your physical traits. Using that record, or template if you will, a copy physically identical to you can be made. In our case here," she gestured to the cylinder. "Ziedra was the unfortunate recipient of a magical tissue destroying poison that corrupts the body's template record with the specific intent of making reconstruction impossible. Because a reference template was preserved, in this case some of the young lady's blood, we can use the information within it to correctly rebuild the damaged areas of her body. However, Lord Loric suspected that the person who had the template--*tampered* with it. When I examined the sample I located the alterations, but also discovered a flaw in the alleles that make up her unique talents. Wren here," she nodded to Wren. "Indicated that she has been imbued with the original prototype alleles. I can use this device here." She held up her arm and the black object on it. "To read her structure and see if she has the alleles we need. With that map to go by, we can repair Ziedra's damaged alleles."

"Whoa," Azir breathed behind her.

"Fascinating," Vanidaar said. "I believe I followed everything you said. So, if I understand correctly, the template or the 'design' for a person, is something that you can not only manipulate, but store in your artifices?"

At his words, Dame Techstar and Loric looked back from the tablet toward the conversation.

Marna's brow furrowed. "Yes," she said slowly.

"I want to be clear," he said. "I forbid any such records of my daughter, or any other creatures you may encounter in these demesnes, to leave these premises. Please understand this is not a negotiable condition. I have and will utilize such *rituals* that will enforce this wish."

The elder Kriar smiled and dipped her head. "A disappointing but reasonable request. It will be as you request."

Vanidaar nodded. "You may proceed."

Wren looked up at her father, her respect already growing. He was smart. He recognized a potential threat and dealt with it in a direct fashion.

"Hold out your hand," Marna directed Wren.

She did so, and the Kriar brought the black device up by her arm. Wren noticed there were tiny crystalline windows within the device where glowing symbols were displayed. The gold woman touched some jewels on the mechanism and a square section in the side of the apparatus began emitting a beam of bright violet light. This she trained on the back of Wren's hand.

Wren felt only a tingling and some warmth as the square of light illuminated her skin. After only a fraction of a breath, a crystal lit up on the device and Marna drew it away. She scrutinized one of the crystal windows for a moment and seemed satisfied.

"That is all," she reported. "Thank you."

"That's it? That fast?"

The Kriar lady nodded.

Vanidaar eyed the device and frowned.

Marna returned to the tablet that Loric and the others had been studying. She pulled thin object out of the thing on her arm and placed it in a slot on the side of the tablet. She pressed some crystals, and all of them leaned forward to examine whatever was being displayed.

"Their artifices have truly staggering abilities and potential," Damay remarked.

"I was thinking the same," Vanidaar remarked.

"Li," Azir said. "Why do they call you, Wren?"

"I didn't know my real name until a couple seasons ago. Everyone knows me as Wren. When I was taken from here, the temple priests messed with my head and made me forget everything; Father, Mother, you... I didn't even know who I was until Lord Loric there true-spoke me."

Her father looked at her. "Which would you rather we call you?"

She shrugged. "I would like to think of Wren as my 'street name'. I made quite a reputation with it."

Vanidaar looked down at her. His finger went to the guild mark on her neck. "Did you now?"

She nodded. "For reputation's sake, we might want to, ummm, keep that identity separate from Liandra the daughter of the Baron."

He raised an eyebrow. "Indeed."

Loric turned back from what they were consulting over. "Wren, it would appear you do have the prototype alleles. We can integrate these and begin treatment immediately."

"Good," she answered. "One thing, Loric, did you hear my grandmother was here?"

"I think the whole manor felt it," he answered.

"Knowing a little of my mother, and guessing grandmother is a lot like her. I'm thinking," she glanced up at her father. "I'm thinking we should do a story night tonight--to kind of help introduce, explain, and such."

Loric's brow furrowed. "A story night." Smoothing his mustache, he pushed out his lower lip. "I don't see why not. I am interested to hear about the parts I missed myself." He looked back to the cylinder. "Ziedra should be well enough to attend by this evening." He nodded. He looked to Vanidaar. "Do you have a hall for around sixty or so?"

"The feast hall is sufficient," Vanidaar answered. "I confess to also wanting to meet your family and friends."

Loric grinned. "It will be a long night, one we'll look forward to. I shall make the arrangements when things are set here."

"Take good care of Zee, please," Wren said to Loric. "I'd stay but I think I'm going to have to go see grandmother soon."

"Certainly," Loric answered.

"I will stay with her," Damay offered.

"Would you?" Wren said. "That would be great. I feel bad. I should stay with her. It's my fault she's hurt."

"Hush about that," Damay said. "She would tell you to hush too."

Wren sighed. "Yes, she would. Okay, I have to get these two men dressed." She nodded to her father and brother.

"Sindra," she addressed the tall D'klace woman.

Sindra turned and brushed back her dark-hair and raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Make sure your mother is there," she said. "I promised her a present."

The elder woman tilted her head. "A present? Will it be entertaining?"

"Major highlights."

Sindra nodded in acknowledgement. "Ah. Very good. It will be done."

The three of them said their partings to everyone, and left.

She let out a breath as they walked down the hall. "My head is spinning. There's too much going on. Grandmother, the Kriar, Aarlen, Ziedra... There's probably other things going on too. I wonder where Laramis is, he'd want to see Azir."

"Laramis is here?" Azir asked, surprised and obviously pleased.

"Sure. He was one of the first people I ran into after I found Cosmodarus. He helped organize the infiltration into the mansion. That's how I found out you'd been captured."

"Damn, Sis. I don't know how you did it ..."

"Oh no mistake," she said. "I had help, Gaea definitely looks out for me."

"Gaea?"

She blew out her cheeks and rubbed the back of her neck. "Whoa, do I have a lot to explain. I hope you aren't going anywhere soon."

"No plans," he grinned.

"Then I guess we'll have time."

She accompanied her father and brother to the baronial suite and stood outside in the hall, sitting on a bench while they located appropriate clothing and dressed. Her mind flicked over a hundred different things. One of them was what to do when her mother called her to see grandmother. It seemed to be taking a long time. She wondered what was going on. There'd been no other rumbles since the initial 'knocking'. When she extended her senses, she could still feel the powerful life-forces of the goddess. With concentration she was able to pick out her mother as well. Apparently, nothing untoward had occurred. That was a good thing. She just wasn't prepared for any more excitement.

Another consideration was what Marna wanted. Though the lady was helping Ziedra, she was far too old and powerful to be here for anything trivial. Being mother of her race and given the brief look at the artifices the Kriar, the Dama-prime possessed incredible resources that dwarfed even her considerable personal abilities. When Loric moved the people of the citadel, they had all stood in awe of the monstrous metallic sky-thing that had descended out of the clouds, sucked up the crated contents of the estate, and retreated back into the heavens. She felt certain that was another of the Kriar 'artifices'. A gigantic mechanism like the one she had seen in Starholme Prime. What had Marna said? 'Some familiarity with the instrumentality created by the First-ones'. Just the way she asked made Wren uneasy.

The door to her parent's bedchambers opened and the Baron and his son exited now dressed like the nobility they were.

Her father looked regal in his gold embroidered indigo-colored waist-coat. The silk shirt, breeches, and hose were all exquisitely tailored and color matched. Though he obviously knew how to dress the part, she could tell from the way he shrugged his shoulders and pulled at his shirt that he much preferred more 'relaxed' clothing.

Taller and thicker than his father, Azir cut a striking profile in a simple black tunic with silver stitching. The black breeches and polished boots gave him that 'dark and mysterious' look that Wren knew many women found attractive. As her brother stepped up to her, she rose and smiled up at him.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She nodded. "Nice." She let out a breath. "I just can't get over it. You're my brother. It still feels like a dream to me."

Azir shook his head. "That's how it is for me. I sat in a cell for a week or so. I get knocked out and the next thing I know, I'm waking up in the infirmary with our parents back to normal, and the avatars gone. It's still pretty dream-like to me too."

"Imagine how it is for your mother and I," Vanidaar said. "Under Mishaka's spell we didn't realize you two were gone. Both of you are much older than the children we raised--and obviously much more world wise than we probably would have allowed."

"Beat up and kicked around, you mean," Wren said. "Me anyway."

"For me, chased, beat up, kicked, and chased some more," Azir said. "I've spent so much time on the run I don't even know what it's like to stay in one place for more than a tenday."

"Guess we'll have some war stories to swap," Wren said. "I hear you're pretty good with a blade."

He nodded with a smile. "I can hold my own."

Wren called Azimuth into her hand. The blade appeared in a flash of blue light. She swung it up and spun it on her fingertip, flipped it around her hand and caught it.

"See that little crack in that pillar over there?"

Both Azir and her father squinted at the feature some thirty paces away.

She whirled Azimuth sidearm, arcing the throw to make it even harder. The weapon whirled with a satisfying hiss, its ultra-keen mithril tip lodging in the rock with a loud clunk. She squinted to make sure she had hit the spot straight on.

Wren blew on her fingers and wiggled her eyebrows. "Hmmm?"

Azir was looking at the weapon with wide eyes. "Remind me not to gamble daggers with you."

She snapped her fingers and Azimuth reappeared in her hand. She put it in her sash.

"As phenomenal as that shot was, I find the weapon to be the more impressive of the two," her father said. "Who made that--Loric?"

She put her hand on it. "I thought these were great too, but nearly everyone in the Loric's family has one. His wife Cassandra made this one."

"I want one," Azir said, grinning.

"Me too, this one is on loan," she said. "We have so much we can learn from these people."

"So it appears," her father said. "Something we will have to take up with them."

Wren started to answer when a voice echoed in her mind. <Li?>

The telepathic call surprised her so much she staggered. Her brother caught her shoulders. "You okay?"

"Yes," she responded. "Mother caught me by surprise."

"Mother? What?"

Wren held up a hand to forestall him.

She focused. <Mother? You still know how to do this?>

<Of course I do. You don't think I'd forget something so useful? Your grandmother wishes to see you. Can you find your way to my sitting room?>

Wren swallowed. <I think so.>

<Tell your father we definitely want to do the skalding tonight, and to have the servants prepare appropriately.>

<I made arrangements with Loric.>

<Good. Please come here now.>

<Yes, Mother.>

She sighed and turned to her father. "Mother says that Grandmother definitely wants the skalding tonight and that the servants should prepare appropriately."

Her father frowned with narrowed eyes. "You just spoke with your mother?"

"Sure, with telepathy. Before the fight with Hecate, I taught her how to do it. All savants and immorts can do it--well, if they know how. I'll tell you about it later. She wants me to come to her sitting room right now, so I better go." She looked to Azir. "Don't go anywhere. Your turn is probably next."

Azir nodded solemnly, obviously wondering like her, what such an audience would be like. She waved to her father and brother and headed off toward the back of the mansion and the back hall where the stairs were that she and Ziedra took on their first meeting with Euriel.

She skidded to a stop as she passed one of the sitting areas and saw Laramis and Irodee engaged in conversation with Caldorian, Sebenreth, Bronawyn, and Jolandrin. The three couples seemed to be trading stories concerning the city outside the mansion.

Wren leaned back. "Laramis, pardon."

The man looked over. "Lady Wren! Praise, it is good to see you healthy again!" He and Irodee rose as did the other two couples.

"Don't trouble yourself," Wren said. "I have to rush off, I just wanted to tell you, Azir and my father are awake." She indicated over her shoulder. "They're right down the hall, I thought you would want to see them."

His face brightened with sincere appreciation. "Zounds yes, Milady, thank you! Where is it you must be in such haste?"

She winced and pointed up. "Grandmother Idun."

The man's face froze. "Ah." He blinked. "Uh, I wish you--well. We will see you later, yes?"

"There's going to be a skalding festival tonight," she said. She focused on the two brothers. "In other words, story night. Make sure you tell everybody that they're expected to attend."

"Very well, Milady," Laramis said.

Cal, Seb, and their wives nodded in recognition.

She bowed to them and rushed off. Glad that she had seen Laramis but regretting the delay. Gods weren't generally known for their patience.

<Wren, are you lost?> her mother asked in her mind.

There it was. <No, Mother,> she answered. <I had to stop along the way. I'm at the stairs now.>

<That's fine.>

She climbed the steps feeling her proximity to the environment-bending power of the goddess increase with every step. What was she going to say? What was she going to do? Damn, she would just be cautious and watch her mother for cues.

She topped the stairs, remembering the hall where she had fought her mother. She blinked. The burn mark caused by her mother's magic still blackened the flower covered trelliswork.

Wren drew a breath and swallowed. Goddess. If I can *fight* a goddess, I can be polite to one.

She turned the corner into the connecting passage that opened into the sitting area. Wren slowed down. She saw her mother sitting on the largest of the divans facing the hall. Her shadow was framed against the back wall from a glow cast by the figure sitting in the divan opposite her. From this vantage Wren only recognized gold hair and something shiny.

Euriel raised her chin to acknowledge she saw Wren. She gestured her to come.

Wren steeled herself and walked forward, not in a great hurry. As she came around a divider and took a step down into the chamber, she noticed the room felt warmer than it did in hall even though the hearth was not lit, and the odor of some kind of pleasant smelling fruit lingered in the air. A figure a little larger than her mother dressed in mirror reflective robes reclined on the divan, her arms across the back and legs crossed. Glowing golden blonde hair tumbled down her shoulders and flowed into her lap.

The goddess looked up as Wren stepped in, the creature's ageless face a magnification and refinement of her mother's traits. Her glowing blue eyes caused reflections on her pale cheeks, casting shadows from her understated nose and broad mouth.

She was beautiful of course, and much smaller than Wren expected. Of course, a goddess could look any way she chose. Indoors, some huge body would just be a bother--mortals were just as easily impressed and intimidated without it.

Wren paused by her mother, still unsure what to say to this breathtaking and incredibly potent creature.

"Mother," Euriel said. "This is Liandra, her friends call her Wren."

Idun raised her chin, blue eyes shining. She smiled, turning her head to one side and brushing at her hair. She stared at Wren for a long moment.

Wren wasn't sure whether she was supposed to meet the goddess' eyes, she knew that would not be tolerated from a worshipper. She wasn't a worshipper--she was a blood relation. She swallowed, appreciating the perfection of her grandmother's skin, the sparkle of her jewelry, the obvious magic of the mirrored satin robes that reflected the light given off by her hair, causing the golden glow that bathed the room.

"Strong girl," Idun said after a moment. Her voice had an echoing melodic quality that made the walls hum. "She meets my eyes. She's not afraid."

Wren dipped her head.

"The time difference between Cosmodarus and Gladshiem is an annoyance," Idun continued with a frown. She held up a finger. "I last saw her when she was what, seven?"

"Eight," her mother corrected. "It was shortly after your visit that the incident occurred."

Idun's frown deepened and the room itself grew darker. "Afterward Odin gave me an assignment in Bellerophon, which coincidentally just *happened* to be in a pocket of very slow time. A handful of fortnights was more than two cycles back in Gladshiem and more than double that here." The goddess drew a breath. "To be truthful I was suspicious of the number of assignments the Allfather favored me with after paying me no mind for centuries. It never occurred to me that there might be some plot afoot." She looked to Wren, the lines of her face pulling down into a disappointed expression. "My apologies, Granddaughter. My inattentiveness allowed a great deal of misfortune to befall our family. We have lost so much time. I have missed all of your

growing up, something I truly wished to witness and take part in." She bowed her head and brushed at her hair again. Her glowing blue eyes dimmed.

Wren blinked, feeling a little ache in her chest, not really knowing what to say. The goddess seemed truly concerned and sorry. That was something she hadn't expected. She had grown to be suspicious of the pantheon lords and ladies, knowing their history and animus.

She drew a breath. "Don't be sorry, Grandmother. At least we're still a family. I'm not so old that I'm done growing. I have a lot to learn."

Idun looked up. A slow smile spread across her face, and the room brightened. The lightening of the goddess' mood made a warm feeling in Wren's chest. "A most excellent outlook." She held out a hand. "Please, come sit with me. You look uncomfortable."

Wren paused for a moment, then moved forward. She still felt self-conscious around this incredibly powerful creature whom she didn't know.

She sat on the divan, feeling the energy of the goddess on her skin, smelling the pleasant scent of her.

Idun gently put an arm around Wren, her heavy flesh warm and soft. She put her other hand on Wren's shoulder, blue eyes intent. She leaned close enough that Wren could detect the candy-like scent of her breath. "Of all the people in the universe, you are one of the most dear to me. Never fear that you will come to harm at my hand. I will always protect you as I can. Trust in that."

She swallowed and nodded. Regardless of how sincere the words sounded, she still found it hard to relax with the massively potent creature. She wasn't Gaea, and she couldn't pretend she was.

"Would it hurt to try a hug with your grandmother?" Idun asked.

Wren tried not to show her hesitation. She closed her eyes and let the goddess pull her close.

She put her face in the curve of the goddess' neck, feeling the silky warmth of immortality. She felt the goddess' heart beat, heard her slow breaths. In her savant senses, Idun was a beautiful array of colors and elemental forces. This was her grandmother. As she pressed against her, she realized that Idun had opened herself to Wren's senses. She could feel her grandmother's concern, her pride, her affection and intent to protect. They weren't just words. She cared.

Wren relaxed into her grandmother's arms, feeling the powerful elder's hand stroke her hair and being soothed by it...

She spent some time in the company of her grandmother, getting to know her and telling a fraction of history that had brought about the current turn of events. She promised to bear all for the *skalding*. Wren found Grandmother Idun an interesting creature, very curious, at times intense and other times more jovial than she would have expected. She was pleased at Wren's martial training, but unhappy she had not explored magic. She indicated that Euriel should begin Wren's magical training at earliest opportunity. Already grandmother was going to start influencing her life.

Wren was just standing up to give way to Azir's private audience when Loric called her, saying that if she was free, she could be present for Ziedra's awakening.

Wren gave both her mother and grandmother a parting hug and rushed down to the infirmary to be there when Ziedra woke up.

She almost ran into Radian as she skidded around a corner heading to the infirmary. The gold-skinned young man was dressed in a deep violet tunic and dark breeches that had probably been purchased and tailored in town. The two of them fell in step, still moving quickly.

"There you are," she greeted. "I wondered where you'd been. Have they been keeping you tied up?"

Radian shook his head. "Mother Cassandra insisted I accompany her into the city, she wanted me to get my mind off Zee."

"Oh, I'm sure that worked."

He frowned, the jewel on his forehead flickering. "Indeed."

They entered the infirmary together.

Light was still playing back and forth in the case containing Ziedra's body, casting odd stripes of color on the walls and the faces of Loric, Damay, and the two Kriar ladies who were watching the process with apparent interest. Both sets of twins were still observing, each pair sitting together on one of the treatment daises.

Loric looked over. "Ah, Wren, Radian, well timed. We are just now finalizing the treatment. Everything has gone well."

She and Radian each took a side of the cylinder to gaze at their friend. Wren noticed that her face looked more relaxed now, not in pain.

"There is one thing," Loric said leaning down to Wren. He fingered his chest at the collarbone. "When I was checking to preserve permanent enchantments, I noted that little *addition* she made to herself. Do Cassandra and Dorian know?"

Wren frowned. "I doubt it. Does it matter?"

"To them it does. It's theft of intellectual property. I know those two put protections on their work to prevent deconstruction." He dipped his head. "I won't tell, but you should encourage her to divulge it. They'll have to forgive it of course. It'll spare feelings though."

"Lady Wren," Radian asked. "What are you speaking of?"

"Zee gave herself the ability to fly. She did it by copying one of your mother's flight amulets."

His eyes widened. "Ohhh, those are a very--ahhh--" He blew out his cheeks. "Yes, they could get very prickly over that... especially if she discovered the details of the design."

Wren rolled her eyes. "She's a savant of magic."

"Ah," he gritted his teeth. "Yes, it's something sticky we should handle with *delicacy*."

"That appears to be it," Loric said as the lights in the case winked out.

Marna and Dame Techstar went around the cylinder apparently checking things. Sindra came forward and handed Wren a blanket, a folded slip, short-clothes, shift, and sash. She accepted them with a nod and a word of thanks.

Apparently satisfied, Marna nodded to Loric. He pressed some jewels on the side of the cylinder. A series of lights played through the interior and Ziedra twitched a little. She drew a breath. A soft hissing sound came from the chamber, and the lid separated.

"Be polite and turn your head for moment, Radian," Wren told him.

The young man sighed and turned around as Wren opened the lid.

There was Ziedra clothed in her newly reconstructed flesh, dark hair shining and dusky skin aglow with fresh life. Her chest rose and fell in the steady rhythm of sleep. The circular scar of the amulet remained carved in her flesh, however now it seemed more a part of her than before. Wren shook her head. The woman never had muscle tone like that since her days as a dancer--maybe not even then. Well, at least now Vera wouldn't cheat her out of dessert. She pulled the blanket over her, and put the clothing in the cylinder next to her.

Wren ran a hand through Ziedra's hair. "Zee?" She pushed on her shoulder. "Zee?" The dancer's eyes fluttered. Her head lolled a bit and she rolled her shoulders. She pushed a bit harder. "Come on, Sleepyhead, Radian wants to give you a kiss."

That made Ziedra's eyes crack. "Mmmm?" She made a muddled sound. "Wren?"

"Hey you." She said, rubbing Ziedra's shoulder.

Ziedra blinked. "Wren?" She murmured again. "Uhrm?" She seemed to realize that she was in someplace strange. "Whoa. What's...?"

Radian came around the case and smiled down at Ziedra. He reached in and touched her brow. "You're safe," he said.

"I--" She lifted her hand from beneath the blankets and rubbed at her shoulder, obviously still confused. She shook her head. "Hecate... I was stabbed." She focused on Wren. "Uh, we must--must have won."

"Yup."

Ziedra groaned. "Was it my turn to get the most hurt?"

"Guess so," Wren answered.

"I--feel--*different*."

"Well, there's a reason for that..."

"Here's something to feel different about." Radian leaned forward and kissed her.

"Mmmm," Ziedra put a hand behind his head, pulling herself into the kiss. When they broke apart a breath later, she sighed and her eyes fluttered. "Ahhh, just the way this girl likes to wake up." She raised an eyebrow and looked at Wren. "Do I get one from you too, hmmm?"

Wren kissed her on the forehead.

"Hmpf," Ziedra snorted, a cheated expression on her face.

"I have some clothes for you here," Wren said patting the bundle by Ziedra's leg. "Get dressed and I'll introduce you to the people who took care of you." She looked back to Loric, Marna, and Dame Techstar who were all watching with folded arms. "She's back to normal."

Sindra laughed, and Cassin shook her head.

They waited while Ziedra pushed herself up in cylinder and struggled into her clothes. She made 'ooohing' sounds as she did so, obviously noting the changes that had occurred during her sleep.

"Thank you," Wren said putting a hand on Loric's arm, then Marna and Dame Techstar.

"My pleasure, I learned a great deal," he said dipping his head toward Marna and the Dame.

"We too found it of interest," Marna said. "This encounter with savant physiology was an unexpected learning experience for us as well."

Loric eyed Wren. "How did the meeting with grandmother go?"

Damay came over to stand by the elder with a raised eyebrow obviously interested in her answer.

She pushed out her lower lip. "It went well, actually. She was a lot nicer than I thought she would be." She grimaced. "Unfortunately, she was just as pushy as I expected." She sniffed. "I have to start taking magic lessons."

Everyone laughed.

"Out you come," Radian said, lifting a fully dressed Ziedra out of the container.

"Gads, Zee, you don't weigh anything anymore," he said as he set her down.

"I feel great," the dancer said. She took a step, swayed off balance, and Radian caught her. "Not too steady though," she said putting a hand to her chest.

"The muscle tone is there, but you must retrain them," Marna told her.

"Zee," Wren said. "These are Counsel Marna Solaris and Dame Techstar, Cassandra's grandmother. They provided the apparatus and expertise to heal you."

Ziedra bowed. "All my gratitude ladies, whatever I may do to repay your kindness, you have only to ask." She turned to Loric. "Thank you, Milord." She saw Sindra and Drucilla. "I see my cousins have been watching over me."

"Indeed they have," Loric casting a glance at the two giant D'klace ladies. "I kept something for you." He reached into a pocket and pulled out Gaea's black diamond band. "An interesting item." He handed it to her.

Ziedra slipped it back on her finger with another murmur of thanks. She blinked, felt the ring, and frowned.

"Something wrong?" Loric asked.

Ziedra was slow to speak, her brow furrowing as she tried to express herself. "The impressions are stronger--clearer."

"You got a savant upgrade too," Wren told her.

"Whoa. I--this is all so fast," she looked around at the strange environs. "I mean, what's been happening?"

"Tell you what, I'll get you started on that, but let's get out of Loric's way first. We have to get ready for dinner and story night."

"Story night?" Ziedra blinked.

"Yes, and you're going to be a star performer. We both need to find some nice clothes before then."

"Uhhh, okay." She smiled at Radian. "You'll help me pick something out? Maybe you'll help Wren too, she has terrible taste."

"Hey!"

Ziedra pushed Wren with a grin and looked to Damay's camouflage outfit. "Perhaps you'd like a *clothing* upgrade?" She grinned at Wren. "Wren's buying."

The elder nodded with a smile. "Absolutely."

"What about you two?" Ziedra said to the huge D'klace twins. "Join us? Auntie Aarlen probably has you following me around anyway."

Sindra grinned. "Of course--especially if Wren is buying."

"Count us in," Cassin said.

Wren rolled her eyes. She put a hand on Loric's arm. "I guess we'll see you at dinner. I guess I have to get some money from Father now..." She looked to Marna. "You'll be joining story night?"

The elder Kriar smiled and dipped her head. "I'll be there with Dominique, we're both looking forward to it. Afterwards, I would like to schedule a bit of your time for that *other* business."

"As promised," Wren said.

Wren gave another farewell to Loric and the Kriar ladies, and she and the clothing parade headed out to spend her money.

Ziedra regained her strength and balance quickly. It wasn't long before she was demonstrating her ability to fly as well. As news of Wren's clothing trip spread, she quickly had a host of Felspar clanswomen and friends ready to join the fray. Finally, it was decided by Euriel to just bring a dozen seamstresses and tailors in from the city rather than risk the havoc of that particular group running amok in Cosmodarus.

The whole group ended up in the mansion's main audience hall eying the wares of several vendors, getting fitted, and chatting. It was the most "normal" thing Wren had done in several fortnights. After all the tension, she along with everyone else enjoyed it immensely.

Dinner came four or five bells later, as night was closing in on Cosmodarus. The feast hall of the mansion buzzed with animated conversation as Felspar clanspeople,

players from the great game, friends and associates gathered for the occasion. Even Aarlen seemed to be in a good mood, the giant woman even laughing now and then. Marna made her appearance on the arm Gabriella's daughter Dominique, the tall smooth-talking vamp that Wren met during the game. Wren knew there must be story behind how those two wildly different individuals would meet. Tal and Terra were there as a couple, as were T'Gor and his burly Myrmigyne-appearing wife Tigress. Bertram showed up with a tall red-haired woman she learned was named Val'Siden. Algernon had a small, almost tiny, blonde woman with him. Arabella appeared in the hall escorted by an extremely handsome Kriar man who came dressed in uniform similar to those worn by Cassin and Annawen. Damrosil and Beia's red-haired sister Ess seemed to be each other's company for the night. Dorian's husband Brin had come in with Gabriella on his elbow, while Dorian herself seemed to be favoring Cassandra this evening.

She recognized Stark was there with an older woman she guessed was his wife, and a few of the mages and warriors that had provided support for the attack. There were at least a half dozen unattached people that Wren did not recognize, but everyone was welcomed and seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Dame Techstar, and another Kriar woman Wren learned was Cassandra's step-mother were there as well. Laramis and Irodee, were hanging close with Azir who had blonde Ralani on his arm, the winged girl who had judged during the great game. The tall thin teen did not have wings and a sword tonight but instead a glittering gown of jewels that flashed and winked in the torchlight. Wren didn't know when Azir had time to move in on the girl, but she had to admire the speed with which he worked.

Her grandmother was present at the feast, her radiance toned down to dim glow. Rather than being isolated, the goddess seemed to be the focal point of several conversations between her and several of the elder humans and Kriar. The whole group of 'fossils' as the youngsters referred to them, seemed to be enjoying themselves exchanging indecipherable humor that Wren guessed one had to be thousands of seasons old to appreciate.

As she was walking around, Wren was surprised to find Damay with Darin'kel on her arm. She had to laugh to herself, thinking of Desiray's remark about the elder savant being 'human'. It appeared she was indeed.

Radian kept the newly restored Ziedra well occupied, leaving Wren to wander about the party, trading pleasantries and introductions with all the new people and mates she had not yet met.

Euriel and Vanidaar obviously enjoyed playing host and hostess to this super elite group, and they kept a dozen servants scrambling the whole time.

Wren found herself a seat by the hearth away from the discussions, the laughter, the clink of glasses and silver, satisfied to be alone for the nonce. The vaulted ceilings of the great hall vibrated with tremendous vitality of the dinner attendees. The appealing odors of cook-smoke, roasting meat and bread, mingling with a dozen exotic perfumes gave the air a euphoric scent.

She leaned back against the stone and sipped her stickerberry ale, enjoying the sweet bite and the warmth in her middle. She had come so far. She wished Jharon had lived to see this. To be at a party with all these knowledgeable and well-traveled people; he would have loved it. It was exactly the kind of thing he liked. Being anything but shy, Grahm too would have gamely joined such a gathering.

She had reached her goal, but there were some important things she had left behind and would never have back.

A small person came and sat by Wren. "Wren-friend alone?"

"Not anymore," she answered.

Dressed in her gold shift, the dusky girl smiled at her, dark eyes intelligent and incisive. She leaned back, her shoulder brushing Wren's as she took a sip of something red from her glass.

"Must be nice to be served for a change," Wren said.

Vera nodded, gaze staring off into the distance. "Vera serve this family many seasons." She looked at Wren. "It never easy, but I thankful. Loric good to me, *all* of them good to me. Sometimes, I feel alone." She looked down. "Thank you for being Vera's friend."

"Hey, Vera, we were there for each other. I only wish I could be more there for you." She looked out to the group. "Here we are, a pair of pretty girls all by ourselves."

"It quiet," Vera said, sipping her drink.

They both lapsed into silence. Wren felt a tension in Vera's body, something the woman wanted to say. She waited patiently for her to get to it.

Vera's eyes lost focus for a moment. Finally, she said, "Vera thinking about leaving the family."

The words made Wren feel like she'd been punched in the heart. "What? Why? Did something happen?"

"No," Vera said with a shake of her head. "Vera--I--have lost balance--have lost self." Her gaze met Wren's. "You said, you help me."

Her breath caught. "Anything."

Vera nodded. "I not decided. Think more." She sipped her drink. "Think maybe first just go someplace to find me."

She swallowed. "I wish I understood what's wrong. Did I do something?"

Vera shook her head again. She put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "My heart. My family. I left them behind." She gestured to the gathering. "This remind me. These summers I hiding. It time--" She paused and drew a breath. "It time I close circle." Her chin dropped. There were other words but she didn't utter them. She looked up, a sad look on her face. "I decide--I tell you--okay?"

She nodded numbly. Seeing that distant look in Vera's eyes made a chill race down Wren's spine. She had been taken from her family, and had finally made the long journey back to it. Vera had been cut off from hers. She had taken the Felspars as a new family. Someplace in her heart, the G'yaki woman still had ties to the people that had cast her out. Ties that now seemed to pull at her. How could Wren not feel for and relate to that? It stunned her that Vera would come to her for support and not someone else.

The two of them sat in the warm silence of each other's company, not saying anything, but each comforted by the presence of the other. As dinner began to wind down, the people of the party took notice of their absence and they gathered them in to be with the others.

With more than a dozen lore-mages in the assemblage, the dinner dishes and table were cleared in a manner of heartbeats. The servants stood aghast as Tal, Algernon, Bertram, and Val'Siden with some minor assistance at the middle by Sindra and Drucilla hefted the tons-heavy scalebark banquet table and carried it to the far end of the chamber to make more space around the hearth. She guessed it took no less than twenty strong men to make the massive construct even stir. The mages threw some spells and in moments there were several sets of couches for couples to sit together in comfort. A gesture from Idun created the skalding throne by the hearth, the place from which the stories would be told. Arabella, Sindra, and Drucilla walked up to the front carrying large black cases, which when opened had instruments inside. This

gesture caused a ripple of excitement to rush through the group, including Wren's grandmother who was nodding in anticipation of an enjoyable night.

Arabella pulled out a long metallic instrument Wren had never seen before, it was long and thin with many holes and buttons along its length, and she blew across the end rather than into it. Sindra had a wooden instrument similar to a lute only it had a much larger body and two necks with metal ribbing across them, one neck sported twelve strings, the other eight. Drucilla had a variety of smaller instruments in addition to a square-bodied instrument similar to Sindra's only it had just four thick strings.

Within a few heartbeats of sitting down, Drucilla was thumping a pulsing rhythm while Sindra's able fingers picked nimbly on her instrument creating a chiming melody that Arabella joined in with on the breathy metal instrument. It was apparent after only a few moments of listening that this was definitely not some passing fancy for the three. Arabella's lead rose and fell, reaching notes that made Wren's heart skip beats. They each seemed to take turns leading, the other instruments becoming softer so one could bring out the beauty in their instrument. Sindra's two-necked lute thrummed rapidly, trilling one moment and alternating with bass notes and resonances in rapid succession, tripping gamely along the scales. Even with her simple four stringed instrument, Drucilla could bang out some catchy rhythms that had people nodding and tapping their feet.

The three musicians drew to close after only a short time to the applause of the group. Even her grandmother was clapping.

Arabella dipped her head and told the audience. "We'll just be playing to provide a little drama here and there. We've got some good stories and good story tellers here tonight."

Loric stood up and bowed to Arabella who bowed back. He walked to the front. "Vanidaar, Euriel," He gestured to Wren's parents who got up and came forward. "While I have our host and hostess up here, I want to thank them for their tolerance in our invasion of their home regardless of circumstances. I would like to do introductions starting with Vanidaar Kergatha," He patted Wren's father on the shoulder. "And Euriel Idun-daughter Kergatha. These two are the authors of that feisty troublemaker over there that has endeared herself to so many." He pointed to Wren. "I'll let them say a few words, and then I'll lead some introductions and pass lots for story order."

Both her parents introduced themselves, expressing themselves graciously and lucidly, offering thanks and appreciation of the company and conversation they'd experienced this evening.

After they were done, Loric stood up again, and went around the room offering each person the opportunity to introduce themselves. Most took their introduction time to thank Vanidaar, Euriel, and sometimes Wren. Most of the players of the great game made jokes and references to Wren's win and a potential rematch next summer. Even Idun stood up, bowing and introducing herself as an original Aesir, mother of Euriel, occasional diplomat, *arborist* and dragon-keeper for the pantheon of Asgard.

Then it was time to draw lots for the story order. There were far too many people for everyone to tell a tale, so only those willing to share something would draw. Some people like Euriel, T'Gor, Damay, Laramis, Irodee, Stark and Ziedra were required to draw because of their participation in recent events. Cassandra and Dorian both offered to tell tales as did Gabriella who always seemed to take part. The Dragon Queen despite her haughty demeanor obviously loved theatrics, and at the few story nights Wren had attended, her illusion magic had provided breathtaking depth to many of the stories told. Arabella decided to draw, and to Wren's surprise, so did the

elder Kriar Counsel Marna. The last person to raise a hand to take part was Idun herself, the declaration drawing a host of nods and murmurs.

After the picks, Wren's story would be fifth, which was a source of relief to her. She could not have gone first. As it turned out, Marna fell first in the order.

The Kriar matron took the skalding throne, spreading her dark cloak and hair in true theatrical style, she brought with her a small gray box which she placed in her lap. Dark Dominique settled at her side smiling.

Marna introduced herself again and Dominique as well, then launched into her story. The Dama-prime's fingers played on the box in her lap creating haunting ethereal sounds and airy pulsating harmonies. Added to the display was Gabriella's daughter who demonstrated her mastery of magical illusion, flourishes of her hands creating wall-sized vistas of star fields, towering mountain-scapes, and lush panoramas of landscapes as seen from high in the sky.

Marna's story was a parable of sorts that described the plight of a Kriar man in search of himself, suffering from a crippling hubris that blinded him to the needs of all save himself and the many worlds and peoples he encountered. The story went on to describe his eventual suffering at the hands of the creatures he sought to exploit, and his failed attempts at atonement. The story itself was told in a powerful way, the ironies and fallibilities characterized in such a way that there was no-one in the room who could not relate to this all-too-human creature as he compounded one mistake on top of another. Through the woes of this one individual, the tale depicted the Kriar in their vagabond trek through the stars, focusing on knowledge and perfection to the exclusion of all other things, and in so doing losing their very souls. The Dama-prime ended with the murmuring of her box guttering out to a tinny echo, Dominique's images of a lone Kriar standing on high snowy peak and appealing to the stars fading to black.

The room was silent for moments, tensely held breaths being let out in relief. Then the applause began in appreciation for the performance, not a single hand still in their response to the showmanship of the two women.

Cassandra took her seat with a hand harp under her arm that she used to highlight a tale considerably lighter in tone that described the surprisingly antic adventures of preparing for the wedding of her daughters to Sindra and Drucilla. The gold woman, normally so serious, did more than her share of jocular justice to the peculiarities and difficulties in catering to a same sex marriage. The gold mage's descriptions of the some of the remarks, expressions, and surprise of various vendors and attendees had everyone giggling, including the twins themselves.

Arabella, being a master bard, put on an artful display her tale set to music and accompanied by Sindra and Drucilla on their instruments. The thing that surprised Wren was the topic of the story--it described a master thief accidentally embroiled in a dangerous game of immorts, her trials, and eventual surprise victory. Throughout the song there was plenty of wink-wink nudge-nudge humor as Arabella masterfully characterized and parodied everyone including herself. The room was crying tears of laughter by the end.

Stark, the guard captain, was no storyteller, but he gamely chose to focus on something humorous just the same--learning to fly. With nods to Ziedra, T'Gor and Damay, he did fair comic justice to the errors and ill landings that ensued as T'Gor and Damay tried to teach a frantic group of newly flight capable warriors.

It was Wren's turn. She borrowed Ziedra from Radian and the two of them took the skalding stage to mild applause. Heart beating fast and breath tight she seated herself in the comfortable padded throne. She looked out to all of the faces, many of whom she liked, and others she loved.

She swallowed and drew a breath. "I guess it's a good thing that we had some funny stories, as mine is not a happy tale. The only happy part is the way it ends." She nodded to each of the members of her family. She gestured. "Take note of them, they were what I was fighting for even though I didn't know them. More the better when I found them so worthy of the struggle." She looked down for a moment composing herself. "Most of Loric's family have heard my version of the events that led up to my being with them. I'm going to attempt a little briefer version tonight that should be considerably more vivid. I will leave out some of the more troubling parts for everyone's sake. I will however be doing a complete account of our battle with Hecate as was promised to certain members of the audience." She glanced to Ziedra. "With Zee's indulgence we'll start in a certain darkened alley, just a stone's-throw from Cinnabar's tower in the city of Corwin..."

She nodded to the dancer who raised Gaea's ring to her temple. She focused on that night, the night where it all seemed to begin, when her life changed forever.

As she did in the temple of Meliekki she focused on a particular time, making the moment her now. To the gasps of everyone watching the spherical portal swelled from the dancer's hand becoming a huge window, hearing, seeing, and smelling the events of another time and place.

Everyone flinched and covered themselves as Cinnabar's fire blast blew her over the over the wall and into the arms of her partner Grahm. It was a flashy and painful start to a long story, a tale she settled herself to tell knowing that the most precious things in life often started with a journey. Hers had finally ended in this house, in this room, at the feet of her friends and family--and for that she could not be happier.

In life there are endings, and there are beginnings. Stories however, rarely really end, they just pause to catch their breath...

--*Damay Alostara*

Epilogue

Late into the day after story night, there was still a buzz in the air. The story she and Ziedra presented before their audience took the better part of two bells to bring to a conclusion and had people talking for the rest of the night and into the morning. The viewing had been startling not only for her friends, but for herself as well. Even being the subject of the story, sometimes she couldn't believe she'd done some of those things.

In a secluded sitting room at the back of the manor, Wren closed and locked the door and turned to the small group awaiting her attention. A fire flickered in the small hearth and cups of spiced tea sat steaming before Marna, Dame Techstar, and Cassandra. There was a tense sense of anticipation in the bodies of the three gold women, as they watched her sit down.

She looked around at them, curious as to what this was about, and dreading the possibilities.

Wren sighed. "Okay, you have me all to yourselves. What can I do for you?"

Marna smiled. "Before we start this business, let me say again, I found your story quite impressive and rather moving. The end was quite--" She colored a bit her gold skin growing lighter. "Intense."

Wren nodded. "Imagine what it was like to *live* it."

"I thought about it a *lot* last night," Cassandra shook her head. "I don't know what you did, and I don't think I even want to know."

"My feelings about the matter are different than Cassandra's," Marna said. "I believe that your fight with Hecate may answer part of my inquiry."

Wren felt a chill. "Go on."

"Since story night was so recent, I think it only appropriate that I relate another tale." Marna steeped her jeweled fingers in front of her chest. "It was about two hundred or so kilorevs ago that Dominique told me she was rushing off to join in some skirmish I was later to learn was a confrontation with the pantheon lord, Hecate." Marna looked toward Wren. "With the time difference between our home and this plane, that would put it about early in the evening two days ago."

"Around the time, we were gathering to fight Hecate."

Marna nodded. "Dominique departed to join in the battle and I didn't worry overmuch as there are few things that pose any real threat to her. It was not long afterward that one of our scouts reported that some unusual activity was taking place in an area of space they were patrolling. A particularly large amount of energy was being emitted and focused interdimensionally."

Wren raised an eyebrow, now having some inkling of where this was going. She didn't like the sound of it either. What would she do? She held her breath as Marna continued.

"I was asked to authorize closer investigation of the phenomena, that, when given the amount of energy and the way it was being focused, certainly posed a potential threat to surrounding areas of space." The Kriar brushed back her long hair, her glowing green eyes fixing on Wren. "I approved the request. One of our skilled commanders approached the source of the emissions while they were still in progress. He discovered a complex about ten or twelve times the size of this city here where

you live. This artifact was built deep beneath the surface of a world long dead, floating alone in the void without a star."

Marna glanced to the other women. "The commander gained entry to the site, finding it to be extremely old, predating any civilization that we know to currently exist. He was able to examine the area and capture a few pictures before automated defenses within the complex forcibly ejected him."

She reached down to a case she had brought with her and opened it. She pulled out six pieces of what looked like glossy white parchment, only the surfaces were slick and amazingly detailed pictures had somehow been impressed into them.

The elder Kriar put the picture-parchments on the table and pushed them toward Wren.

She pulled sheets toward herself feeling her stomach hollow out. She forced her hand not to tremble as she stared at the pages. Without even examining them closely, she recognized the hallways, and an image of the inside of one of the giant cooling shafts with broad beam of magic jagging up the magic transfer conduit. Someone had actually been inside. They had been 'ejected' as Marna said, but they had been inside.

They knew where it was.

An ache surged in her chest. This was bad.

Wren pushed the pictures away and leaned back in her chair. Someone else she might have tried to bluff or feign ignorance; not these three. Cassandra could discern truth from lie with a glance. Elders like Marna were worse, able to know your thoughts before you spoke them.

Wren swallowed. "You should stay away from that place."

"Then you recognize it?"

She looked around at them. "It is a secret that should remain buried. I made a mistake."

"'You' made a mistake?" Cassandra asked.

Wren closed her eyes. "Please. I can't deal with this."

"Observation," Dame Techstar said. "I believe my speculation was correct. Timing, vector, and Sara Wren's corroboration indicate she was the focus of the energy detected. Concluding, this explains phenomena witnessed during story night in the time portal."

"Time portal?" Wren asked.

Cassandra nodded. "Yes, Ziedra's ring is actually a rather powerful First-one artifact for temporal event viewing."

Marna stayed focused on Wren. "So, is Dame Techstar's speculation correct?"

She looked at them. "Yes."

Cassandra fell back in her chair, jaw falling open. "No."

The elder Kriar frowned at her and made a shushing motion. "Wren, could you duplicate what you did?"

She stared at the Kriar woman, body like ice. "I may have to now."

"Pardon?"

"That place is dangerous. No-one should know about it. It's supposed to be hidden. I closed it to the pantheon lords but I didn't think..." She slapped her hands on the table. "I didn't know creatures might fly around close enough to... to do whatever you did."

"What do you mean you closed it?" Cassandra said.

"It will never acknowledge or allow within it an un-joined pantheon lord. When I told Starholme to seal itself, it booted your person out... but you still know where it is. You'll try and get in again." She scrubbed her forehead.

Marna slid the picture of the cooling tower toward Wren. "Do you know what that is?"

"It's a cooling shaft for the magic conduits," Wren said rocking her head back.

"Do you realize--" she started.

She thumped her chair onto all four legs. "I realize that one shaft alone can continuously generate over 500 terapsions of magical energy, and there are sixteen of them. With a decent immortal host body properly synchronized I can tap into about ten megapsions of that power." She looked around the table. "Starholme Prime was the First-one's greatest legacy and their greatest fallacy--it never should have been created. It was designed to remake the universe as they saw fit."

Cassandra had changed color, she looked the faded yellow of a sheet of parchment left too long in the sun.

Marna was staring at her.

"You've just put me in a horrible position. Nobody can study Starholme, they cannot play with it--*anything* it. I'll find a way to destroy it before that happens."

The gold mage's eyes went wide. "Wren, you can't--"

She gripped the edge of the table. "Cassandra, yes, I can--and I will."

Continued in *Aesir's Blood*

Aesir's Blood Preview

Talking with one's fists—G'yaki style

...Wren turned to head back to her quarters and stopped. She glanced back to the corner. "Vera, you must be slipping. I felt you that time."

The G'yaki melted out of the shadows, moving with her typical silence and came to a stop by Wren's shoulder. The short dark-haired cook had her hood up and the smoke gray robes she wore for fighting and training laced down. Wren ducked down to see under the hood and look into the little woman's eyes.

"You okay?" Wren asked.

Vera frowned.

Wren put an arm around Vera. "You look like you need to hit something. Let's find someplace quiet." She took the woman's wrist and drew her down the hall toward the center of the manor.

She was still learning her way around the mansion, it was so huge, and many of the halls looked the same. They passed the wood paneled passages of the servant's quarters, and passed into the broad tiled corridor called heraldry hall, where the coats of arms of the manor's previous barons were on display.

Wren was surprised when a deep male voice called to her from behind. "Li?"

She looked back. Her father was standing in one of the side galleries with Loric.

The Baron was dressed much more comfortably this evening, a simple brown tunic and breeches, his long red hair tied back with a leather band and braided. Lord Loric wore nothing ostentatious either, a dark blue shirt tucked into a pair of the oddly sewn and pocketed close-fitting pants that she had seen members of the Felspar family wear on occasion.

Wren walked back to her father and gave him a hug.

Vera came and bowed over Loric's hand wordlessly.

Vanidaar Kergatha smiled. "What are you up to, hmmm? You had the look of a girl on a mission."

"Of a sorts," she said. "Where would be a good place to work out you think?"

"Sword practice?" Vanidaar asked.

"Anything quiet with a good size floor."

"We have a dueling hall at the far end of the terrace level," he pointed. "Top of the stairs turn right and follow the hall to the end." He put a hand on her shoulder and bent down to meet her eyes. "You'll still join us for dinner?"

"I think so," she answered, glancing at Vera. The dark-eyed woman's expression was stony and unreadable. She had no idea what was going on in her head. Obviously, she wasn't herself because Wren had sensed her in the hall. Since they met that was the first time that had ever happened.

Loric's brow was furrowed. He obviously noted Vera's serious demeanor that was a stark contrast to her normally cheerful countenance.

"Vera?" he said.

The woman backed away from him with a bow shaking her head, she turned away as though afraid to meet his eyes. She made a terse bow to the Baron and pulled Wren toward the corridor. As she was being led away, Wren met Loric's eyes and gave him a shrug and an expression to indicate she didn't know what was going on either. Her gesture seemed to forestall the elder mage, because he'd been about to say something. Vera pulled her up the hall and took the stairs as Vanidaar had suggested.

They located the room her father described, Wren found the sensor and activated the magelights. The dueling area was a rectangular chamber thirty paces long and almost twenty wide with a cork covered floor. The place had a musky smell that Wren associated with places of heavy exercise. Racks of weapons ranging from daggers to polearms lined one of the short walls. A thick pad had been made onto the other short wall, its surface rippled from many forceful impacts. A row of bleachers for observers lined the long wall close to the entry. Mirrors placed behind a steel grid covered the far wall, and at its base were benches for the warriors and their gear.

"You want to talk or work?"

"Work." Vera's voice was sounded raw, like it took effort to even speak.

Wren nodded. She had never seen Vera so off her rhythm. She had been strange and distant the evening of story night. Less than a day had passed and now she seemed magnitudes worse. Had something happened?

She pulled off her boots and unstrapped Azimuth's sheath. She pulled her hair back, pulled a lace from her pocket and tied the strands tight. Vera didn't look like she was in any mood to go easy.

Vera stepped to the center of the floor and stomped into a formal salute and slid back to an aggressive front stance, fists held in a new kind of guard pattern Wren had not seen before.

She was here to be with Vera, not question, so she mimicked the stance as she had practiced through many grueling workouts.

The G'yaki woman lashed through a complicated shadow fight, strokes of the hands and feet, slashing into the vitals of enemy after invisible enemy. Vera's robes cracked with the speed of each move, all of her punches and kicks snapped out with a precise stiffness that was unlike her normal fluid style.

Keeping her breathing even, her eyes and figure in sync with Vera, she let the G'yaki pour out her frustration. Vera spoke with a language of bodies that a cycle ago Wren wouldn't have understood. The crease of hands, the set of shoulders, the subtle nuances of a spirit off balance and out of center echoed in stances and footwork. In a flurry of cadences, Vera spoke and Wren listened.

As perspiration began trickling down her face, Wren didn't like what she heard. Vera was in trouble. She was losing herself. Vera's indecision echoed in the eye-blink long pauses that created a stutter in the transitions from defense to attack and opponent to opponent in the universe of lines. The little woman's harmony of perfection was marred by errors in timing and footwork that Wren would never have noticed if she hadn't drilled with her for hundreds of bells.

What was she going to do? The woman who gave so much to her was in a spiritual turmoil that was swallowing her up. On story night, she had said something about returning home, about closing the circle.

Vera stomped into a finishing move and salute, Wren following. The little woman drew back with a slash of her arm and a ritual close of her fist to indicate a switch to opposed forms.

Heart thumping, Wren wiped her brow, drew a breath, and set her stance opposite the G'yaki master. Vera lunged and circle struck, Wren slipped and ducked, then double punched to counter and pushed off a in a front kick. Vera blocked with crossed wrists, swung through with a forearm strike and spun into an elbow 'cheek crusher'.

Involved in the clash of flesh on flesh, Wren felt the tension building to a decision. Each assault was a statement or question, every defense a reply and each counter an answer.

Axe kick, claw strike, ridge fist... *My shoulders are heavy. My eyes no longer see. My mind is clouded.*

Bridge block, wrist pivot, palm guard... *I will support you. I will be your eyes. My hand is in yours.*

The exchanges continued. Vera was not gentle, kicks and punches growling her discomfort and frustration, strong defenses stating that she hadn't given up. Her tentative counters mirrored her indecision. *What about my family? What will they think? Will they understand?*

Wren pushed hard, knees and elbows speaking fiercely. *They will survive. They want what's best for you. They want you to be happy.*

Involved in both their physical conversation and simply not getting her head knocked off, Wren did not realize that the light in the room had brightened and that people were observing until she heard the bleachers creak.

The momentary distraction caused her to miss a timing cue as one of Vera's spinning kicks came whistling around with bone crushing force. Off balance, she dove and rolled instead of slipping the attack.

With the rhythm of the combat interrupted, Vera drew back into a ready stance and turned toward the sound.

Wren bounced to her feet and faced the bleachers.

Blonde hair gleaming, shapely body in mirrored robes, the pantheon lady Idun sat on the bottom bleacher studying them with glowing blue eyes, her triangular face set in smile. Next to her, grinning face almost a mirror of Idun's, hair braided and thick body dressed in dark robes was Euriel.

"Mother, Grandmother," Wren said with a gasp. Wren rubbed the back of her neck. Perspiration was pouring down her face. Her heart was thudding in her temples. They had been going really hard. "You surprised me."

Vera didn't say anything. She simply bowed toward them.

"Sorry," Euriel answered. "Your father said we could find you up here. I know you told me that Vera was teaching you, but I had trouble crediting it. Now that I see her, I realize why."

"Right." She swallowed. "I--"

"Any chance Vera would indulge me in some sparring too?" Euriel asked, rushing on. "Ever since you and I traded hits in the hall I have been feeling out of practice."

"Now is probably not a good time..." Wren's voice trailed off.

"Nonsense, there's plenty of time before dinner," Euriel said. She looked to Vera and leaned forward. "Yes?"

Wren felt a cold shiver run down her spine as Vera made a sharp come-here gesture. The woman had never sparred with anyone but her.

"Excellent," Euriel hopped up and kicked off her shoes. She undid the ties on her robe, slid them off and folded them. She wore only a slip and short-clothes underneath. She turned to Idun. "Mother, something loose?"

The goddess gestured and in a flash of light Euriel was clothed in a glossy black sleeveless war-tunic made from heavy silk, thick fingerless gloves, and some baggy kick-fighting pantaloons.

Dressed in this clothing, her mother's powerful physique was much more obvious. She was much broader across the shoulders than Wren, and as she tensed her fists, the muscles in her arms took on definition. Euriel made an experimental kick, rolled her shoulders, and turned her head side-to-side. She nodded and smiled. "Nice. Thank you."

Idun nodded back.

Euriel turned back to face them.

Wren swallowed. "Mother, I really don't think this is a good idea."

The daughter of Idun grinned and bounced with energy. "Don't worry. I'll go easy." She gritted her teeth. That wasn't what she was worried about.

Vera made another sharp coming gesture. She reached inside of her robes and pulled on a pair of gloves with the fingertips cut off.

She didn't like this. Not with Vera in such a state of mind. "Mother, seriously, you shouldn't spar with her."

Still bouncing, Euriel moved out into the center of the floor. "Baby, you really think she'll hurt me?"

"Mother, I don't think you realize..."

With her gloves up, Euriel snapped a coming gesture with both arms. "Bring it."

Vera pivoted slowly. She turned her head to one-side. Her feet dropped into a stance. She reached up to her neck and pulled the mask up over her nose and mouth.

The Baroness shook her fists. "Come on."

Icy claws raked Wren's insides. Vera was serious. "Mother, no!"

Vera had already shot forward with crack of robes and a triple thud of fists on flesh that sounded like one long impact.

Euriel yelped, toppled backward, rolled and came up to her feet, panting and gripping her torso.

Vera swayed side-to-side letting out a hiss like a snake, fists making patterns in the air between them.

If it had been any other person besides her mother, they'd be writhing on the ground clutching several broken ribs. Vera was hitting with her full strength.

Idun rose concern on her face. This was obviously not the way a pair of war-like Aesir expected a fight to start.

Euriel rubbed her middle and stared at the hissing Vera. "Well struck."

Heart thrashing, Wren rushed to a stop between them. "Mother. Listen to me. Stop. Just drop your guard and step away. She's not well." She glanced at Vera. The woman's eyes were just glimmers in her hood. Her body swayed sinuously, ready to strike at the slightest provocation. Words wouldn't reach her now.

Euriel frowned. "Not well? She has the strength of three. No mortal ever hit me that hard."

She drew a breath, straightened, and put a hand on Wren's shoulder to move her aside.

"Not well in the head!" Wren gripped her mother's shoulders, trying to physically push her back which was impossible. "She thinks it's a real fight! You don't know how dangerous she is!"

Euriel frowned at her. "You underestimate me." She pushed Wren aside and stepped forward. "She wants a real fight. She has one." She lunged forward.

"Mom!"

Vera met Euriel's charge in a brutal exchange of hands and feet. The daughter of Idun had an immortal's strength and speed, limitless endurance, and the Aesir instinct for battle. As Wren had experienced in her own battle, Euriel raised the level of the conflict, her movements becoming a blur. A lesser opponent would have been crushed in a heartbeat, but Vera was a G'yaki grand master of open-hand combat. She had trained for more than a century to do one thing--*kill*.

Greater strength and mass did not avail Euriel. Vera never let up long enough for her to use it. The little woman had perfect control of her body and insane flexibility, able to give with a blow or sway out of the path of an attack and counter in the same motion. Euriel was built for power not speed, and she had all the flexibility of a scalebark tree. The little woman hammered away, dealing out a horrible drubbing in the space of heartbeats before Euriel managed to snag her robe and smash home a hit that made the room shake. The G'yaki woman was sent sailing backward as though shot out of crossbow.

Vera spun in the air, hit the padded wall with her feet, kicked off, flipped and landed in a crouch hissing. She gripped her middle, but straightened with a shake of her head. Even that powerful strike had not slowed her.

Euriel staggered, wiping at her bloodied nose and split lip. She looked like she had been run over by a carriage. Gasping for air, she straightened up.

Brushing aside her glowing blonde hair, Idun stepped onto the floor between them and held up her hands. "Enough."

Wren was clutching her chest. It had happened so fast, there had been no way to get between them.

Vera started to move forward. Idun frowned at her, glowing eyes flashing. Vera took another step. Idun's brow furrowed. Sparks spun around Vera's limbs and slid off. The little woman growled and shook her head and continued. Idun's head dipped and she narrowed her eyes, tightening her hand into a fist.

The G'yaki woman growled and staggered back a step.

The goddess raised an eyebrow. "Little girl, you will stop."

Taking deep heaving breaths, Vera relented, the stiffness in her shoulders rounding down. She stood there wavering like a puppet with most of its strings cut, then she slowly sank to her knees.

Euriel was staring at her mother. "She was resisting you?"

Idun nodded. "Phenomenal."

Wren ran to her mother. "Ow mom, you look like me after one of my fights."

Euriel stared at Vera in dismay. "What in Odin's eye is she?"

"A G'yaki grand master, she's like--well no, she *is* a savant of combat. Damn, you scared me."

The daughter of Idun staggered and gripped her head. She winced. "Mmmm. That didn't feel good at all."

Wren glanced back to Vera. "She's having some kind of problem. I was trying to work it out with her when you came in."

"You were fighting her," Euriel accused.

"No, it was opposed shadow battle. It only looks like fighting. You can get real lumps if you don't do it right, but that's why we practice." She put a finger gently to her Mother's face. Already the bruises and cuts were beginning to heal.

"Ouch," Euriel grabbed her hand and pulled it down. "Yes, I'm bleeding, and yes, you told me so."

"Ummm, sorry."

Her mother put an arm around her, still a bit unsteady. "What are you going to do about your friend? She doesn't look well. She's got a lot of fight in her, but not much else."

"Her spirit is heavy," Idun said, frowning. "Very heavy."

Wren kissed her mother, then turned and went to Vera. The little woman no longer seemed aware of anything. She stared at the floor arms slack at her sides, hands still spotted with Euriel's blood.

She bent down next to her. "Vera?"

Wren looked into the woman's eyes. They were glazed and distant.

"Vera?" She gave the woman's shoulder a shake, but got no more response. She touched the G'yaki's face. Her skin didn't feel hot like it normally did. It felt cool. She shook her again. "Vera, you're scaring me."

Euriel walked over and bent down. She looked at Vera for a moment and put a hand on Wren's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Baby. She seems to have withdrawn completely."

"Damn it, this shouldn't be happening to her." She sighed. "I better get her to Loric, he'll know what to do..."

Glossary of Terms

-- A --

adamantium -- A magical metal known for it's nearly indestructible qualities. The gates to a certain famous nether-region are said to be made of this material.

Aesir -- (also Aesirian) The name given to the Lords of Asgard. There are two clans in Gladshiem consisting of pantheon lords and their issue. There are the more well known Aesir, and their often rival brothers the Vanir.

See Also: Asgard

aesirian -- See Aesir.

Allfather -- the honorific applied to the pantheon lord Odin i.e. Allfather Odin. See Odin.

Alostar, Damay -- Eldest of the Kel'Varan's and reputed to be the most powerful. Damay fought many epic battles against Mandrimin (c.f.) the Ta'arthak Nola (savant of matter) in her time. About 6000 years ago she fell to Aarlen Frielos in a duel of magic, she was approximately 2900 summers old at the time. It is unknown exactly how or why, but Aarlen trapped Damay's tao essence in an amulet of shael-dal metal. It is surmised that the amulet was an experiment to create a magical item fueled by the essence of a savant. Apparently, the item was never completed. In 1091 N.I.S., Wren Kergatha came into possession of the amulet. She later resurrected Damay by rejoining her tao with a suitable body. Shortly thereafter Damay and Aarlen dueled again, this time resulting in a draw. Damay's current whereabouts are unknown, but some sources surmise that she has returned to Starholme Prime.

See Also: Frielos, Aarlen, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, megapsions, Starholme Prime

Alpha -- Alpha is the name given to the entity which procreated life in the body of Gaea and is thus the progenitor of the elder races that diversified to become the various forms of life throughout Eternity. Many scholars speculate that Alpha and Gaea are merely metaphors for the burgeoning of life. Others cite differently quoting texts that indicate that both Alpha and Gaea were actual creatures that pre-dated all other forms of intelligent life. The Alphaforce is the spark said to be carried by savants. This spark is sometimes referred to as a 'tao'.

alphas -- Alphas (plural) is general reference to creatures that possess a 'tao' and have the potential to merge with their 'beta' match. All savants are considered 'alphas' while the pantheon lords are considered 'betas'. It is theorized that each living alpha savant has a corresponding beta who is their reciprocal. It is theorized that these two entities may conjoin to form a single more advanced creature. It has not yet been proven however.

See Also: Alpha, betas

Arabella -- Bard hailing from Corwin, renowned through Sharikaar. Many of the epics of the Ring Realms are translations written by this red-headed lady bard. The number of adaptations attributed to Arabella seem excessive considering her relatively young age (around 50). While most famous for her ability with instruments, song, and pen-- Arabella has a notorious history. She was associated with some of the more nefarious thieves guilds in Sharikaar, and purportedly involved in many kinds of violent mayhem.

Arabella was renowned for her temper, and was involved several known public duels that resulted in the death of her opponents. Certain sources cite that they find it unusual that in more than half of these fatalities, the slaying blow appeared to be inflicted from behind.

A number of reliable witnesses claim that Arabella is currently no longer among the living. With a town full of onlookers, a red haired bard, purportedly Arabella, was accused, tried, and hung for murder in northern Ivaneth. The credence of this report is in doubt however, because new songs and written materials with Arabella's distinctive flair have since appeared. Whether they are actually the work of Arabella, or simply the works of another bard publishing under her name is unknown.

See Also: Sharikaar

Ariok, Dominique Kalan -- Daughter of Gabriella Sarn Ariok and Sarok Ariok. Like her mother Dominique was turned to vampirism to survive in the Silissian campaign against the servants of Kali. Dominique was trained from birth to be a warrior specializing in the destruction of the minions of Kali. She is a renowned blade master and with her extended lifespan, she turned to magic and became a loremage as well. Unlike her mother, Dominique was not a willing vampire, she was forced into it by her mother. Centuries later when this condition was removed, it remains a point of friction between them. (Ah, the drama of having an evil dragon-draining vampire for a mother!) As a result, Dominique was always closer to her father, who as one might imagine was no angel either if he took a vampire as his wife.

Through a complicated series of events, Dominique attempted to free her mother after she had been captured by Dorian and Cassandra, and the evil purified from her. Not knowing what had been done to her mother, Dominique was quite surprised when her mother turned on her and assisted in her capture. Dominique too was turned from the darkness, and the vampirism that had been forced on her reversed. Many cycles later through a gradual campaign of persuasion, Dominique has slowly become friends with members of the Felspar clan. Though no-longer a vampire, she is still a 'vamp', and characterized by her smooth and lascivious dialogue, it goes without saying that she still likes whips and chains... but that's another story.

For a number of cycles, Dominique and Tal Falor were an "item" and both did a tour of duty in the Shael Dal where the lady began to like the role of the hero. She and Tal split up on friendly terms in 1087 N.I.S. Dominique's exemplary contributions to the Protectorate were significant enough that she was asked to continue being a contributing member.

It was through her involvement with the protectorate that Dominique came into contact with the Kriar high counsel Marna Solaris. She and the Kriar became fast friends in the wake of her recent separation from Tal. Later, she and the Kriar lady became lovers. They eventually married when Marna underwent renewal. (Kriar periodically change sexual identity-- so Marna took on the identity of Marn--a male Kriar). Dominique has one child by Marna which she foathra'd when Marna was still female, a boy named Celaesh.

Dominique has been teaching the Kriar matriarch magic, in return she has been learning Kriar warp-science and gate control. The woman's already formidable mastery of magic intertwined with Kriar super-technology make her one of the most dangerous creatures in the Ring Realms.

See Also: Ariok, Gabriella Sarn, dragon, kriar, silissian, Solaris, Marna (Counsel) (Vatraena)

Ariok, Gabriella Sarn -- The Dragon Queen of Silissia. This great elder's true name (Drakka'Tah) is known only to a few. Gabriella was born sometime during the infancy of the Silissian old world, approximately 14,000 cycles ago. She was the sole survivor when the Kali cult over-ran her village and staked out her family. Swearing vengeance, she undertook a campaign against the followers of the death goddess that lasted close to five millennia.

Early in her history, Gabriella turned to vampirism to get the strength and lifespan to continue her vendetta. Gabriella is known as the Dragon Queen because unlike typical vampires who feed on humans, her targets were typically dragons both for the amount of blood and their power. It is unknown how she gained the power to prey on dragons in such a fashion, but it surmised she gained this ability (curse?) from one of the three orbs of dragon-kind.

In her later years, Gabriella had the misfortune of crossing some of the Band of the Crescent Moon. After a number of clashes, the elder was eventually captured by the combined efforts of Dorian Degaba and Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. With the power of grand magicks, Gabriella was turned from darkness to serve the light. Regardless of her new 'outlook', Gabriella is uneasy ally of House Felspar and the regime of Isis. After her 'conversion' Gabriella shared a close bond with Dorian, and two are fast allies. Dorian, along with her daughters Cassin and Annawen, serve as Gabriella's magical apprentices.

Gabriella has four living daughters: Dominique, Gabrin, Sabella, Sarokirin. Her only son, Sarok, died in a conflict against her. Before her capture and conversion, Gabriella acted occasionally as an agent for Aarlen Frielos. Gabriella plays a significant roll in the story of Savant's Blood.

See Also: Ariok, Dominique Kalan, dragon, Frielos, Aarlen, goddess, Silissia, silissian

Asgard -- The city within which the pantheon lords of the Aesir live.

See Also: Aesir

avatar -- A creature who has been bonded to another through avatarism (c.f.)

See Also: avatarism

avatarism -- A magical/telepathic process by which a creature of greater power may share or channel its energies into one or most host bodies. The deities of the pantheons most commonly use this technique to channel into the figureheads that command their legions of followers. The Eternals use this ability with the Shael Dal. The Time Guardians also use this technique with the Talisman elite. Though this magic is generally used by beings of extraordinary power, upper echelon mages can also use it for various purposes. There are various forms of avatarism, from the forced domination of a host called 'succorunding' to binding rituals and channeling through magical foci.

See Also: telepathic

Azimuth -- Dagger of flight belonging to Cassandra Felspar. Cassandra loans this weapon to Wren Kergatha for self defense. Through their unique magical properties, daggers of flight can be thrown as much as quintuple the distance of a ordinary dagger. They are exceptionally accurate and well balanced. The most valued ability is the magical 'returning' or 'summoning' power they possess. If the person has said the weapon's name prior to taking possession of it, they may call the weapon's name... in so-doing, the dagger vanishes from wherever it currently is and appears in the caller's outstretched hand. Depending on the particular flight weapon, this can even work across dimensions.

See Also: Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

-- B --

Baltizaar -- The oldest of the Kriar 'henges'. Examination of the materials place its construction as far back as 200 million cycles. These henges are permanent gates built by the Kriar in order to facilitate moving from star to star. These gates also act as eyes and ears, collecting data on activity in the surrounding regions of space. How many gates exist is unclear because in some instances they move in both space and time. Exactly how this is accomplished or whether this is even intentional on the Kriar's part is unknown. Surveys performed by the Protectorate project no less than 64 planetary based gates distributed through known space.

See Also: kriar

battleblade -- Something of a misnomer, all swords are designed for use in combat. A battleblade is a weapon designed for PROLONGED use in battle. Typical swords have a lifespan of only a few serious combats before breaking (or the edge blunting). Only specially tempered metals have enough resilience to retain their edge and rigidity for any significant amount of actual abuse. This is historically what set Saracen steel and the folded designs of Japanese samurai swords apart. A battleblade is a weapon that has these resilient qualities.

See Also: battlesword

battlestaff -- Used to describe a staff that has been fitted with heavy metal shods, often installing cudgel balls, blades, or spikes into the ends of the weapon to make it more effective in combat.

battlesword -- This is an alternate usage for battleblade. See battleblade.

See Also: battleblade

betas -- Betas (plural) usually refers to one of the pantheon lords. See Alphas.

See Also: alphas

biophase -- A form of energy that can be tapped by the proper magical rituals. This energy is often used to dispel fatigue and reinforce the body. Mages utilize it to boost the efficiency of their spells.

Utilization of biophase has a strong euphoric effect that makes its use dangerous. Despite the hazards, biophase is one of the commonly manipulated powers in "carnal energies".

blackhorn -- An antelope-like creature that bares a startling resemblance to a deer.

Blackstar -- Mountain in the eastern border of Malan. Home of the largest dwarven community on Sharikaar.

See Also: Malan, Sharikaar

bloodguard -- The "Bloodguard" is the name of a group of created Valkyrie's who serve Odin. The Bloodguard and the "Chosen" sisterhoods are bitter rivals in their service to the Aesir.

See Also: Aesir, Allfather

bloodsong -- A kind of magical charm that is actually an infection of a victim's blood by the spiritual power of a vampire lord. A victim is typically infected by the bite of a vampire. In this unusual case, something is being put IN as opposed to the blood being sucked out (though the vampire might snack a little in the process of doing this).

The bloodsong can be used in a number of ways by a powerful vampire. In general, it allows them to control the victim. It allows them to know their thoughts, to sense their location, and spiritually possess that person in a way that is similar to avatarism. The bloodsong is extremely difficult to expunge from a victim's body once infected.

Gabriella Sarn Ariok infects Wren Kergatha with bloodsong in order (according to her) protect Wren from the advances of the D'klace sisters, Sindra and Drucilla Frielos.

See Also: Ariok, Gabriella Sarn, avatarism, Frielos, Drucilla, Frielos, Sindra, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

bloodspar -- A bloodspar is a powerful form of magic bow. The only more powerful bows are called shadowspars. Both of this "class" of magical weapon draw

upon the life force and native willpower of the wielder to enhance the accuracy and damage of the arrows they fire. Only truly skilled archers can use them because of the nature of the powerful magicks within them. Irodee De'Falcone uses a bloodspar bow.

broadpaw -- A large heavy-set furry omnivore that inhabits forests and mountain areas. On earth, you might confuse one for a bear.

-- C --

Cloudshriek -- A large bird in the raptor family with extraordinary eyesight. On some worlds they are called hawks.

Coormeer -- A small Kingdom to the south and east of Ivaneth. Coormeer is known for its moderate climate and the fertility of the hills spread through the heart of its territory. Coormeer makes most of its income as a nation that barter trade. They have a large seaport and a sizable overland freight industry. Coormeer is also known for its vineyards, and kingdoms from all over Titaan import the different wines made there.

A few notable figures have dealings with or are part of Coormeer. The Justicar Sir Laramis De'Falcone hails from there and his family owns one of the major vineyards. Lord Mazerak Duquesne the savant of storms also hailed from Coormeer. Lastly, Princess Janai T'Evagduran of Malan holds the title of Baroness in Coormeer, and owns extensive lands there as a widow of one of the Kingdom's nobles.

See Also: Malan, Titaan

Corwin -- Kingdom on the western border of Ivaneth. Biggest Kingdom (in terms of territory) on the continent of Sharikaar. Corwin is also the oldest settlement in Sharikaar. Corwin's capital is Corwin city, a sea port with a population of just under 2 million people.

See Also: Sharikaar

Cosmodarus -- Two major cities in the Ring Realms bear the Cosmodarus name. The great city wherein the goddess Isis rules is often called Cosmodarus the city of magic. Another city bearing the same name is in the ribbon realms of the purple plains. It too is called Cosmodarus the city of magic. It is rumored that at one time Isis lived or hailed from the Cosmodarus out in border realms. She may have simply brought the name with her and forgot the other existed. There is often confusion when a person claims to be from Cosmodarus, as both places are home to some of the most skilled and talented adventurers in the Ring Realms. Wren Kergatha was born in the ribbon realm's Cosmodarus. The Kergatha family are the manor lords of Cosmodarus.

See Also: goddess, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

crenellation -- The notches on castle battlements. The crenellations are the blocks set on the wall top that create the "notched" appearance.

-- D --

D'klace -- The D'klace are actually a guild of assassins for hire. They are retained by the various kingdoms usually in a deterrent role much the way weapons of mass destruction are stockpiled in the modern world.

The D'klace are actually a branch of the "all-world's" or "masters" guild lead by half-god Drow Adorne Doonweir. Membership in any branch of the over-world guild is a measure of status because of the rigorous initiation that must be passed in order to join. There is a close association between the masters guild and Dream Merchants. The rogue Kriar, Theln Azygos, is said to have ties in both organizations.

See Also: god, guild, kriar

D'Shar, T'Gor -- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Korvel.

See Also: Korvel, shaladen

D'Shar, Tigress -- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the honorary shaladen Swiftwind.

See Also: shaladen

D'Tarin, Algernon -- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Warstar. One of the nine Lords of Ivaneth, and master of the East wood. One of the core members of the Band of the Crescent Moon dating back to their first treks in Silissia. Algernon has one daughter, Val'Siden, currently married to Bertram Tarrantil.

See Also: shaladen, Silissia, Tarrantil, Bertram

danee -- Corrupted form of the Numinorian Dan Nae which means 'power two'. The Dan Nae is a fighting style that stresses speed and flexibility and the use of two equal length weapons. The Danee style is a favored not only for fighting but entertainment as well because the dance-like rhythms, spinning defenses, kicks, and other showy forms that are parts of the discipline. The Danee is considered a moderate form that emphasizes misdirection and capitalizing on an opponent's mistakes. Ceraph Silkere practices the Danee weapon style.

darkroot -- A deep brown root which when steeped in a boiling water creates a potent drink. The concoction is similar to other drinks made by steeping dried leaves.

dasta -- Kriar word that has no literal translation. It is used interchangeably in context when referring to named cliques, organizations, or groups of people. Dasta Daergon was the political affiliation of followers loyal to Daergon Surr. In another instance, Dasta Fabrista is the entire host of people and creatures who live on the Fabrista Homeworld.

See Also: kriar

De'Falcone, Irodee -- Myrmigyne of Jhandris'kul clan, follower of Nethra, and wife of Laramis De'Falcone. Her maiden name is Irodee Ki'Targallae. In Myrmigyne, the Ki suffix before the proper name means adopted sister. Irodee is a long time

friend of Wren Kergatha. Irodee is the biggest woman ever born among the clans, measuring just a hair under 22 hands tall and weighing almost 17 stone she is nothing short of imposing. Irodee's natural mother, Tolumbra Skyesteel, died when the girl was still young, thus she spent a most of her youth in the care of various foster mothers. Gawky and clumsy because of her quick growth, she found growing up in the clans difficult first because of her inability to compete with her sisters then later because of her size.

Ess Targallae, the sister of Myrmigyne Queen, adopted Irodee and changed her lineage from Skyesteel to Ki'Targallae when she was early into her teens after the girl proved her bravery and commitment to the clan. As the protege of the Queen's sister, Irodee learned quickly and developed into a skilled warrior. In addition to being one of foremost warriors in the clan, Ess Targallae is one of the best educated. She tutored Irodee and eventually sent the girl to the best schools in Malan and Ivaneth. It was while in the schools that Irodee truly flourished. She became a favorite amongst the teachers, a gentle giant with a caring disposition and a thirst for knowledge. She graduated with honors from two universities, and holds advanced certificates in language and history. She speaks six languages fluently: Myrmigyne, common, sea trade, both the Elf High Tongue and Dikeeni, and Dwarven.

While she is highly intelligent, Irodee is somewhat uncomfortable in letting it show. She prefers instead to play 'dumb' and often speaks in broken fragments like a barbarian. After marrying Laramis she confused many of her friends in the way she only showed her mastery of language to her husband. When not in his presence she lapses back to her fragmented speech patterns. Irodee is thirty summers old and has a five summer old daughter. Shortly after the birth of their daughter, Irodee accepted the ki'succorund (voluntary avatarism) for Ukko.

See Also: avatarism, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Myrmigyne, Malan, stone, succorund

De'Falcone, Laramis -- Appointed high Justicar of Ivaneth and Malan. Originally hailing from Coormeer (a kingdom in the south of Sharikaar). Laramis is an exemplary knight of the order of Ukko. He is swordsman of extraordinary skill, and veteran of many conflicts. During the events of Reality's Plaything, Laramis is 32 summers old. Laramis is married to Irodee, a Myrmigyne of the Jhandris'kul clan. Laramis and Irodee have a five summer old daughter named Marta. It is revealed by the end of Reality's Plaything that Laramis is an ki'succorund avatar of Ukko.

See Also: avatar, Myrmigyne, Malan, Sharikaar, succorund

deity -- The generic term for a pantheon lord.

demon -- A generic term referring to any of a number of outer planes dwelling creatures created and utilized by the pantheon lords to wage war and intimidate lesser creatures.

Dericost, Childers -- Retainer for Laramis De'Falcone.

dragon -- These magical reptiles take many forms, colors, and sizes and live throughout the Ring Realms. What more can be said about them that whole volumes of material haven't addressed'

Draupnir -- Hammer of thunderbolts used by Talorin Falor.

Duran'Gravar -- Giant tree in the valley of Jhandris'kul and the home to the tribe of Myrmigynes lead by Beia Targallae.

See Also: Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

dwarves --

-- E --

elder -- Used to describe creatures (usually humanoids) that have lived far longer than normal human life span. Any creature with more than 500 cycles of living is considered an elder. Many elves fall into this category.

elemental -- In the broadest sense a creature that is manifestation or embodiment of one of the four elemental forces (stone, air, water, fire). Note that this extension is more or less metaphorical. Races such as Djinni and Efreeti are considered elementals (air and fire respectively). What gives them this distinction is their mastery of magicks which manipulate their respective element.

See Also: stone

Elf -- Elves are a race of creatures seen throughout magically endowed worlds of the Ring Realms. It is popularly believed they are the descendants of the elder race called the Silcanna (also known as the silver elves). The patron of the elves, Carellion Lothlarian, is rumored to not be a pantheon lord but is instead one of the Silcanna. This has not been substantiated however. The Elf race is noted for the longevity of its members and their close relationship to magic and nature. The elves themselves are split into several distinct hereditary branches (sub-races) that each have their own language and customs. These are the Gray-elves, the High-elves, Wood-elves (faeries), Mountain or 'Valley' elves, and Sea-elves.

There is no particular racial bias or prejudices between these races and their dialects are derivative enough from each other that all of them can understand and communicate at a rudimentary level. Of the five, the aquatic semi-amphibious Sea elves are the furthest removed from the original hereditary strain and by necessity are the group that has the least interaction with both other elves and humans.

Elves are typified as having the same approximate stature as humans, but having a tendency to be slimmer and more fine boned. Their ears and eyes are slightly larger in proportion to their faces than is typical for a human. The ear cartilage is up-swept and pointed, this trait being most noticeable in Wood-elves. The eyes of elves have a luminous phosphorescent quality that is noticeable even in daylight. This 'glowing' quality enables elves to have exceptional vision at night, being able to resolve reasonable details in approximately half the light necessary for human viewing. Elven vision is tuned to longer ranges (being able to resolve at 40 feet what a human does at 20). This trait is at the sacrifice of close-up vision. As a consequence, Elven script tends to be quite large and their books rather thick. They often employ vision aides when it is necessary to read smaller print in any volume.

The other characteristic of elves is their lifespan which is typically over five hundred cycles. The gray elves are the most long lived of elves, their lifespans extending well beyond two millennia. In fact, it is unknown exactly how long they do live because few that become great elders ever die of natural causes.

elves -- Plural of Elf. see Elf.

energy -- (generic) of or pertaining to any spectral force which can perform work (change states in matter).

eternals -- The seventh generation Eternals were evolved for the purpose of fighting of invasions of 'foreign bodies' and the cancerous infestation of germane life (temporal 'trouble makers'). Each entity was imbued with complete mastery over a certain element, energy or power, and lesser control over other forms.

Since the matrix provided more raw power than even than Eternals could control, the eternals were given the ability to surrogate their powers to other creatures. This surrogation is commonly referred to as avatarism. This same technique is practiced by the deities of the outer planes, and in some instances by grand magi. The surrogates of the eternals were dubbed the 'Shael Dal'. The number of surrogates each Eternal can have is unknown. The time guardians, who also possess this power, and have been known to have as many of sixty-one functioning surrogates at one time. See Eternity. See also time guardians.

Roster

Eternal's Name	Position	Shaladen Name	Power
=====	=====	=====	=====
Koass Vinax	Prime Commander	Sharonsheen	Reality
Foross Kerall	Strategic Commander	Stellaraac	Shape Shifting
Nethra Argos	Tactical Commander	Nova	Space
Garn Ellon	Tactical Leader	Warstar	Time
Sroth Mephista	Covert Ops Leader	Korvel	Life Energy
Areth Jalt	Intelligence Ops	Starsong	Sound
Aurra Levon	Psych Tactics	Starwind	Mind/Control
Yi Esperantil	Chronal specialist	Krelstar	Time
Zarthel Benwarr	Magic/Tech spc	Pulsar	Mind/Forces
Jarella Kepsforia	Security specialist	Cataract	Dimensions
*Culavera Sajaer	Tactical specialist	Jemfire	Reality/energy
**Leto Satieroth	Tactical specialist	Cybersong	Fire/energy
=====	=====	=====	=====

*Culavera is one of the oldest living beings in the universe, and the only creature surviving of the third generation of the Protectorate. Her powers are in actuality greater than those possessed by the prime commanders. Unfortunately, she cannot exert herself at those levels for very long.

**Leto is a product of the fifth generation of the protectorate, and, like Culavera, much older than the rest of their peers. Leto suffers from energy 'seizures' as a result of not being sufficiently synchronized with the eternal's power matrix.

Roster of Shael Dal (surrogates)

Eternal's Name =====	Position =====	Shaladen Name(s) =====	Surrogate(s) =====
Koass Vinax	Prime Commander	Sharonsheen	Megan Vinax
Foross Kerall	Strategic Commander	Stellaraac	Aarlen Frielos
		Snowfire*	Beia Targallae
		--Stellaraac	Corim Vale
Nethra Argos	Tactical Commander	Nova	Talorin Falor
Garn Ellon	Tactical Leader	Warstar	Algernon D'Tarin
Sroth Mephista	Covert Ops Leader	Korvel	T'Gor D'Shar
		Swiftwind*	Tigress D'Shar
		Blightscythe	Vulcindra Skybane
		Flameripper	Suda Nightrhymer
Areth Jalt	Intelligence Ops	Starsong	Arabella
Aurra Levon	Psych Tactics	Starwind	Elsbeth Crowninshield
Yi Esperantil	Chronal specialist	Krelstar	Adwena Swiftwing
Zarthel Benwarr	Magic/Tech spc	Pulsar	Zedar Cloudseeker
		Darkbane*	Aleesha Cloudseeker
		Golnir*	Bertram Terrantil
Jarella Kepsforia	Security spc	Cataract	Gwenafra Tristar
Culavera Sajaer	Tactical spc	Jemfire	Terra Karlin-Falor
Leto Satieroth	Tactical spc	Cybersong	Damrosil Terranath

***Shaladen names so marked are "honorary" embued weapons.**

See Also: avatarism, Arabella, Frielos, Aarlen, Korvel, Mephista, Sroth, shaladen, temporal, Terranath, Damrosil, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen), Tarrantil, Bertram

Eternity -- The name 'Eternity' is only a concept. However, it is popularly addressed as a living, breathing creature, and is often worshipped as a god. Eternity itself is actually a composite consciousness. It is the pooled psychic resonances of all living things. It is suspected that, after the first expansion, outside influences planted the seeds that would eventually develop into the super-consciousness that is Eternity.

One speculation points to a "Father" and "Mother" force (Alpha and Gaea) as being the originators of these seeds. These two beings are cited throughout the records made during the early development of the Protectorate, but their actual presence is never recorded. These two creatures are also cited as the progenitors of the First Ones, the race from which the original stock, and many later generations of universal protectors originated.

During the earliest stages of evolution, Eternity was little more than an infinitely large amoeba with a few basic responses. The thoughts of the myriad forms of life that were evolving began to etch neural paths on this receptive blank slate. At some point, the populations of life grew large enough that the resonances activated the 'seeds'. These twelve gigantic gems began to pick up and enhance the neural responses, and themselves take on the sophistications necessary for stimulus and response.

As Eternity evolved, life-forces were drawn into the matrix of gems. A residual imprint of these first primitive creatures created the first evolutionary steps in Eternity's progress toward awareness.

A billion cycles ago, both Eternity and life had diversified to a point where major changes could be undergone. During these changes, creatures began to be physically drawn into the matrix. From that point, these creatures became Eternity. The composite awareness saw all of time and space as a body. The body lacked defense

mechanisms, and this fusion of living and unliving essences could sense wounds that threatened the health of 'the body'.

Forces brought the 'seeds' to a central 'womb' to focus the consciousness. With this centralization, further powers became realized, and development increased in speed. Hosts were cultivated from the vastness of evolving creatures; these would be the anti-bodies that would attack and destroy infestations, and heal wounds.

The matrix continued to assimilate living creatures; its power multiplying as it grew.

Initially, twenty-four hosts came into being; two were linked to each seed. These hosts were incubated, forged, and evolved to fulfill special roles in the universal defense. These were the first Guardians.

These first creatures were far less refined than the Eternals and Guardians that evolved later. They did have a purpose and a design. They built defenses around the womb, and created the pocket dimension Siderous Chronous.

These first defenders oversaw the choosing of their predecessors. They learned ways to make them stronger and more durable, having longer life-spans and broader capabilities.

The second generation Guardians were more in tune with the matrix, capable of tapping into its now-immense powers themselves, physically and mentally superior to their parent races. Their life-spans were greatly extended, some ten times that of their parent races. These were the generation of savants that would eventually shape the 'seed-womb' into Eternity's Heart. The 'seeds' were faceted, and refined, to amplify their consciousness-projecting powers. They amassed the knowledge and powers to build defenders far more advanced than themselves. At this time, the defenders were broken into two groups: The savants and the warriors. The savants were to evolve mentally, with consciousness that extended through time and space. The warriors would tap directly into the cosmic forces now funneling through the matrix.

The Protectorates third generation was fraught with disappointments. Many forms of life did not survive the rigorous incubation processes, or the radical alterations in their physical and mental structures. The projects of this generation were shelved as too ambitious after 47 of 48 subjects died through body failure or instability. The sole survivor (Culavera) was stasised as a borderline case, and took part later in the scaled-down mutations.

By the time the scaled-down projects were underway, the second generation Guardians were nearing the end of their lives. The survivor of generation three, and two other volunteers, underwent the fourth generation treatments. All three came through alive, but mentally shattered. Only Culavera, who was the result of the far more ambitious 3rd generation group, was salvageable for further treatment. Culavera was put into stasis pending further review.

Three of the second generation guardians had died by the time the fifth generation process went into affect. One volunteer (Leto) went through the process and survived physically and mentally intact, but undershot expectations for the

desired matrix synthesis. The subject was put in stasis for review by his predecessors.

All but three of the second generation guardians were dead when the sixth evolution forging was undertaken. Five subjects underwent the rigorous process, and all survived. Only one second generation guardian survived to see the seventh evolution, which birthed five time Guardians and ten Eternals. He died before the final annealing of the subjects was completed.

The seventh generation Eternals and Guardians was a near perfect synthesis of power, longevity, and durability. Possessing hardened mindsets, expanded mental power and flexibility, they evolved into the Eternals and Guardians known today, about 10 million cycles ago.

See Also: Alpha, fusion, god

ether -- The somewhat dated notion of a fundamental fabric that binds matter together-- in other words the vacuum where things AREN'T. (The author notes that its a dated concept in light of quantum theory. However, since most of the readers don't have a doctorate in physics-- we'll stick with easier concepts.)

ethereal -- Typically it means to be insubstantial. It however can be used to indicate 'out-of-phase' state. The Ethereal plane is an alternate interpretation of real space much like the astral. See astral plane.

etherlock -- An etherlock is caused when a time-driver, mage, or device causes the probability fields in a specific area to become static. Essentially all matter in the target area is forced to assume the same inertia, temporal phase, and energy potential as designated by the 'lock'. This has the effect of rooting an area in time and space absolute to either a specific set of coordinates or a given vector. The etherlock prevents any kind of matter or time transference within its confines. The process takes a tremendous amount of power, and is the most demanding discipline practiced by a time-diver.

See Also: temporal

eurwren -- Wren when trapped in her mother Euriel's body makes a mocking joke of herself when she asks, "who am I now?". The combined name is pun and an aspect of the bitterness she is experiencing at that moment.

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Fabrista -- The race of Kriar occupying the 'Fabrista' Homeworld.

See Also: kriar

Falor, Talorin {Tal} -- Talorin Falor is one of the more storied figures in the Ring Realms, a warrior with a truly mythical ability to find himself in the 'hot-spots' of legends in the making. Tal's history is a complex knot of twists and turns that involves many enterprises and tragedies. After a few seasons spent treasure hunting, Tal retired while still young to invest his gold and become a businessman. He ended up in the unlikely role as the proprietor of a brothel, an enterprise he shared with his

adventuring partner Kaas Windsbane. The two men, while running a house of ill repute, were known as the 'softest touches in town'. They never bound their girls to contracts, nor did they ask more than a token percentage of any fees collected. In fact, the two men even helped their 'girls' get 'legitimate' work should the seamy life no longer appeal. Perhaps it was this low-pressure approach that made their business so successful. The endeavor was not to last, Tal grew bored and started looking for adventure again. He took up with king Tradeholm's eastern front regulars as an experienced captain. It was during this tour of duty that he met and fell in love with an Elven woman named Deirde Silkere. Tal continued his borderland tour and kept house with Deirde for several seasons. What might have been an idyllic life for the warrior turned tragic when raiding parties from the east realm overran several villages and cities along the border. Tal and the troops under his command were quick to respond, and over a period of days drove back the enemy. It was during this conflict that Tal showed mercy to one of the enemy commanders. An act of altruism which would see an entire village of elves sacked as revenge, and result in the loss of his wife of only a few seasons. This experience would harden the man for the many adventures to come.

After this harsh lesson, Tal's tactics and demeanor took on a darker tone, the bitterness over his loss one not quickly forgotten or left behind. He went back to active adventuring and campaigning now in a more serious vein. It was shortly after that he met up with members of the Band of the Crescent Moon, and learned more of the Death Spectacles run by Meridian Arcturan. He met Beia Targallae and T'Gor D'Shar and began assisting them in shutting down the arenas. It was during this time that Tal began adding to his fighting skills, learning to combat the arena pit fighters on their own ground. He began studying and mastering the harsh art of the Dan Sadad.

During the cycles that followed Tal would be involved in the recovery of the amulet of Tarkimaar, he would fight all manner of creatures from adamantium golems to skellar. He would take part in the revival of the Eternals slain by Garfang, and help organize many of the quests to recover the Shaladen swords. He himself would recover the shaladen blade Warstar. He would foray repeatedly in the cities of Dream Merchants and even fight the rogue elements belonging the deposed Kriar leader Daergon Surr.

Tal's hard heart would soften and there would be romantic interludes with Desiray Illkaren (then single) and Dominique Ariok. However, it was a fellow Shael Dal, Terra Karlin whom he often adventured with that eventually captured his eye and heart. After a courtship of several seasons, they would become the second married couple in the Shael Dal (T'Gor and Tigress being the first).

Tal's adventures would continue. He became a key figure in the Shael Dal, the indomitable spirit to succeed against all odds. He would prove instrumental in several missions including a special cooperative mission with the Fabrista Kriar to Karanganoi Homeworld, where they would learn of the Baronians and their mysterious 'masters'.

Tal remains active in the Shael Dal and few would dispute his being their spiritual core. He and his wife Terra continue their efforts to remove all traces of the Arcturan death spectacles. Tal created several schools for adventurers, that serve as sources of income as well as recruiters for the various causes that he takes part in.

See Also: Ariok, Dominique Kalan, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, golems, kriar, shaladen, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

Falor, Terra Karlin -- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the Shaladen blade Jemfire.

See Also: shaladen

fastcast -- Fastcast is term coined for a powerful form of spellcasting which uses the person's personal energy and life force to "short circuit" the normal spell casting process. Normal magical spellcasting takes time and some high order spells can take up to a minute or more to perform. Naturally, in battle, time can be something of a luxury, which is why the skill of fastcasting was developed. Fast-casting is the balliwick of warmages and battlemages who hone and condition their bodies for the stresses caused by channelling powerful spells directly through their bodies.

Felspar, Annawen Kel'Ishtauri -- Annawen is the silent sister to Cassin. The two sisters are as different from one another as they are alike. Where Cassin represents restraint, logic, and intellect, Annawen represents hedonism, creativity, and passion. Annawen is extremely promiscuous, outgoing, and spontaneous. While Cassin plans things down to the last detail, Annawen simply makes it up as she goes. Each sister represents the pure forms of the extremes that might occur in a normal personality. This is why Annawen is so good at magic. It is a skill that requires confidence, the slightest shred of doubt can ruin or cripple a spell. Annawen literally has no worries, and no fear or compunction about the consequence of her actions. By that token, she has nothing holding her back. This is, of course, why she has problems with control.

Though law and rules are not the kind of thing Annawen would normally like, she finds the idea of twisting rules to her own ends intriguing. Her creative and exhibitionistic nature are extremely well suited to both a courtroom and the stage. She would be perfectly suited to them except for the fact that she does not speak aloud. This of course, keeps her out of trial law in all but the most sophisticated territories where telepathy is tolerated as a means of communication. She does on occasion call on Cassin to be her 'voice' as she is in most of their everyday life. Cassin typically refuses most of her sister's requests because she feels Annawen should 'find her own voice'. Being the eldest, they are the big sisters to all the Felspar family children. They are often bailing their brothers and sisters out of trouble. Annawen's interest in law is quite valuable for resolving many of the situations that arise.

Annawen feels that Cassin is an errant part of her that has run away. The fact that she cannot function overlong without her troubles her. She harbors a secret (not so secret to her sister) desire for them to unify into one person. Cassin is extremely bothered by this desire in her sister, likening it to being 'consumed'. Despite their oppositeness, they are as close as two sisters can be and NOT be one person. Becoming married to Sindra and Drucilla Frielos has been an extremely satisfying experience for Annawen. Her pairing with Drucilla provides a balance in her life that Cassin was unable to provide.

The Frielos twins are specialists too, but it is not along the right-brain left-brain aspects. Drucilla represents the passive aspect of their pairing (to Sindra's aggressive) which is well suited to Annawen's personality and tendencies. Cassin and Annawen are extremely active and well traveled. They are adored on Homeworld. Elsewhere they are regarded with respect, and in many cases with fear and suspicion.

Elsbeth Crowninshield considers the twins, and Annawen in particular, two of the greatest threats to the integrity of magic. Despite herself, Elsbeth has been unable to view these two as enemies though they embody the very essence of what she fears (the merger of magic and technology). Whether by luck, or through their empathy, the twins knew it was essential to make sure they became close to this elder elite. A campaign several years in the making got them into the good graces of the red-haired woman buying them safety from her war on technology.

After an encounter with Corim Vale, and his metapathic talent, Annawen has become rather fixated on the handsome man. The fact that he's in love with Dulcere Starbinder is not at all troubling to her. She knows she'll get her way eventually... she always has in the past...

See Also: Frielos, Drucilla, Frielos, Sindra, telepathy

Felspar, Caldorian -- Son of Desiray Illkaren Felspar and Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. Cassandra is the "Foathra" or the surrogate of a female / female coupling who provides the male genes. Caldorian is has an identical twin brother Sebenreth'Kar Felspar.

Caldorian is currently married to Bronawyn Shadowstalker and has two daughters: Cassopeia and Dona-Rae.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Shadowstalker, Bronawyn

Felspar, Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri -- Cassandra is one of the only surviving members of the first incarnation of the Band of the Crescent Moon. She has traveled and adventured extensively throughout the Realms during her 91 years of life. At one time she was engaged to be married to Gondor Degaba who by a quirk of fate was changed from a male to a female by the Aesir pantheon lord Loki. In Gondor's new identity as a female things got pretty complicated as he and she had already managed to conceive children. Cassandra ended up not being able to handle the relationship and the two of them grew apart but continued to raise their daughters Cassin and Annawen. Cassandra went on to marry the elder mage Loric Felspar.

After the adoption of Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri by house Techstar, it became a fashion among the Kriar nobility to start interacting with the humanity and skilled mages in particular. The ability of magic to overcome something Kriar science could not opened many eyes, and sparked intense interest in learning the secrets of magic. Also, humans being young and impressionable, made them excellent proteges. The Kriar being empaths, derive a great deal of satisfaction being around creatures who still experience excitement and passion. They can feel 'vicariously' through their empathy, emotions and sensations that they themselves have become numb to due to hundreds of millennia of life.

The Techstar family has profited enormously by Cassandra's addition to their ranks, as the mage's 'star status' among Kriar is worth a great deal in favors, media deals, and other 'celebrity status' benefits. This, of course, certainly hasn't hurt Cassandra's popularity among the members of her adoptive family.

See Also: Aesir, Felspar, Loric, kriar

Felspar, Cassin Kel'Ishtauri -- Cassin is the steadfast twin of the union. She represents all the things that Annawen is not. She is steady, logical, and dedicated to rational thought. Cassin is extremely close to her Mother (Foathra) Dorian. Dorian is Cassin's paternal progenitor. Early in her life, Dorian was in fact Gondor (a man) and engaged to Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. A extremely unfortunate encounter with a vampire and a the humor of a Loki resulted in a man being placed in woman's body. By shape changing, he could regain his normal male form, but the magic would eventually wear off and he would again become 'Dorian'. It was in his shape changed state that Dorian (Gondor) fathered the twins Cassin and Annawen. As a way of keeping things from getting confused, they coined the term 'Foathra' for a female that had sired children.

There are other Foathrings in the Felspar family, but Cassin and Annawen were the first. Initially, Cassandra thought she could deal with her husband-to-be having become female, but later found she couldn't handle it. Gondor also had problems having thought like a male for 50 odd years, now being a female and (via hormones) beginning to think like a female. The two of them grew apart but raised Cassin and Annawen as a family. Cassin married Sindra by 'default'. She thought the pairing with the Frielos twins was a bad and unsafe endeavor. Only later did she come to really appreciate the benefits of being spoiled by an elder. Now, many years into the marriage, she has fully embraced their relationship and enjoys all of its benefits. Cassin plays the passive role to Sindra's aggressive one, and is content to satisfy the needs of her sometimes demanding mate.

Cassin is much more involved in technology and more technically savvy than her sister. In that aspect, she complements her sister well, who is extremely magic savvy. Working together the twins can excel in practically any culture.

See Also: Frielos, Sindra

Felspar, Darin'kel -- Son of Desiray Illkaren Felspar and Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku. Darin has a twin sister named Everia. Darin is known as the "beauty" of the Felspar clan for his androgynous jaw-dropping handsomeness. His appearance is such that even the pantheon lord Isis keeps the young man on display nearby so she can look at him from time to time. This is one of the reasons for his accelerated rise through the ranks of Isis' followers, a fact which has earned him more than a little enmity.

Despite his rival's jealous claims to his "sleeping his way to the top" Darin'kel is in fact an exceptionally gifted and talented individual. Having his mother Desiray's incredible physique and Dorian's keen intellect, there is little this young man cannot do once he sets his mind to it. As a cleric of Isis the dogma of the worship was stifling to him. However, he became a cleric as something of a defiance to his mother Dorian who wanted him to learn the magical arts (actually, it was more of Everia's defiance

than his, but Darin generally follows the will of his sister). It was not until Darin entered the ranks of the Sovereign that he truly began to flourish (the sovereigns are mages with priest training who serve Isis).

Both Darin'kel and Everia feel a certain amount of resentment and rebellion against their mother Dorian. Most of their clash is rooted in a mother-daughter tug of war for identity and freedom. Ironically, Dorian's persuasive and manipulative ways work on everybody except her children. Darin's heart is considerably softer than Everia's when it comes to Dorian, and when not toeing-the-line laid down by his sister he and his mother are very close. Desiray experiences none of the hostility that Dorian is privy to. She was the "fun" parent and had no part in the law laid down by Dorian which is in part the reason for the mage's unpopularity with these two children.

Darin'kel later marries a cleric by the name of Gwynned, and later still they have two sons: Xandar and Tristham.

See Also: display, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Everia

Felspar, Desiray Illkaren -- Desiray Illkaren Felspar, also known as Whitelock, is one of the core members of the Band of the Crescent Moon. She is one of the "three matriarchs" of family Felspar (Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri and Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku being the other two). Desiray has had a long and sordid history as a thief. Her adventures in Silissia and later in quests against Hellzan, Surr, and the Dream Merchants made her fortunes which she turned to the task of building a network of guilds. Her skills as a thief are renowned through Sharikaar as is her merciless reputation. In her later years, this reputation softened considerably when she married Loric Felspar. She became gentler still after the advent of children.

Desiray was the personal patron of Sireth, who in turn was the patron of Liandra Kergatha. Desiray and Liandra initially share a mutual enmity toward one another that almost ends in them killing each other. Later, they grow closer and Desiray takes on a role as Wren's surrogate mother. In an attempt to shield both Desiray and Liandra, Gaea alters Desiray so that she can become Liandra's tao beta (meaning that they can join to become a single far more powerful being). In this form, Desiray and Liandra proved a reasonable match for even elder elite like the D'klace sisters Sindra and Drucilla.

See Also: Felspar, Loric, Frielos, Drucilla, Frielos, Sindra, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Sharikaar, Silissia

Felspar, Everia -- Daughter of Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku and Desiray Illkaren Felspar [Desiray Foathra]. She is one of a pair of polar-body twins ((identical / fraternal) similar appearance but different sex). Her brother is Darin'kel.

Everia marries the Baronian warmage Luthice in 1114 N.I.S.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Darin'kel

Felspar, Farveth -- Son of Desiray Illkaren Felspar and Loric Felspar. Farveth is something of a black-sheep in the Felspar family. Sporting the brilliance of his father, and the physical coordination of his mother, Farveth has the traits to excel in a number of fields. With his father's training he is an accomplished tracker, and exceptional woodsman. Despite his exceptional potential, Farveth is adrift in life, neither applying himself or taking any particular interest in finding a true calling. The boy is into and out of trouble on a regular basis, wasting money on gambling and dallying with less than reputable women. It was when he got a girl pregnant that his mother Desiray yanked him up straight by the short-hairs. Farveth is still something of a problem child, but is slowly finally beginning to become a more productive member of the household.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric

Felspar, Loric -- Numinorian elder elite and patriarch of family Felspar. Loric is a renowned Ranger and grand lore-mage. He has two wives, Desiray and Cassandra. He has three children by blood (with Cassandra). Loric is the creator of many magical items and technologies. The most notable of which are the Krillar. His wife Desiray wields the krill sword and dagger, Khairhavhel and Khairhavkul. Cassandra and Dorian both used krill staves of his design.

Loric is one of the last generation of Numinor, an elder race that eventually destroyed itself in pursuit of the ultimate power of entropy once possessed by the first ones.

Loric was born approximately 90,000 cycles prior to the events chronicled in most of the stories taking place in the Ring Realms. He by far pre-dates the lives of Aarlen Frielos and Elsbeth Crowninshield. Being one of the few remaining creatures possessing "true-magic" he felt that he should have a say in the development or the corruption of magic and how it was being distributed by the pantheon lords. This led Loric down a path where he began trying to police the ancient lore once controlled by the Numinorians and the first ones. He developed powerful magicks and trained allies to help him in this venture. Despite their limited number and resources Loric and his followers became a growing irritation to many of the pantheon lords, as he "kept them in line" policing not only the spread of magic, but enforcing a certain amount of separation between the lords and their sources of demiurge. The hit-and-run gorilla tactics of the Krill warriors finally escalated into full fledged war and Loric and his followers were forced into hiding. He and his followers would go into seclusion for centuries at a time, spending the "cooling off" cycles in specially designed stasis chambers that Loric had secreted throughout the worlds of the Ring Realms. There were occasions when he spent as long as five millennia in stasis, the exact reasons for these extended submergences are unknown but there are at least four known periods when he went "underground" for several thousand cycles. It's been speculated that he was in actuality sleeping off massive injuries to his body and spirit, but there is no evidence to support this theory. Upon each new emergence, he was stronger and more persistent in his desire to "clean up" the tyrannical dominion of the pantheon lords. Over the course of the millennia, the original desire to merely shepherd magic transformed into a one-man vendetta against the lords. It was in the latter portion of this war that Loric met and befriended Damay Alostara one of the great Kel'Varans. They undertook several quests to protect various members of the savant race scattered throughout the Realms. It was Loric's eventual plan to gather

up all the savants and turn them against the pantheon lords. In the middle of this plan, Damay soured on the idea fearing that they would in fact cause the destruction of savant kind rather than their preservation. This fundamental difference eventually resulted in their going their separate ways. In the interim, Loric had learned a great deal from the individual savants he had met, and had discovered intrinsic properties in the founding power of Eternity. These new discoveries were integrated into the Krillar weaponry and the power turned against the pantheon lords in a renewed onslaught in order to force the lords to give up their possession of the "material plane" and constrain their activities to the outer dimensions. The conflict escalated quickly, and several lords were slain permanently by Loric's new powers. The threat posed by the Numinorian created a situation where the pantheon lords would be forced to either comply and give up their possession of the core worlds, or cooperate and dismiss Loric from existence once and for all. The lords chose the latter, and in a massive battle the pantheon lords came together and in final battle corralled Loric and his followers and destroyed them all in a single entropic blast of demiurge.

In the aftermath of the conflict, it was a general consensus of the pantheon lords that they would all withdraw their primary influence to the outer planes, in order to prevent any further such conflicts. This was not only a direct result of Loric's efforts but an increasing pressure from a number of other sources.

Unknown to the lords, Loric had invested his essence into a secluded location, placing it within one of the five great krillglobes of his creation. Several millennia later, Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri found the globe and discovered the great mage's essence within. The lady mage used her powerful magics to recreate a body for Loric and place his essence within the shell, restoring the ancient Numinorian to life. This last violently forceful vacation had taken most of the fight out of the great mage, with the pantheon lords having withdrawn to the outer planes there really wasn't much left to fight about. Loric spent a great deal of time in seclusion, healing, and regenerating his lost powers. In the meantime, Cassandra was fascinated by this powerful man, both by the possibility of gaining his lore, and learning from him, and the romantic idea of associating with this legendary figure. Loric was, of course, alone and lonely, Cassandra was hungry and enticing. Eventually, the youngster wore down the elder's resistance and the two of them developed a more intimate relationship. They were finally engaged in 1074 N.I.S. after five years of persistence. They were finally married in 1079.

Loric is the patriarch of the clan. The gods tolerate his new existence but remain wary that he might start his old tricks again. He has three boys by Cassandra (born as triplets) Loric II, Radian, and Celek. He has a single son by Desiray (his second wife) named Farveth.

See Also: Alostari, Damay, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Farveth, Frielos, Aarlen, krill, khairhavhel, khairhavkul

Foldrin -- Master Locksmith and trap creator. Guilder par excellence of the last millennium, that happens to be the measure by which Desiray Illkaren Felspar challenges herself.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, guildier

freecast -- Freecast is a term coined by mages to describe spells that when invoked do not have a penalty on the mind and body. Typically, a mage must memorize a spell and based on certain factors may only be able to cast that spell a few times before it must be memorized again. As a result, mages typically utilize a large arsenal of devices that increase the number of times memorize spells can be utilized. Through training, discipline, and special augmentations of their minds and bodies, mages can develop "permanent" spells that they can invoke at will without threat of ever losing it from memory. This invocation is called a "freecast" because they can do it without preparation or fear of losing memory of the spell. Ziedra Skyedoom-Felspar the Ishtar Nola is noted for her ability to freecast spells without even memorizing them. She does this simply by touching a mage who has the desired spell and then having them duplicate the spell's casting. Her freecast is not unlimited however, she only retains the freecast of an unknown spell for two to three bells.

See Also: Skyedoom, Ziedra

Frielos, Aarlen -- Supreme Magestrix of the 4th Alliance territories. Engaged to Regaura Targallae. Aarlen's exact age is unknown (even to her) but historians agree that she can be no less than 45,000 cycles old. This member of the grand elder elite is descended from Teritaani branch of humanoid stock. Aarlen was magically and technically enhanced by her Father in order to create a living weapon. Abused and tortured throughout her childhood, she eventually turned on her Father who had already killed her mother and sister. Unfortunately for the then twelve cycle old Aarlen, the cycle of violence did not end there. Mishap, misfortune, and aggression over a span of years eventually turned the white-haired woman into a brutal killing machine. She became proficient in all the major martial and magical arts, and mastered many forms. The a millenniums long series of bloody conquests she hacked out the territory of space now known as the fourth alliance.

During her rise to power she made many enemies which include Elsbeth Crowninshield, Vulcindra Skybane, and the Trackazoid and Eddorian empires. During her thousands of cycles of life, Aarlen has begotten children for purposes of having agents under her direct control. She has thirteen acknowledged children still living. The Frielos family has some 12 recognized generations of relatives that number close to 75,000 members. Though it seems hard to believe, with a life that spans over 1000 generations, Aarlen's distant relations likely number in the hundreds of millions.

See Also: Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

Frielos, Drucilla -- Daughter of Aarlen Frielos. Elder elite and member of the D'klace guild of assassins. Being "into" everything, she even plays in an all-girl musical group with Luthice and Arabella. She is the silent sister to Sindra Frielos.

Something to note about Drucilla and her sister is the fact that while they are to a certain extent evil, and definitely self serving, these two never became the irredeemable black that many of Aarlen's creations became. This seems to be a deliberate happenstance on Aarlen's part, presumably so that they would be more effective as spies and seductresses.

Drucilla is married to Annawen Kel'Ishtauri Felspar. The elder woman has been teaching Annawen the etiquette and protocols of the 4th alliance high court, as Annawen seeks to conduct law there.

See Also: Arabella, Frielos, Aarlen, Frielos, Sindra, guild

Frielos, Sindra -- Daughter of Aarlen Frielos. Elder elite and member of the D'klace guild of assassins. Being "into" everything, she even plays in an all-girl musical group with Luthice and Arabella. She is the speaking sister to Drucilla Frielos.

Something to note about Sindra and her sister is the fact that while they are to a certain extent evil, and definitely self serving, these two never became the irredeemable black that many of Aarlen's creations became. This seems to be a deliberate happenstance on Aarlen's part, presumably so that they would be more effective as spies and seductresses.

Sindra is married to Cassin Kel'Ishtauri Felspar. Being the "voices" of the two sets of twins its not uncommon to see them paired with the other twin. Why they didn't simply marry that way is still something of a mystery...

See Also: Arabella, Frielos, Aarlen, Frielos, Drucilla, guild

fusion -- The propagation of energy through the merger of atoms into a heavier molecule i.e. hydrogen into helium as takes place in every stellar body.

-- G --

G'yaki -- The G'yaki are together a race, a culture, and a guild rolled into one. The G'yaki are night warriors that hire out as mercenaries and sometimes assassins. They share many common characteristics with monestarial sects, gathering together in strictly governed colonies which dedicate themselves to self discipline, martial training, and enlightenment.

G'yaki masters are renowned for their stealth and ability to escape, able to vanish through means of indirection, and pseudo-psionic disciplines. They are vicious warriors, their master-level fighters able to shatter a wall with a single punch. The G'yaki are most notable for their advances in tao-disciplines and spiritual-hardening. G'yaki devotees can over time develop spiritual properties similar to savants. Vera, the woman who serves as the Felspar Clan family cook is a G'yaki master. The little woman has demonstrated extraordinary combat abilities, able to single-handedly hold three Frielos family Sen'Gen at bay.

See Also: guild

Gaea -- The name for the female creator-force. Legend has it that a coupling between Alpha and Gaea gave rise to all the living things in Eternity. Gaea is the patron of Wren Kergatha. She is known to many as the 'green mother' and there are many legends of this cosmic fertility goddess interacting with various heroes. The diaries of Wren Kergatha cite having met and received boons from this powerful immortal creature.

See Also: Alpha, goddess, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

Gladshiem -- The outer plane where Asgard, Nifelheim, and the other realms ruled by the Aesir and Vanir can be found.

See Also: Asgard, Aesir

glowglobes -- In the Ring Realms glowglobes are one of magick's solutions to artificial lighting. In the case of glowglobes the effect is not entirely magical. Rare chemicals that have been enchanted take on a property than when agitated (the globe is shaken slightly) they will give off light for up to a bell.

god -- Generic term for the immortal pantheon lords and ladies who make their homes in the outer planes.

See Also: goddess

goddess -- Generic term (female gender) for god. See god.

See Also: god

goldskins -- A slang term used to refer to members of the Kriar race.

See Also: kriar

golems -- Creatures made from inanimate materials which motivate and act as something alive. Some such creatures are autonomous, most are not. In the Ring Realms, golems are typically used in the role as guardians, tireless, fearless, powerful, and ultimately loyal they are popular tools amongst powerful mages.

guild -- In the generic sense, any of several organizations that represent various craftsman. Mages, thieves, and warriors all have representative guilds (sometimes more than one in the bigger cities). When spoken of as 'THE guild', it is generally assumed to be the thieves or assassins guild.

guilder -- A member (usually referring to a thief) who is a member of a guild.

See Also: guild

-- H --

Hades -- The outer plane where many 'under-realms' of demons and creatures of the dark can be found.

hardware -- Of or pertaining to any technological artifice.

Hecate -- Pantheon lord, goddess of magic, death, and the moon. Hecate is an outcast even among her own kind. She pursues the ultimate power, Tan'Acho, and is willing to go to any lengths to achieve it.

See Also: goddess

Hethanon -- Initially an avatar of Set, who was the cult leader of a thieves guild called the Dagger. Hethanon destroyed the guild of Brethren in Corwin. Desiray Illkaren Felspar and Wren Kergatha mounted a counter assault and drove him out. Hethanon eventually lost face with Set after failing twice in to recapture Wren Kergatha. Hecate eventually opted to make Hethanon her avatar for purposes known only to her. After his acceptance into the cult of Hecate, he changed his name to Nystruul. See Nystruul.

See Also: avatar, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, guild, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

Hoshihana, Virasama Takara {Vera} {Su'Ko Tai} -- One of the little known members of the Felspar clan, but undoubtedly one of the most essential to its smooth operation is Virasama or Vera. She is the cook, the housekeeper, the caregiver, the seamstress, the lady's maid and a host of other functions. Vera is an energetic, respectful, and oh-so-correct servant of Loric gifted with extraordinary abilities. How this diminutive lady actually manages to do all the things she does is largely a mystery to most of the members of the household, but over the cycles they have grown accustomed to Vera's "magic". That include such things as being able to pour nine different drinks out of the same pitcher, or just happen to provide a new person with their favorite food.

Vera is rarely idle and almost never seems to sleep. She is a extraordinary chef that provides the family with flavorful, no-nonsense, "country cooking". Many are the times that some of Loric's elder guests have tried to hire Vera away, but she always declines.

The truth of Vera's magical abilities lay with Loric, and his desire to make his huge household manageable for his trusted follower. Over the cycles, he has developed house magicks which respond to Vera's unique mental talents, allowing her tao-like spiritual strength to manipulate the environment of the citadel to her wishes. Since few creatures save savants have a tao, it was safe for Loric to create these magics.

Vera's tao abilities come from her training as G'yaki assassin. Vera is a master level G'yaki with more than a century of combat experience. Upon passing rites of a master Virasama was given the alias Su'Ko Tai as her 'true name' and identity as a 'true' G'Yaki. Vera functioned in this capacity for several decades. It was only when she refused to take her own life after the death of her husband that she was dishonored and expelled from the G'yaki clan in which she lived. This dishonor lives with her to this day, and is why Vera feels herself only worthy of the trivial position of house maid.

Vera has the exceptional combat skills acquired from decades of training as a G'yaki stealth master. In addition, she has the birth advantage of coming from region surrounding Tralondizaar, a location of one of the ancient Kriar gate systems. This particular gate was malfunctioning and leaking chonal energy into the environment. Over the millennia, the G'yaki family that lived in area were affected by these energies. Making them able to "slip" ticks in time creating an illusion of extraordinary speed. These "slipped" or bypassed ticks also extend one's lifespan, prolonging their already tao-advantaged life forces.

Vera hides her G'yaki training unless there is an emergency or there are special circumstances. When she "becomes" a G'yaki, her whole persona undergoes a change and she becomes a vicious machine with a mission. She does not speak while in this state, and communicates only with hand gestures and head shakes. She is a truly formidable fighting machine, able to stand off three of Aarlen Frielos' technically armed Sen'Gen while sustaining only minor injuries.

Vera's tao-enhanced physiology gives her near superhuman endurance, and she needs little sleep. She is two to three times as strong as a well honed athlete of her height and weight. Her ability to "slip" time gives her phenomenal speed exceeding the reflexes of highly-enhanced immorts. G'yaki mind disciplines and close to two hundred cycles of life give her formidable mental skills as well. Vera is immune to most mind affecting magics.

See Also: Felspar, Loric, Frielos, Aarlen, kriar

-- I --

Idun -- Pantheon lord of the Aesir, goddess of immortality. Idun is one of the more powerful goddesses of the Aesir. In mythology she tends the fruit which grant the Aesir longevity. As a pantheon lord of the Ring Realms she is the keeper of fruits which have restorative powers on pantheon lords that also can temporarily imbue a mortal creature with immortal strength, resilience, and magick.

Idun is the mother of Euriel Kergatha Idun-daughter, and grandmother of Liandra Kergatha.

See Also: Aesir, goddess, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

immortal -- Any of class of creatures which have effectively infinite life-spans. Immortal in the greatest sense can mean almost impossible to kill. The pantheon lords fall into this category being able to heal back from the most fearsome of wounds. In later stories, Bannor tests just how far "immortality" goes.

interdimensionally -- Pertaining to dimensions, particularly to the interface between dimensions. Sometimes dimensional interfaces are used to create pocket dimensions for the purposes of storage. Powerful mages 'interdimensionally' store materials for easy access through an item or specialized spell. Desiray Illkaren Felspar's shadow cloak is itself a dimensional interface, allowing her to store objects, or even place it on the ground and create a space in which to conceal or guard herself.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren

Ishtar -- Pantheon lord, goddess of love and war.

See Also: goddess

Ishtarvariku, Dorian Degaba -- Dorian's history is long and complex. She started life in another guise, as a man named Gondor Degaba. Gondor's life was one of adventure. He forayed against slavers, and giants, and evil elves. As a skilled mage he was injured many times but had never really met his match. It wasn't until he

joined up with the Band of the Crescent Moon in their fight against a lich Lord named Ceta that he met with real defeat. The undead creature made everyone's life hard. Her minions killed two of the band outright and Gondor himself was turned into a vampire which the party was forced to destroy in order to continue their quest. Through some powerful magics Gondor's life-force was preserved, but he was an disembodied spirit. The band had undertaken their quest at the behest of the Aesir pantheon lords, and it was lord Loki who decided to take an hand in providing a new form for Gondor. The god bound Gondor into the body of a woman. From then on Gondor became Dorian. This made life difficult as during the course of their adventuring Gondor and Cassandra had already become close and sworn to each other. It wasn't until a few months later they discovered how close they had become, because Cassandra was pregnant. Gondor/Dorian's life was only beginning to get complicated.

As a woman, Dorian went on developing her skills as a mage. Her relationship with Cassandra grew and changed, and later changed further still as Desiray entered the picture. She helped raise Cassin and Annawen and watched them grow into young women. Dorian's adventures continued.

Dorian is a skilled and creative mage that is far more powerful than a typical mage of her age and skills. She has a knack for creating magic items and blending magicks to create devastatingly powerful combinations. In later cycles, she takes up the sword and martial training purely for the physical "toughening" to enhance her powers even further. Over the course of decades Dorian has developed a reputation as a schemer and a manipulator. She has successfully won the support, dedication, and even adoration of many extremely powerful allies, including such personages as Gabriella Sarn Ariok, who now mentors her in magick. While all are suspicious of Dorian, there is more than a little respect as well, where brute force has failed, Dorian's clever deceptions have more than once saved the day.

Dorian is the wife of Brin Ishtarvariku, she has eleven children between four partners, two with Brin: Rindar and Jaraed. Four with Cassandra: Cassin, Annawen, Kassandra, Dorrian. Three with Desiray: Darin'kel, Everia, Leandra. Lastly, two with Megan Vinax: Ralani and Silvia.

See Also: Ariok, Gabriella Sarn, Aesir, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Everia, Felspar, Darin'kel, god

ishtite -- A rare metal especially conducive to the conduction and absorption of magic. Ishtite itself is typically far too rare and not durable enough to make solid objects from. Other materials are usually wrapped around it or alloyed with it. An amount of ishtite able to make a simple finger ring can be valued at hundreds of thousands of gold depending on the material's purity. Pure ishtite is incredibly rare and probably exists in only one or two magic labs in all of the Ring Realms.

Isis -- Pantheon lord, goddess of magic and fertility.

See Also: goddess

Ivaneth -- Name of the kingdom south of Malan, with Corwin on its western border, and East realm and Coormeer on the east. Ivaneth is ruled by King Edmund

Tradeholme. The capital of Ivaneth is Ivaneth City. A city of just over 1 million people.

See Also: Malan

-- J --

jacdaw -- A style of fighting that stresses the use of two weapon. Jacdaw is a close-in style that concentrates on 'punishing' moves that wear down the opponent through body-stress fatigue.

Jhandris'kul -- The valley where the great tree Duran'Gravar resides. See Duran'Gravar.

See Also: Duran'Gravar

jikartandak -- A powerful toxin whose name translated means 'faith killer'. It is as Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri Felspar calls it, a poison composed of "concentrated hate". This incredibly virulent magical material is a distillation of demiurge that saps the spirit energies of living creature at the same time causing body wide necrosis (tissue death). It is extremely painful and there is no known specific antidote.

justicar -- A paladin or warrior given authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner (if necessary) in the fringe areas of the Ring Realms.

-- K --

karagal -- A fast acting poison distilled from Wyvern toxin. It is typically used to coat weapons. Convulsions set in within moments of the toxin entering the bloodstream, with severe loss of motor control occurring in a minute to two minutes. Karagal can kill if not treated in 2 to 3 hours. Herbal antidotes are rare but do exist. Typically, it requires clerical magic to save someone poisoned with this substance.

Kergatha, Azir -- Son of Euriel and Vanidaar Kergatha, and older brother of Wren. Azir is a Sil'Kar Nola, a savant of light. During the avatar raid that captures Wren and makes Euriel and Vanidaar mental prisoners in their own home, the then eighteen summer old boy made his escape into the plane-scape surrounding Cosmodarus. Already trained in the techniques of plane-shifting as well as survival and woods-craft, it was an easy matter for the young man to elude capture by the avatar's minions in the ever changing environment around Cosmodarus.

Unfortunately, Azir's ability to elude pursuit did not prevent him from getting lost amongst of the thousands of parallel worlds of the ribbon realms. He moved from place to place, doing odd tasks to get food and shelter, and looking for a way back home to help his family. After a few seasons spent plane hopping he did eventually find his way back to Cosmodarus, a little older and more determined.

After several aborted attempts to free his parents and barely eluding capture, he went to the world of Titaan, and the city of Corwin, following the trail of his kidnapped sister. He learned that the temple of Hecate there had recently been over-run by the Justicars and most of the prisoners freed. His inquiries with Justicars bore no fruit, as none of the warriors involved in the raid recalled seeing a young girl. It was during these inquiries that he met his school friend Laramis De'Falcone, a well-

connected Coormeerian paladin of Ukko, who had just been admitted to the ranks of the Justicars. Laramis' funds helped finance a wider search of Corwin, but the efforts netted no leads or any evidence that Azir's sister Liandra still lived or was even still on Titaan.

Azir turned his attention back to trying to find a way to free his parents from Mishaka. He turned his attention to the Elven land of Malan, his parents being longtime friends of the T'Evagduran royal family. It was Malan where he and Laramis had attended academy together learning everything from academic subjects to war-craft. His attempts to garner the help of the royal family were frustrated by a border war between Malan and the neighboring lands of Ironwood, and the Dwarves at Blackstar. The conflict had grown to the point that the T'Evagduran royals were involved and unable to be contacted much less assist in Azir's family crisis.

Azir then turned his attention to higher powers and his Grandmother Idun, the pantheon lady of the Aesir. He found it strange that the powerful goddess had not already come to the aide of her daughter and grand-daughter already. It was during his attempts to contact her that he learned of a wider conspiracy by the court of Odin against Euriel and her mother Idun. For more than two summers his efforts to contact Idun or get into Gladshiem were blocked by various "coincidences" and "happenstances" that he knew were anything but. It was shortly after that agents of Set and Hecate began pursuing him. He also began having run-ins with the black-winged Valkyries called the Bloodguard. It was only incredible luck, his powers as a savant, and chance alliances with warriors of the All-World's Tournament that kept him from getting killed or captured.

With such forces mobilized against him, Azir could do little more than run. He spent several years only steps ahead of the agents of the pantheon lords. Eventually they gave up the pursuit and Azir was free to turn his attention back toward freeing his parents. Azir returned to Titaan, and located his friend Laramis, who, over the seasons, had risen considerably in the ranks of the Justicars and the faith of Ukko. Hardened by cycles spent on the run, skills honed by constantly being hairs from death, Azir decided to make one last ditch effort to free his parents with the assistance of Laramis and a few of his retainers.

Azir's efforts were to be short-lived by a chance and detrimental encounter with the avatar Hethanon, who would capture the man and give him into the hands of Mishaka. It is shortly after this time that Azir's sister Wren Kergatha would finally find her identity and her way back home after more than a decade spent in the streets of Corwin where she was a member of the Brethren guild of thieves. Wren and her friends would eventually succeed in their efforts to restore the Kergatha family, and Azir could finally end his cycles of torment and exile.

See Also: avatar, Aesir, Allfather, Blackstar, bloodguard, goddess, guild, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Kergatha, Vanidaar, Malan, Titaan

Kergatha, Euriel Idun-daughter -- Daughter of the goddess Idun, wife of Vanidaar Kergatha, mother of Liandra Kergatha and Azir Kergatha.

See Also: goddess, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Kergatha, Vanidaar

Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter -- Daughter of Euriel and Vanidaar Kergatha, sister of Azir Kergatha. Wren is the fifteen summer vetren of the Brethren guild. Wren is a Kel'Varan Nola, a savant of forces. Wren has had dozens of run-ins with the pantheon lords and their servants. She has fought several avatars and permanently killed eight (she has actually dispersed more but we're only counting **permanent** deaths). She has become a power whispered among the pantheon lords... especially considering her allies and her ability to rally assistance from a great number of powerful adventurers and immorts.

See Also: guild, Kergatha, Vanidaar

Kergatha, Vanidaar -- Husband of Euriel Idun-daughter, father of Liandra Kergatha and Azir Kergatha. Vanidaar, like his two children, is a savant-- Kul'Vita Nola-- a savant of life forces.

See Also: Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

khairhavhel -- Krillsword used by Desiray Illkaren Felspar, created by Loric Felspar.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric, krillsword

khairhavgul -- Krill dagger used by Desiray Illkaren Felspar, created by Loric Felspar. Krill daggers have all the abilities of a dagger of flight, plus some powerful extras.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric, krill

Kirikos, Dame -- A cleric of Ishtar in service Jharon Ko. The dame (along with the entire Corwinian precinct of Ishtar) is slain by Mishaka.

See Also: Ko, Jharon

Ko, Jharon -- High priest of Ishtar's precincts in Corwin. Longtime friend of Wren Kergatha. Jharon is slain by Mishaka in a brutal combat after the desecration of his temple by the avatar.

See Also: avatar, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

Korvel -- Shaladen blade and spirit talisman of the eternal Sroth Mephista. Korvel has the distinction of being perhaps the most lethal of all the shaladen weapons. Korvel confers the ability of ultimate stealth upon the user.

See Also: Mephista, Sroth, shaladen

kriar -- **Summary:** The Kriar being a vegetative (rather than mammalian) humanoid race possess several plant-like attributes. Their skin is photosynthetic, and they derive nourishment from light. Their tissue is dense (like wood) and thus they are heavier and more resistant to injury. Kriar scientists have heavily modified the hereditary physiology of the species and many of the evolutionary drawbacks of their origins have been engineered away. Most Kriar rely on a life-support mechanism

called a matrix stone that is embedded in their bodies at a young age. These jewels provide supplemental photosynthetic nourishment so the Kriar can function for extended periods in environments where there is little to no natural sun-light. These jewels are normally installed in sets. A focus stone in the forehead, a distribution matrix en-fleshed in the collarbone, and brain-stone or central control en-fleshed beneath the lower abdominal muscles. These matrixes often have cybernetic enhancements and convenience mechanisms built into them depending on the kind of work the Kriar does. Warriors typically have additional implants in the palms of both hands. These are high-energy foci. The hand focus allows the warrior to create force weapons and shielding, along with usually having various sensor and cybernetic apparatus built into them.

See Also: stone

krill -- krill is actually a generic name for a class of synthetic materials noted for their metallic and crystalline properties. Most of the compounds in this class of material have overlapping or co-bonding electron shells i.e. the molecules bind together so tightly that adjacent molecules begin sharing electrons (the electrons actually begin orbiting two or more nuclei in the molecular mass). The result is a material that once catalyzed is super-inert, wave dense, and non-conducting. Such a material is extremely difficult to manipulate or work because the multi-valent bonds resist expansion and heating. Essentially structures of these materials can only be created through molecular assemblers that maintain the raw atomic material in a plasma state.

Krill can be made photonically opaque or permeable through nano channeling in the molecular structure. In other words, this allows the creation of a super resilient transparent metal.

Krill cannot be alloyed as with other materials. However the material can be interwoven into the structure of other compounds to lend strength and resiliency. Krill itself has extraordinary tensile strength, even thin wires of the material able to hold hundreds of tons. This property is the basis for the 'monofilament' wire, which is a strand of multi-bonded molecules with super-resilient qualities. Most forms of krill are super-rigid and thermal-resistant to well over a 100,000 degrees. However, there are variants with alternate properties.

See Also: shaladen

krillsword -- One of the Krillar weapons. See Krillar.

-- L --

Luthice -- A Baronian war-witch hailing from the Karanganoi home-world. She and her sister Senalloy both have an extraordinary knowledge of Kriar technology and artifices. Both sisters speak the Kriar high-tongue fluently which alone is very rare.

Beyond her millennia of hardened hand-to-hand combat and weapons training, Luthice is noted for her stealth abilities, and her understanding of locks and traps. In addition, she is an extremely accomplished mage rivaling the likes of Elsbeth Crowninshield and Aarlen Frielos. Those skills coupled with her Baronian physiology makes her a harrowing opponent.

At some point, Luthice came into the possession of Kriar master gate key. She has in some way managed to magically alter this technical tool and has used it on occasion to "hack" the Kriar time-gate network. Luthice is in possession of a kind of magic that allows transport between universal pockets. Something previously thought to only be possessed by the very oldest of the elder races the Jyril.

In return for being freed from captivity on Karanganoi home-world, Luthice agreed to work as an agent for the pantheon lord Isis. Her infiltration skills and knowledge of magical security have been put to abundant use since.

As a diversion, Luthice joined up with a group of musicians headed by the infamous bard Arabella. With Luthice's help, the red-haired bard persuaded the D'klace sisters Sindra and Drucilla to also participate in this odd musical endeavor. The group which they dubbed the "Rainbows in the Dark" is fast becoming renowned through the Ring Realms for their music. This is not surprising given that the skills and resources of three great elders are at the core of the group. Initially, this group started as a traditional bardic troop using common stringed and wind instruments. The three technically savvy elders eventually led the group to technical instruments like amplified guitars, keyboards, and rock-style band accouterments. This band's own unique style of "bardic rock" is an unmimickable mixture of vast elder life experience influenced lyrics, youthful creativity, and beautiful all-girl band novelty. This group became so profitable that even Aarlen Frielos wanted to manage for them.

Later, Everia Felspar is engaged to Luthice, and the two of them live together in the Felspar citadel.

See Also: Arabella, Felspar, Everia, Frielos, Aarlen, Frielos, Drucilla, Frielos, Sindra, kriar

-- M --

mage -- Simply a person who uses or is knowledgeable in the science of magic.

magelights -- Magelights are similar to priestlights, the only major difference being the guild that installs them.

See Also: guild

magic -- Magic in the Ring Realms is a science, but unlike a technical science it is an elitist pursuit. While anyone can study and understand biology, and put its principles to use, the same cannot be said for magic. It's largely believed that all creatures have the ability to wield magic to a certain degree, however the spark which allows us to tap into that power is typically too small to do anything significant with. The evidence of this at work are those isolated moments in our lives when we experience *deja vu*, briefly see another's thoughts, or foretell the future.

While magic itself can be learned, the powers that can be attained cover a vast range, from simple hand illusions to the altering of reality on an interdimensional level. In some cases, creatures can substitute personal and psionic (mind power) energies for the gift that allows most mages to cast spells and manipulate magical energies.

Magic is not a specific energy or range of energies. It is more of metaphor that encapsulates a "principle" of action and reaction. In the Realms, the true magic is defined as:

The persistent ability to manipulate the environment in ways otherwise impossible without the utilization of natural phenomena, the influence or cooperation of physical bodies, or the use external artifices.

By this definition then, powers such as telepathy, and telekenesis, and other abilities of mind qualify as magic. However, they are not what is considered "traditional" or "ritual" magic.

Ritual magic uses the wielder's magical spark and aspects of "sympathetic bonding" to generate chains of forces that act in place of birth-granted abilities to mentally tap and manipulate energy. In another regard, these ritual formulas substitute for an actual working knowledge of the mechanics and physics that make a particular feat possible. Rituals are coded schemes that at the basic level simply unleash simple reactions while at the higher complexities are actually sonic mnemonics that generate sympathetic reactions in dimensional space that can unleash whole chains of complex energetic interactions. As a mage increases in power and knowledge, his/her reliance on "ritual" totems for the performance of magical feats grows less.

Magical sophistication falls into categories at follows:

Order/Rank =====	Classification =====	Description =====
1st Order	Raw Ritual	The most basic level where all principles of magic are taken by rote and no underlying understanding of the physics or laws is assumed. Most shamanistic magic exists at this level
=====	=====	=====
2nd Order	Reinforced Ritual	Rituals are assisted by a rudimentary knowledge of natural laws and fundamental sciences. This is the level of most trained lower-order mages.
=====	=====	=====
3rd Order	Academic Ritual	Rituals are combined and enhanced with more sophisticated studies and scientific principles like chemistry and alchemy. Mages who have advanced to the point where they may expand their abilities without a mentor's guidance have this level of magic.
=====	=====	=====
4th Order	Elaborate Ritual	Lower order rituals can be performed by force of will alone. The mage's academic understanding of rituals and their interaction with nature and physics allows them to create simple rituals that can be followed by other mages. They can also alter rituals to create slightly different effects. At this level of skill, a mage can insinuate ("bind") magical energies into an artifice. Magical staves, swords, wands, and the like are examples of this ability.
=====	=====	=====
5th Order	Sophisticated Ritual	The mage begins to develop pseudo-psionic capabilities. Many lower-level rituals can be performed with little or no concentration. The mage's reliance on ritual is now a matter of following "templates" or "guidepaths" that tap the interactions of energy. The mage begins to manipulate the powers "manually".

=====	=====	=====
6th Order	Psionic / Pseudo-Ritual	Pure psionics are considered to practice magic of the sixth order. However, a being who uses mental energies like telepathy or telekenesis do not have the broad scope of abilities a ritual mage typically possesses. On the other hand, a creature who can perform such feats without resorting to rituals tends to have more flexibly and control in their application. Generally, psionicists have greater capabilities in their narrow spectrum of power. Ritual mages at this level can work magical energies in abstract ways and can combine them into newer structures. Rituals become "source material" that can be treated as building blocks.
=====	=====	=====
7th Order	Reinforced Psionic / Free ritual	At this level the creature's psionic potential affects a broader spectrum of the physical world and chains of interaction can be stimulated into motion. They can perform feats like cellular adjustment (healing). Mages of this order rely little on ritual. Their understanding of ritual is complete enough that they can "make it up as they go". They are essentially still using rituals but are now only using them as anchoring or controlling points in their magic.
=====	=====	=====
8th Order	Psi-Master / Ritual Independent	Psionic creatures begin to exhibit broad powers that are in many ways like ritual magic only performed by force of will alone. They can develop skills like self teleportation, dimensional travel, and can in some instances control their psyche so completely that they are independent of their physical bodies. Mages at this skill level no longer rely on ritual except for reference and ideas. They freely combine energies and are limited only by endurance of their physical bodies.
=====	=====	=====
9th Order	Living Magic	The highest order of psionics and magic is cosmic or "living" magic where the creature becomes in tune with the physical nature of the cosmos and can manipulate it directly. The 9th order of magic is the top of the scale but creatures that possess this level of ability have a tremendous range in the scope of their capabilities. At one end of the range might be the ability to control storms or perform miracle healing-- in the Ring Realms the other end of the scale is the strength to destroy stars and alter the flow of time.
=====	=====	=====

See Also: spectrum, telepathy, teleportation

Malan -- The kingdom of the elves north of Ivaneth ruled by King Jhaann T'Evagduran and Queen Kalindinai. Malan is one of the most powerful nations in Sharikaar.

See Also: malanian, Sharikaar

malanian -- Of or hailing from Malan. See Malan.

See Also: Malan

matayan -- A Matayan is a follower of the Lore-Knight's code of ethics. The Matayans maintain an ethic of peace through knowledge. Matayans maintain high standards of personal and moral conduct and maintain that life is sacred and that force is the measure of last resort.

megapsions -- A term used in techno-magic as a measure of force altering potential. It is similar to a calorie in concept (1 calorie of energy is the ability to heat one cubic centimeter of water 1 degree in 1 second). One "psion" is the mental or magical potential to shift (rend or decompose) the physical state of one stone (20 pounds) of solid material. In this regard, a psion actually represents a great deal of power. A fireball capable of slaying a dozen people represents perhaps ten psions of energy. A megapsion is one-million psions. Or a power equal to 100,000 fireballs! Easily enough energy to level a city.

The complex at Starholme Prime was purported to be able (at optimum operation) to transmit 8 million megapsions of energy continuously (instant to instant). When translated to raw power, due to the cascade nature of psion or tao energy, this is a potential greater than the combined output of several hundred stars.

Theoretically, the redesigned first ones (or ascendants) were able to channel ten megapsions of power. When translated to raw potential this is enough to destroy an entire planet.

See Also: Starholme Prime, stone

meliekki -- Pantheon lord associated with nature and fertility. The priestesses of Meliekki are famous for their love of good wine and the their plentiful endowments.

Mephista, Sroth -- Eternal and alpha rank member of the protectorate serving as covert operations leader. Sroth is the ultimate master of stealth and deception. It is believed the name Mephistopheles, the lord of lies, is actually derived from his name. His spirit talisman is named Korvel. If there is a blade among the Shaladens that is said to have a reputation, it is Korvel. It is the only blade whose natural form is a two-handed sword. Korvel has the distinction of having had many surrogates in recent cycles (Sroth currently has the most surrogates of all the eternals). Every surrogate to ever wield Korvel in a major battle were simply terrifying opponents as the sword just seems to seek out the jugular of its opponents, even when the users were trying to subdue with it... Despite its killer reputation, Korvel's primary power is stealth. It grants the wielder a super cloaking ability that allows them to be even MORE undetectable than a normal shaladen. This extends to sound, smell, thoughts, and even touch. The wielder can create an illusion so as to make themselves appear as another creature familiar to the viewer. This ability can work for multiple viewers, each individual seeing something different (or the same as is the wielder's will). As might be suggested by Korvel's powers, Sroth's primary function is gathering intelligence. However, when called for, his second function is taking out the trash (if you're into rough metaphors).

T'Gor & Tigress D'Shar are Sroth's primary surrogates. T'Gor has furthered the legend of Korvel's lethal reputation on many occasions. In recent cycles, Vulcindra Skybane was caught by the eternal and rehabilitated. The powerful Dreel woman was simply too strong and unpredictable to release back in the universe. She remains on probation in Sroth's care and the two are friends of a sort. She is serving out a term of "community service" to the Protectorate, and is acting as a beta rank Protectorate enforcer with Shaladen powers. Suda Nightrhymer is a mage who made Sroth's acquaintance through members of the Felspar clan. Through some soap-opera type dynamics she and Sroth started "dating". One has to stretch the imagination a bit to imagine dating a god-like eternal, but it helps to know that the eternal lead pretty lonely existences and crave contact-- any kind of contact. It's believed that their relationship is leading up to something akin to the marriage between Koass and Megan. However, in true soap opera fashion, Vulcindra has set her eyes on Sroth, where that leads is anybody's guess...

See Also: Alpha, bit, god, Korvel, shaladen

metamagic -- Metamagic is term coined to refer to magical feats typically performed by natural abilities i.e. a magical effect generated without spell casting. Telepathic communication is a metamagic feat. Telepathy can be purely with mental (psychic) power and it can be performed with magic as well. Teleportation and the ability to transform ones shape are two other powerful metamagic abilities when they can be performed without the use of ritual spellcasting.

See Also: telepathy, teleportation, telepathic

mindspeak -- Another word for telepathy. See telepathy.

See Also: telepathy

mithril -- A light strong metal that possesses magical properties even in its 'raw' state.

mitochondric -- Having to do with or pertaining to the mitochondria of cells.

Mon'istiaga -- A horrendously powerful sword created by the first one Shiva. It has the ability, in Wren Kergatha's words, to cleave a world in two. Wren uses this weapon on a few occasions to devastating effect. She slew hundreds of demons and the physical essence of Hecate with this weapon. This artifact is the embodiment of destruction, and its true capabilities are unknown.

See Also: Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, megapsions

Myrmigyne -- Member of an all woman clan of warriors. The Myrmigynes typically have isolated communities in the deep forests and jungles.

-- N --

needleleaf -- Tall evergreen tree common to the highlands and mountain regions, with a thin cylindrical leaf and pungent sap. They have a striking similarity to pine trees on earth.

Nethra -- Eternal, tactical commander of the Protectorate and goddess of the Myrmigynes. Nethra's shaladen surrogate is Talorin Falor.

Nethra is probably one of the more outgoing and accessible of the Eternals. Her relationship with Tal Falor is extremely informal (he calls her 'boss') and they indulge in some very loose banter. Despite appearances, the two are extremely efficient and deadly serious in their actual conducting of Protectorate business. Tal is a stickler for chain-of-command but is ultimately a results-oriented person. Nethra is much the same, thus the two of them get along extremely well.

Nethra is characterized by her flaming red hair which goes well with her passionate and expressive nature. She is physically the second strongest of the eternals behind Garn. Her skills in combat were legendary even before she became an eternal.

See Also: goddess, shaladen

nightfang -- Small winged nocturnal mouse-like creatures which navigate by means of shrieking sounds. Sounds something like a bat doesn't it?

nola -- Used to refer to a savant's magical power. In powerful savants the Nola can be considered much like a living thing that inhabits his or her body.

nomar -- A class of trade ship used in the violent seas around southern tip of Canth. Nomar ships are renowned for both their speed and ability to run in rough seas where other ships capsize or break under the strain. Nomar ships range from a hundred tons to over ten thousand... the biggest ships on Titaan. Their design is a closely guarded secret and it is commonly believed that there is magic involved.

See Also: Titaan

Numinor -- Numinor is the world that was home to the Numinorian race.

Numinorian -- The Numinorians of old Numinor are one of the elder races lost in antiquity. Much of the pseudo sciences like magic, fighting, alchemy, and the development of chimerae can trace their roots to the lore left behind by this culture. The Numinorians were the ultimate magical "scientists" pushing the limits of the art of what it was capable of. At some point the core counsel of Numanor became obsessed with the discovery of the power of ultimate entropy. The ability to control life itself, to be able to harness the decay of all of living things. This pursuit ultimately ended in the destruction of their people. Loric Felspar is the only known living member of their race.

See Also: Felspar, Loric

-- O --

Odin -- Pantheon lord, ruler of the Aesir. Odin is god of the atmosphere and warriors. Odin is the father of Thor with his discarded wife Jord.

See Also: Aesir, Allfather, god

Olinar -- One of the most ancient time gates placed by the Kriar in the Ring Realms Universe.

See Also: kriar

-- P --

paladin -- A warrior who fights and represents a religion or cult. Paladins are generally seen as warriors who represent the most holy and righteous of the orders of the light.

pepperwood -- A rickety looking tree that gives off a extremely pungent smell. It produces copious amounts of sap and is characterized by small pinkish seed berry clusters. They grow in semi-arid regions and might even be confused with the common pepper tree of terran origin.

Pernithius -- The larger of Titaan's two moons, often called the harvest moon.

See Also: Titaan

phoenix -- A powerfully magic bird-like creature that appears to be made of flames. When this creature dies, it reconstitutes out of its own ashes. Only a few phoenixes have been sighted in the Ring Realms and they are difficult creatures to find as they prefer the calderas of volcanoes as the location for their barn-sized nests. Phoenix are said to be the guardians of the lore of the First Ones.

planewalk -- As it sounds, moving between planes or dimensions.

posiedon -- A pantheon lord. Posiedon is a diety associated with the sea and storms.

priestlight --

priestlights -- Priestlights, along with magelights, and a few other devices are the magical equivalents of artificial lighting. In both cases, the spell is cast on a sacrificial item that slowly disintegrates as the spell gives off light. Something the size of a large coin can be made to give off light for several seasons. The innovation of priestlights and their brethren magelights is the ability to turn them off and on from a remote location. The guilds which install them guard this on and off capability carefully which is why only influential families and establishments in the Ring Realms have them. Families such as the Felspars who have powerful mages as their core members create their own versions.

-- Q --

Quicklick -- A dagger of flight used by the red-headed bard Arabella. Wren Kergatha borrows the weapon from her for use in competing in the "hunter's game".

See Also: Arabella, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

-- R --

Ratch, Boss --

Thug leader hired to capture Sarai.

rathsteen -- Term used to describe the essence of vampirism. Some would call it the unique scent and aura of "living decay" given off by members of the vampire race.

reedwood -- Thin flexible trees that grow in marshy surroundings. Rather like willows one would imagine.

rhinotaur -- Rhinotaurs are uncommon (thank heavens!) creatures that live in various locations throughout the Ring Realms. They mostly have been spotted in Silissia, but have also been encountered in southern Corwin and in northern Coormeer. Rhinotaurs bare a rudimentary resemblance to centaurs, only they are far larger and covered with a hard gray exo-skeleton. When fully grown, the four footed aspect of the Rhinotaur can reach 3 paces high at the shoulder and can be as much as 2 paces across the chest. Specimens weighing more than 3000 stone have been brought down.

The armored hide of the Rhinotaur is equal to twenty overlapping layers of leather and conventional weaponry is all but useless against this defense. The humanoid torso of this creature is proportional in length to the shoulder height of its four footed body and is covered with the same thick gray armor. The arms are thick and powerful and end in four-fingered hands that possess an opposable thumb. The humanoid head has broad flat features and thick square teeth for pulverizing whatever food isn't already pulverized. A single thick horn protrudes from the creature's forehead. These creatures possess no language, but do make rudimentary use of tools. They commonly use huge clubs to bludgeon prey they run down. Rhinotaurs are vicious bad tempered and extremely territorial. Once enraged, they attack until slain. Because of this behavior they are sometimes used as extraordinarily powerful guard-dogs.

In combat, Rhinotaurs are a easily a match for an elder dragon because of the toughness of their armor. Rhinotaurs are stupid and thus can be easily controlled by a mage with the proper preparation and materials. This is, of course, the only way these creatures can be used in any guarding capacity. Rhinotaurs have been known to be used in the death spectacles arena combat. Legend has it that Rhinotaurs were created by grand lore-mage Theln of the Dream Merchants.

See Also: dragon, Silissia, stone

Riverback -- A small village east of Ivaneth. The village is destroyed in a conflict with Hecate's avatars.

-- S --

savant -- savant is the common and generic term for creatures who possess the spark of Alpha. See ka'amok.

Savant Powers and Known (living) Wielders:

Prime Savants:

Garmtur'Shak Nola (savant of reality) - Bannor Starfist
Latis Nola (savant of time)
Chakta Nola (savant of space)
Ta'Arthak Nola (savant of attractions) - Daena Sheento
Kel'Varan Nola (savant of forces) - Wren Kergatha, Damay Alostar
Ishtar Nola (savant of magic) - Ziedra Skyedoom

Lesser Savants:

Kul'Vita Nola (savant of life forces) - Vanidaar Kergatha
Sil'Kar Nola (savant of light) - Azir Kergatha
Nomtar Nola (savant of fire/cold [heat])
Lokar Nola (savant of elementals [storms]) - Mazerak DuQuesne
Gellid Nola (savant of phasing)
Tong Nola (savant of minds)
Ein'Doc Nola (savant of traveling)
Brill'Kes Nola (savant of sound [thunder])
Mairn'Tete Nola (savant of gases)
Mairn'Kath Nola (savant of metals)
Mairn'Reth Nola (savant of organics)

See Also: Alostar, Damay, Alpha, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Kergatha, Vanidaar, Skyedoom, Ziedra

scalebark -- Sturdy heavy-boled trees with thick scale-like bark and extremely dense wood. Quite similar to an oak actually.

scanning -- The act of utilizing a scanner.

scrying -- Scrying is the term used to describe magical remote observation. Scrying can be done through devices and through spells, and their a varying levels of strength that range anywhere from being able to see a few rooms away to being able to see events taking place on other planes of existence.

scrying --

sector -- Similar to quadrant (in usage and misuse). An area of a circle between two measurements of arc (far more usable for defining an area in polar coordinate areas).

Sen'Gen -- Armored agents of Frielos family known for their stealth and ferocity.

shadowspar -- A type of bow renowned for its power and quality. It is known to enhance the bow-wielding skill of the user. Janai T'Evagduran, the second princess of Malan and renowned elven marks-woman has never been bested in archery competition or combat when using one of these bows.

See Also: Malan

Shadowstalker, Bronawyn -- Deposed princess of Silissia and adventurer, sister of Nevarr Shadowstalker who is now the current castellan of Drakmourn. Member of the Brethren guild of Ivaneth. Bronawyn married Caldorian Felspar in 1101 N.I.S.

Bronawyn has two daughters by Caldorian: Cassopia and DonaRae.

Bronawyn was cast out of Silissian because of a bloody coup staged by Gabriella Sarn Ariok over the Kingdom's harboring of the followers of Kali. Bronawyn's parents and immediate family aside from her brother Nevarr were all slain.

Later when Nevarr returned to reclaim the Shadowstalker birthright from Gabriella through an arranged marriage, Bronawyn regained her royal titles and rights to the lands in Drakmourn.

Through her contacts in the Felspar family Bronawyn happened to meet Gwensullan Techstar, the matriarch of the powerful 2nd generation Kriar house of Techstar. The Kriar lady technologist was looking to purchase lands on habitable worlds and it so happened that Bronawyn was willing to sell the (to her) worthless chunk of desert on the western border of Drakmourn, several hundred square leagues of barren rock and sand that were uninhabitable (for humans). Bronawyn sold the land to Gwensullan against the urgings of many in the Felspar clan (especially Cassandra-- the reasons for Cassandra's desire to block her adopted great-grandmother's land deal are murky). Bronawyn received a payment of several million Kriar comtimes for the land parcel, a currency valid only on the Kriar home-world. Bronawyn had known that the comtimes could purchase Kriar 'magicks' far beyond the meager means of anything that could be bought with gold. With Dame Techstar's assistance, she ventured to the Kriar home-world searching through catalogs to find something appropriate to purchase with her money. Many of the first things she chose the Kriar simply would not sell to a "primitive". After a long negotiation period, and purchases of several trivial items, Bronawyn came upon the idea of purchasing a Kriar cybermed. The Silissian princess had seen the miraculous healing abilities of cybermeds because she had seen the one Clan Felspar consulted from time to time for healing critical injuries and ailments. When she made the request to purchase a cybermed, surprisingly the approval was granted for the sum of two million comtimes. The reasons the Kriar allowed the sale of Mercedes' contract are unclear, but it is surmised that Mercedes herself through the network of cybers on home-world arranged her own 'vacation'.

Mercedes lived as a member of the Felspar household and acted Bronawyn's assistant and later the caregiver for Bronawyn's two babies. It is believed that Bronawyn's relationship to the clan was one of the other ulterior motives that Mercedes had when she arranged the approval for the contract. The Kriar, and the cyber hierarchy were intensely interested in the science of magic and this was a golden opportunity to study a whole household full of mages in their "natural environment".

Not long after Mercedes became a part of their family, Bronawyn came up with a money-making scheme utilizing the cyber's incredible healing ability. She would

locate rich families that had members with incurable ailments, and for a price restore them to health.

While it was a good idea, the basically good-hearted and very "human" cyber would have nothing to do with this "selling life to the highest bidder" mercenary plot. Try as she might, Bronawyn could do nothing to persuade the cyber to cooperate. She was ready to give up the cyber as a wasted investment and try "to get her money back" when her far more diplomatic husband, Caldorian stepped in. He suggested a compromise, run a clinic that offered healing at whatever the patients could afford, if free, so-be-it, but whatever could be reasonably born by the patients and their family... They had to charge *something* as he later explained to Mercedes, in order to pay for the facilities and such to support the endeavor. With careful persuasion they were finally able to convince the cybermed to agree, and the Shadowstalker Miracle Clinic was born. Bronawyn was careful to limit the knowledge of this institution and help enough less fortunate people to satisfy Mercedes' sense of equity, while raking in huge sums of cash from rich families desperate to cure the incurable. This enterprise was as can be imagined, wildly successful. Mercedes was only one individual though and there was a limit to what she could do. Bronawyn then branched out into pharmaceuticals, the cyber's knowledge of advanced medicines made her capable of devising vaccines and inoculations of incredible worth. Again, to satisfy Mercedes she had to temper the sales providing the product to the poor as well as the rich. The enterprise continued, with Bronawyn organizing better and more efficient ways to utilize Mercedes skills while still satisfying the temperamental cyber's saintly sense of equity.

As Bronawyn's financial resources blossomed, she hatched another scheme. The Kriar wanted to purchase land in the idyllic core-worlds of the Ring Realms, however, Elsbeth Crowninshield was utilizing her vast resources as an elder elite, to block, intimidate sellers, and buy up land to prevent any Kriar homesteads from being created. Remembering her initial extremely profitable deal with house Techstar, Bronawyn saw another way to make money. She began buying land in the different locations where the Kriar were showing interest and secretly brokering it to agencies on Homeworld. This simple enterprise far outstripped the extraordinary profits that she had been bringing in with Mercedes. However, it was not long before Elsbeth learned that her embargo had been undermined and the Crimson Mage turned her wrath on the Princess. Only by fact of her being Loric's daughter-in-law did Bronawyn escape severe punishment at the hands of the elder elite. It was while hiding behind Loric and Cassandra that Bronawyn decided that if she was going to make enemies like Elsbeth, that she needed serious protection. She put word out on home-world that she would pay handsomely for Kriar bodyguard.

Bronawyn was teased by the Felspar family that there was no way that some ancient Kriar warrior would "babysit" a human for any amount of pay.

They were wrong. Not only did Bronawyn get an applicant, the one who answered the call was none other than retired Tarkath Eclipse Shargris, one of the most renowned warriors on home-world. This development stunned the family elders. It was a conundrum as to whether they should allow Eclipse to be in or around the household. It wasn't until Bronawyn threatened to move out that they finally agreed to allow it as long as Eclipse promised 'good behavior'. This Eclipse did do but the ancient Kriar's assurances did little to calm misgivings. Loric knew if this impossibly

old creature decided to cause trouble there was virtually nothing he or anyone else in the citadel could do.

Eclipse became the next Kriar member of Bronawyn's household within a household. Loric's unease proved unwarranted, the Tarkath turned out to be a model house-guest causing decidedly less trouble than the mistress he hired on to guard. In fact, he helped Cassandra out with several thorny problems which helped ease tensions. It was shortly thereafter Eclipse's acceptance that family members discovered Desiray's involvement with the rogue Kriar Quasar, who by coincidence was Eclipse's mate. Which involvement came first remains in question, but it soon became clear that the Felspar clan had some ancient Kriar mercenaries now vacationing in their midst.

It was shortly after these events that the elder elite Aleesha Cloudwalker, who had recently come back on the scene due to the efforts of Cassandra and Dorian, got wind of Bronawyn's recent hi-jinx. For whatever reason, the elder elite took exception to the Silissian woman and decided to make an end of her. Only the intervention of Eclipse prevented Bronawyn from meeting an untimely "conversion" to the light.

The rivalry between Aleesha and Bronawyn continues. The elder elite is waiting for Eclipse to get tired of protecting Bronawyn, and then she shall finally have her way...

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For those time conscious individuals, the aforementioned details concerning Eclipse come after the events in both Savant's Blood and in Shaladen Chronicles: A Knot In Time. They have already taken place by the time of the events in Reality's Plaything.

See Also: Ariok, Gabriella Sarn, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric, guild, kriar, Kirikos, Dame, shaladen, Silissia, silissian

Shadowstalker, Ranfast -- Renowned guildmaster thief and shape changer. Ranfast is a student of the teachings of Berek Tristar considered by most as the defining authority on the science of self-transmutation. Berek is attributed with the ability to divide himself into separate functional pieces, and able to become even inanimate objects and mechanisms. Ranfast is one of the original wearers of the dimensional shadow-cloak and gained membership into the Master's guild. Ranfast retired after many cycles of adventuring to pursue his shape-changing studies. He opened an "antiquities" shop in Ivaneth to continue funding his research and his rather expensive lifestyle.

It is rumored (but unsubstantiated) that Ranfast is related to the Silissian family of the same name who were ousted from eastern Silissia. It is believed that he is the nephew of the now dead King Xenos Shadowstalker. If so, he would be cousins with the still living heirs Bronawyn and Nevarr Shadowstalker.

See Also: guild, Silissia, silissian, Shadowstalker, Bronawyn

shaladen -- A weapon made of the spirit metal shael dal. The most notable Shaladens are those wielded by the ki'succorund surrogates of the eternal. See eternal.

The shaladens of the eternal's are a physical manifestation of that particular eternal's spirit that has been combined into alloy of ishtite, adamantine, and krill. The resulting material is for most practical purposes indestructible. See krill.

All of the shaladens have a 'vorpul' quality edge. When a user is "bound" to any of the blades the following abilities are conferred to the wielder:

- **Physical enhancement:** All wielders are endowed with varying degrees of enhanced strength and resistance to physical injury. The smallest such enhancement (provided by the shaladen Cataract) confers strength sufficient to lift 30 stone overhead without straining. The body is toughened to the point that the user's bare skin is as resistant to injury as if they were wearing chain mail. Most of the blades confer a limited form of "environment adaptation" that allows operation in hostile environments including airless space for a short periods of time.
- **Unlimited telepathy:** this ability allows mental communication across any normal-space distance, and in many cases across trans-dimensional distances as well. This communication can take place regardless of whether the target creature has any telepathic ability.
- **Cross-culture idiomatic language translation:** The shaladen confers the ability to synchronize with a particular creature to speak and understand in their mother tongue. The spoken language is as non-biased and idiomatically correct as is possible when translating the wielder's thoughts to words in the target language.
- **Point-to-point summoning:** A wielder can "summon" another wielder via plane-shifting provided the other wielder is willing and not resisting the transfer. The "summonee" must be conscious and able to grant permission for the summoning to work. The "call" of the blades is very powerful and can occur across dimensional barriers and through all but a few kinds of magical and technological defenses.
- **Temporal autonomy:** After binding with an eternal shaladen, the wielder is thereafter completely immune to the effects of time. They do not age, and chronological shifts and attacks are ineffective. The shaladen acts as an anomaly compensator allowing the wielder to function in back-time without causing downstream event disruption. The shaladen's most unique power is its ability to confer pan-temporal uniqueness. The wielder cannot meet his "alternate" parallel time-lines.
- **Undetectability:** As a function of its anomaly compensation, under normal circumstances the wielder of the shaladen is completely undetectable. The user's presence is not registered by electronic or magical devices. There have been some agencies which developed items specifically for the detection and tracking of the Shael Dal, but in most of the cases the eternal's soon confiscated the devices.

See Also: krill, stone, succorund, telepathy, temporal, telepathic

Sharikaar -- The largest continental landmass on Titaan. The major continents of Titaan in order of size are are Sharikaar, Fraestar, Canth, Pedon, and Silissia.

See Also: Silissia, Titaan

shields -- (generic) For a force-field (c.f.) protecting an area.

Sil'vaya -- The elven name of Desiray Illkaren Felspar.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren

Silissia -- Large island continent in the southern hemi-sphere of Titaan. Silissia is renowned for the evil creatures which have bred and grown in its territories. Most

notable are the enclaves of evil dragons that have extensive cavern networks on the borders of the Silissian desert.

See Also: silissian, Titaan

silissian -- Someone from Silissia. see Silissia.

See Also: Silissia

skalding -- The original skalding was simply a recital of inspirational heroic poetry practiced by the Aesir and Vanir in order to bolster morale and encourage comaradie. Skalding can, in general, be referred to as organized story-telling for entertainment purposes.

See Also: Aesir

Skyedoom, Caladar -- Recognized as the only patriarchal figure in the Frielos family. Longtime paramour of Aarlen Frielos. For more than ten millennia, Caladar served as one of the family heads, organizing affairs and running battle campaigns.

Around 1088 N.I.S. Aarlen Frielos was taken prisoner by the Eternals and subsequently punished. The powerful matriarch lost much of her will to live. Through a course of events several seasons long, she took up with Beia Targallae. In the following summers, Aarlen grew closer to Beia and more apart from her dark associations (and Caladar). She eventually married Beia in 1092.

In 1112 N.I.S, Caladar tried and failed to assassinate Beia, and was subsequently ostracized from the Frielos family.

Caladar had two brothers, Marduk Skyedoom, and Zhentar Skyedoom. Zhentar is the father of Ziedra Skyedoom, a good friend of Wren Kergatha.

See Also: Frielos, Aarlen, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, Skyedoom, Ziedra, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

Skyedoom, Ziedra -- Ziedra Skyedoom is a ex-patriot noblewoman of the eastern Silissian kingdom of Drakmourn. Daughter of General Zhentar Skyedoom, and Beldwin Skyedoom. At a young age, Ziedra was sent away from her home to seek refuge in the Sharikaarian city of Corwin. There Ziedra joined up with a band of gypsies for shelter and refuge. She later met and befriended Wren Kergatha another orphaned young girl. Wren joined the Brethren guild and with her guild earnings supported herself and Ziedra for many seasons. In the interim Ziedra began learning to dance, and over a span of seasons grew famous and prosperous on her own. She took up with royalty and she and Wren gradually grew apart. Ziedra's prosperity was not to last, she dallied with the wrong man and was forced to escape Corwin with city guard on her heels. Again destitute, the young woman wandered from kingdom to kingdom doing odd jobs and staying ahead of the princess' agents. She finally ended up in the port city of Ivaneth where she again met up with an older wiser Wren Kergatha who again took her under her wing.

It shortly after this reunion that Ziedra's destiny was to truly crystallize. Through Wren's recent acquaintances she met Bronawyn Shadowstalker, one of the only surviving family members of the uprising that killed her father. She also discovered her father's relationship to family Frielos, discovering she was actually the niece of Caladar Skyedoom the paramour of Aarlen Frielos. The revelations were not to end there. Wren Kergatha also discovered that Ziedra was a savant, an Ishtar Nola, a savant of magic.

Through circumstances, Ziedra was forced to develop skills quickly simply to survive the events that her relationship with Wren got her involved in. Ziedra learned sword fighting and ended up as an magical apprentice of Aarlen Frielos.

As an Ishtar Nola, Ziedra is a natural mage, able to learn spells simply by touching the caster during the incantation. She has an eidetic memory that allows her to memorize movements and vocal sounds with the briefest exposure. Her ability to couple memorization and the coordination of her body makes Ziedra an incredible student of any coordination reliant skill. This ability is sophisticated enough that she can build skills virtually as fast as she is exposed to the nuances. The Ishtar Nola also allows the reading of magical auras. Ziedra can read not only the properties of magic, but can discern details about the caster who created the enchantments. As a living avatar of magic Ziedra is extremely resistant to harmful magicks, and totally impervious to all forms of magical charms, paralyzation, control and domination. She can manipulate magical energies much the same way the Kel'Varan Nola manipulates forces. This control combined with her personification of magic allows Ziedra to use a magic item that would otherwise work only for a specific person. The exact limits of this last skill are unknown, but it is believed that her nature as 'magick's mistress' causes all magical items to see her as their 'true creator'. The pantheon lord Isis possesses a similar capability and some surmise she is the tao-beta to the Ishtar Nola.

See Also: avatar, Frielos, Aarlen, guild, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, silissian, Skyedoom, Caladar, Shadowstalker, Bronawyn

Solaris, Marna (Counsel) (Vatraena) -- Marna Solaris is the spiritual mother of the Kriar race, and the oldest living Kriar in existence. While the persona of the Vatraena dates back to before the launching of home-world, she is only in spirit that same person. Untold millions of cycles old, the Prime Mother of the Kriar has been through renewal thousands of times. While she is (in spirit) the eldest Kriar, she is, in many ways, the youngest because she has forgotten so much of her past in antiquity.

Marna is the undisputed mistress of the Kriar warp science, and the most skilled time diver on Fabrista home-world. She is rivaled only by military commander Tarkath Quasar Diliaysus, who uses extensive matrix enhancements to increase her powers. In addition to her time diving capabilities, Marna is able to perform n-space folding by pure force of will. This talent is the ability to cause the atomic and sub-atomic structure of matter to twist upon itself and occupy higher order dimensions. This process can be likened to taking a two dimensional object and folding it so it occupies three dimensions. Marna can take three dimensional matter and "fold" it so that it occupies four and even higher order spaces.

After the adoption of Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri by house Techstar, it became a fashion among the Kriar nobility to start interacting with the humanity and skilled

magies in particular. The ability of magic to overcome something Kriar science could not opened many eyes, and sparked intense interest in learning the secrets of magic. Also, humans being young and impressionable, made them excellent proteges. The Kriar being empaths, derive a great deal of satisfaction being around creatures who still experience excitement and passion. They can feel "vicariously" through their empathy, emotions and sensations that they themselves have become numb to due to hundreds of millennia of life.

See Also: kriar

spectrum -- The distribution of energy arranged in order of wavelengths.

spicewood -- A light-colored fragrant wood used in the construction of some furniture, and often used to line walls. Chips of spice-wood are sometimes used in gardens for their odor.

Starholme Prime -- Starholme Prime is the gigantic artifact left behind by the first ones. This titanic machine is both a world and a massive magical power source. The power of savants and the pantheon lords comes in part from this place. The knowledge, lore, and legacy of the first ones is bound into this installation that spans hundreds of leagues. It is speculated that this one magical device has the power to reshape the cosmos.

See Also: megapsions

Steelwood, Jolandrin -- Renowned ranger and lady student of Loric Felspar.

Wife of Sebenreth'Kar Felspar.

See Also: Felspar, Loric

stickerberry -- Bumpy red berry fruits about the size of the end of a thumb. The flavor is both pithy and sweet.

stone -- Measure of weight. For those concerned with Terran equivalents, a stone is equal to 20 pounds or just hair over 9 kilograms.

Stonebones -- A powerful magical potion for mending internal bone structures (like ribs). The ritual of the stonebones is an extraordinarily painful but quick way of magically repairing hard tissue that would otherwise take weeks or months to heal.

Stonewood -- Kingdom to the north of Ivaneth, so named for the rock-like fossilized trees that can be found through much of its territories. Stonewood is has the notorious reputation of having been the birthplace of Lady Karn Taath, the Iron Queen, otherwise known as the womb of abominations. The birth-mother of the avatar Mishaka.

See Also: avatar

succorund -- The act of spiritually binding a being to a pantheon lord. There are various forms of this process that have varying side-effects on the host.

symbiote -- Literally, the word means 'to live together'. Many creatures in nature exist in a symbiotic relationship. The best example of this are insects and plants. Many varieties of plants rely on flying insects (like bees) to spread their pollen which results in genetic diversity which is necessary for survival.

Some extremely advanced races create specially tailored symbiotic creatures to perform various tasks. One example of this is an organism that can be used as clothing. The creature itself is a colony organism that binds together into a non-porous "cloth". This living clothing feeds on the body heat, skin oils, dead skin, salts, and perspiration present in a humanoid creature. The colony creature also scavenges any metabolizable particles that come in contact with its surface, including hair, pollen, (dandruff =)), dust, and, of course, any trace amounts of food a sloppy wearer might spill on it. It is designed to absorb to break down or depolarize (disassociate) itself with many of other kinds of inorganic particles as well. In essence, this creates a "self cleaning" fabric. Added to this basic structure are "microdot energy capacitors" anchored throughout the body of the symbiote. These organic "batteries" store bio-electric energy and are arranged in a positive-negative lattice allowing them to repel or attract one another. Through this mechanism and the symbiote's own fibrous motility the fabric can be reshaped, creating a form of reconfigurable clothing.

Kriar symbiote clothing is more sophisticated yet, employing discrete matter conversion nodes into the symbiote's body, allowing for more involved changes of the wearer's living attire.

In her trip to Starholme Prime, Wren accidentally triggers some "hungry" first one symbiotic clothing.

See Also: kriar, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter, megapsions, Starholme Prime

-- T --

t'a'fugit -- The spell of spirit binding. The words actually mean 'spirit in time' but this literal translation doesn't really capture the essence of what the spell does which is to transfer or bind a 'free' spirit into host body.

T'Evagduran, Kalindinai (Queen) -- Queen Kalindinai became the bride of Malan 999 summers ago at the age of 1153. She is a well respected and regarded queen who travels extensively within the borders of Malan conducting affairs of state. Kalindinai is what as known as a wilder mage, possessing extraordinarily strong magical and mental abilities. Her skills are only equivalent to an arch-magi but the power of her magic is significantly greater. It is the Queen's participation in some of Malan's border skirmishes that have caused the conflicts to end so quickly. The Matradomma is a devastating wamage and capable of destroying entire legions. Because of her intimidating reputation, Kalindinai often conducts negotiations on behalf of Malan. Kalindinai has three daughters.

See Also: Malan

Taath, Mishaka (princess) (avatar) -- Hated avatar of Hecate, and arch-nemesis of Wren Kergatha. Mishaka is the offspring of Lady Karn Taath, known as the Iron Queen. Baroness Taath was so evil and her children hellions of such magnitude

she was dubbed 'the womb of abominations'. Mishaka was the most infamous and notable of the string of despots and witches birthed by the woman. Mishaka is around eight hundred cycles old and due to the influences of Hecate's powerful demiurge almost completely insane.

See Also: avatar, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

tanglefoot -- A common type of weed that acts as the name suggests.

tao -- The spirit force of savants. The tao is a far stronger essence than that of a typical mortal, able to retain consciousness and identity for extended periods of time outside of a physical shell. The tao can all retain and capture the essence of mortal life-forces and keep them intact within its matrix, incorporating that pseudo-life into the host entity.

Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen) -- Summary

Queen of the Jhandris'Kul clan of Myrmigynes that reside in the great tree Duran'Gravar. Beia is a survivor of the Arcturan death spectacles, victor of 611 bouts, 7 losses and 12 draws. She wears the shadowbolt tattoo and in an acknowledged 12th circle grand master of the Jac Daw and Dan Sadad fighting styles. She is a renowned archer and hunter as well. See has a younger sister named Ess. Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri is her adopted 'clan sister'.

History

Beia has a long and sordid past. Raised in the arenas she new nothing but gladiatorial combat until the age of 26 when she escaped the arena's with the assistance T'Gor D'Shar. T'Gor had been drafted in the arenas as an outside competitor, lured there by promises of great weapons, fabulous wealth, and the best fight training available in the realms. Most of this being true if one could manage to win seven combats in a row-- which draftees rarely did.

Beia served as an arena "ringer" or block-master, an impossible opponent set up to defeat draftees so that they would be forced to continue the gladiatorial contracts. As a lifer, a pit fighter born in the arena, freedom could only be achieved by going one hundred battles undefeated. As Meridian Arcturan's star fighter, Beia suffered exactly one defeat every hundred battles through various tricks rigged by the evil mage.

One of the conditions of defeating an opponent in the arenas is that the warrior may opt to take 2 of that person's belongings, or take that person into servitude. Part of Meridian's twisted arena schemes is that his riggers were often able to defeat their opponents without slaying them outright. These hapless people would be carted off the field hanging by a thread where revival magicks would be used to restore them to health. Each revival cost the contractee seven battles. So, in defeat not only did they still need to fight seven more battles, they owed seven more. As a result draftees rarely could rarely overcome the deficit of owed fights to earn their way out.

T'Gor D'Shar fought for three years in the arenas, learning the Dan Sadad from various block-masters. He deliberately forfeited optional matches to maintain his contract but not dig himself into a hole where he could not win his way out.

When he felt he had learned everything of value, he began his push to win his way clear of the arena. Unfortunately, T'Gor had become rather popular and had a reputation for winning all the big fights. When it looked like T'Gor would get himself free, Meridian arranged to have him fight Beia.

The fight was vicious and Beia was more than challenged by this powerful draftee. However, her greater experience and wild animal power (plus a little rigging by Meridian) ensured that she defeated him. This being her six hundredth battle, Beia resented that Meridian had robbed her of a fair fight. She chose to take T'Gor's service rather than deprive him of his magic items.

It was during this service time that T'Gor and Beia got to know one another. Both of them were mutually angry at Meridian's rigs, T'Gor for being duped, and Beia for being robbed of an honorable challenge against a worthy opponent. It was during this time that T'Gor convinced Beia to try to leave the arenas. Years of conditioning and abuse had made her believe that it was not possible to overcome Meridian.

T'Gor believed different. His plan was to request a special challenge rematch and have Beia throw the fight. He would "kill" her and collect the body as his spoils. Of course, there was the little matter of winning six more fights. With Beia's additional training and coaching, T'Gor won the six fights and made the special challenge against Beia.

It was this "special challenge bout" that brought Beia to the attention of Aarlen Frielos. Unbeknownst to Beia and T'Gor, the fight had been rigged so BOTH warriors would end up in a three way match and get defeated. This was known to the spectators but not the two warriors. It was Aarlen who made the gift of Tariegron, the great battle blade to Beia right before the fight. The odds ranged from fifty to one to over a hundred-to-one against the two fighters surviving.

The battle was horrendous, invisible block masters, monsters and a host of trickery was turned against them. However, Meridian had not counted on Tariegron's vorpal edge nor the determination of the two. When the dust had settled they had defeated four Rhinotaurs, a half dozen hidden block masters, and several other fighters. Gasping for breath, facing Meridian's box the two of them looked up at him defiantly. While Beia stood their glaring at the evil mage, T'Gor stepped back and slammed Beia across the back of the head, knocking her unconscious and "defeating" her for the seventh time. T'Gor claimed her "body" as the spoils. Emotions from this titanic struggle were so high and audience involvement so great that Meridian was forced to release T'Gor who in turn pulled Beia from the arena.

After a brief stint with freedom and recovery, Beia and T'Gor would return to the arena to help others escape the rigged battles including Beia's younger sister Ess.

On the outside Beia would go through a long recovery and acclimation process. She became "attached" to Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri after serving as body-guard for her in a few adventures. The gold mage and her friend Dorian would eventually soften the hard exterior of this cold fighting machine and bring out her real emotions and feminine nature.

She would go on to make friends with Talorin Falor, and become the widely regarded teacher of pit fighting techniques. Tal would eventually persuade Beia in backing a campaign to destroy all of Meridian's arenas.

Years later she would meet and grow close to Aarlen Frielos.

See Also: Duran'Gravar, Frielos, Aarlen

Tarrantil, Bertram -- Active member of the Shael Dal wielding the honorary Shaladen weapon Golnir. Bertram is the high Justicar of Ukko, the highest ranking law upholding religious figure on the continent of Sharikaar. Bertram is married to Desiray Illkaren Felspar for particular political reasons too complicated to enumerate here. Desiray is also married to Loric Felspar and Brin Ishtarvariku. Bertram has six birth children from a previous marriage to Thamara Narrimar. Recently Bertram married Val'Siden D'Tarin (the daughter of Lord Algernon D'Tarin). Bertram has close to thirty adopted sons and daughters.

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric, shaladen, Sharikaar

telepath -- Used generally to describe a person who has telepathic ability. However, the word is also often used to distinguish a group of individuals with psionic capabilities that might or might not include telepathy.

See Also: telepathy, telepathic

telepathic -- The ability to communicate via mental projection. The capabilities of telepaths ranges from simple impressions that can only be communicated across a room to creatures like the Eternals and pantheon lords that can physically control several creatures across interstellar distances.

See Also: telepathy

telepathy -- The ability to project / communicate via mental energies. See telepathic.

See Also: mindspeak, telepathic

teleport -- The act of teleporting. See teleportation.

See Also: teleportation

teleportation -- Magical teleportation was originally developed by Mandrimin (c.f.). The simple explanation is that it is a magical process which allows instantaneous transport between two locations. For the technical mage, teleportation involves two phases, the first being the extraction a simulcraic derivation of the source matter from chaotic space, then a fractal compression of the interpolated particulate helices is performed. The corresponding magical data is then compact enough to do matter / energy exchange with the target locale where the simulcra are reconstructed into their approximations. Note that the source and destination are no longer the same, but extremely accurate approximations created out of the templates

located in mathematical space. [Complicated isn't it? That's why it takes special training to be a mage!]

See Also: teleport

temporal -- Of or pertaining to Time.

tenday -- Like it sounds-- ten days.

Terranath, Damrosil -- Damrosil is a 2nd generation member of the Band of the Crescent Moon. She has free-booted across many planets and participated in numerous adventures. Damrosil was a longtime companion of Tiernia Nirvanae and the two of them had numerous encounters with the Dream Merchants and their operatives. Damrosil and Tiernia grew apart in their later years as Tiernia settled down to build a bard school. Damrosil went on to fight in the Arcturan Death Spectacles and made the acquaintance of Beia Targallae.

Damrosil escaped the arena and shortly thereafter assumed leadership of the Jhandris'Kul clan of Myrmigynes. Several years later, Beia also escaped the spectacles and returned to her home among the clans. Itching to begin adventuring again, Damrosil willingly stepped down from her seat as queen and gave the position to Beia. It was shortly after this period that the Eternal Yi began the reformation of the Protectorate with the help of Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri Felspar. By that time, Damrosil had already found the Shaladen blade Cybersong. Since Damrosil had bonded with the weapon, and few better warriors existed, the protectorate asked her to join their ranks. Damrosil accepted. Damrosil has the distinction of being the first of the indoctrinated warriors of the Shael Dal.

Tournament details: All-World's Tournament of 1089, winner 14th circle, All-World's Tournament of 1093, winner 15th circle, placed in top 10 of unlimited play in 5 entered tournaments. Damrosil is a veteran tournament warrior with over 312 victories at various ranks. She spent some years in the Arcturan Death Spectacles and has trained extensively with Beia Targallae. Beia and Damrosil often compete in tag-team unlimited class tournament play. When together they have never failed to place below the top 10.

See Also: shaladen, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

Territaani -- One of the elder races noted for the fierce fighting ability and sturdiness. Aarlen Frielos, as well as the father of Euriel Idundaughter are of Territani blood.

See Also: Frielos, Aarlen

timewinds -- A figure of speech, the "flow of time".

Titaan -- One of the core worlds of the Ring Realms, the planet from which the Band of the Crescent Moon hails (among others).

Tuffala, Grahm -- Wren's contemporary in the thieves guild of Corwin. Grahm died when the cult of the Dagger overran the Brethren guild that she and he were

trying to defend. Grahm lives on as a ghost-like impression in Wren's memories. For more on Grahm, see savant's Blood.

See Also: guild, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

tuvan -- Derogatory term used by Myrmigynes to refer to outsiders, presumably those with little to no actual skills. Terran cowboys use the words 'green horn' and 'tenderfoot' in a similar context.

-- U --

Ukko -- Pantheon lord, god of the atmosphere and lord of the Vanir. Ukko is to the Vanir what Odin is to the Aesir. Laramis and Irodee serve Ukko as avatars.

See Also: Aesir, Allfather, god

unicorn -- Equine appearing mammals that have a single spiral horn. Unicorns are uncommon but can be found in fairy forests throughout the Ring Realms.

-- V --

valkyries -- Plural of Valkyrie. See Valkyrie.

Vectra -- A dagger of flight enchanted by Cassandra Kel'Ishtauri. Wren Kergatha uses Vectra in several battles.

See Also: Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

Vilesilencer, The -- Loric Felspar's sobriquet is "The Vilesilencer" a reference to his days trying to destroy the evil of the pantheon lords when their influence was stronger in the mortal worlds.

See Also: Felspar, Loric

Vinax, Koass -- The prime commander eternal of the Universal Protectorate. Koass has a wife named Megan, and two step-daughters Ralani and Silvia.

Vinax, Ralani Kiverina Armadoi -- Daughter of Megan Vinax foathra'd by Dorian Degaba Ishtarvariku. Ralani lives with and is in the care of her step father Koass Vinax and his now current wife Megan. Megan is an ex-air-maiden for Ukko (a pantheon lord related to Odin). The air-maidens are a clan sisters to the "Chosen" clan of Valkyries. In her natural form, Megan has wings. Her daughter Ralani has inherited this trait. She and her cousin Siriena are within hours of each others age. They were born only a few weeks after Cassandra's triplets Lorrik, Radian, and Celek. Both Ralani and Siriena are well regarded in the Felspar clan. They are both consume students of war and personal combat.

See Also: Allfather

void -- Of or pertaining to space.

vorpul -- Weapons possessing a 'vorpul' edge are said to possess a 'perfect' edge that can (under the proper circumstances) cut through even hardened metal.

Beia's spear Eboneye possesses a vorpul quality edge. The krill blades created by Loric Felspar, such as the one wielded by Desiray Illkaren Felspar, have a 'lesser' vorpul edge. The shaladen blades of the eternal's have what is termed a 'greater' vorpul edge sometimes called an 'annihilator' edge that can carve through virtually any material (provided there's enough power behind it).

See Also: Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Felspar, Loric, krill, shaladen, Targalle, Beia {Regaura} (Queen)

-- W --

warwand -- A general term for any weapon used in battle.

watercloth -- A densely woven cloth noted for its ability to retain water when treated with wax. It has a smooth texture similar to silk. Watercloth is often used in the manufacture of cheap but serviceable bedding.

-- X --

-- Y --

Yolagg -- One of Hecate's avatars, and leader of the avatar coven that attempted to destroy the entire Band of the Crescent Moon, plus the other players of the great game. Damay Alostara, Aarlen Frielos, Wren Kergatha and Desiray Illkaren-Felspar combined their powers in order to overcome the avatar trap. The end result was the dissolution of Yolagg and nine other avatars. Whether they were permanently slain is currently unknown.

See Also: avatar, Alostara, Damay, Felspar, Desiray Illkaren, Frielos, Aarlen, Kergatha, Liandra {Wren} Idun-daughter

-- Z --

About the Author

First published in 1983, Will Greenway started his creative career wanting to draw and script comics. After a number of years, he found writing better suited to his skills. Aside from writing and art, Will is a self-taught programmer, PC technician, and network troubleshooter. He enjoys skiing, racquetball, Frisbee golf, and is steadfast supporter of role-playing games. To date he has completed twenty novels more than twenty short stories, and numerous articles on writing. He resides in the Spring Valley suburb of south San Diego.

The Ring Realms, the shared universe his novels take place in, has an online presence at <http://www.ringrealms.com> (which has a LOT of detailed information about the universe and its inhabitants).

As Will's "universe" is so complex the following is some information that may help with timelines:

Wren Kergatha (whose story line starts earliest of the three series) interacts with many of the characters depicted in the Chronicles. She also is the savior savant who befriends and helps Bannor in the Reality's Plaything series.

So the chronological order to the events of the novels roughly follows the list below. (Numbers specify the summer cycle N.I.S [New Ivaneth Standard]):

- 1100 Savant's Blood: Shadow of the Avatar
- 1102 Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty
- 1103 Aesir's Blood
- 1108 Shaladen Chronicles: A Knot In Time
- 1108 Shaladen Chronicles: Anvil of Sorrow
- 1109 Reality's Plaything
- 1109 'Neath Odin's Eye
- 1110 Gaea's Legacy: Eternal's Agenda
- 1110 Gaea's Legacy: Savants Ascendant
- 1110 Gaea's Legacy: The Infinity Annihilator
- 1111 Shaladen Chronicles: Who Mourns the Creator
- 1111 Gaea's Blood
- 1112 War of the Genemar

* N.I.S = New Ivaneth Standard.

Since the initial conception, the idea for the War of the Genemar has been broken into a multi-book series. What I have in mind for that story will not fit into a standard novel length. There are simply too many characters and too many side plots.

If you are more inclined to follow a particular character's storyline and not care to read chronologically the series are:

Reality's Plaything Series -- Tales following the adventures of Bannor Starfist:

1. Reality's Plaything (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=181>)
2. Neath Odin's Eye (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=182>)
3. Gaea's Legacy: Eternal's Agenda
4. Gaea's Legacy: Savants Ascendant

5. Gaea's Legacy: The Infinity Annihilator

Savant's Blood Series -- Tales following the adventures of Wren Kergatha:

1. Savant's Blood: Shadows of the Avatar
(<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=586>)
2. Savant's Blood: Hecate's Bounty
3. Aesir's Blood
4. Gaea's Blood

Shaladen Chronicles Series -- Tales following the adventures of Corim Vale.

1. A Knot In Time (<http://www.readerseden.com/product.php?productid=183>)
2. Anvil of Sorrow
3. Who Mourns the Creator