

The Selanian Chronicles

Volume Two

The High Priestess

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The High Priestess

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The High Priestess

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The Alley

1. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

The alley was a gloomy place where stray cats prowled among rusty garbage cans and shadows slunk through filth and rubbish left there to rot by indifferent tenants. On warm summer evenings, a stale odor of things best forgotten pervaded the ominous silence, infesting obscure niches just below the surface of conscious thought until the cold winds of another bleak fall drove it out.

The street was a dead end. On three sides, brick walls towered over the narrow passage, smothering any hope of light from above and condemning the alley to perpetual shadow. At night, white and yellow bulbs cast their dim glow through grimy windows, creating ever-changing patterns of light and dark on the street and walls below. Only a muted hum penetrated the corridor from the city outside. To anyone stumbling into the close confines of this secluded world, it must have seemed a cheerless spot indeed.

But Jonathan hardly noticed his dismal surroundings. Despite his fatigue, he crossed his thin arms in front of his chest and propped his chin in one small hand. His brow creased in deep folds, the way he often saw his friend Mr. Denning stare at a table or chair before deciding where to move it. Not that Mr. Denning had much furniture in that damp hole the landlord called an apartment. Besides, Jonathan couldn't see what difference it made where a certain piece of furniture ended up. There had to be some baffling grown-up logic behind the man's constant urge to move things around.

The thought faded, drawn into the cauldron of jumbled images churning in Jonathan's mind. He often found it hard to concentrate, as if only scraps and impressions could breach the mantle of weariness enshrouding him. What drove him was the fierce desire that had seized his heart. It had never been this strong...luring him, drawing him, entangling him in the chaos of his own bewildering emotions. Should he dare to hope?

Jonathan didn't know why, but he felt he had to focus on this single moment in time and space. He stared at his favorite toy, a marionette resembling a tin woodsman that he had assembled from aluminum pots, metal tubes, and two crossed pieces of wood, with a funnel for a hat. At present,

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the puppet dangled from a nail next to Jonathan's wooden crate in a dim corner of the alley, but it seemed about to come alive as it peered back at him from the depths of its black button eyes.

Jonathan narrowed his eyes into slits. Maybe if he concentrated hard enough, he could finally penetrate the veil separating him from that world just beyond his perception. He couldn't say what was drawing him, but he knew he would recognize it when he saw it. He always did. Just before his mommy went away, she told him it was a gift, like the one his daddy had. Jonathan could sense things. Intuition, she had called it.

Jonathan's piercing gaze drilled into the tin woodsman. He had to know, he just had to! But the more he tried, the more his sight was clouded by an intangible, shimmering mist.

Suddenly he recoiled. Had the puppet turned its head? Were its fiery black eyes staring right at him, mesmerizing, compelling, challenging?

When will you take me down again, Jonathan?

His eyes opened wide at the eerie whisper echoing through the alley. He wanted to look around, find a way to escape, but all he could do was stare at the puppet.

Why won't you play with me? What are you afraid of?

Jonathan backed away. Could a puppet's gaze be so reproachful? He pressed his hands against his ears, trying to banish the puppet's thoughts from his mind.

I know you don't want to stay here. You want to go just as much as I do.

Jonathan shook his head. No, it wasn't time. Not yet. And he was sure a puppet couldn't raise its hand like that to point an accusing finger at him.

You're so cruel. Why won't you take me home? Don't you want to see your mommy again? The puppet tore at its strings and tried to get up. *You can free us, Jonathan. Please, I'll show you the way.*

Jonathan felt confused and frightened. But for some reason, he also felt sorry for the tin woodsman. The puppet did have a point, and Jonathan's mommy had always told him to be honest, no matter how he felt.

The puppet's strings fell loose. *All you have to do is follow the yellow brick road. There it is. Don't you see it?* The puppet's eyes pleaded with him as it drifted closer. It pointed toward the shimmering path before them. *Come on, let's go! I'll take you to the Emerald City. Or anywhere*

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you want, as long as it's far, far away from this terrible place. Please come with me before it's too late!

The puppet stopped right in front of him, its eyes brimming. One of the tears spilled over. Jonathan watched it float downward, his lips parted in awe. The teardrop slowed as it fell, until it reached the space between their hearts, a tiny crystalline orb glistening in the clear light of this precious instant. There it lingered, as if frozen in time, while heaven held its breath.

What are you going to do, Jonathan?

The droplet splattered on Jonathan's bare foot.

His eyes snapped open. He shook his head to clear his mind, tossing his thick black hair. Something cold and wet dripped onto the back of his neck. His hand shot up and slapped it. When he examined his hand, he saw it was only water. He glanced up and an icy cold raindrop struck him in the face, making him blink. Another one hit his arm.

He gaped down at the tin woodsman, but all he saw was a lifeless puppet made of wood, metal, and string. A thick raindrop smacked into the pavement beside him, much like the one that had torn him from his daydream.

Jonathan sighed. His limbs seemed filled with lead and he felt miserable. He had been so close, he knew he had! Why couldn't he find out what was going on?

When he turned back to the puppet, he froze and his fingers tightened into fists. Was there a faint glimmer in the puppet's dark eyes?

Jonathan felt his skin crawling. He looked at his arm. Goose bumps.

2. Travista, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

For visitors descending from the heights of the Elitian Rise, the first view of Chyoradan's capital was a breathtaking experience. Set in the beautiful Orisan Valley, Travista, or "New Travis," was a jewel in a world already saturated with scenic splendor. The Orisan River flowed through the metropolis like a cerulean serpent, its lazy currents sparkling in the sun's rays while fluffy white clouds sailed across the azure sky of an unusually warm spring morning.

For Tamenisa, staying put on a sunny bench in the heart of the city was proving a difficult task. She struggled to concentrate on the immediate situation but couldn't get her mind to focus. How

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could she have allowed anyone to trap her in this secluded alcove on such a wonderful day? It made her think of the countless tourists arriving at Lajuras Spaceport who were at liberty to enjoy the pleasant weather. But then again, she couldn't envy them or even sympathize with them, since they probably considered themselves fortunate to be here. Most people believed Chyoradan was preferable to the fear, grief, and misery prevalent on so many other worlds.

Tamenisa shuddered. Sometimes, ignorance really was bliss. She hated knowing things weren't as they seemed.

She pushed the notion away and made another effort to listen, but her thoughts kept wandering back to the intimidating edifice rising up behind her. Every child in the Alliance recognized the Capitol Dome, which had been designed to dwarf the elegant structures in its proximity. The prominent assembly hall and administrative building of the Advisory Council was surrounded by vast grounds that now served as a refuge for Tamenisa and her two guests.

Although the grounds were open to the public, Tamenisa was reasonably sure they wouldn't be disturbed. The Capitol Gardens could swallow half the city's population without seeming crowded, so it would be quite a coincidence if someone stumbled upon them. Besides, the Council had convened earlier this morning and was now in session. She could only hope visitors would be engaged by the proceedings, despite the inviting weather.

Tamenisa hadn't seen Melina in ages. She would have rather just spent some time alone with her, enjoying the beautiful surroundings together like they used to. If only Melina hadn't entreated her to hear Talas's appeal. Out of consideration for her friend, she tried again to concentrate on the man's palaver. But how could anyone pay attention in this insufferable humidity? It was stifling for this time of year.

As Talas expanded upon his oh-so-inspiring monologue, Tamenisa could hardly refrain from tugging at her collar. How humiliating! She had been trained for decades in the discipline of equanimity—and by the best in the field—but it was all she could do to keep from squirming on a park bench.

At times like this, she desperately missed Silana's guidance. Despite any shortcomings she might have had, the former High Priestess, who had been Tamenisa's best friend and mentor, had been unrivaled when it came to the art of equanimity. Why had Tamenisa been so blind? Because

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of her selfish pursuit of accomplishments and recognition, she had learned much too late why Silana could always remain so calm.

At the memory of her friend, Tamenisa had to squelch another surge of anger toward the man in her presence. She cautiously relaxed her fingers and extinguished the embers she felt smoldering in her eyes. At least she could be near Silana's sister again, even if it was just for a short while. Melina was more proof of the fact that equanimity wasn't a matter of technique or training.

Tamenisa studied the woman sitting beside her. How calm and composed her friend looked! No sign of the discomfort Tamenisa was suffering. Contrary to Melina's dark green and burgundy gown, which was made of a light material ideally attuned to the weather, Tamenisa was wearing her robe of office. Granted, the sweeping, cream-colored summer dress of the Selanian Order was comfortable. But it was also high-necked to accommodate the two plain, button-like ornaments pinned to the left side of the robe's collar—one platinum, the other gold—identifying her as the High Priestess. They should award a medal for enduring that collar! On the spot, she resolved to draft a bill to that effect as another bead of sweat trickled down her neck, forcing her to suppress a maddening urge to tear the accursed collar from her robe.

It didn't help that her friend had her hair pinned up in the style of the House of Tolares, which consisted of a royal crown braid but added two handsome loops on the right and left, a deliberate resemblance to a triphyllon, the Selanian symbol for infinity. This left Melina's neck free to revel in any cool breeze that deigned to favor them. As a distinguished representative of the Selanian Order, Tamenisa had to leave her long, dark hair unbound so it reached to her hips. With the sun glaring down on them, she felt as if she had been locked in a sweatbox, simmering under the masses of her own thick mane. And it wasn't even *setavelates! A'mada*, why did the man have to prattle on so?

She took another deep breath, allowing the air to flow into her nose and expand her lungs, then escape in a gradual stream through an imperceptible gap between her lips. During the exercise, she kept her hands folded over her belly and assumed an erect yet relaxed posture. The drill gave her an air of intense focus, but was in fact a strategic deception. Whatever tiresome fool was wasting her time at the moment would invariably believe she was devoting her undivided attention to his affairs. In reality, she was only monitoring the steady rise and fall of her diaphragm. Not that she

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needed to. After so many years of endless instruction, breathing techniques had become second nature.

But it seemed Talas was at long last coming to an end. Since Melina was sitting between them, Tamenisa turned so she could get a better view as his concluding words washed over her. She had to admit, the man was well built, and he looked dashing in the light gray uniform that characterized him as an elite pilot of the military's primary strike force. Others considered him of moderate stature, although he was taller than the two women. He was clean shaven, a fashion that agreed with him.

But Tamenisa didn't judge people by their looks, and this man she knew only too well. She fixed him with a cold gaze. "So, what exactly do you expect of me, Tal?"

"All I ask for is an honest opinion."

Tamenisa pursed her lips. "Consider the responsibility you're loading on my shoulders with such a request."

Talas's jaw muscles tightened and he narrowed his eyes. "The responsibility is and remains ours."

"I can't believe you'd be so naïve." She turned to Melina. "What's your view on the matter?"

Melina sighed. "It is very important to Tal."

"I'm well aware of what Tal wants. Aren't you entitled to your own opinion?" She smothered an impulse to glare at Talas.

"Nisa, don't you think it would be worth the effort if it helped us to finally gain some peace of mind?"

"Us?"

The two women studied each other. Melina's eyes beseeched her.

"I still can't understand how you can love him so," Tamenisa said, leaning forward so only Melina could hear.

"He's my husband."

"That was your choice."

"Yes, and I don't regret it."

Talas's brow clouded over and his eyes darted from one woman to the other. "What's all this whispering?"

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Tamenisa bristled at the dark look on his face, but she was just able to restrain her sharp response. Her jaw snapped shut, immobilizing her most lethal weapon: that ever-quick tongue of hers. She took a deep breath through her nose, holding the air in. *Easy, Nisa, easy*, she told herself. *Slow down, girl. Teva'lin*, why did it have to be so hot?

She noticed Melina's anxious glance but kept her eyes fixed on Talas. Even if it was only for her friend's sake, she would control herself.

"Nisa?" Melina's face was pale and her voice small and husky. She touched Tamenisa's arm and mouthed two words. "*Ne votal*; please don't."

Tamenisa searched her eyes. Yes, Melina knew her well enough to understand what she was capable of. Tamenisa released her breath in a drawn-out sigh. "Alright, you're both adults, and I have no right to patronize you. Besides, you're my friends, even if I don't agree with your plan."

Talas favored her with a bitter smile. "Is that what we are, Nisa? Your friends? I hadn't really noticed that in the past few years."

At the periphery of her vision, Tamenisa saw Melina's features wilt. Her friend's shoulders sagged, and she buried her head in her hand.

But Tamenisa no longer cared. The heat around her seemed to be feeding her rage, bringing her blood to a steady boil. The pounding in her ears surged to a deafening roar, and her eyesight flared crimson. The sensation was exhilarating, liberating, drowning out the little voice in her head screaming for her to stop. She would have ignored it anyway.

Who did this man think he was? She had been ordered here like some common laborer, submitted to his monotonous, mind-numbing oration, endured the agony of being broiled alive, and now he expected her to put up with his obnoxious sarcasm?

With a true killer instinct, Tamenisa reached out with her mind. It was the work of an instant to discover where she could inflict the most pain. Her voice was soft, but the deliberate emphasis of her training ensured that every stinging word found its mark. "Oh, yes, Tal, by all means, make sure you know who your friends are. I suppose it's even more important than being one. Silana might still be with us if she had learned that valuable lesson sooner."

Talas gaped at her, his face ashen and his eyes wide. Tamenisa could hardly suppress a certain sense of gratification at the look on his face. It almost made her smile.

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But when she glanced at Melina, all spitefulness washed out of her. Her friend didn't say anything. She had her head down, her arms crossed, and one hand over her eyes. When Melina looked up, Tamenisa saw wet streaks glistening on her face, and her eyes looked so sad.

Tamenisa felt the pressure in her veins drop abruptly. The blood drained from her face, the pounding in her ears diminished to an imperceptible throb, and she felt light-headed. A gentle breeze rippled her hair and cooled her feverish skin. She shuddered. Her voice was a mere breath. "*Tevas 'an!* What have I done?"

3. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Jonathan rubbed his arms to get warm. A shiver ran down his spine. He could feel himself trembling, but he returned the tin woodsman's stare. "No," he whispered, "I can't go. It's not time. Mommy said so. Daddy isn't..." He tried to swallow but couldn't hold back the tears. One of them rolled down his cheek. He brushed it away in frustration and took a deep breath.

What was going on? Was he dreaming? He had always believed his tin woodsman could talk, but now that it had actually happened, he didn't know what to think. He had never imagined it being so scary.

On the other hand, he had felt something. He had been close. Something had been there in that shiny fog just beyond his reach. As he tried to recall the scene, the puppet's words echoed in his mind. *Follow the yellow brick road.* Yes, that was it. It had to be! He was sure he had seen something. If only the fog would clear.

But he also knew something else. It wasn't time. His daddy wasn't ready. He knew that now with absolute certainty. And Mommy had also told him he would have to wait. When it was time, she said, the angels would come for him. Was the tin woodsman maybe an angel? He shot it a hopeful glance.

There seemed to be an amused twinkle in the puppet's eyes, and words whispered through Jonathan's mind like a breeze in the rye. *Don't worry, the messenger will come. But as a precursor of destiny, I had to prepare the way.*

The skin on Jonathan's forehead crumpled up. "What's a precursor?"

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All he heard was the cold fall wind blowing through some newspapers scattered near the garbage cans. Jonathan shivered and rubbed his arms. A thought entered his mind and he whirled back to the puppet. “Hey, why did you want me to go away? You knew Daddy needed me!”

The response felt as if silk had enfolded his consciousness in a gentle embrace. *Freedom means choice, Jonathan. You have made yours.* There was one last, tender caress, soft lips brushing the boundaries of his awareness. Then the presence lifted from his mind like dew fading in the morning sun.

“Mommy?”

There was no answer. Jonathan knew he would hear no more voices.

Suddenly, he felt very alone. His head drooped. He was exhausted and confused. His mommy had told him being tired would be part of what was happening to him. But why did that have to be? He didn’t want to feel tired. Nevertheless, when he glanced at his crate, the blanket looked inviting. Of course, he knew why he was tired, why his mommy had been so tired before she left. She had explained it to him very carefully. But that didn’t mean he had to like it.

His eyes wandered over to the box next to his crate, where he kept all the other playthings he had made. There was the rusty old tea kettle with the clothes hanger sticking from its top. He had converted it into a cable car that could run from one wall of the alley to the other, hanging from a worn-out clothesline. Then there were the two pot lids he had mounted to the sides of a cardboard shoebox. Ginger, one of the stray cats he had become friendly with, would sometimes pull the little wagon through the alley with a makeshift harness constructed from two pencils and a string.

The neighbors were astonished at the way Jonathan could transform seemingly worthless objects into fascinating toys. He somehow just sensed how things fit together. Of course that was also a gift, just like his father’s, who had earned good money repairing exotic cars until...

A suppressed sob escaped him. He didn’t want to think about that. Life could be so carefree and happy, if not for that dull ache in his heart and the inexpressible desire that kept welling up in him. If only he knew what it meant! When would the angels come? What would happen when the fog cleared? Where would the yellow brick road lead? In the meantime, he invented new games and created imaginary playmates to keep busy and his mind off—other things.

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Everything had changed so suddenly one and a half years ago when his mommy had left them. One day she was there and everything had been perfect. The next she was gone, and his secure world crumbled around him.

Although he had been only five when his mother passed away, the conversation they had a few weeks before she left was as clear in his mind as the movie he had watched on TV last night. She was sitting in her armchair near the window, wrapped in her ever-present blanket, her thick black hair cascading down to her waist. On her lap was a book opened at Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*. Jonathan knew, because his mommy had taught him to read when he was three.

But his mommy's eyes were turned to the gray winter world outside. She must have sensed he was sitting at her feet, looking up at her. She sighed, then turned her head and smiled at him. Her face seemed so tired, so pale, but at the same time so beautiful, as if a light was shining from inside her.

She leaned down and spoke directly into his ear. "Jonathan, I love you," she said in that colorful accent of hers as her fingers glided through his hair.

To Jonathan, her voice was the most beautiful sound in the world. He knew his mommy talked different from other people. Some of his playmates even insisted she talked funny. But Jonathan didn't think so. How could something so beautiful be funny? He especially liked the way she pronounced his name. It sounded soft, as if she were saying, "You're not on."

She kissed him on the forehead and her hair fell around his face like a velvety curtain, tickling his cheeks.

He giggled and smiled back at her. "I love you, too, Mommy."

"Oh, my poor little boy, you're still so sweet and innocent. If only I could save you from the pain and fear that is to come. 'For even the brightest flower in the field can be trampled until it lies dead and broken amongst the weeds. But the seed that is planted must die so new life may come of the old and tragedy at last begets wisdom and love.'" Her eyes seemed to be gazing at something far, far away, and her voice was so soft, so sad.

Jonathan could feel his eyes widening. "Mommy?"

She came back from wherever she had gone, took a deep breath, and smiled at him. "Jonathan, do you love your daddy?"

Jonathan's head bobbed up and down.

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“Yes, of course you do. I hope and pray you’ll be able to love him when I’m no longer with you. But don’t worry, I’ll always be close to your heart until the day we can be together again.”

As the conversation faded from his mind, Jonathan took a deep breath. He wanted to hold on to his recollections of his mother’s warmth and tenderness, her treasured words and insights. It was the only thing that kept him from despairing on those cold and lonely nights in his crate.

Somewhere above him, a window flew open with a loud bang. Ice-cold dread sliced through him. Jonathan cringed and looked up, afraid of what he would see.

4. Travista, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

Tamenisa was horrified at herself. She pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. Even if she thought the man deserved it, she had no right to treat her friend’s husband with such contempt. She wrung her hands in frustration. Why couldn’t she learn to control herself? Although she knew the reasons, she felt powerless to do anything about it.

She looked at Melina. There was no indication of reproach in her friend’s tearful eyes, just sorrow, and maybe a little compassion. But that was worse than if she had been shocked or outraged. Melina’s calm gaze brought the whole weight of Tamenisa’s transgression crushing down upon her. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Melina wiped her cheeks. “It’s not your fault. I should have known this would happen. Putting you and Tal together is like pouring oil on a flame.”

“Please, Melina, can you forgive me?”

Melina awarded her a doleful smile and shrugged. “What’s there to forgive? If you want to play with fire, you mustn’t be surprised when you get burned. But you should give us some credit. We did try to take on the sharpest tongue this side of the galaxy.”

Tamenisa’s shoulders sagged. She was aware of the various phrases the media often used when reporting about her, but she hadn’t expected to hear them from Melina. She would have preferred her friend hadn’t experienced how appropriate those labels sometimes were. The media did have a knack for defining people. Her attempt at a smile was pathetic and her voice toneless. “So, you follow the media.”

“Of course! Do you think I’d miss a chance to see my friend, even if it’s only her image?”

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“Oh, Melina.” In embarrassment, Tamenisa’s fingers glided across the seal of office discreetly embossed like a watermark over the left breast of her robe. Had she neglected her friends so much since she had been elected?

She looked over at Talas. He was still pale and was staring at the ground. Melina had taken his hand, moving her thumb in reassuring strokes over his fingers. Tamenisa knew she owed him an apology, especially since using her powers in the way she had done was forbidden. Just like Arena Catanin, Silana’s mentor and predecessor as High Priestess. Another ugly memory Tamenisa had tried to keep buried for too long. She took a deep breath and looked directly at him. “I’m very sorry, Tal. I suppose I have been holding you responsible for Silana’s disappearance. Please accept my most profound apologies. It’s not behavior worthy of a High Priestess.”

Talas glanced up at her, but immediately dropped his gaze. He swallowed and nodded, but remained silent. His expression reminded Tamenisa of a whipped *carulen* that had been banished to a gloomy cellar, slinking down the stairs with its ears flat against its head and its tail between its legs. She had been known to have that effect on people, especially after an outburst like before. But she could never bring herself to respect anyone who could be so intimidated by her. Now she didn’t know whether to despise Talas or feel sorry for him.

How could Melina waste her time and energy on such a man? He might be an excellent soldier and one of the best pilots she had ever seen, but emotionally, he remained at the level of a child. The progress he had made in the past years was due only to Melina’s subtle and patient influence. What in the world did she see in him?

Then again, who was she to challenge the manner in which Anae guided a particular heart? If she dared such a thing, she would have to question her own calling as High Priestess. Not that she didn’t do so enough already.

“I suppose you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately,” Melina said.

Tamenisa sighed and shook her head. “It’s so kind of you to seek excuses for me. But please, can’t we at least be honest? It’s strenuous enough having to second-guess every word I hear at the office.” She gazed at Melina. Would she understand?

Melina drew in her breath. The luster of her eyes changed ever so slightly, but it was enough for Tamenisa’s trained Sensation to perceive. Yes, Melina’s awareness had turned inward, and she was alert.

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Tamenisa had initiated a conversation in the complex implicative language Silana had taught her so long ago. She had never used it before with Melina; there had never been a need. But now she was desperate. Things couldn't go on this way. She no longer had the liberty of such outbursts as before. And who else could she trust if not Silana's sister? More than anything in the world, she needed a good friend by her side right now.

Out loud she said, "Silana always insisted my hotheaded nature would be my downfall if I didn't come to terms with myself." What she meant was, *Please, help me, Melina. I know what I need to do, but I can't face it alone.*

Melina hesitated, studying her face. "My sister was very insightful. I'm sorry you found it so difficult to place your trust in anyone." What she had actually told Tamenisa was, *I'm aware of your problem, and I'm glad you are too. But are you sure I'm the right person, and this the right time and place for such a delicate subject?*

Tamenisa returned Melina's warm glance by parting her lips and raising her eyebrows. What a careful choice of words! Melina had caught her off guard by giving her a chance to back off. But this display of thoughtfulness only intensified Tamenisa's resolve. She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. "It was bad enough when I was Silana's protégée, but as High Priestess I'm supposed to set an example." *I've run out of time. I don't know what will happen if I fail to get these problems sorted out and myself under control. I'm desperate for your help, and I really need to talk to you.*

Melina's expression was a study in caution. Her wide eyes, moist lips, and contracted brow were saying, *Are you sure you want to do this?* But she must have sensed Tamenisa's determination because she placed her hand on her arm. "I wish you could speak to your mother about it, but I understand how difficult that is for you."

Tamenisa took a deep breath as relief welled up inside her. Yes, Melina understood even the deeper meaning of her implications, she knew that now. She was so glad to have won a friend who could advise her and stand by her in this most difficult of times. But how well was she informed? "What did Silana tell you?"

"She was my sister, Nisa. We didn't have any secrets."

"Such trust is rare these days."

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“I’m sure Silana told you all about our family. We did have a very special childhood, and our parents were—let me say, exceptional. Silana knew what she owed you as her protégée. She told you everything you would let her.”

Although she tried, Tamenisa couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice. “I know. But you must at least congratulate me on that insight. It’s not easy if you’ve been sending scapegoats into the wilderness all your life, always blaming others for your own shortcomings.”

Melina leaned toward her, took Tamenisa’s hands in her own, and looked into her eyes. “Every one of us has his own burden to carry. Neither I nor Silana ever censured you for your various, um... mishaps. I think you were making things difficult enough for yourself without our constant reproof.”

Melina’s circumscription of Tamenisa’s difficulties wrung a feeble smile from both of them.

Tamenisa eased her hands away. “Why didn’t you talk to me about these things before?”

“Would you have let me?”

Tamenisa sighed. Melina was right, of course. If only she had listened. She could have learned so much. And it had been right there in front of her for the taking. But Tamenisa had always known better, hadn’t appreciated the spiritual aspects of the knowledge she acquired. To her, everything had been about technique and training. If it couldn’t be done by skill or reason, it wasn’t worth doing. She had never realized what profound wisdom and spiritual insights occupied the fragile shells of these two sisters.

The thought conjured up memories of Silana, who seemed to be staring back at her from Melina’s large, dark eyes. A dull pain echoed in her heart at the recollection. Since she had been elected to the office, she had attempted to drown her sorrow in nonstop activity. No more mourning for her. The High Priestess was above such things.

Yet the deeper she tried to bury all the issues that had accumulated over the years, the more they reared their ugly heads at exactly the wrong moments. She needed to remember, needed to be sure of what Silana had been trying to tell her, and she hoped Melina would help her.

Melina squeezed her hand. “What is it, Nisa?”

“Oh, it’s just—Melina, I’m so sorry I neglected you. You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you.”

Melina searched her face. “I know. I’ve missed you, too, very much.” Her voice was cautious.

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“If it hadn’t been for you, I don’t know where I’d be today.”

Melina smiled. “You’re so kind, Nisa. But I always felt I let you down.” Again her tone was guarded.

Tamenisa couldn’t understand Melina’s caution. “You didn’t let me down, you just moved on. We both did. But I think you did a better job of it.”

Tamenisa remembered the year after Silana’s disappearance only too well. It had been one of the worst in her life. With bitterness, she reflected on the renowned Emissary and his wife, who had vanished without a trace several years earlier. Certain “elements” in the Council had always regarded them as uncomfortable meddlers, but the couple was difficult to ignore because of their status as religious icons. Although the reverberations caused by their loss were significant in the Selanian Order and the Alliance, not many tears were shed in the Council.

The effects of the High Priestess’s subsequent disappearance were devastating. Silana had been very popular, and the elders’ attempts at explaining away her vanishing act led to mayhem in the Advisory Council. Everyone blamed everyone else. Committees were formed, bills were proposed, funds were appropriated. As expected, any genuine attempts at finding her got bogged down in the meandering wheels of legislation. Tamenisa’s emotional distress at the time was unbearable, but the ensuing chaos the affair produced might have broken her if it hadn’t been for Melina.

During that year, Tamenisa had been granted an exclusive leave of absence. She and Melina spent hours together every day, wandering in the gardens, shopping in the malls, or just sitting on a bench and sobbing on each other’s shoulders when sorrow overwhelmed them. Often, they attempted to encourage each other with the hope of impending news regarding their sister and friend. But as the year wore on and Silana remained missing, it became clear that Talas and Melina had come to an understanding. They were engaged almost a year to the day that Silana departed in her private yacht, the *Sinaven Tyenares*, never to be seen again.

Melina touched her arm. “Nisa, we still haven’t settled the matter we were discussing before.”

There it was again. Why was her voice so guarded? “Which matter?”

Melina gestured toward Talas, who watched them while attempting to be inconspicuous.

Tamenisa was about to smile at the transparency of his behavior when the full significance of Melina’s meaning struck home. Her jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide. That’s why Melina had been so cautious with her words! Melina had been brought up with the implicative language

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and was much more adept at it than she was. While Tamenisa was attempting to convey her message, Melina had been trying to tell her something, too.

Tamenisa could feel herself going into meltdown. After everything that had happened in the past years, this last, dreadful piece of news was just too much. This couldn't be happening. She needed Melina!

She tried to catch her breath, but her diaphragm failed her. A huge fist seemed to be constricting her chest and crushing her heart. With her last strength, she attempted to regain control of her respiratory system.

No chance. She couldn't breathe.

Despite the crisis, she felt embarrassed. She didn't want this to happen, not here in public and in front of her friends. It was ridiculous!

But there was nothing she could do. In utter helplessness, she realized she was going to pass out.

5. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Jonathan released the air from his lungs as a warm surge of relief swept through him. He had feared his father had come home and would want him to come upstairs to face whatever injustice was awaiting him. But the person he saw in the window was just an elderly neighbor, watering the plants on her window sill. She smiled and waved down at him. He smiled and waved back, hiding behind the familiar routine and pretending everything was okay.

He examined the sky for signs of rain. It was still overcast and a bit chilly, as it had been all week, but the few drops that had surprised him before seemed to be an isolated incident.

The old lady smiled down at him again before pulling her window shut. Jonathan sighed. He was so tired of this game. When would be the next time he had to guard the black-and-blue streaks on his arms and legs from the observant eyes of the neighbors? Or, if the welts and discolored patches were too noticeable, claim he had been careless while playing on the fire escape or had slipped from a chair while washing the dishes?

On the other hand, the alternative was unthinkable. If anyone found out how desperately ill his father was, they might take him away, and that would be horrible! His father's soul needed healing,

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the kind of healing his mother used to give, the kind that worked only through love. Would anyone else be able to love his father if Jonathan was no longer there to care for him?

He eyed the crate next to his tin woodsman and felt his stomach do a summersault. Countless images rose up and assailed him, visions of fleeing the apartment in dread to cower in the wooden crate. He couldn't remember how often he had spent the night there, huddling under his old army surplus blanket in an attempt to keep warm while shaking all over in the aftermath of terror. But it was the only place he knew where he could hide his tears and aching heart from the world until the sound of passing cars and his own weary sobs finally lulled him to sleep.

He turned toward the trash cans and sighed. What was this strange yearning in his heart? And why did he have to feel so tired? He glanced back at his tin woodsman. The puppet did look kind of sad and naked, hanging there all alone by its strings. Maybe he could find some clothes for it. He wished he had accepted the puppet's offer and run off to the Emerald City. But he had to wait; it wasn't time. His father wasn't ready yet.

Somewhere in the distance, he heard the faint sound of a school bell. As Jonathan rummaged through the garbage, he could imagine the scene. He had often watched the children playing in the schoolyard or sharing their lunches on "The Steps" down to Jerome, his heart pining to join them. Right now, they would be racing out into the yard, shouting and laughing as they spilled forth from the doors of the tall, rundown brick building.

A few times, when he had wandered by on his way down to Yankee Stadium or the Grand Concourse, some of the children had shown compassion for the haggard little boy hanging around outside the fence and had come up to talk to him. At first, Jonathan was a bit reserved, afraid of attracting attention. He would be seven in a few months, so they might have wondered why he wasn't at school. If the wrong people found out his enrollment had been postponed because of his father's lack of interest, they might start asking uncomfortable questions. But what the children told him soon made him realize he had nothing to worry about, and their gossip really was quite entertaining.

For instance, Juanita, who kept twirling her black pigtails as if she were going to lift off like a helicopter, said the classrooms were all so crammed you could hardly find a spot to put your books. But she didn't mind so much because the teachers never noticed her, despite her being so tall, which was just the way she liked it. In other schools, she stuck out like a sore thumb and was

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always called upon. It was really embarrassing because she stuttered a lot, especially if she had to read.

Jeb, whose great-great-great-great-grandmother had been a real-life slave girl in South Carolina during the Civil War—“no kidding, cross my heart and hope to die”—always got so thirsty during class because of his Ritalin. But the students had to go down the hall if they wanted a drink of water, so he had to ask the teacher’s permission each time to get a pass. Talk about embarrassing! With wide eyes he explained that, half the time, the faucets in the classrooms didn’t work. Sometimes they even had to haul in water from the restroom to clean the blackboards.

Jenny admitted to seeing a cockroach during a break and screaming her head off in the main corridor, right in front of everybody. Boy, was that ever embarrassing! She was never going near that locker again. But worse than creepy bugs were the loudmouthed kids in the upper grades, who were getting more obnoxious all the time because the teachers were afraid of clamping down. She whispered that just the other night, a teacher who had kept one of the kids after school was ambushed and was still at Lincoln Hospital. The police didn’t have any suspects, but everyone in the neighborhood knew it had been the gang of the kid’s big brother.

Although Jonathan enjoyed these short moments of companionship, the children’s accounts of life at school told him another story altogether. The educational facilities were overcrowded and in disrepair. Discipline was at a minimum, delinquency was up, and the authorities were so swamped they were grateful for any child whose registration could be deferred for another year. No one cared that Jonathan wasn’t at school. Then again, he wasn’t able to sit in a warm and cozy classroom or play with the other children in the schoolyard. Instead, he was poking around in the filth and rubbish of this cold and windy passage, seeking warm clothes for a stupid puppet that could never feel the chilly air sting its limbs.

Jonathan felt his eyes and mouth forming circles in his face, and the newspaper he had just picked up slipped out of his fingers. Was he imagining things? He brushed the newspaper away. No, it was real.

He recognized the little blue purse immediately. It belonged to Mrs. Woodsworth, the kind widow on the second floor who had been his mommy’s best friend. He had often seen her handle the purse when she paid for a COD or passed a few coins to some bleary-eyed, crumpled semblance of humanity who had spent the night in the alley. If he remembered correctly, she stopped to dump

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a bag into one of the garbage containers only half an hour ago. Then she continued out of the alley, towing her little shopping cart behind her.

Jonathan plucked the purse out from under the newspapers and opened it. It was full of green bills, and one of the compartments contained lots of shiny coins. Without further hesitation, he snapped the purse shut and rushed out of the alley, heading down the street to the little store where Mrs. Woodsworth did most of her shopping.

6. Travista, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

Tamenisa closed her eyes, resigning to the inevitable. There was that familiar buzzing in her ears again. What was left of her perception registered that she was in the process of slumping over.

But she didn't fall. Instead, she felt the firm but gentle pressure of Melina's hands seizing her shoulders. A few moments went by, and the constraint on her chest gradually lifted. She was able to breathe again. When she opened her eyes, Melina had an arm around her for support.

Tamenisa's head moved back and forth as if it had a will of its own. "No! No, Melina, you can't mean what you said. You can't leave now. I need you!" She was still short of breath, and her words were barely audible.

Melina tightened her hold on Tamenisa's shoulders in an encouraging hug. "Take your time, Nisa. Deep breaths now."

Tamenisa did as she was told, allowing her training to take over. Soon, her head was clear again, but her emotions were chaotic. She clenched her teeth and commanded them to stand down. "Melina, please don't go."

Melina's eyes were sad. "Think about it, Nisa. It might console us all if we discovered any news regarding Silana's fate. Wouldn't that be better than the tormenting uncertainty we so often endured in the past six years?"

Tamenisa was well enough again to sense the anger rising in her. She tightened her lips and pushed her wrath away. But she could feel her eyes smoldering as she glared at Talas. "This was your idea, wasn't it?"

Talas met her gaze. He was still pale, but this time she felt considerable resistance. She had overwhelmed him once, but she had had the initiative at the time, and he plainly wasn't going to

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do her that favor again. His opposition astonished her. Was there more to him than she had seen or guessed?

Melina put her hand over hers and squeezed. "Please, let's not quarrel. Remember, if it's what my husband wants, it's what I want."

Tamenisa stared at her. How could she respond to such dedicated submissiveness? She still felt dizzy, her voice was weak, and her words barely rose above a whisper. "Please, Melina, no. You have no idea what's going on here. Silana was right. Things aren't as they seem in the Council. Please, don't leave me alone."

Melina's face was grave. "Is it that bad?"

"Worse."

Melina nodded. "I assumed as much from the little Silana told me, but you know how withdrawn she was toward the end. I'm sorry, really I am, but I can't help you. I have to do this."

Tamenisa's eyes stung. She was breathing heavily, but she forced herself into a state of calm poise. Why was everyone deserting her? Silana had been so much better at these things. Why did she have to go and leave her alone like this, forcing the dreadful burden of her legacy upon someone entirely unprepared to deal with it?

She remembered how uneasy she had been when Silana asked for leave to settle some personal matters after their last fateful trip together. Only Tamenisa and Melina had suspected the true reasons for her sudden departure. Keeping her eyes low and her lips jammed together, Tamenisa glowered in Talas's direction. Although she would have gladly blamed him, Tamenisa knew he was only the tip of the iceberg. It was the dark secrets Silana had uncovered that weighed so heavily on her shoulders.

For reasons that were now only too clear, the members of the Advisory Council took their time finding a replacement after Silana's disappearance. Three years passed before they elected a new High Priestess. Tamenisa couldn't believe how naïve she had been to fall for such a deception. And now she was stuck with the office. Was this really all Anae's will?

"Nisa?"

Tamenisa bit down on her teeth and stared at the ground. Her voice was bitter. "Alright, then, go if you must."

"Nisa, please, does it have to be like this?"

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“Take it or leave it. I don’t care either way.”

“Yes, you do. I hate to say this, but I must ask you to remember who you are.”

Tamenisa stared at her in surprise. She managed to close her mouth and swallow. “You’re right, of course.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let the air out in a frustrated stream of resignation. Her voice had found its accustomed authority when she spoke. “I’m aware of how much I owe you. Alright, where will you begin your search?”

Melina put her hand on Tamenisa’s arm, squeezing ever so gently. “I assume we both know where she went. But given your position and office, I think it would be better if you said it.”

The women studied each other. Tamenisa’s words emerged reluctantly. “*Halena Yazoral.*”

Melina nodded. “Yes, that’s what I believe, too.”

Talas’s voice was uncertain as his eyes fixed upon Tamenisa. “So you’re really going to give us permission to search for her at *cepesati*, the ‘center of all things’?”

Tamenisa could practically feel her eyes shoot sparks. “Never!”

He gaped at her. “I...I don’t understand.”

“Well, then, listen up, you despicable windbag—and you’d better pay attention, because—” She clamped down on her tongue and closed her eyes, trying to relax. No, that wasn’t the right way to begin this.

Tamenisa clenched her teeth and attempted to swallow her anger and frustration before speaking. She was able to continue in a calmer tone. “A journey to Halena Yazoral is not only in opposition to every known regulation, it’s also against my better judgment. I’m telling you from the bottom of my heart, I have an extremely bad feeling about your going. Besides, the information I gave you makes me responsible for your subsequent actions.” Talas seemed about to object, but Tamenisa held up her hand in a gesture that demanded silence. “I know you don’t agree, Tal, but I’m not saying this to aggravate you. It’s just the way the Council will interpret it, and believe me, I know how they think.”

“Then how are we supposed to do this?”

Melina smiled and patted his hand. “What Nisa is saying is that nobody knows of our intention, and I do mean nobody. Not even the High Priestess herself is aware of this conversation, is she?”

Tamenisa returned Melina’s smile with a grim one of her own.

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Talas exhaled loudly and glanced at Tamenisa. “Ah, I see. Alright, thank you. You won’t regret this.”

Tamenisa’s lips formed a thin line. “Oh, yes, I will. More than someone like you could ever imagine. But I’ll cover for you as best I can. When are you leaving?”

Talas glowered. “I’ve taken leave from my division for the next three weeks. We can have everything ready by the day after tomorrow.”

“Alright, I’ll try to arrange my schedule so I can see you off. Please be discreet.”

“We will.”

“Yeah, right,” she mumbled as she let her eyes wander through the sunlit gardens. Only then did she notice the group of tourists watching them a few hundred armlengths to their left. She groaned. “Oh, no. This is just what I was afraid of.”

When they realized they had been seen, the members of the group came closer. Some of them were pointing in her direction and talking excitedly, accompanied by eager gesticulations. In all, there must have been about twenty of them. One of the couples, who were obviously in charge, cautioned their companions to silence.

Tamenisa looked at her friends. “I’m really sorry about this.”

Melina smiled, but her eyes twinkled with amusement. “*Tezatal*. It is to be expected if you insist on lingering in a public place with a prominent official.”

Tamenisa awarded her a wry smile as she rose from the bench. The party, which had been approaching cautiously, stopped at a respectful distance and bowed low. “Your Eminence, we are honored,” one of the leaders said.

Tamenisa bowed her head in return. “*Tam zalun, berete nur*; good morning, my friends.”

The leader stared at her. “Your Eminence speaks our language?”

“*Deh, ya zunerul bura tamen*; yes, and I trust you are doing well?”

“Thank you, Your Eminence, we are in good health. But this is a pleasant surprise. When we saw you from afar, we thought we could distinguish two pins on your collar. And now it seems you speak our language. I can’t begin to tell you what an honor it is to meet you here!”

“The pleasure is mine. So, you’re from the Lodanian system?” The question was mere rhetoric. The colorful, billowing gowns; the men’s bald heads, thick eyebrows and pointed goatees; and the women’s thick, dark-blond ponytails, which they carried over their right shoulders so they flowed

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over their breasts; these things all spoke for themselves. The man's precise and fluent Selanian distinguished him as a diplomat or politician, and he did look familiar.

"We are here to support the bill in congress later today." He eyed her cautiously.

Tamenisa raised her chin ever so slightly as things fell in place. "I appreciate your effort, Congressman Baral, but I fear you will meet with little sympathy for our cause in the Council."

"We are well aware of that, Your Eminence. But with patience and diligence, we may gain our objective in time." With a casual smile, he gestured around the alcove. "I think the chief gardener has done a magnificent job here, but his staff must always be wary. Certain flowers tend to escalate in their growth if they are neglected."

Tamenisa caught her breath. She studied the man in front of her. Could she trust him?

The Lodanian representative must have sensed her hesitation, because he continued with the same unconcerned smile. "I suppose it takes time to cultivate such a beautiful garden."

Tamenisa returned his smile. "I'm sure it does. I've heard there's much preparation involved. But to witness the splendid result, you must admit it was well worth the effort."

The man bowed his head. He glanced in Melina's direction. "Would you introduce me to your acquaintance?"

"Of course. Congressman Baral, this is a dear friend of mine, Melina Penates, nee Tolares."

Congressman Baral's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, your predecessor's sister!" He turned to gaze down at the quiet woman beside him with one eyebrow raised.

The woman inclined her head in a subtle nod and tightened her hold on his arm. Contrary to the sharp leanness of Baral's features, her face was somewhat broader and her figure motherly yet not prone to excessive indulgence. She was about the same height as Tamenisa. The woman returned Tamenisa's watchful scrutiny with an openness that gave her a most pleasant appearance, but Tamenisa could sense alert intelligence in her misty blue eyes. Her left earlobe was pierced with the traditional matrimonial ornament worn by Lodanian females. The adornment dangled down to her shoulder in delicate threads of finely woven gold and platinum. It was without a doubt an extremely valuable piece of jewelry, reflecting her dignified status in Lodanian society.

Congressman Baral's left earlobe bore a discreet golden ring, implying he was no longer available. Based on their closeness and familiarity, it wasn't difficult to deduce the woman was his wife. He looked at Melina and bowed. "Madam, it is an honor."

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“The honor is mine, Congressman,” Melina replied.

As Baral turned back to Tamenisa, she saw his wife step up to Melina. Tamenisa’s lips parted in surprise. In compliance with Lodanian custom, the woman was free to engage Melina after the formalities between her husband and Melina were completed. What astonished Tamenisa was the women’s intimacy. They embraced like old friends and turned aside, already deep in whispered conversation.

“So, I assume this is Madam Penates’s husband, Captain Vatal Penates.” Congressman Baral bowed to Talas. “I can only marvel at your astonishing track record, sir.”

Talas returned the bow. “Thank you for the compliment, Congressman. But I suppose not all people feel that way.” He regarded Tamenisa with a sour glance.

Tamenisa granted him a wry smile. “That’s not true, Tal. I’ve always had the utmost confidence in your military expertise.”

The congressman’s eyes wandered from one to the other, an amused smile on his lips. “Well, then, we don’t wish to take up any more of your valuable time. But I think some of my friends here would be delighted if they could have an autograph, and maybe a picture?”

Tamenisa sighed and nodded. She was immediately surrounded by chattering Lodanians, shoving their com-pads under her nose. When they were satisfied, Baral grouped Tamenisa, Melina, and Talas together to take their picture. When she had transferred a copy of the image to her own pad, a pang of anxiety sliced through her heart at the sight, and inexplicable sadness settled in her belly like a lump of lead.

Congressman Baral bowed to them. “It was a pleasure meeting you here. I trust we will see each other later today?”

Tamenisa bowed her head. “Be assured, I look forward to it.”

Congressman Baral bowed again, then turned and ushered his party out of the alcove.

Melina leaned over and examined the photo. “What is it, Nisa?”

Tamenisa studied the picture again. “I don’t know. I get a sense of finality when I look at it.”

The two women exchanged a glance, but Melina remained silent.

Tamenisa sighed. “I really need to get back to the Council. There are a few items on the agenda that require my presence later this morning.”

“The Militia Bill?”

The High Priestess

Tamenisa nodded. “Melina, can I trust him?”

“Yes. His wife Tura is a very close friend of mine. It is possible I suggested that a tour of the Capitol Gardens at this time today might be worth her while.” Her eyes twinkled merrily.

Tamenisa gaped at her and poked her in the ribs. “Why, you sly *carulen*. You set this up.”

“I thought you might need a good friend. Take your time, but I assure you, you’ll find them absolutely reliable. Silana often used Tura and me as intermediaries when she needed to communicate with Fores.”

“Fores?”

“Tura’s husband, Congressman Fores Baral.”

“Oh, sorry, of course. But I don’t understand. If they’re so important, why didn’t Silana ever tell me about them?”

“She tried.” Melina must have seen the remorseful look in her eyes. She touched her arm. “*Tezatal*, Nisa. That’s all gone and past.”

Tamenisa nodded but wasn’t convinced. “He knows about...” She hesitated.

Melina squeezed her hand. “About flowers, yes.”

The words and Melina’s large, gentle eyes triggered a surge of painful memories. Tamenisa didn’t think Talas and Melina would find Silana alive. With a flutter of apprehension, she prayed no harm would befall them while trying. She didn’t know if she could live with herself if anything happened to Melina. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

Melina regarded her with sad eyes.

“You don’t really believe you’ll find her, do you?”

Melina didn’t answer. Her expression was much the same as it had been three years ago, when Tamenisa asked her a similar question.

Approximately two months before Tamenisa’s election in the late summer of 1983, she awoke one night and knew with absolute certainty that Silana had passed on. She couldn’t explain the sensation, but she had never before had an impression of such clarity. When she talked to Melina about it, her friend only looked at her with wide eyes, much the way she was doing now. It was the last time the two women had spoken in private because Melina and Talas were married several months later. She couldn’t believe how much she had neglected the relationship.

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Melina touched her arm. “We need to go. I’ll never forget your kindness, Nisa. I know it’s not easy for you.”

As Melina and Tamenisa exchanged a tender embrace, Tamenisa put her lips against Melina’s ear. “Thank you for Tura.”

Melina gave her arm a gentle squeeze before they parted. Talas’s nod in her direction was frosty. The couple left the grove, strolling along hand in hand. When they reached the bridge of the little stream traversing the garden, they turned and Melina waved. Tamenisa smiled and waved back. But her smile faded as she watched them disappear behind a lush curtain of green vines and shrubs.

She sighed. Her limbs felt heavy, and she sat down again. Despite Melina’s thoughtfulness, Tamenisa had never felt so alone. The idea of returning to her office depressed her, and the images and emotions Melina’s presence had revived wouldn’t let her go.

She hadn’t been quite truthful to her friend. She didn’t have to return to the Council yet, but she needed some time to herself. Since Melina couldn’t help her, she would have to face her memories alone, and now was as good a time as any. It would be the first time in months that she would allow herself to reflect upon her relationship with Silana. It would be hard on her, but it was necessary because there were two crucial episodes in her life she had to revisit.

She closed her eyes and began her breathing. With her accustomed proficiency, it didn’t take her long to attain the proper state of consciousness. A shudder went through her as images rose in her mind.

7. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Ellie Woodsworth bit her lip and risked an anxious glance at the cashier. The man was leaning on the counter, drumming his fingers on the worn surface, each deliberate blow of his fingertips a resounding thud that triggered another flurry in her stomach. If she turned around, she would see the other customers in line rolling their eyes or glaring at her with impatient stares.

She brushed a wavy lock of shoulder-length, graying hair out of her face and attempted another futile search through the pockets of her winter coat. It had to be here somewhere! She grabbed her shopping cart and bent down to look inside. It was so dark in there she wouldn’t have been able to see a thing, even if her eyesight hadn’t been clouded by confusion.

The High Priestess

“Excuse me, Mrs. Woodsworth. Is this your purse?”

Ellie looked up at the small, timid voice, astonished and uncomprehending. Then she saw what the boy was holding. She released her breath in a loud rush and smiled. She could feel the nerves at the ends of her fingers tingling as she took the purse from the boy’s outstretched hand. She bent down close to where she suspected an ear hidden behind his dark, unruly mane. “Jonathan, you’re a lifesaver.” She took out several bills and handed them to the cashier. “I’m so sorry for the holdup.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” the cashier growled as he handed her the change.

Too disconcerted to consider the annoyed expressions of the customers, Ellie stashed her groceries in the cart, took Jonathan’s hand, and rushed from the store. Outside, she stooped and gave him a hug. “Thank you so much. You don’t know what a help you’ve been. Any other boy probably would have taken the money and run off.”

Jonathan examined the sidewalk and explored a crack in the pavement with his toe.

She had forgotten how shy he was and squeezed his hand. “Can you tell me where you found it?”

He finally raised his head. “I was looking for some clothes for my tin woodsman near the garbage cans. You must have dropped it there. I thought you might be needing it pretty bad, so I ran after you.”

She studied him. “You’re so much like your mother. She was the best friend I ever had, such a kind and honest woman.” She tousled his thick, black hair. “I hope you always stay this way. But that reminds me. You deserve a reward.” She opened the purse and handed him a five-dollar bill.

Jonathan’s eyes grew round. “You don’t have to give me anything. I’m glad I could help.”

“I’m sure you are, but I believe good deeds should be rewarded.” She stuffed the bill into his pocket. “Now, not another word.” When she stood, she finally realized the state he was in and gasped. “Goodness, what happened to you?”

He was barefoot, and every visible patch of skin on his body was stained with soot. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and pants that barely covered his knees, exposing his thin arms and legs to the crisp fall air.

Ellie felt a dull ache in her heart as she looked him over. “Jonathan, it’s not summer anymore. Don’t you have anything else to wear?”

The High Priestess

He shook his head.

“Well, we’re going to change that right away.” She took his hand and led him back to the alley, then up the stairs to her apartment on the second floor. Jonathan sat at the table while she rummaged through her little closet.

The various paraphernalia brought back old memories. There was Ralph’s case with his cameras and equipment, still in excellent condition. Her husband could drag her out the door for a spontaneous photo excursion any time he wanted. He was always shooting pictures, if not for the magazine he worked for, then for his expositions.

Ellie sighed. She had never touched his gear after his death. After she had mourned her loss, she packed everything away, determined not to give up. And she believed she had succeeded. Although her husband had lost his bout with cancer in this very apartment more than thirteen years ago, she had never resigned to her grief. Instead, she remained active, staying on as a midwife in the neighborhood where she felt she was needed.

Ah, there were her children’s things. Hope’s old teddy bear, the hair on its breast worn thin from many a child’s tears and caresses; Faith’s bucket and shovel, with which she had constructed innumerable sand castles when the family vacationed in Virginia Beach; and there were tomboy Charity’s baseball bat and mitten, which still smelled of Little League games on Saturday afternoons. And right next to them were the clothes she was looking for.

Ellie spoke over her shoulder as she sorted through them. “These belonged to my grandson, but he’s grown out of them. I always keep a few extra clothes around. Children usually need a change when they’re playing.” She sent an understanding wink in Jonathan’s direction.

Ellie helped him clean up, then made him slip into the warmer clothes. When he was finished, she folded his things in a neat pile and put them next to her on the sofa. She studied the boy from where she was sitting. It saddened her to see how thin he was. He looked famished. “I think you could use a nice, warm bowl of chicken soup.” Her voice was firm, the tone she had always used with her own children when she would tolerate no contradiction.

It didn’t take long to warm the soup. Ellie smiled as she watched him spoon down vegetables, noodles, and large, white chunks of meat, but she was inwardly disturbed, wondering when he’d had his last meal. When she was certain he had eaten his fill, she handed him his old clothes and told him to run along.

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He gave her a hug. “Thank you, Mrs. Woodsworth.” Then he dashed out the door, taking two steps at a time as he rushed up to the apartment where he lived on the fifth floor.

“Bless you, little one,” Ellie whispered, listening to Jonathan’s diminishing footsteps in the stairway. She bit her lip. Should she inform Child Protective Services, despite the consequences?

She recoiled from the thought and shook her head. She had been over this countless times with Lina, Jonathan’s mother, in the year before she passed away. She knew what would happen if she took such a step. In the end, her interference couldn’t save Jonathan, no matter what she did. His fate was sealed, just as Lina’s fate had been sealed from the moment she had been stranded here.

Ellie looked at her watch. She would have to hurry if she wanted to make it to her shift in an hour. And it took at least half that time to get over to Lincoln Medical, if she could catch the shuttle. She wiped away a tear and turned back to her housekeeping, attempting to push away the gloomy thoughts so she could concentrate on the task before her.

8. Travista, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

Even with her eyes closed, Tamenisa was aware of her surroundings. In the distance, she perceived the rich vibrancy of Chyoradan’s capital. As the legislative center of the galaxy, Travista was always buzzing with activity. But it wasn’t the pervasive drone of industry or the dull hum of commerce. No, Travista had a deceitfully placid tenor all its own. The thought chilled her to the marrow.

Visitors were always surprised at the calm amiability with which everyone seemed to go about their business here. Such guests might well observe assistants on pressing errands, not rushing, but strolling leisurely through charming plazas. Or they might witness officials en route to important meetings, taking their time to stop for a chat in beautiful, secluded gardens. But when Tamenisa was confronted with such scenes, she saw only hollow puppets, like ghostly shades, drifting through their futile performances. What did it matter if the stage they were playing on was spectacular?

Tamenisa felt a warm breeze ruffle her hair. Above her, the sun was shining and clouds were floating by, as they had been all morning while she was sitting here in this alcove with Melina and Talas. Somewhere on the boundaries of her awareness, she could distinguish the sound of public

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transport gondolas swishing through the Grid, the guidance system that directed the elegant vehicles to their destinations several stories above the pedestrian boulevards of the metropolis.

All these elements seemed to paint a charming picture of relaxed prosperity. But her spirit revolted against the image, an image she knew was only a deception meticulously upheld to conceal the truth. Blended into the fragrance of warm spring days and blossoming flowers, its foul odor lurked on the edge of her perception like an ominous shadow. It was always there, watching, waiting, wearing down her resolve until her nerves were raw.

How long had Silana known? Thinking back, Tamenisa felt her mentor must have been aware of the danger even before she was elected to the office in 1971. She reached down into her mind, seeking the images of a particular evening two years before Silana's advancement to High Priestess.

Arena Catanin, Silana's mentor and the High Priestess presiding at that time, had gone to a meeting. Silana opted to stay home with Tamenisa since they hadn't had a chance to be alone together in months. They were listening to Torvolan Novesta's opera, *The Swordmaster*, which Tamenisa had chosen for her paper in advanced music appreciation and analysis, one of the last courses required to be considered for a commission as priestess.

They always used the sitting room for sessions like this because it was the most comfortable. A soft beige sectional filled half of one wall, then cut around the corner and filled the next. A low table stood near them, with a vase of fragrant novantan in the middle and two cups of steaming deventas in their reach. They had dimmed the light to enhance the listening effect, so the lovely pastel paintings on the walls didn't stand out as much. On her right, a panorama window looked out upon the lights of the city.

The walls, floor, and ceiling were, of course, a standard interface matrix, so each square *runam* contained thousands of specialized modules. One of their purposes was to generate sound that seemed to emanate from any desired point in the room. At the moment, the women were transplanted into the midst of a full-scale orchestra.

Tamenisa sat on the floor, enjoying the softness of the dark, plush carpet while reclining against a section of the sofa. Silana sat three armlengths away, on one of the sections against the other wall. Every time Tamenisa looked up at her, Silana seemed to be tracing the lines in her palm, and

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she saw concern in her eyes. Sometimes, Tamenisa would stop the recording so they could discuss a particularly interesting passage, but Silana remained unusually quiet.

Tamenisa had her eyes closed. Her ear was tilted up toward the middle of the room, from where the mezzo-soprano's voice was coming. Suddenly she pushed herself away from the sofa and sat up. "Computer, pause recording. There! Did you hear it? That's clearly a catoptric inversion. I'm sure Novesta got the inspiration for his aria from *Alin*, that one musician's song—what was her name again?" She snapped her fingers several times. "You know, the one who lived in the latter days of the Millennial Peace on Piral. Vodana! That's it! Vodana Satural!"

Silana answered with a tired little smile.

"Why do they call it a 'catoptric inversion,' anyway? I've never understood that. 'Catoptric' has to do with light, not music."

"You need to go back to the definition of catoptric," Silana said.

"Alright. Catoptric pertains to the use of mirrors to focus and reflect light, as with reflector telescopes. So?"

"I would think, since Vodana was the first to use the term in a musical context, she probably wanted to make a statement."

"Yes, but what kind of statement?"

Silana sighed. "Nisa, use your head. It seems to me Anae put a very good one on your shoulders."

"What's with you? I've had to drag every single word out of you today."

Silana hesitated. "It's nothing. I guess I'm just a bit preoccupied."

"I'll say. Come on, I love it when we brainstorm like this. It's so inspiring. Please, give me a hint."

Silana's eyes twinkled. "Remember, light is one of the fundamental concepts upon which the Selanian culture was originally established."

"Hmmm...light, focus. As an artist, I assume Vodana would probably wish to 'en-light-en' her audience. So maybe, in a catoptric song, she wanted to focus the light, or meaning, of her song in a particular way, allowing it to be reflected outward to her listeners."

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“Very good, you’re getting there. But you need to beware of two-dimensional thinking. Vodana was a brilliant musician, and her goal wasn’t to make things easy for you, but to create the most aesthetically pleasing musical composition possible with the methods available to her at that time.”

“Oh, I see. So, the reflection, or mirror, isn’t just directed toward the audience, but toward the song, maybe as a focused reflection of its form.”

Silana smiled but remained silent.

“Oh, yes, of course! Her music was polyphonic and required a strict set of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic rules. So catoptric refers not only to the way the song’s meaning is conveyed to the listener, but also to the rules’ focus on the form, and the form’s focus on the meaning. It’s three-dimensional.”

“Excellent! Although I’m afraid you’ve only scratched the surface. And the inversion?”

“I assume the inversion is just as ambiguous. On the one hand, the form of the song was inverted. On the other, Vodana was trying to bring light to the song itself, and not necessarily to the audience. She therefore created a double, maybe even a triple focus. It certainly seems that way from the metric analysis. Instead of focusing inward to the center verse, the song is mirrored, or focused, outward from the center verse: *‘I’ulavan tenevarae; And eternity held its breath.’* Vodana expands from dimeter in the center stanza, through trimeter in the medial stanzas, to tetrameter at the beginning and end.” She peered up at Silana. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“The same way you do, by studying.”

“Yes, but you really seem to know it. I just learn it.”

“If you really want to know something, you have to love it and make it your own, discover the context and how it’s put together.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“Since when were you afraid of work?”

Tamenisa grimaced. “I’m not! You know that. But music...”

“I thought you enjoyed music.”

“I do! I just don’t understand why we need music appreciation to become priestesses.”

“Think about it, Nisa. Definition!”

Tamenisa regarded her with a sullen glance. “Alright. Appreciation means an awareness or delicate perception of qualities and values. So, what exactly are you—Oh!”

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Silana smiled. "I assume the word 'perception' rang a bell?"

Tamenisa groaned. "The Art of Sensation."

"Precisely! Through music appreciation, your perceptive skills are honed and set in an aesthetic context. You won't be any good as a priestess if you can't perceive the subtle currents of harmony and dissonance around you and the context in which they're created and applied." She fell silent and her gaze turned inward.

Tamenisa studied her. She reached over and put her hand on her knee. "What's wrong, Silana?"

Silana looked down at her with her lips parted and her eyebrows raised just a fraction, as if astonished Tamenisa was still there. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Silana studied her fingers. Then she looked up, her lips forming a thin line of determination. She took a deep breath and attempted a smile. "How are your courses in Sensation and Induction coming along?"

"I completed advanced-level Induction last month. The practical examination was on the realignment of unbalanced ethereal patterns and the Rite of Union. I also wrote a paper on inductive transmigration principles."

"And?"

Tamenisa shrugged. "I was best in my class."

Silana smiled. "I should have known." Her smile faded. "Nisa, how current are you on the ethical principles of Sensation and Induction?"

Tamenisa felt a flurry in her stomach and cast an uneasy glance at Silana. Ethics were concepts of Selanian theology, a subject she wasn't keen on discussing right now. "Why?"

Silana looked at her hands. "I think the application of moral principles might not always be clear. Things aren't always as they seem."

In an instant, Tamenisa was fully alert. Was Silana attempting to initiate a conversation in the implicative language she had been teaching her? Silana should have known Tamenisa wasn't that well versed in the art of inference and often misunderstood her meaning. "I agree."

"Should I read your mind?"

Tamenisa recoiled. "No!"

"So you believe it wouldn't be right."

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Tamenisa became more cautious. “Well, I’m not sure. Doesn’t that depend on the circumstances?”

“Yes, of course, but I could always induce you to do my bidding.”

Tamenisa eyed her uneasily. “But you wouldn’t, would you?”

“No, I probably wouldn’t.”

What was Silana trying to tell her? That she wouldn’t, but others might?

Silana seemed to know what she was thinking and smiled grimly. “But then, that is the question, isn’t it?”

Tamenisa stared at her.

“It’s such an injustice, Nisa. Sometimes, you have the best intentions. All you want is to help. You extend your finger, but your adversaries take your hand. You extend your hand, and they take your arm. At least that’s what I believe.”

“That sounds...rather ominous.”

“I’m not sure ominous is the right word. *Kindhearted* on the one hand, and *deceptive* on the other, might be better. But don’t worry. Things aren’t as bad as they seem.”

Tamenisa sat in brooding silence, staring at her cup. Silana’s words confused her. If Tamenisa’s deduction was correct, Silana believed someone had been tricked into doing something illicit and was now being framed. It probably had to do with mind-control: Sensation and Induction employed illegally against someone to gain an advantage. Silana said it was what she believed, so it was most likely deduced by her knowledge of the person’s character. But who was Silana talking about? And if things weren’t as bad as they seemed, they could be—worse!

Her eyes opened wide. Why was the room suddenly so warm? She hoped she hadn’t interpreted Silana’s message correctly. “Well, that’s good, then, isn’t it? Because you...you do know quite a few people.”

Silana’s eyes were soft. “Yes, but we always remember those closest to our hearts.”

There were only three people living in their penthouse. Tamenisa, Silana, and...

Tamenisa’s eyes opened wide in horror. She shook her head.

Silana nodded, and her voice was overly casual. “By the way, Arena mentioned yesterday she might withdraw her support from the newest militia bill, the one proposed by the Lodanians.”

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The room spun around her. Tamenisa shook her head in confusion. She didn't know if she wanted to understand Silana's insinuations. If Arena withdrew her support, the bill had no chance. It was dead. What was Silana trying to tell her? She shook her head again. She didn't really want to know.

But Silana continued mercilessly. "Then again, she might just make a few subtle amendments."

A few subtle amendments? A poison pill to get the bill killed! Arena was going to withdraw. Withdraw from what? And withdrawing could get someone killed. Tamenisa could hardly breathe. "Silana, I..."

Silana was already behind her, massaging her neck and shoulders with gentle pressure and firm, circular motions. "It's alright, Nisa, everything's fine. I'm right here. Remember your breathing."

Tamenisa closed her eyes and leaned back against Silana. It felt so good being this close to her friend again. It had been much too long since they had been able to share some time alone. What had they just been talking about?

Tamenisa looked up, feeling the warmth and pressure of Silana's belly against her head, and the scent of her hair like the perfume of summer blossoms in an open meadow. "Hey."

Silana smiled down at her. "Hey. Feeling better?"

"Much." She reached up, and Silana took her hand. "*Tinataran esa.*"

Silana squeezed her hand, then bent down and kissed her on the forehead. "*Tezatal.*"

Tamenisa closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of the moment. It reminded her so much of Mom.

She immediately pushed the thought away. "Are you ever going to get married?"

Silana laughed. "I certainly hope so, some day, when the right man comes along. Where did that suddenly come from?"

"I don't know. I think being married could be so—cozy."

"Oh, I see. A little like this, maybe?" She caressed Tamenisa's cheek with the back of her hand.

Tamenisa caught Silana's hand, kissed it, and pressed it against her face. "A lot like this. What kind of man are you going to marry?"

"Oh, I don't know. Someone strong and tender. And understanding. Certainly no wimp."

They both laughed.

Silana took a deep breath. "Sometimes, I get so tired of all these politics."

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“Arena feels you’re the perfect politician.” Oops! That wasn’t a path she wanted to go down, either.

“I know. But I wish I could resume my duties as Protectress. I miss the forests. It was so calm and peaceful there.”

“I rather enjoyed your term as Guardian of the Rites.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because of the Elinar. They’re so old and wise, and so beautiful! I wish I could see into the ethereal realm like they can.” Tamenisa turned around, crossed her arms on the sofa next to Silana, and rested her head her hand while her friend continued to stroke her hair. “I wish I could see into the future.”

Silana sounded thoughtful. “I’m not so sure. Sometimes, it might be an advantage. But more often than not, I feel it’s better we can’t.”

“Do you think I’ll be commissioned as a priestess?”

“I know you will.”

“What does it mean, being a priestess?” She looked up at the golden pin in Silana’s collar.

“You should know the answer to that. It’s the same one I always give you.”

“Our teachers tell us it means being a spiritual guide.”

Silana sighed. “A guide to what? But while we’re speaking of it, how did you do in Selanian theology? You must have completed the coursework by now. From what you told me about your other classes, I’m sure you did amazingly well.”

Tamenisa felt as if a *chyves* had kicked her in the stomach. She turned her head down, avoiding Silana’s eyes, and tried to keep her voice casual. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? I transferred to comparative religious philosophy.” She risked a glance in Silana’s direction.

Silana stopped stroking her hair. Her face went pale, and she stared at her with wide eyes. Her mouth was a thin line. “It seems you forgot to mention that one insignificant little detail.”

Tamenisa sat up. “Silana, no one majors in Selanian theology anymore. I would have been the laughingstock of the whole school. Don’t be so narrow minded.” Tamenisa wished she could get that whiny tone out of her voice. Why did she feel she had to justify herself?

“I suppose it must be important not to be laughed at. Who authorized the transfer?”

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“Arena did. You were away because of that assignment to the Lodanian system she sent you on, so I asked her. She didn’t seem to have any problems with it.”

“No, I suppose she wouldn’t. Why didn’t you ask me before I left, or wait until I returned?”

“You’re always so busy, and I didn’t want to bother you with such a trifle.”

“So you decided to bother the High Priestess instead?”

Tamenisa turned around with her back to Silana and stared at the table in front of her, where her cup of *deventas* was getting cold. Why did Silana always have to make things so difficult? “It really wasn’t a problem. I was best in my class in all my courses, and I’d already taken all the prerequisites necessary to meet the requirements for a major in philosophy.”

Silana’s voice was strict. “I have no doubt in my mind you’ll always excel at anything you strive for, Nisa. But you knew I’d advise against such a decision, so you waited until I was gone and went behind my back.”

Then Silana did something Tamenisa would never forget. With a speed that was mind boggling, and with no prior indication of her intent, she grabbed the black vase of *novantan* standing on the table and flung it against the far wall, where it burst into a thousand pieces. Tamenisa was so shocked, all she could do was stare at the splashes of murky water running down the plastered surface. How could Silana be so fast?

When she looked back, Silana was sitting there as if nothing had happened. On the contrary, her gaze was quite docile, if not a bit sad. “Do you think it’s a great loss?”

Tamenisa stared at her. It took her a while to stammer even the one word, “What?”

“The vase.”

Tamenisa turned to look at the black shards strewn everywhere on the carpet. “I...I suppose not.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t. We could always let the transformer realign its pattern. It would be as good as new. Or we could have the computer clean it away. No harm done.” She clapped her hands. “Computer, pattern realignment, disposal.”

A subtle white glow filled the room. When it faded an instant later, there was no trace of what Silana had done.

Silana fixed her eyes on Tamenisa. This time, there was only sadness in them. “I’m afraid relationships don’t work that way. You can’t just fix them when they break.”

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Tamenisa felt her cheeks glowing.

Silana's voice was gentle, yet firm. "I trusted you, Nisa. You broke that trust. What do you propose we do about it?"

Tamenisa jumped to her feet and stared at her mentor, the knuckles of her fists turning white. She could feel her blood boiling. Her lips were trembling, and tears stung her eyes. She pressed her lips together and swallowed. "Trust! With you it's always about trust!" She could hardly believe the anger and bitterness in her voice. She wanted to say something—anything—that would make Silana regret her infuriating attitude. Finally, she blurted the first words that came to her mind. "Damn you, Silana! I hate you!" She ran to her room and flung herself on the bed, where she spent the rest of the evening weeping her anger and frustration into her pillow.

During the next days, Tamenisa acted as if nothing had happened. She was too embarrassed to mention it, and Silana probably found it wiser not to confront her. After a while, Silana attempted to revive the conversation, but Tamenisa pretended not to understand. She deliberately blocked her mind to certain truths and kept herself busy soaking up the philosophy of the age or practicing the newest combat techniques, often to the point of exhaustion. Silana's subtle warnings went unheeded.

The High Priestess Arena Catanin's grisly death one and a half years later came as a complete shock.

9. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Jonathan was cleaning the kitchen table when his father stumbled into the apartment, his arrival heralded by a ruckus in the hall, followed by boisterous cursing and the sound of pottery crashing to the floor. Jonathan made a mental note to fetch a broom when he had finished with the table. A cloud of whiskey wafted toward him, alerting him of his father's presence in the kitchen. "Hello, Daddy." He was glad his father was back, but he knew better than to run up to him when he was in this frame of mind.

His father grunted something in return. Then he spotted the five-dollar bill on the table. The speed with which he snatched it up was frightening. "What's this? Where'd you get it?" His words

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were slurred, and he stared at Jonathan with bleary eyes. When he noticed Jonathan's clothes, his eyes narrowed into threatening slits. "Where'd you get those? Did you steal them?"

"No, Daddy. I found Mrs. Woodsworth's purse, and she gave me five dollars as a reward. She was the one who gave me the clothes."

"Mrs. Woodsworth's purse, huh? Was there very much money in it?"

Jonathan heard the dangerous calm in his father's voice. He nodded, his eyes wide, sensing that something was very wrong. He bit his lip to stop the trembling.

His father's face turned red. "What kind of a son are you, anyway? Your daddy works his butt off to earn us a living, and the minute you get your hands on some real money, you go and throw it away!"

Jonathan knew his father hadn't worked in weeks. He felt panic rise from his belly and catch in his throat. As his father's voice grew louder, filling the kitchen with its suffocating fury, Jonathan tried to back away, but he couldn't stop shaking or convince his legs to move.

He flinched when his father waved the money under his nose. "Is this how you treat your daddy, huh? Five lousy bucks!" His father clenched his fists, crushing the bill. He bared his teeth like a snarling wolf and hurled the little green wad into a corner. Then he spun around and slapped Jonathan across the face.

Jonathan reeled and hit the floor. His father grabbed him and ripped his shirt open. The stench of liquor took Jonathan's breath away.

"We don't need any charity from that holy widow bitch! Don't you ever let me see you in those clothes again!" He shook Jonathan and flung him against the wall like a rag doll. In blind fury, he swatted and kicked at anything in his reach, striking out in savage, uncontrolled anger and plunging the kitchen into chaos.

His rampant rage ended as abruptly as if someone had turned off a faucet. Jonathan, dazed, looked up through silent tears. His father had broken down and was slumped against the far wall, crying. "My God, what am I doing? I think I'm going crazy. Oh, God, why did you take her away from me? Why?"

As the weeping continued, Jonathan stole to his room. He took off the torn clothes, biting his lips at the pain where his head and shoulder had hit the wall, but he made no sound. He put on his old rags, then peeked out the door. His father was crumpled up in a heap against the sink cabinets,

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an isolated sob escaping his sleep. Jonathan crept over to close the cabinet door, where his father had probably hoped to discover a bottle of that horrible brown stuff, but he shied away when his father twitched, mumbling a few unintelligible words in his unconscious stupor.

Jonathan escaped the apartment and snuck down the stairs. A cold rain was falling outside, so he bundled up in his blanket, his small, exhausted body comforted by the familiar pressure of the wooden crate's bottom against his back. He folded his hands and closed his eyes, the way his mommy had taught him. "Dear God, please help my daddy. I know he misses Mommy and he doesn't mean it when he yells at me and hits me. Please do something to make him well again. Thank you, God. Amen." His breath came in soft, shuddering gasps, and tears rolled down his cheeks. But his own sobbing and the sound of the rain drumming on the wood above him soon lulled him to sleep, and the night around him grew cold and dark.

10. Travista, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

A part of Tamenisa's mind registered the cloud moving across the sun, and she adjusted her breathing to compensate for the slight decrease in temperature. Somewhere beyond the Capitol Dome, the operator of a transport vehicle sounded his horn against an annoying traffic situation, but Tamenisa ignored the noise, knowing it didn't concern her. Her thoughts were engaged by the events following Arena's assassination.

Tamenisa had no sympathy for the composure Silana demonstrated at that time. Silana's grief was evident—Tamenisa often heard her weeping in her room in the small hours of the night—but her equanimity during the day was unnerving. When Silana attempted to speak with her, Tamenisa played deaf. Not until recently, when she began piecing everything together for herself, did Tamenisa realize what Silana had been trying to tell her, the dreadful truth Tamenisa had been concealing from herself since that evening when Silana smashed the vase.

Silana was only thirty-seven when she was chosen as High Priestess. This was well below the minimum age recommendation of forty-four defined for the office. The members of the Council, especially certain elders, decided to waive the restriction due to her unique past. They declared unwavering confidence in her calling and invoked a faith ruling. What a wretched sham! All they wanted was a puppet to do their bidding.

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But Tamenisa suspected her friend was more than these people had bargained for. She thwarted their plans to twist her around their vile and conniving fingers. Was that why she had to flee in the end? Silana was very resourceful and held on to the office for almost ten years, despite the countless attempts to frame her. She always seemed to be one step ahead of her enemies. Unperturbed by these constant attacks, she proved to be a dedicated and loyal servant, working indefatigably toward the strengthening of the Alliance and ultimately toward a lasting peace in the Galaxy.

Tamenisa accompanied her on almost every one of her trips, but it was their last flight together she needed to remember. The assignment had involved diplomatic negotiations in the Ventarian system. The talks were nerve wracking, the atmosphere tense and hostile. But Silana never batted an eyelid. With her calm demeanor, she was able to turn the parley in their favor and achieve a temporary armistice, gaining time for further negotiations and fair prospects for a permanent resolution.

For their flight home, Silana asked Tamenisa to take the helm of the *Sinaven Tyenares*. Silana remained in the copilot's seat, completing some paperwork. She had allowed her escort to retire to their cabins, so the two women were alone in the cockpit.

The journey wouldn't take long, so neither of them had changed. Silana was still wearing the silky black ceremonial sash of the Selanian Order, which draped over her left shoulder and wound itself around her waist. The High Priestess donned the sash at conferences and diplomatic functions, such as the one they had just come from. The sash included the ancient gold and platinum brooch that adorned Silana's left breast. In earlier times, the brooch had distinguished the various offices of the Selanian Order, but it hadn't been used in centuries. If Tamenisa remembered correctly, the simpler collar pins depicting only the triphyllon had replaced the brooches in the early days of the Age of Enlightenment. That must have been more than seven hundred years ago.

The black sash's contrast to Silana's cream-colored robe was striking, and Tamenisa felt her friend had never looked lovelier. Tamenisa had always wanted to know what it felt like to wear that sash. Would she radiate the same calm authority Silana did? How could Silana stay so calm? What was her secret? Since Tamenisa needed the training, she didn't engage the autopilot. But whenever she had time between course corrections, she shot furtive glances in her mentor's direction.

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Silana didn't look up from her work but just smiled. "You already know the answer, Nisa."

Tamenisa stared at her in surprise. "To what question?"

"The same question as always."

Tamenisa turned her gaze out front and puffed. "I just can't seem to grasp your technique, your perfection of equanimity."

Silana looked up and fixed her with her large, dark eyes. "And you never will, until you accept the fact that it has nothing to do with technique."

Tamenisa clenched her teeth as she switched on the autopilot. She shook her head and targeted Silana with a helpless glance. "I don't understand."

Silana put her hand on her arm. "Tell me why you joined the Order."

"Because you saved my life, and my virtue. You took care of me after Mom was—"

The sound of her jaw snapping shut sounded ominous in the quiet cockpit. Even after all these years, she still avoided thinking about what had happened on that ill-fated cruise. She wished she could finally find some closure. Her mother certainly was no help, and Silana also remained mysteriously quiet on the subject, not that she could blame either of them. If only she had a father to talk to about it.

Tamenisa's lips tightened. Oh, yeah, right, her father, who probably didn't even know she existed. She could feel her brows contracting and anger welling up inside her. She tried to push all the bitterness back down.

Silana ignored Tamenisa's aborted remark and raised an eyebrow. "Your virtue?"

Tamenisa felt her cheeks grow hot and cast her eyes down. "Well, yes, I mean, it's use in that context is legitimate."

"Yes, but it's a bit archaic, don't you think?"

Again, the anger rose up like some phantom serpent ready to strike, even at her best friend. She glowered at Silana. "It's important to me."

"Well, at least it's good to know the Tamenisa I've come to love and cherish is still in there somewhere." An amused glimmer shone in Silana's eyes.

"It's not funny. Stop playing with me!"

Silana's eyes grew soft. "I'm not."

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“Look, Silana, I’ve been a priestess in my own right for almost ten years now, and you’re making me feel like the greenest of acolytes.”

“You mean like a fool?”

Tamenisa crossed her arms in front of her chest and stared straight ahead, watching the stars flash by on the view screen. The cockpit of the *Sinaven* was generously proportioned and could easily hold ten passengers without seeming crowded. Although they kept the light at a comfortable level, the brightness suddenly hurt Tamenisa’s eyes, and she felt claustrophobic.

Silana was only five years older than Tamenisa, but she had to admit her friend was by far more mature. How did Silana do it? And why did Tamenisa feel she had to compete? Hadn’t Silana always been willing to teach her everything she knew? Everything, that is, except her technique of equanimity.

“Nisa?”

“Alright, yes, you made me feel like a fool.”

“Look at me, Nisa.”

Tamenisa sniffed, but she knew that tone of voice. She found her own angry resistance a difficult obstacle to overcome yet forced herself to obey.

Silana searched her face. Her expression was stern, but there was also an unaccustomed sadness in it. “Compared to others, you *have* earned your commission as priestess, and many times over. Your dedication and ability are unrivaled, as is your thirst for knowledge. There’s hardly a priestess in the Order who could outdo you in any of the spiritual disciplines. You know it, and they know it.”

Tamenisa took a deep breath and her chin went up just a fingerbreadth. “So, what exactly is your problem?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“That, Nisa, is exactly my problem!”

Tamenisa’s jaw dropped at the intensity of Silana’s words and the fire in her eyes. Her friend had seldom spoken to her in this way. It took Tamenisa a moment to stop staring and close her mouth. When she did, her lips jammed down into a thin line, and she could feel her blood seething.

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She realized she needed to breathe, so she tried to relax and allowed her lungs to fill with air. She tugged at her collar. The cockpit had suddenly become so warm. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m getting to that. But tell me first what you felt when you were thinking of your mother, and then your father.”

Tamenisa sucked in her breath.

Silana’s smile was grim and her eyes unyielding. “Come, now, let’s not be hypocrites. I’ve known you since you were seventeen, and there was seldom a day we weren’t together since. What did you feel?”

Tamenisa shuddered. Silana had never acted like this before, ever. “Why are you doing this?”

“Answer the question.”

“I...felt angry.”

Silana nodded. “And when I mentioned your use of the word ‘virtue’?”

The memory made Tamenisa jam her lips shut again. Her blood was gradually coming to a boil, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. “Silana, please, I—”

“Nisa!”

Her cheeks felt hot, and she could hardly breathe. “Same thing, angry.”

“But you were also embarrassed, right?”

Tamenisa choked. “Yes.” She felt feverish, and she wished whoever was pounding her head with the sledge hammer would stop. Everything inside her was whirling, dragging her inexorably down into the black hole at the center of her being.

Silana’s voice seemed to be coming from the other side of eternity. “I’m really worried about you, Nisa. You can’t hide behind archaic phrases forever. At some point, you’re going to have to confront the past.”

When the moment Tamenisa had been dreading finally came, it was almost a relief. Her vision flared to the dark crimson of deoxygenated blood, her head snapped up, and she thought she would start by clawing Silana’s eyes out. “How dare you! You, of all people. You know how afraid and helpless we all felt, and you were shaking and crying so hard after it happened...”

“Nisa.”

“...and there was so much blood, and you and Mom were so hurt and humiliated and—”

“Nisa!”

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Tamenisa hardly felt the stinging blow to her cheek. As if through a misty veil, she saw Silana kneeling in front of her, holding her firmly by her shoulders. Tamenisa's lips were trembling, and she felt hot tears of rage burning in her eyes. Had that high-pitched, hysterical voice really been her own?

Silana's gaze was calm and her voice quiet but resolute. "I know."

Tamenisa stared at her. Of course Silana knew. That was the problem. She realized how heavy her breathing was and tried to calm down. "You always know exactly which of my strings to pull, don't you?" she hissed. "I hope no one ever again knows me as well as you do."

"Please don't say things you'll regret. And, Nisa..."

"What?"

"You might want to let go of the armrests now."

It took a moment for Silana's words to register. When Tamenisa's eyes wandered down to her hands, all she could do was gape. Her fingers had clawed themselves into the armrests, tearing through the synthetic fabric like talons and exposing the gray, foamy material underneath. She exhaled and deliberately relaxed her hands. Then she reached up and felt her cheek. "You slapped me."

"Yes, dearest, I'm so sorry."

"I hate you."

"Really!"

"Yes, I hate you more than anything."

Silana sighed. "I saw the look on your face, Nisa. It you truly hate me so much, why didn't you claw my eyes out?"

Tamenisa felt a tear slip down her cheek. "I do hate you. Really I do. I..." The rest of her words trailed off in a pitiful whimper.

Silana put her arms around her and pulled her close, holding her tight.

The tears came unrestrained. Tamenisa clutched at Silana's robe and cried into her shoulder. Her sobs were so violent, they felt like convulsions. But Silana didn't seem to mind, so she let herself go. After a while, she was able to breathe normally. She whispered in Silana's ear between sobs. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"I know."

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“You shouldn’t have sacrificed yourself for me.”

“It’s alright.”

“Why did you do it?”

“You were only seventeen, and you and the other girls were so scared. I was an acolyte, and when your mother asked for my help, I felt it was my duty.”

“I never would have had the strength or the courage to...to do what you did.”

“Neither did I.”

Tamenisa pulled back and stared at her. “What do you mean?”

Silana shook her head. “I can’t do this anymore. Not now, when there’s so much at stake and so little time. Nisa, I’m so sorry I misled you, but there are things about that horrible cruise that you don’t know.”

“What things?”

Silana’s eyes were sad. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you.”

“Silana, you can’t just spring something like that on me and then clam up.”

“I promise your mother will tell you everything when the time is right. For now, just know that there’s more to the story. But there are others involved whose confidence I won’t betray, so I can’t tell you more than that.”

Nisa cast a sullen glance in her direction. “Then you shouldn’t have started.”

“Maybe. But I want us to be honest with each other. So please tell me, Nisa, when will you learn to control your rage?”

Tamenisa sighed and shrugged. “I don’t know.” Her eyes wavered and she dropped her gaze. “I mean, I don’t know how.”

“Good, Nisa. Good for you. And why did you join the Order?”

“I told you, because you saved my life.”

“If that’s true, then you did it for the wrong reason, just like all the other priests and priestesses who resent you because of your abilities.”

Tamenisa jumped from her seat and glared down at Silana, her fists clenched at her sides and her knuckles white. “What? How can you say such a...?”

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The sharp rebuke Tamenisa had on her tongue trailed into silence as Silana rose to her feet. How did her mentor do it? With a simple glance, she somehow managed to jumble all her thought processes. Granted, it was a glance full of tenderness, the way only her mother...

Tamenisa's shoulders sagged, and she swallowed several times to keep from bursting into tears again. "I don't understand. What are you getting at?"

Silana folded her hands and let them fall with a helpless shrug. "There's not much more I can teach you. You truly are the best at everything you set out to accomplish. But I'm afraid I failed to teach you the one thing that really would have mattered."

Tamenisa felt her brows contract as a surge of indignation flashed through her. She jammed her lips shut and stared at the floor. "Then why didn't you?" Her words sounded forced, even in her own ears.

"Because you were so busy learning everything else you didn't have time to listen."

"I always listened to you."

"Did you?" There was sadness in Silana's voice. Her hand went to her eyes and she took a few steps away from Tamenisa, as if ashamed of sudden tears. She contemplated the stellar panorama in the view screen at such length that Tamenisa thought she had been hypnotized by the sight.

Silana finally turned back with a deep sigh. "I really have failed you, my beloved protégée. I was hoping there would be more time, but I'm afraid that's the one thing I no longer have."

Tamenisa felt a chill run down her back. "Please, don't speak in riddles."

"There's more to being a priestess than techniques and spiritual exercises, much more. You always wanted to know the secret of my equanimity, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. No one has ever been able to master the technique as you have. Everyone says so. If you could teach me..."

Silana gave her a rueful smile. "Then you truly would be the best."

Tamenisa averted her gaze. She could feel her cheeks glowing. "Yes."

"I'd love to teach you, Nisa, with all my heart. But I can only repeat what I've been telling you for years. It has nothing to do with technique. It has to do with trust."

Tamenisa flung up her arms. "There you go again! What does trust have to do with it?" Her heart sounded an alarm and she hesitated. "Wait a minute. Do you mean I need to trust in myself and my abilities? Is that the secret of equanimity?" She feverishly searched her memory, skimming

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through all the theories she had ever studied or discussed with her friends. Somewhere deep inside, an isolated thought stood out. Her eyes opened wide. “Don’t tell me you’ve mastered the principle of ethereal continuity. Oh, Silana! You’ve unraveled the age-old mystery of cosmic harmony!”

Silana sighed and shook her head. “It’s so sad. What has the Selanian Order come to?”

Tamenisa’s euphoria collapsed like a house of cards. She stared at her friend, even more baffled than before. “Silana, please, tell me what’s going on.”

Silana quickly turned away, but not fast enough. Tamenisa gaped in astonishment. Bitterness was the last thing she had ever expected to see in her mentor’s eyes. Silana must have realized the futility of her cover-up because she turned back, no longer attempting to hide her resentment. “Why don’t you ask the elders? They seem to know so much.” She began pacing the room. “I’m sure they’ll be glad to answer your questions, Nisa. They’ll tell you all about moderation and tolerance. They’ll let you know there’s always a rational explanation, and that everything will balance out in the end.”

Tamenisa watched in fascination as sparks seemed to shoot from Silana’s eyes. She hardly knew how to respond to her friend’s sarcasm, but the sensation of color rising in her own cheeks was unmistakable, and irritating. “Well, isn’t that what the modern age is all about?”

Silana’s laugh had no humor in it. “Oh, yes, of course. How could I have forgotten? Anything to keep us docile and complacent.” Since she had her back to Tamenisa, her next words were hardly audible. “Dear Goddess, help us! There’s no more stopping them, and those destined to guard against this horror have been poisoned by the flowers.”

Tamenisa felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. “Silana, you’re frightening me.”

Silana stopped pacing and took a deep breath. “You’re right. There’s no use in burdening you with such nonsense. It’ll be difficult enough for you as it is.” Her eyes wandered down to the sash she was wearing. In sudden determination, she pulled it over her head and solemnly presented it to Tamenisa. “Here, take it. You always did want to wear it, and you might as well get used to it.” Tamenisa felt dazed and hardly put up a struggle when Silana helped her slip it on. Then her friend embraced her tightly and whispered in her ear. “I love you, Nisa. Remember what happened here today. Remember what I taught you.”

Tamenisa passed the rest of that journey in thoughtful and confused silence. She could have remembered the details if she wanted to, but they weren’t important, and she let the images fade

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from her mind. Instead, she quickened her breathing. As she resurfaced from her semiconscious state, the world around her drifted into focus. Although the sun again warmed her face and a pleasant breeze caressed her skin, the sensation brought her no joy. She took one last deep breath and exhaled in a gradual stream.

When she opened her eyes, she could see colorful flowers and green vines spreading out in all directions, and the fragrance of the blossoming novantan filled her senses. She had indeed returned to the sunny gardens of the Capitol Dome. But she had also attained her objective, and the memory of that fateful trip was now clear, as clear as the message Silana had been trying to send her. Despite her beautiful surroundings, Tamenisa could feel her eyes stinging. When she tried to rub them, tears spilled down her cheeks.

Why had she been so dense? Silana had never concealed anything from her or tried to hold her back. Tamenisa's own intolerable arrogance had thwarted her progress and prevented her from learning those things that would have been of the most value to her.

"Oh, dear Goddess, please forgive me. I've been so blind. Please, help me to trust."

As the tears streamed down her face, she thought what a gullible fool she had been. Her self-centered naïveté had been just what the Council was hoping for. She had been so easy to control, so easy to bend to their will, as if she were a piece of clay in their hands.

After she dried her tears, she walked away with her head held high. The Capitol Dome's colossal shadow loomed before her like the ominous fiend she knew it to be. The sight of it caused a flurry in her stomach and made her feel sick. She swallowed and forced herself to move toward the sinister edifice, where the Council's treacherous minefields of intrigue awaited her.

11. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Jonathan awoke to the sound of a bouncing ball. He felt weary. Although the rain had stopped, the morning was dark and chilly. An overcast sky filtered out much of the negligible amount of light that normally fell between the buildings. He sneezed and coughed.

The bouncing stopped. "Hello," said a timid voice from above.

He looked up and saw a girl with a long, golden ponytail standing over him. She wore a shabby dress and held a brightly colored ball. She regarded him with concern. "Are you okay?"

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He shook his head as he emerged from his blanket. Another deep cough contorted his body. Feeling the cold air, he decided to huddle up in the blanket again, but it slipped off.

“Here, let me help you.” She put down the ball and pulled the blanket over his shoulders. When she had wrapped him up, she kept her arm around him and let him lean against her. Her presence reminded him of his mother, lending him a sense of warmth and security.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Sina.”

“My name’s Jonathan.”

The corners of her lips turned up. “I know.”

“Oh.” He fell silent, trying to think clearly. “How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I guess about eight or nine.”

“Good enough.”

He coughed again. She drew him closer, a concerned expression on her face, and laid her hand on his forehead as if feeling his temperature.

Jonathan felt dazed. He didn’t want to talk, but the silence became awkward. “Do you live here?”

“No, not really.”

“Where are you from?”

She studied him, her deep blue eyes wide and solemn. But then her face brightened. “Here, look what I can do.” She lifted the ball and spun it on her finger. The bright colors swirled and flowed together in a milky haze.

Jonathan stared at the whirling orb, entranced. Like a fog dissipating in the morning sun, the haze before his eyes cleared. He saw warm light and a green meadow spotted with bright flowers. Figures, like angels, were laughing and playing in the field. As he watched the merry scene, his heart filled with longing and reached out to the playing individuals. He felt their hearts touch his in answer, calling to him, inviting him to come and play.

Jonathan snapped out of his daydream and shook his dark mane, tossing his disheveled hair every which way.

Sina lowered the ball and smiled. “Feeling any better?”

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As a matter of fact, he was feeling much better. He nodded.

“Good. Would you like to play?”

Jonathan grinned. Sina didn’t need any further encouragement and helped him to his feet. He dropped his blanket in the crate, not feeling quite so cold anymore. Sina walked ahead, then turned and threw the ball in Jonathan’s direction, letting it bounce on the ground several times before reaching him. He caught it and threw it back in a high arc. After several passes, he began to warm up and really started having fun. Sina giggled. The ball soared over Jonathan’s head. He laughed and raced after it. It rebounded off the far wall and he caught it, throwing it back in one fluid movement. Sina made it bounce high. He got under it and caught it.

Just then, Mrs. Woodsworth came out the door with her shopping cart. “Hello, Jonathan. Who’s your new friend?”

“Hello, Mrs. Woodsworth. Her name’s Sina.”

Sina’s face lit up, but Mrs. Woodsworth never once looked in her direction. She stared at Jonathan. “Oh, my god! What happened to you?” She went over to him and carefully inspected the blue swelling on his right eye and cheek, then the discolored patches and wheals on his arms and legs. “Oh, Jonathan, was it your father? And where are the clothes I gave you?” Her voice was calm, but Jonathan detected a slight tremor.

He stared at the ground and swallowed, unable to respond.

“Listen,” she said. “I’m going shopping, and when I get back, you’re coming up with me, and I’ll see what I can do about those bruises. I guess some breakfast and warm cocoa wouldn’t hurt either. You stay right here now and don’t go anywhere, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you,” Jonathan whispered.

Mrs. Woodsworth kissed him on the cheek. “It’s the least I can do, dear.” She took her shopping cart and hurried from the alley.

Sina watched her leave. “What a nice lady.”

Jonathan nodded, tears brimming in his eyes.

Sina took out a handkerchief and wiped them away, then gave Jonathan a warm hug. “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be all right.”

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“Hey, Jonathan. How’s my ol’ buddy?” Mr. Denning, an elderly black gentleman with graying hair, came hobbling down the alley carrying two heavy books he had probably borrowed from “da Highbridge Liberry” after his daily stroll along the Harlem.

“Hello, Mr. Denning. Can I help you?”

“Oh, that’d be real dandy.”

Jonathan took hold of one of the books.

Sina touched Jonathan’s arm. “I need to go now. But I’ll be back later, okay?” She brushed his forehead with her lips.

“Okay, good-bye.” He turned to wave, but Sina had already disappeared into the shadows.

“Who’s that you’re talkin’ to?” Mr. Denning inquired.

“That was Sina.”

“Oh, I see. A new ‘playmate,’ huh?” He chuckled and winked at Jonathan.

Jonathan fixed the aging man with a quizzical glance as he accompanied him to the stairs leading down to a dark and musty basement, or what others called Mr. Denning’s apartment. He was glad Mr. Denning’s eyesight wasn’t very good, so he wouldn’t be asking any embarrassing questions about the black and blue patches in Jonathan’s face.

But Jonathan liked Mr. Denning. He felt sorry for him because he knew the old man hardly scraped together enough money to stay alive, so he helped him as much as possible and did little chores for him. He set the book down on an ancient, rickety table and turned to leave. “Good-bye, Mr. Denning. Have a nice morning.”

“Hey, wait a minute, Jonathan. Would ya like a glass o’ milk?”

“No, thank you, sir. I have to wait for Mrs. Woodsworth.”

“All righty. You have a nice day then.”

Jonathan dragged himself back up the stairs and went over to his crate. Now that there was nothing to do, he realized how sleepy he was. He must have dozed off, because it seemed as if only minutes had passed when Mrs. Woodsworth returned.

They climbed the stairs to her apartment, where she put ointment on his wounds and fed him breakfast. At the door, she stooped in front of him and looked into his eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

Jonathan shook his head.

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“Well, all right. But remember, if you ever need anything, don’t be afraid to come knocking. You’re always welcome here.”

Jonathan nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Woodsworth.”

He crept down the stairs, wincing at every step, and stopped in front of the tin woodsman. “Hello. Want to play?”

But the tin woodsman didn’t want to play. Jonathan felt tired and sad, so he sat in his crate and wrapped the blanket around himself. Soon, he was fast asleep and dreamt of swirling colors that flowed together, of green meadows and laughing children playing in the warm sunlight. His heart yearned, but he didn’t go and play with the beckoning children. He ached for his father, who stayed far away in the shadows and wouldn’t come into the sunshine. In the meadow, he saw his mother waving. She seemed to be calling his name: *Jonathan...Jonathan...*

“Wake up, Jonathan.” A hand touched his shoulder. “Come on, sleepyhead, time to get up.”

His eyes reluctantly blinked open, and he saw Sina kneeling beside him. “Oh, hello.” He sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but I think I feel a little better.”

“Good. Would you like to play some more?” She held up the colored ball.

He grinned. “Okay.”

Soon, the alley echoed with their laughter. They invented little games with the ball: variations of catch and tag. The afternoon flew by without Jonathan knowing where the time had gone.

Toward evening, a window on the fifth floor flew open, causing Jonathan to flinch. His father stuck his head out. “What are you doing down there?”

Jonathan looked up. “Playing ball.”

“Get up here and do your chores.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And on the double.” The window slammed shut.

“I’m sorry. I have to go,” Jonathan mumbled, speaking to the pavement.

“That’s all right. Listen, I have a few things I need to take care of, but I’ll be back tomorrow, okay?”

“I’d like that.”

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Sina took Jonathan's hands and squeezed. "Good-bye." She flashed him an encouraging smile, picked up her ball, and vanished into the growing darkness.

"Good-bye," Jonathan whispered. He headed up the stairs.

Later that evening, Jonathan peeked into the living room, where his father was watching a wrestling match and drinking beer. Mainly drinking beer, and getting very drunk in the process as he cursed the wrestlers' seemingly horrible performance. Not wanting to repeat last night's incident, Jonathan snuck back downstairs after completing his chores. The rain had started again, and the air was cold. Jonathan bundled up in his blanket and listened to the drops pattering on his crate. His eyes filled with tears.

"Dear God, I miss my mommy so much. She told me you would always be my friend and would always take care of me. But please take care of my daddy, too, and make him well again. My mommy also told me you forgive me for all the bad things I do. But could you please forgive my daddy? I think he needs it more than me. And please, God, take care of Mrs. Woodsworth and Mr. Denning. They're such nice people. And also take care of Sina, who's being such a good friend. Amen."

As tears rolled down his cheeks, he drifted into a troubled sleep, while rain pounded on the crate, and a cold, relentless wind blew into the alley.

12. Lajuras Spaceport, Orisan Province, Chyoradan: Setanimata 1986 SV

Melina deleted the pre-takeoff checklist from her console and looked at her husband. His jaw muscles were taut as he viewed the technical statistics of the ship on his console—again. "Please, dearest, I know you're eager to be off, but I'm sure she's coming."

Talas glanced up at her. Then he sat back and attempted a smile. "Alright. I know how important it is to you. Besides, an hour more or less won't matter."

Melina caressed his hand. "*Tinataran esa, vosal anar*; thank you, my love. It really means a lot to me."

Melina studied the man beside her. Nobody could understand why she had married him. Many of her friends felt she just wanted the prestige that belonged to the wife of such a highly decorated officer. But Melina's true reason was much simpler: She had loved him from the first moment she

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set eyes on him. She also seemed to be the only person who sensed who and what he really was and how desperately he needed her.

Melina had met Captain Vatal Penates eight years ago at a reception held in his honor. He had saved the High Priestess and her protégée yet again when an enemy faction attacked their ship. Silana personally pinned the Star of Chivalry to his chest during the festivities. Although Talas struck up a polite conversation with Melina following the event, it pained her that the officer had eyes only for her younger sister, whom he had known since she was twenty-two. She deliberately remained in the background during the next two years as Talas attempted to court Silana.

When Silana disappeared, Talas sought consolation in the company of those who had been closest to her. Tamenisa had little patience with the man, but Melina was there for him whenever he needed her, and she made sure he soon came to realize how much she cared for him. About a year after Silana vanished, he confronted Melina and she confessed her love. From that point on, they spent as much time together as possible, and both of them blossomed in the warmth of each other's affection.

Two years later, the Advisory Council elected Tamenisa as High Priestess. In accordance with the impression she and Melina had a few months earlier in regard to Silana's passing, Tamenisa's first official act was to declare a three-month mourning period for her predecessor. Melina and Talas were married soon thereafter.

Melina often tried to explain to Talas the various factors she believed had provoked Silana's disappearance, but he still felt guilty and remained restless. Because Melina knew and loved her husband as she did, Tamenisa's verbal and mental attack of the day before struck as deeply into Melina's heart as it did into Talas's wounded conscience. After they left the High Priestess in the gardens of the Capitol Dome, Melina comforted Talas in the only way possible, by subtle displays of affection.

She worried that her husband couldn't find any peace. She wished she could explain to Nisa the reasons for his emotional instability so her friend would understand. But that was a secret Melina would probably take to her grave.

She sighed and directed her gaze to the starboard view screen of the cockpit. She was just in time to see a feminine shape enter the docking area. The figure was shrouded in a black cloak with her hood pulled low over her face, leaving her countenance in dark shadow.

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Melina caught her breath. “She’s here.” She raced to the ship’s starboard exit, down the ramp, and into her friend’s arms, hugging her tight. “Oh, Nisa, I’m so glad you’ve come.”

“I’m sorry I’m so late. It was difficult getting away from the Council,” Tamenisa said as she gazed into her eyes.

Melina took a deep breath. “That’s alright, as long as you’re here.”

Tamenisa looked up when Talas descended the ramp. Her eyes glided over the sleek, silvery ship, and she smiled. “I can see why the technicians outside are in such awe. The *Mivelin Navines* is incomparable.”

He grinned as he squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Nisa. I do what I can.”

Despite her inner distress, a ghost of a smile touched Melina’s lips. Tamenisa could be quite charming when she wanted to and had, of course, found the exact words to warm Talas’s heart. Talas was proud of the effort he had put into his ship. Where Silana’s private yacht, the *Sinaven Tyenares*, had been graceful and conveyed a certain sense of nobility, the *Mivelin* had the sleek and lustrous appearance of a military pursuit vessel and was built for speed and maneuverability. Talas deliberately chose a design similar to the original *Mivelin*, the first vessel to employ telatian technology and breach the barriers of time and space in 3176 TC. There was hardly another private ship in the galaxy that could outrun it.

“You’ve been traveling incognito, haven’t you?” Talas asked, nodding at Tamenisa’s cloak.

“I thought it would be prudent for your departure to proceed without the publicity it would have received if the High Priestess were here to see you off.” An amused gleam lighted her eyes.

“How did you slip away without the media finding out?”

“I know a few tricks. For one thing, we used public transportation instead of the limousine, and security here in the private annex isn’t as strict as in the main terminal, so we didn’t have to present any identification. My escort didn’t like it, but they’ve learned to do as I say.”

“Very clever. Well, it was kind of you to come. I hope you don’t mind, but I would like to get going and have a few more things I need to check first. I’ll be seeing you.”

He extended his hand, but Tamenisa stepped up and planted a kiss on his cheek. “Good-bye, Tal. Please take good care of Melina.”

“I will.” His smile seemed more like a grimace as he turned and walked back into the ship.

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Tamenisa took Melina's hands. "I'm so sorry for the way I behaved the other day. Can you ever forgive me?"

Melina squeezed back. "Of course. We both carry a burden each of us must bear alone. I'm so sorry I couldn't help lighten yours." She studied her. "But you look different today, more relaxed. And you were perfectly amiable to Tal."

Tamenisa smiled. "Yes, I admit I do feel hope again. I think I could even hug an elder." Her smile faded and she tightened her lips. "I've been doing a lot of soul searching, and I realize how much I still have to learn, especially about trust."

"Oh, Nisa, I'm so glad. If only Silana could hear you. She would be so proud." She hesitated, looking into her friend's eyes. "But really, you look radiant. What happened?"

Tamenisa's eyes shone. "I met with Tura last night."

"Yes, she told me she was meeting you when I saw her yesterday. How did it go?"

"She's wonderful. We didn't part until sometime early in the morning. I can't explain it, but I feel as if I've known her all my life. Thank you so much."

"*Tezatal*. I knew you'd get along. It's good to know my two best friends will be together after I'm gone."

Tamenisa's brows contracted ever so slightly. She considered Melina with a sharp gaze. "After you're gone?"

Melina bit her lip and stared at the ground. That remark shouldn't have slipped out.

"What's going on?"

Melina looked up and tried to sound casual. "Don't worry, everything's fine."

Tamenisa gazed into her face. "And you expect me to believe that?"

Melina cast her eyes down.

"I didn't realize the situation was so grave." Tamenisa hesitated, and her eyes wandered over to the ship. "No, that's not true. I must stop deceiving myself." She turned back to Melina and took a deep breath. "How are you holding up?"

Melina shook her head. "It's not easy. At least I've had a few months to take care of everything and say good-bye to my friends and family."

Tamenisa's glance spoke volumes. "You've known for a while this would happen, haven't you?"

The High Priestess

Melina nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were busy, and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Oh, Melina.” She squeezed her friend’s hands. “You didn’t answer my question the other day. Do you believe you’ll find Silana?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Alive?”

Melina could only bring herself to breathe the word, “No.”

Tamenisa ran her tongue over her lips. “When can I expect you back?”

Melina looked at her friend in sorrowful silence. What could she tell her? “I need to go.”

Tamenisa pulled her close and hugged her tightly. Melina suppressed a shudder as she felt her friend’s comforting warmth. Tamenisa held her back at arm’s length and searched her face. Melina thought Tamenisa’s teeth were clenched, and it seemed as if her friend was holding back tears, a deed Melina couldn’t quite accomplish. She brushed them away.

“I love you, Melina.”

“I love you, too, Nisa. I won’t forget you.”

They hugged once more. Then Melina released herself from her friend’s embrace and turned away. She didn’t look back until she was settled comfortably in the copilot’s seat. Tamenisa had left the docking area and was watching from behind the large screen outside.

Talas hardly looked up from his console. “A takeoff window is opening in one and a half minutes. Are you secured?”

Melina nodded.

The ceiling above the docking area slid back, and the glowing green band encircling the chamber blinked red. Talas sealed the entries and activated the telatian field while retracting the ramp and the landing gear. A low, vibrant hum in the depths of the ship hinted at the vast power of the telatian reactor behind them. The ship floated on the anti-gravitational cushion that had built up beneath it.

Talas adjusted the internal interface matrix to simulate translucence. He enjoyed the sensation of soaring freely through the heavens, but Melina had never grown accustomed to it. She would rather see the firm floor beneath her feet and be surrounded by solid walls.

The High Priestess

The blinking red band turned blue. Melina waved once more to Tamenisa, who waved back. Then she was gone as the ship rose through the ceiling and the vast complex of the Lajuras Spaceport became a conglomeration of small structures beneath them. To the north, she saw Travista disappear beneath the clouds.

Melina was familiar with the routine from the countless flights she and Talas had taken together. When Talas reached his designated height, his expert touch pushed the Mivelin forward. The ship swept through the stratosphere and out into space. Chyoradan's largest moon loomed up ahead, but it, too, disappeared beneath them. Melina watched Chyoradan grow smaller as the ship gained speed.

As soon as they had assumed the required distance from the gravitational flux of their home world, Talas increased the telatian field's shift to trans-dim. In one silent surge of immense power, the vessel sliced through time and space. Her husband was so busy at the controls he never noticed the tears glistening in Melina's eyes as the stunning radiance of entry into ethereal space engulfed her.

13. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

The alley was once more cast in the subdued twilight of morning when Ellie emerged from the building with her shopping cart. The wintry air cut into her, and she stopped to close a flap of her coat. Out of habit, she shot a glance at the little wooden crate in the corner.

Her heart sank. She pulled her cart over to the crate. "Jonathan. Jonathan, wake up, dear. Did you sleep here again all night?" She stroked his hair and felt his forehead. "Why, Jonathan, you're burning up!" She snatched away his blanket and lifted the limp bundle of a child. "The poor boy's light as a feather," she muttered as she carried him to the staircase.

"Hey, Ellie. What's with Jonathan?"

Ellie saw Morgan Denning standing in the doorway to his basement. She heard heartfelt concern in his voice. "He slept in his crate again all night and is running a high temperature. It's a wonder he's alive."

"Oh, Lord. Lemme getchy'a warm blanket right quick."

The High Priestess

“Don’t bother. I need to get him upstairs. Do you think you could grab my shopping cart and set it in front of my door?”

“Sure.” He took hold of the cart and they started up the stairs, the old man breathing heavily under his burden.

When they reached the second floor, Ellie probed Morgan’s face as he set down the cart. “You’re not looking so well yourself.”

He avoided Ellie’s eyes. “Aw, it’s nothin’. Dontchya go worryin’ about me. You take care o’ that boy there, ya hear?”

“You can count on it.”

As usual, Morgan wouldn’t let on, but he was probably having difficulties with his rent again. After exchanging a few kind words, he shuffled back downstairs and she continued up three more stories with the boy clutched to her heart.

Out of breath from the climb, Ellie knocked on the door to Jonathan’s apartment. There was no answer. Finding it unlocked, she let herself in and carried Jonathan to his room, where she laid him on his bed. She hadn’t been in the apartment since Lina passed away and was astonished at how neat and tidy everything was. There was no doubt in her mind that Jonathan was responsible.

The sight of the small room awakened memories tinged with sorrow, her pleasure of being there overshadowed by her friend’s untimely death and Jonathan’s subsequent plight. How many evenings had she spent here when Lina needed someone to babysit? Jonathan had been such a sweet little boy, with his thick black hair contrasted against the white linen of his pillow, always looking up at her with those large, trusting, deep brown eyes when she came to tuck him in. Why did there have to be so much pain in them now?

But there was another quality to the apartment, something she couldn’t quite define, as if the wonders she had experienced here had left a silent yet noticeable impression on these rooms. The thought sent a delightful tingle down her spine. Sometimes, she hardly dared believe the things Lina had told her, but she knew they were true. Lina had sent her to Oregon that summer three years ago, and Ellie had seen for herself.

She took a deep breath and sighed, then looked down at the little boy lying so still on the bed. “I guess the best thing to do is give you some Tylenol and make you a cold vinegar pack.”

The High Priestess

After she had done what she could, she sat next to the boy and watched him for a while. The fever made him restless, and he sometimes fidgeted in his sleep. Ellie brushed a lock of hair away from his hot forehead. She didn't want to leave him alone, but a nurse had called in sick this morning and another was on vacation, so the newborn nursery was understaffed. Although she was worried about Jonathan, she didn't believe he was in any serious danger. She leaned over and kissed his brow. Then she reluctantly left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

14. Yazorian System: Setanimata 1986 SV

Melina yawned and rubbed her eyes. The journey had taken only three hours, most of which she had spent sleeping. She glanced at Talas and felt the corners of her mouth crinkle up in a wry smile. Before they left, he had grumbled about voyages like this being a waste of time. If the people at the top would finally get their act together and expand the existing network of telatian portals, anyone could get where they were going instantaneously.

But she ignored his feigned exasperation, knowing full well how much he enjoyed flying. When he realized his tactic wasn't working, he went on about how the conscious mind couldn't interpret the transcendent aspect of ethereal time. The link between the portals was synchronized in such a way as to compensate for the temporal displacement, so you'd never even know you'd breached the barriers of time and space.

Alas, there was no telatian link to Halena Yazoral. The Selanian prophets had placed the system off limits millennia ago, so Talas could rant all he wanted. Melina enjoyed these quiet voyages, in which she could be with her husband or catch up on her sleep.

Of course, without the luxury of linked portals, trips through ethereal space could be dangerous. The warped structure of the space-time continuum and the influence of singularities and gravitational fluxes were sometimes unpredictable. But when it came to piloting a spacecraft, Melina trusted Talas implicitly. She peered at his console to check on their status. "Where are we?"

"About a stellar league from our destination. I'll be dropping out of trans-dim in just a minute."

Melina stared in fascination at the small display on Talas's console showing their position relative to the universe spinning around them. For historical reasons, most navigation systems were calibrated to the coordinates of what the Selani once believed constituted the center of the universe:

The High Priestess

Halena Yazoral. *Tena'cepesati*, or just *cepesati*, meaning 'center of all things,' had therefore become the technical term for this universal calibration point. Their display showed them to be near the exact center. Her gaze wandered to another screen displaying the gravitational forces of ethereal space in their immediate proximity. There didn't seem to be any problems.

Talas touched a few spots on his console. Of course, their consoles had no actual buttons or switches, just holographic displays or interactive areas projected onto the surface through the interface matrix. The console could therefore be configured in any way to accommodate the user's preferences. Talas pulled down on a virtual slider, and the ship dropped out of trans-dim in a brilliant flash of light. One of the stars swiftly grew larger. A few minutes later, she saw the planet. She stared in awe as they closed in on it. The world was completely blue, with puffs of white clouds swirling in the atmosphere like wafts of cotton.

"*Halena Yazoral*," Talas said in a soft voice.

"Why, it's completely covered with water."

"Not necessarily. It's possible we just arrived at an angle where we can see only water. Look, there's a land mass coming up on the western horizon." As they came close enough for the sensors to engage, a yellow light blinked on Talas's console. His face broke into an immense grin. "Ah, look, we have a fix on the *Sinaven*. But I need to change course. It's coming from the east." He looked at Melina, a joyous flush on his face.

Melina returned his grin with a tired little smile. "And how did you accomplish that, my love?"

"I downloaded every scrap of information regarding the *Sinaven Tyenares* from the main libraries on Chyoradan and programmed the computer to create an identifying blueprint that could be detected by the sensors. It seems to have worked."

Talas glanced at Melina for approval. She returned his gaze by searching his face. Her husband's fascination with technology baffled her. At times like this, he seemed like a little boy thrilled with a new toy he had received for his birthday.

Talas's grin suddenly withered. "Hold on. What's this?" His fingers flew over the console.

Melina felt a flutter in her stomach. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know, but I don't like this at all." He pushed a button and flipped a switch. "This is impossible. Damn! Why did I have to get so caught up with the *Sinaven*?"

"What is it, Tal? Speak to me."

The High Priestess

“I’m not sure, but from the look of things, it seems as if the entire system is enclosed by some kind of surveillance network. Here, look at those fluctuations in the—”

A deep, resounding gong startled Melina, followed by the computer’s pleasant but insistent female voice. “Proximity alert. Proximity alert.”

“What the...?” Talas glanced at the main tactical display.

Melina followed his gaze and her eyes widened. From all sides, ships were closing in on them.

The look in Talas’s eyes confirmed the gravity of their situation. “Get yourself strapped in. I don’t have a very good feeling about this.”

Melina nodded and adjusted her straps.

“I’ll try to raise them on the com and see what they—”

A bright explosion. The ship shuddered.

“Why those...” Talas gnashed his teeth. “They didn’t even hail us!” He deftly maneuvered the *Mivelin* upward in an attempt to break out of their enclosure, but there were so many of them. Where had they all come from?

Melina clutched her armrests and braced her feet against the console’s base as they dashed through the enemy’s front lines and dove beneath a second wave of attackers. Talas zigzagged between his aggressors and expertly dodged their lethal blasts, sometimes even luring them into their own crossfire.

The ships looked like deadly black beetles as they sped past. Only the subtle glow of the telatian emitters on their sides lent any contrast to the matte finish of their dark hulls. No wonder Melina hadn’t spotted them before. “Who are they?”

“Caldarian combat scouts.”

Melina remembered, and the memory gave her hope. Caldarian technology was hopelessly outdated, which was evident in the ships’ sluggish movements. The Caldarians wouldn’t stand a chance of catching them if there weren’t so many and they hadn’t caught them unawares. Although they seemed small, she knew the vessels were almost twice as large as the sleek *Mivelin*. But their ship must have been damaged by the first blast. Melina sensed a delayed reaction to Talas’s efforts at the controls.

“Damage report!”

The High Priestess

She leaned forward and touched a few spots on her console. “Lower port hull aft, 18.72 percent decrease in field efficiency.”

Another blinding flash. The ship shuddered again. The helm display went crazy.

“Tal!”

“I see it.”

The ship bucked like a wild chyeves struggling against the restraints of its captors. In the hands of a less experienced pilot, they would have careened out of control. A glance at the console told Melina there wasn't enough of the telatian field left to keep the ship in a stable orbit even if they hadn't been under attack. Her heart sank. What could Talas do to save them?

Her stomach lurched as the ship dove into the atmosphere. She glanced at Talas, realizing what he was up to. Would their assailants follow? What was left of the field would compensate for the effects of reentry. All she could do was hope the Yazorians didn't have telatian technology so the *Mivelin* wouldn't be spotted during its descent.

Was it warmer in the cockpit than before? Her fingers punched the console to make sure. “Tal, it's getting hot in here.”

“*Ate'f!*”

Melina watched him realign the telatian field to cover the damaged areas of the hull, but it was probably too late. The rising temperature indicated any unprotected alloy in the hull matrix must have been fused by the heat of reentry. A quick glance at tactical showed her they had been spared. The assailants had abandoned their pursuit and were most likely watching and waiting to see what would happen.

The ship sliced through the last hazy remnants of the clouds. Melina could see a landmass's western seaboard approaching quickly. Talas realigned the field, letting every ounce of power sift into the keel and bow of the ship in an attempt to pull the *Mivelin* up and decrease their perilous velocity. The coastline disappeared beneath them, followed by the forests of the coastal mountains. A second, higher mountain range loomed ahead.

Still struggling with the controls, Talas induced the *Mivelin* to slow down. They passed the mountains. Melina glanced at the console to get a bearing from the *Sinaven*'s signal and realized they had just flown over her sister's ship.

The High Priestess

The *Mivelin* surged silently onward, into the wasteland that appeared before them. They were rapidly losing altitude. Melina heard the air whistling around them as Talas fought with the controls to keep the ship upright. She could make out a large lake to their left but lost sight of it as the *Mivelin* descended into the desert.

The ship glided through a shallow valley and shuddered when it grazed the treetops. Talas realigned the field and nudged the controls toward trans-dim. They sliced through the trees and plowed into the earth.

For a moment, everything went black. Melina's chest felt like it had been crushed. As she fought for breath and struggled to remain conscious, she saw Talas checking the displays, going about his business as if nothing unusual had happened. At times like this, she envied his military training. She could hardly believe he wasn't as winded as she was.

With her eyes closed, she regulated her breathing and listened to her body. Except for the bruises on her chest from the restraints, she didn't seem to be hurt. As she revived, Talas's expression told her the ship wasn't in any immediate danger. She took a deep breath. "Are we alright?" Her voice was shaky.

"The damage is under control. Are you hurt?"

"No. What about the Caldarians?"

"I'm not registering any activity, so I guess our friends have given up, at least for the moment." The corners of his lips turned up in a bitter smile, but his eyes remained cold. He sniffed. "I suppose they're content with the fruit of their labor. I don't want to take any chances, though. We're going to have to stay alert."

Behind them, Melina saw that the *Mivelin* had left a singed trail of destruction. Talas had taken hold of the telatian field and covered the area in their immediate vicinity, smothering any flames or sparks. Now he maneuvered the *Mivelin* farther down into the earth so the ship wouldn't be seen. Then he carved a tunnel with the field to create an exit on the starboard side.

"Let's take a look at where we are." Talas checked his console, concentrating on the environmental displays. "It seems to be winter. It's currently a little below freezing, but the sun just set, so I'm afraid it's going to get even colder. But at least it's dry, and the atmosphere is breathable."

The High Priestess

Melina unstrapped herself. She reached over and her lips met his. “Thank you, my love. You saved us.”

He looked at her in surprise. “It was just instinct.”

“I know.” She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him on the forehead. Then she rose to prepare for a long night.

15. South Bronx, New York: October 1993 AD

Jonathan’s arms and legs seemed to be made of lead. He was so tired he could hardly open his eyes, but the fever wouldn’t allow him to relax. What was worse, no matter how much he tossed and turned, his aching limbs made it impossible to escape the threatening shadows surrounding him. He saw vague shapes everywhere, sneaking about, perching above, or slipping under his bed. Their whispers and snickers echoed through the darkened room, but every time they tried to reach for him, they flinched back, as if something or someone restrained them.

Although the apparitions were frightening, the ghastly figure towering over the foot of his bed terrified him. Jonathan didn’t have to look to know it was there. The sheer force of its malice overwhelmed him. The manifestation emanated pure evil, haunting him with visions of inevitable doom and smothering all hope. Its presence exhausted him. He could feel it, that shadow cloaked in darkness, stretching out its influence like a gloomy mist creeping along in the moonlight, groping for him, eager to drain his soul, coming ever closer...

He jerked awake, his eyes wide open. But nothing jumped out and grabbed him. All he heard was the wind moaning beyond the confines of the apartment and the soft sound of his own breathing. As he lay in bed staring at patches of daylight reflected on the ceiling from a gap in the curtains, gentle pressure on his fingers made him turn his head. Sina sat beside him, holding his hand. He tried to smile, but his eyes were so heavy he had to close them again.

At first, he dreamed the fog was clearing. He could discern a golden shimmer ahead, and his heart beat faster. It had to be the yellow brick road! The thought of bright skies and soft, green meadows filled his heart with longing. He so much wanted to begin his journey, but he hesitated. Wasn’t there something he needed to remember? Something about it not being time?

The High Priestess

The golden shimmer brightened. It seemed to be calling to him, drawing him forward. He tried to move toward it, but something cool touched his hot forehead and held him back. The fog thickened and the moment passed, leaving him with an indistinct impression of unfulfilled desires.

Jonathan's restlessness increased, along with the heat trapped in the failing shell of his body. He was floating in an eddy of darkening fog, flinging himself back and forth in the hope of finding some way to relieve his agony.

At the thought, the fog lifted and revealed a staircase of rough, gray stone winding down into a black chasm. He put his foot on the first step. The dull pain in his limbs faded. He took another step, then another. With each step, the pain eased a bit more.

As his mind slipped further into the obscure realms of unconsciousness, he realized he wasn't alone. The shadows lurked everywhere, sighing, mocking. But nothing held them back. They crept toward him, their vaporous fingers reaching out. Fear numbed his senses. He felt stifled as the apparitions pressed forward, grasping for his soul. Darkness enclosed him, and he thought he would turn to ice.

Suddenly, the room exploded in brilliant light. Sina stood there in luminous glory, her golden hair shining like a stream of fire. The fiends' hideous scowls contorted into expressions of terror. As her blazing sword sliced through them, they collapsed in a whirl of mist and faded away like night shadows dissolving at dawn.

Jonathan perceived movement at the edge of his vision, and a cloud of such hatred descended upon him it took his breath away. How could he have forgotten the terrifying darkness looming at the foot of his bed?

Jonathan wanted to scream but he could hardly breathe. Trembling and helpless, he watched the awful demon approach. It glided toward him and stretched out a shadowy hand. He stared at the unspeakable horror bearing down, reaching for his heart, and braced himself for the ice-cold touch of death.

Sina spun around. "Oh, no, you don't. Away with you, Abaddon! Back to the Abyss! You have no power over this one." She pointed her sword at the shadow.

There was a bright flash, then everything grew dim. But this gloom was different, peaceful somehow. Jonathan could no longer sense any evil presence in the room. His taut muscles relaxed.

The High Priestess

A cool hand laid itself on his forehead. "I'm so sorry I had to leave you, Jonathan. Sleep now. I promise nothing will harm you."

Feeling safe, he closed his eyes and let his mind drift away.

Toward evening, he woke up feeling better. Sina was still sitting beside him, her comforting hand over his. Outside, it was growing dark, and an occasional raindrop spattered against the windowpane.

"Hello," he said wearily.

Sina smiled and stroked his hair. "Hi." She looked the way he had first seen her, wearing a shabby dress, her long, golden hair tied up in a ponytail.

He gazed at her. "Are you really a girl?"

A sad smile touched her lips. "I was once, long ago."

"What happened?"

Her eyes were solemn. "I don't think you need to hear that right now. Let's just say it's sad that some people choose to behave like monsters instead of beings created in the image of our Goddess."

Her words made him pause. His mommy had once said something similar. But he had waited much too long to ask his next question, and it now burst out of him. "Are you an angel?"

Sina seemed amused by his enthusiasm. "Yes, I'm a messenger."

His brow contracted. "Where are your wings?"

She sat back and suppressed an exasperated smile. "Hey, I'm just a messenger, not a Seraph or a Cherub."

"Oh." He hesitated, looking puzzled.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Um...can I still call you Sina?"

"Yes, Sina's fine. It's short for Sinara." A corner of her mouth twitched upward. "Although, the Powers That Be still insist on calling me *Bemura*."

"Keeper? Why would they call you that?"

Sina shrugged. "I guess they just like to tease me by reminding me of my calling."

"All right. But when will you get your wings?"

The High Priestess

She laughed and shook her head. “Oh, Jonathan, you watch way too many movies. That’s what I was trying to tell you before. Only beings like the Seraphim or Elinar have wings. I’m Selanian.”

“Oh, like me?”

“Yes, and I suppose that’s why I was sent here. I don’t usually come to Earth. Although, to be honest, you’re not completely Selanian, are you? Your father is...different.”

Jonathan nodded. “Mommy told me.”

“I know. She said she couldn’t bear keeping anything from you and felt you had the right to know who you were and where you came from.”

Jonathan’s mouth fell open. “You talked to Mommy?”

Sina smiled. “She says hi.”

“Oh, please, can I see her?”

Sina’s smile faded, and her expression seemed pained. “I’m so sorry, but your journey isn’t quite over yet.”

Jonathan sighed. “All right.” He stared at his blanket for a while, then said, “But...how did you make those...those things disappear?”

“They’re evil, and evil can only thrive in shadow and darkness. Light destroys it.”

“Your sword was made of light?”

“Pure light.”

“Like Luke Skywalker’s?”

“Ugh! Really?” She sighed. “Okay, kind of like a light saber, if you want. I suppose it’s as good a comparison as any.”

He gave her a timid glance. “Do I get one?”

Her smile returned. “Everyone who opens their heart to the light gets one. But you have to learn how to use it.”

Jonathan felt excited at the prospect, but the feeling soon melted away. “What about that really scary one? It seemed so powerful. And you’re...” He dropped his gaze.

“Yes?”

“Well, you’re just a girl. And you don’t look like a very strong one, either.”

The High Priestess

“That may be, but the One who sent me gave me any authority I need to protect you. You’re right about one thing, though. If this hadn’t been my assignment, I never would have stood a chance against that old demon. He—”

They both looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps. Sina leaned forward, kissed Jonathan on the forehead, and placed her lips near his ear. “I’ll be back for you later.” Then she rose and faded into the shadows.

The door opened and Jonathan’s father stuck his head in. “I thought I heard someone talking. Are you awake?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

His father came closer. He sat down, taking the hand Sina had been holding, and studied Jonathan’s face. His father’s gaze was tender, almost pleading.

Jonathan looked into his eyes and saw the struggle taking place there. “Are you my daddy again?”

His father grabbed him up, hugging him against his chest as tears streamed down his cheeks. “Oh, Jonathan, please forgive me. I know I haven’t been a very good father lately. Please forgive me.”

Jonathan put his arms around his father’s neck and hung on tightly. “I love you, Daddy. I forgive you.”

They cried together, their tears wetting the sheets as his father cradled him back and forth. “I can’t understand what’s happening to me. I don’t know why I do the things I do. But I want to make everything better. Oh, please, God, let everything be better.”

They stayed like that, the passing of time meaningless, taking comfort in this short moment of unity. Then his father laid him back on the bed and stroked his hair with a trembling hand. When he straightened the blanket, he discovered the vinegar packs around Jonathan’s calves. “Ellie Woodsworth left me a note. I suppose she did that.”

Jonathan nodded.

“She’s such a wise woman. I should have spoken with her much sooner.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “If only I had listened to your mother, if I had just held on, then all this might never have happened.” Suppressing new tears, he stroked a few locks of hair away from Jonathan’s forehead. The shaking in his hand was more pronounced. The room had grown dark,

The High Priestess

and he rose from the bed. “You’d better get some rest.” He bent down and kissed Jonathan on the brow.

Jonathan slung his arms around him and squeezed weakly, feeling his father’s trembling body. Exhausted, he fell back on his pillow. Sleep overcame him almost instantly.

16. Steens Mountain, Oregon: June 1986

Melina stepped outside and was greeted by the sounds and smells of a clear and warm summer morning. Talas must have risen early and let her sleep in because he wasn’t on the ship, and she couldn’t find him anywhere. She looked up at the aspen surrounding her, enjoying the sight of the trees’ frail leaves flickering in the light breeze. The Yazorian sun hadn’t quite reached the seclusion of their little vale, but she could see her golden rays playing in the branches above her.

To Melina, the past four months had been some of the most wonderful in her life. After their first few days of anxiety, when they feared their enemies would come back to finish them off or they might be discovered by the Yazorian population, they settled into a quiet routine. Melina supported her husband wherever she could, sensing his needs and bringing him food and drink while he worked.

Talas watched the enemy above with the delicate sensors of the ship to discover more about them and their reasons for attacking. He was wary about using active forms of communication, even to attempt to contact the *Sinaven*, since the enemy would undoubtedly be monitoring any transmissions.

He discovered the Caldarians had a rigid social structure, combining religious and military elements. They viewed guarding Halena Yazoral, the Forbidden Planet, as their sacred duty. By shielding the planet from external influences, they believed to be enforcing the ban established by the Piralian prophets in the *Selani s’Ulavan* so long ago. In their blind eagerness and religious zeal, the Caldarians had given themselves the authority of a galactic inquisition.

Their judicial system was very efficient. Indictment, judgment, and conviction were the work of a moment. For many offenses, they had only one sentence: death, which they carried out immediately. The problem was that any unsuspecting soul might commit a felony by infringing upon their religious ideals.

The High Priestess

By entering the Yazorian system, Talas and Melina had forfeited any right to life. The only reason the Caldarians hadn't finished them off was their reverence for the planet and their fear of violating their own law. Talas had done just the right thing by diving into the atmosphere. Any other course of action would have been their doom. Melina could only wonder at the way Anae had guided their fates.

Melina and Talas had also learned more about the world imprisoning them by analyzing the inhabitants' broadcasts. Talas found a way to hack into a Yazorian network termed the Arpanet. It proved to be an invaluable source of information. The ship's decryption system sifted through the various languages used on Halena Yazoral and translated everything into Selanian. The most common language in this area seemed to be something called English.

Melina felt happy. What more could she have wished for? She finally had the person she loved most in the universe all to herself, at least for the time being. Talas's military career had been demanding, and she had hoped for a chance to get away and spend some time with him undisturbed. It seemed her wish had been fulfilled, albeit in a most unique fashion.

The area they had crashed in was lovely. If they had landed but a few leagues farther south or east, they would have been stranded in a bleak desert basin. But Anae had smiled upon them and led them here to this wonderful refuge. Just a few weeks after they landed, the weather warmed and spring arrived. The colors of the high desert vegetation were stunning. Talas often allowed Melina to coax him into exploring the area, which the locals called Steens Mountain.

Melina ascended the gradual slope of the hill. She had gone only a few steps when the sun greeted her, causing her to blink and smile. She was halfway up the rise when she saw Talas standing at the top. She joined him and took hold of his arm.

He put his arm around her waist. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. "I packed everything last night. There wasn't much." She gazed out over the gorge that dropped down several hundred armlengths below them. The vivid colors always astonished her. "I'm really going to miss it."

"So will I. But we have to do something."

She probed his face. "I know."

The High Priestess

Melina had sensed his increasing restlessness over the past weeks. After they ensured the environment wasn't hostile, it had only been a matter of time before Talas would want to go searching for the *Sinaven*. Two days ago, he announced they should be moving on.

After taking one more look at the breathtaking view, they strolled back down into their little valley. Melina brought out the two bags she had prepared.

Talas touched a few spots on the pad controlling the entrance and sealed the ship. "Well, I guess that's it." He caressed the softly glowing metal of his vessel one last time. The telatian field engaged and the ship disappeared, leaving what seemed to be a wall of earth.

Melina smiled and handed him his bag. Talas offered Melina his hand, and they strode toward the tiny stream that would lead them to an infrequently traveled road and then northwest to the little assemblage of buildings called Frenchglen. The day would be hot, and they had chosen appropriate clothing. Melina wore a light gown reminiscent of the Tolares house colors but robust enough to protect her from the sun. Talas had on a coarse linen suit that allowed freedom of movement but could also take a beating.

Every forty-five minutes, they paused to take a short break and drink some water. About mid-morning, they stopped for half an hour and ate some nuts and dried fruit. By noon, the sun was glaring down on them. Since Talas wanted to avoid detection as long as possible, they circumvented the little town of Frenchglen. They turned north on a paved route marked by a sign with the English numbers "205." The road should take them to the town of Burns in two days.

They had measured the distance to the *Sinaven* at about two hundred leagues, as the *zicises* flies, meaning it might take them as long as two weeks to reach it on foot. With a little subtle persuasion from Melina, Talas decided to stay close to the roads in case they required assistance. If they had taken the direct route, as Talas had originally suggested, they would have had to cover two hundred leagues of high plateau desert with nary a soul around.

Melina felt fatigued. She hadn't told Talas she wouldn't be able to go very far in her condition. But Melina had plans of her own. She had learned something of the customs of this society during the past four months and intended to exploit that knowledge. She kept her attention directed behind her and was rewarded when she saw a rusty metal contraption on four rubber wheels traveling in their direction. Melina wearily dropped her bag and stuck out her thumb.

"What are you doing? We don't want to attract any attention," Talas said.

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The vehicle passed them. At first, Melina thought it would just keep going. But then, red lights on the back of the transport medium came on, and the vehicle stopped at the side of the road. Melina picked up her bag and marched toward it.

“*Panaran, vosal anar, ne vamiranu t’ase parena.* Please, my love, we don’t even know the language.”

Melina ignored her husband and stopped next to the contraption. She put her hand on something that looked like an open window and glanced at the man behind the steering wheel. “Excuse me, could you give us a lift?” she asked in more or less fluent English.

Talas gaped at her.

The man in the vehicle smiled. “Sure! Why don’t you folks just throw your things in the back and hop in?”

Melina dropped her bag in the exposed area in the rear of the vehicle and fumbled with the door. She slid in next to the man. Talas finally came to his senses, threw his bag in the back, and jumped in next to Melina.

“Where you folks headed?” The man seemed quite a bit older than they were but had a friendly smile on his broad, wrinkled face. He wore a straw-colored hat with a wide rim, a plaid shirt, and pointed leather boots. His blue trousers looked robust and were held together by rivets. Melina had never seen anything like it.

“West,” she answered.

“Well, you’re in luck. If you want, I can take you as far as Bend. My ol’ pickup ain’t in that great o’ shape, but she should get us there.”

“That would be very kind.”

Talas leaned toward her and whispered in her ear. “*Coni temilusires paren’ani?* Where did you learn this language?”

Melina flashed him a mischievous smile. “*Culen venares tacoran alineti, camar tezenares Caldarei?* What do you think I’ve been doing all this time while you were monitoring the Caldarians?”

The man glanced at them as he guided the vehicle back onto the road. “You ain’t from around here, are you?”

“No, we come from very far away,” Melina answered.

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“Yeah, I thought as much. So, you been visiting the area?”

“Yes, around Steens Mountain.”

“Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I like it very much.”

Melina took Talas’s hand and squeezed. He looked at her and finally broke into a grin. She smiled back.

The journey was pleasant, and the man used the time to tell them about himself. His name was Sam. He was a simple laborer who kept afloat by running odd errands. He had just helped a friend fence in an area near Frenchglen and now had some business in Bend, where he would pick up a relative who wanted to spend some time at the wildlife refuge near Malheur Lake. Sam lived in Burns. Melina noticed that, every now and then, Sam would clench his teeth and grimace.

They stopped only once for fuel, or gas, as Sam called it, although it was obviously a fluid. About four hours later, they pulled over in the center of Bend.

“Well, it’s been a real pleasure drivin’ you folks. You take care, now, ya hear?”

“Thank you, Sam,” said Melina. “If I may, I would like to repay your kindness.”

“That’s awful friendly of you, but what could an old squatter like me need?”

“You are not well.” Melina gazed at him, a sad look in her eyes.

Sam stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“It is consuming you, isn’t it?” Then she added, “Here,” indicating the area around her lower abdomen.

Sam shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “How...how did you know I have cancer?”

“It is evident that you are in considerable pain. Sam, please, do not be afraid. But may I touch you?”

“I...I don’t know. Seems pretty strange.”

“I won’t harm you. I promise.”

Sam took a deep breath. “Well, all right. If it don’t help, at least it don’t hurt.”

Melina gazed at him, studying his face. She placed her right hand over Sam’s stomach and closed her eyes. Her hand began to glow. Sam sharply drew in his breath but stared in fascination. The glow extended to his chest and thighs and grew into a bright light. Finally, Melina let the glow collapse and opened her eyes.

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“I ain’t never seen nothin’ like that,” Sam said, his voice hoarse.

Melina smiled. “I hope you have a long and prosperous life.” She gestured to Talas, who opened the door.

Sam seemed dazed. “Well, I suppose if it were up to you, I would.”

“Good-bye, Sam. May Anae keep you.”

“Bye, Melina. Bye, Tal.”

The door slammed shut, and they recovered their bags. The pickup rolled away.

Talas gave Melina a peculiar look. “Sometimes, you really amaze me. I never knew you could do that.”

She smiled up at him. “What did you expect? My little sister was High Priestess. Something was bound to rub off.”

He shrugged and took out his tracking device. “Well, with your bright little idea, we’ve cut down the distance to the *Sinaven* to about thirty leagues. If we can get into the forest for the night, we can probably get there well before nightfall tomorrow.”

They shouldered their bags and continued west. Near Drake Park, they crossed the Deschutes River and disappeared into the Deschutes National Forest about half an hour later.

17. South Bronx, New York: October 1993

Jonathan’s sleep was light and troubled by disturbing sounds as he tossed back and forth in his fever. Suddenly, he sat up, awakened by the sound of shattering glass. He struggled to climb out of bed and dragged himself to the door, where he listened intently over the pounding of his heart. It sounded like someone was tearing the kitchen apart.

He opened the door a crack and peeked outside. His father was throwing open the cupboards in the kitchen and searching through them in desperation. There was a wild, haunted look in his eyes. Jonathan lugged himself over and stepped into the kitchen doorway, blinking in the bright light. “Daddy, what’s wrong?”

His father spun around, almost frightening Jonathan back into the hall. “It’s gotta be here,” he muttered, licking his lips. “I know I put it here somewhere.” He rummaged some more in the cupboard, shoving objects aside and throwing boxes on the floor. A glass dropped out, splintering

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more shards on the kitchen tiling. He stumbled over to Jonathan, glass crunching under his shoes, and dropped to his knees. He grabbed Jonathan's arms, his body trembling. "Jonathan, please help me. I...I need a drink. Do you understand? I've got to have a drink. I just can't stand it anymore."

Jonathan stared at his father, on the verge of tears. "Oh, Daddy!" He threw his arms around him.

His father began to sob. "Please, Jonathan, help me. Oh, please, somebody help me." He held Jonathan at arm's length and stared at him, wide eyed, licking his lips. "Listen, I...I can't go myself. You know they don't like me down there, and I...I don't know if I'd make it down the stairs in this state." He raised his hand, which was shaking. "You've done it before. Señor Velasquez knows you. He'll give you what I need. He said he would." He looked at Jonathan, his eyes pleading.

Jonathan gazed at his father, a single tear rolling down his cheek. Seeing the desperation in his father's face, he gave in. "Okay, Daddy."

Jonathan did know Señor Velasquez—and his liquor store. The man occasionally allowed him to take home something wrapped in a brown paper bag when his father was no longer in a condition to come himself. He had seen Jonathan up close one day after declining to give him the requested "remedy" and must have decided giving in was the lesser of two evils.

"Oh, Jonathan, thank you. Look, here's fifty dollars." He fumbled a worn and dirty fifty-dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to Jonathan with trembling hands. "I...I don't have anything smaller. Get something cheap and...and bring back the change."

He slumped against the wall, covering his face with his hands and trying to regain his composure. Jonathan regarded him with large, sad eyes. He didn't want to think about where his father had gotten the money. He turned toward the door, walking carefully to avoid the glass.

Outside, the rain poured down cold and mercilessly. Jonathan, shivering in the freezing air and immediately drenched to the skin, shambled through the alley, holding his arms around himself. He felt exhausted. It was the same exhaustion he had seen in his mother shortly before she left him. Unlike her, he had no way of countering the effect. He knew it would not be long now.

At the far end of the passage, he stopped and listened. What was that strange sound? He moved closer to the side of the alley where the sound was coming from and saw a lone figure slouched against the wall, weeping softly. "Mr. Denning? What's wrong?" The cold made him stutter.

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The old man looked up, but it was impossible to distinguish his tears from the rain in his face. “They’ve gone an’ done it.”

“What did they do?” Trembling in the cold downpour, Jonathan feared the answer.

The old man’s eyes looked sad. “Oh, nothin’ you need to worry ’bout.” He wiped his eyes on his sleeve. “Don’t know what to do...”

“They threw you out, didn’t they?” Jonathan heard his own teeth chattering between words. “You couldn’t come up with all the rent, so they threw you out.”

Mr. Denning looked at him as if he wasn’t sure whether to answer. He finally shrugged in resignation. “Yeah.”

Jonathan reached into his pocket and placed the grimy fifty-dollar bill in Mr. Denning’s hand. “Will that be enough?”

Mr. Denning stared at the bill, unbelieving, then at Jonathan, then again at the bill. “Jonathan, I...I can’t take this. You need this just as bad as I do.”

Jonathan shook his head. “No, Mr. Denning. It’s okay.”

“You sure?”

Jonathan nodded.

The old man embraced him, hugging him tight to his wet clothes. “I’ll never be able to thank ya ’nough for this.”

Jonathan helped him up and watched him limp away to find the landlord. He smiled weakly, glad to have been of some help. But then his smile and the warmth in his heart faded. He sneezed and coughed. He shuffled over to his crate and sat down. What should he tell his father? He coughed again, harder, feeling dizzy and cold.

After a few minutes, he mustered the courage to go back upstairs. The steps were cold and clammy under his bare feet, and he felt so exhausted he could hardly drag himself up the stairway. He reached his floor and stood in the hall, shivering, drenched, and miserable, before gathering the strength to face what awaited him inside.

When Jonathan entered the kitchen, he saw his father sitting at the table with his head in his hands. His father looked up, but his hopeful expression vanished as he stared at the dripping, wretched figure standing in the room, empty-handed. “Where’s the whisky?” His voice trembled.

“I didn’t get it, Daddy. I gave the money to Mr. Denning. He couldn’t—”

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“You did what?”

Something inside his father changed. A strange man rose to his feet, a man who was no longer trembling. He walked over to Jonathan, glass crunching beneath his heavy steps.

As the shadow grew, blotting out the bright kitchen light and transporting Jonathan into a world of fear and darkness, he looked up into the creature’s eyes. Something evil stared out at him from those eyes, something cold, like blue ice. Those eyes no longer belonged to the father he knew and loved, but to a thing he had only seen in his nightmares when he woke up drenched in sweat, a scream rising in his throat.

Then the darkness exploded around him, and all his pain faded into the night.

18. Deschutes National Forest, Oregon: June 1986

Carol let out a deep sigh and sat back. She stared at the control panel in front of her, then forced her eyes shut and rubbed them vigorously.

Philip looked up from his console. “It’s not easy, is it?”

She winced. “No, it’s not. I don’t know if I’m cut out for this type of work. Absolutely nothing is sinking in. I keep reading the same sentence over and over, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hey, you’ve been at it, day in and day out, for weeks, and today since sunrise. All you need is a good, long break.”

She took a deep breath and puffed up her cheeks, forcing the air through her lips in a gradual but audible stream.

“Carol, you’re doing fine. You learned the Selanian language faster than any of us. Do you expect to figure out four millennia worth of Selanian technology in four weeks?”

She managed a tired smile. “I suppose you’re right.”

They looked up in surprise when the pleasant female voice of the computer interrupted. “Proximity alert. Proximity alert.”

Carol rose from her seat. “That must be Bill, Don, and Julie, back from Bend. I’ll go take a look.”

“You do that. I’m sure the fresh air will do you good.”

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Carol left the cockpit of the *Sinaven* and stepped into the bright light of a beautiful late afternoon. The sun made her blink. All around her, the blackened trunks of ponderosa lay scattered on the ground, indicating where Silana's ship had cleaved a passage through the forest when it crashed six years ago. Shortly after they moved here, Carol had begun monitoring nature's persistent struggle to win back the area. She even made a game of it and enjoyed looking for signs of new growth whenever she entered the clearing.

But today, her attention was engaged elsewhere. She caught her breath and clutched at the side of the tunnel's entrance. "Silana?"

The woman looked at Carol in surprise. "No." She came closer. Her movements seemed so graceful, so familiar. "I am Melina, Silana's sister." She spoke English, but her accent was heavy.

Carol had always wondered how she would react if something like this ever happened. Now was her chance to find out. "*Sires Melina se Tratan Tolares?* Are you Melina of House Tolares?"

Melina parted her lips in surprise. "*Ti, i tani sirae tavos anar, Talas.* Yes, and this is my husband, Talas." She gestured toward the man who had just come around the bow of the buried ship. They must have split up to look for an entrance. She eyed Carol from the side. "*Camar apara venires lu parena te Selanei?* How is it you come to speak Selanian?"

Carol's hands rose to her mouth. "*Tevas'an! Melina i Talas!*"

"*Ti. Vamires anu?* Yes. Do you know us?"

The shock of seeing Silana's sister, combined with the exertion of speaking a foreign language, was too much. Carol felt lightheaded and rubbed her eyes with her index finger and thumb. She needed to get outdoors more often. Melina took her arm to offer support.

"I'm sorry," Carol said, reverting to English. "It's just such a surprise seeing you here."

"*Tezatal.*"

"No, I really am sorry. I was testing you. There have been some strange people around here lately, and I wanted to be sure."

Melina regarded her with a teasing smile. "And? Did we pass your little test?"

"With flying colors. No one I know could speak such fluent Selanian. Well, maybe Don and Julie." She gazed into Melina's eyes. "Yes, it must be you. The resemblance is phenomenal. Oh, Melina, let me just give you a hug." She clutched Melina in a tight embrace.

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Melina didn't resist. When Carol let go, Melina searched her eyes. "You must have known my sister very well."

"As well as was possible in the short time allotted us."

Talas, who had been lingering in the background, stepped forward. "*Latilares anu, votal, conisira Silana?* Could you please tell us where Silana is?"

Carol looked up at him. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but Silana passed away a little over three years ago."

Talas stared at her and swallowed.

"Excuse me, but how may we call you?" Melina asked.

"Oh, pardon me, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Carol Marten."

Melina touched her arm "It's all right, Carol. I have come to terms with the fact that my sister is no longer with us. But Talas was hoping so much..."

"I understand."

"How...how did she die?" Talas asked, attempting to speak English.

"I think that's something her husband, Philip, should tell you," Carol answered.

Melina stared at her with her mouth agape. "Silana was married?"

"Yes, but only about seven months." She paused. "That's interesting, though. A lot of people have been asking him to write about his experiences and the changes in his life. But instead of writing for the public, he began a very personal account of his time with Silana, almost as if he knew you were coming. He finished it a few weeks ago and titled the manuscript *The Rose*. But I'm afraid the task has been pretty rough on him, and it tore open many old wounds."

Melina nodded. "It takes great courage to face such pain. I could understand my sister marrying someone like that." She offered Carol a sad smile. "You wear your hair in the style of the Selanian Order."

Carol threw back her long, dark-blond locks. She and Bill had both converted to a diet similar to Silana's when they moved to Central Oregon, and Carol's hair had grown amazingly well, now reaching halfway down her back. Bill loved it. She smiled at Melina. "I suppose most of the women in the Society have taken after Silana's example. Is it a problem?"

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“No, but on Chyoradan, only women affiliated with the Selanian Order wear their hair unbound. It is a symbol of submission to our faith. I always dressed my hair in the style of House Tolares so people wouldn’t confuse me with my sister. But which society are you referring to?”

“So many people are interested in what’s happening here that we decided to establish a registered association, which we call the Selanian Society.”

Melina’s eyes opened wide and her lips parted a fraction. “Have you allowed others to see the *Sinaven*?”

“Oh, no, of course not! Silana left Philip explicit instructions before she passed away. Only our closest friends know where Silana originally came from, and we plan on keeping it that way. Most people just believe we are some new, obscure religious group living in a few cabins in a national forest. But it’s becoming more and more difficult. The FBI has surveillance teams watching us, and a lot of people want us out of the forest, which is understandable since it’s an inholding inside a federal preserve.”

“An inholding?”

“Yes. It seems the land Silana crashed in belonged to a family that retained several good-sized parcels when the area became part of the Cascade Forest Reserve at the end of the nineteenth century. For generations, the heads of the family handed it down to their children. But I guess the family must have been in decline, because the last owner was quite old and had no living relatives, at least none that we know of.” She suppressed a smile. “In one of her log entries, Silana said he nearly had a heart attack when the ship came down.”

Melina’s eyes twinkled. “Knowing my sister, she probably befriended him.”

Carol laughed. “Why, yes.” She sighed. “Silana nursed him full time during his last few months. He must have grown very fond of her, because he consigned all the land to her before he passed away in the late fall of 1980. But the government’s fighting it. They claim the deed’s not legitimate since she wasn’t a direct relative. That’s why we’d like to conceal our presence here. We’ve been trying to come up with some kind of cloaking device, but we’re having difficulties understanding your technology.”

“Maybe Tal can help you with that. He’s good at such things.”

“That would be very kind. But why don’t you come on in? I’m sure Philip would love to meet you.” She led the way into the control room and cockpit of the *Sinaven*.

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Philip glanced over his shoulder when she came in. “Hey, Carol, what’s up?”

She lingered in the doorway, blocking his view of the two people behind her. “There’s someone here who would like to meet you.” She stepped aside.

Philip swung around in his seat. His jaw dropped when Melina and Talas entered the chamber. “Oh, my god!”

“Philip, this is Melina, Silana’s sister.” Carol took Melina’s arm and drew her forward.

Philip seemed to find it difficult getting up. “Melina. Silana told me a lot about you.” His voice sounded hoarse.

“And this is Talas, Melina’s husband.”

Philip strode forward and took Talas’s hand in a firm grip. “Talas, I’m glad to meet you.”

Melina touched Carol’s arm. When she had her attention, she aimed a concerned glance in Talas’s direction.

Carol understood immediately. Talas was still in shock. She somehow needed to alleviate the strained atmosphere and decided to change the subject. “Your ship must be somewhere close by. Could we go take a look at it?”

“I’m afraid not,” Melina said. “We were attacked by the Caldarians while in orbit and crashed about two hundred leagues southeast of here. We had to...hitch a ride to get here.” The words made her smile.

Philip’s head whipped around. “What? Are you saying you can’t leave Earth?”

Melina flinched. “Tal said it might take years to repair the damage, if ever.” She hesitated. “Is there a problem?”

Philip’s eyes seemed to drill into Talas’s. “Is that true?”

Talas nodded, his expression blank.

“Oh, no. Please, God, no.” Philip turned away, clutching his hair with both hands.

As the full significance of his words sank in, Carol felt the blood drain from her face. With burning eyes, she looked at the others, and they all stared at one another in shocked silence.

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19. South Bronx, New York: October 1993

Jonathan woke up, shivering and numb. He hardly felt the many cuts and bruises that had lacerated his body. As his surroundings gained substance, he strained to lift his face from the glass-strewn tiling. The light stung his eyes and blurred his sight. He blinked and peered about the kitchen but couldn't see his father anywhere. When he tried to move, glass shards cut into his hands and knees. He dragged himself through the hallway and to the door, insensitive to the pain.

Somehow, he managed the four flights of stairs, but when he got outside, he staggered into a puddle and collapsed with a splash. He lay trembling in the cold water while the rain pelted his back and washed the blood from his wounds. He finally crept to his crate and nestled into his blanket. There he lay still, unfeeling and unseeing, and faced the darkness and emptiness of his broken heart alone. The dull ache in his soul welled up inside him and poured out in great, heaving sobs.

After a time, he had no more tears with which to cry, and pure exhaustion quieted his emotions. In the silence that followed, as the wind and rain blew through the dark alley, he realized he could never give up hope. He clung to the memories of his mother and father and the kindness and love he had once experienced. With his last ounce of strength, he turned his face to the sky and stuttered the only invocation his tormented mind would remember.

“N-now I lay me down to sleep,

“I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

“If I should die before I wake,

“I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

His head drooped toward his arm, an isolated tear glistening on his cheek. The rain stopped, and the wind blew once more through the dark passage, whirling some cellophane wrappers with it. Then it died also, as if it had spent its last breath, leaving the alley solemn and still. The clouds parted, and the moon shone down between the buildings, bathing the scene in its serene light, illuminating the small, peaceful figure lying there, silent and unmoving.

The moment passed. The moon hid its face behind dark clouds, and the wind whispered through the streets, scattering a few solitary pieces of paper. But the alley remained aglow in a warm and brilliant light. Beside the crate, Sina stood in shining glory.

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She raised her arms and lifted her eyes to the heavens, her lips moving in silent prayer. As if in answer, a shimmering mist drifted into the passage. Its billowing glow illuminated the messenger, transforming her hair into a river of flowing gold. Sina bowed her head and folded her hands. Her sweeping, white robe blanketed the ground around her and reflected the fog's radiance with a soft gleam.

She kneeled next to the small figure in the crate and touched his arm. "Wake up, Jonathan."

The boy stirred briefly but otherwise didn't budge.

She shook him. "Come on, sleepyhead. I know you can hear me."

Jonathan groaned. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. It's time to go home. Your mother's waiting for you."

When he opened his eyes and saw his friend, he stared at her. "Sina?"

Her eyes twinkled. "I promised I'd be back for you. How do you feel?"

He stood and stretched. All weariness had fallen from him. He laughed. "I feel great!"

Sina rose. "Good. Then let's be going. Your mother is anxious to see you."

"Mommy?"

Sina smiled and nodded.

Jonathan looked up. He could hardly see the lighted window on the fifth floor because of the glowing fog thickening around him. "What about Daddy?"

"Don't worry. Your father will be fine, thanks to you."

He hesitated, his brow creasing. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Jonathan got one last glimpse of the window before it disappeared in a billow of luminous clouds. "Good-bye, Daddy. I love you." He took a deep breath and tore himself away from the sight. When he glanced around to orient himself, he couldn't see his crate anymore. "What do we do now?"

Sina pointed over his shoulder. Jonathan turned to look—and gaped.

There it was! At long last, the moment he had been waiting for had arrived. The fog had cleared. He was free! He expected to see the yellow brick road lying open before him, stretching on forever, the way it had in his dreams.

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But nothing was the way he had envisioned it. What he saw was far more than he ever could have imagined. The boulevard before him appeared to be made of gold, but gold so pure it seemed like transparent glass. He couldn't find words to describe the beautiful trees lining its path. And when he looked beyond...

Jonathan stared up at Sina, his mouth agape.

She smiled. "Come now." Taking his hand, she led him forward.

The light faded, and the alley was once more left in dark silence.

20. Bend, Oregon: August 1986

Melina felt someone shaking her. She came fully awake almost immediately. The room was still dark, and she heard the gentle sounds of the warm summer night through the open window. "What...what is it? Who's there?"

"Shh. It's just me," Talas whispered.

She exhaled in relief. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry. Listen, Melina, you have to get up."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Please, just do as I say."

Melina had been expecting something like this for some time now. She knew there was no point in arguing. "Alright, Tal, if this is what you really want."

She felt exhausted, and her limbs seemed to be filled with lead as she attempted to pull back the covers. They had been on Halena Yazoral for six months, and the planet was exerting its subtle yet ultimately lethal influence over her body. She sat still and concentrated, bundling her energy as Silana had taught her many years ago. Her outline glowed dully as she realigned her ethereal pattern.

"Are you alright?" Talas asked.

"I'm fine." She sighed and crawled out of bed.

She dressed quickly and looked about the room one last time. It had been their home for the past six weeks. Philip and the Martens had rented a five-bedroom house in Bend while looking to buy something more suited to their purposes. They planned to establish a visitor center for the

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Society and had already found a promising property on the east side of town. After a nasty experience with a religious cult up north two years ago, the government was coming down hard on the Selanian Society. The head of the FBI resident agency in Bend even dropped by personally to talk to Philip.

Talas had assisted Bill and Philip in building a small telatian mechanism that Bill called a cloaking device. It would cover their tracks in the Deschutes National Forest and make it look as if the group had cleared out. Only the initiated would have access to Silana's cabin. Talas had also shown them how to configure the telatian field on the *Sinaven* to make the ship invisible.

Talas nudged her. "Hey, what's going on?"

Melina sighed. "Oh, just out wool-gathering."

"Come on, let's go."

They snuck out the front entrance. Philip had acquired an older-model Corvette convertible that corresponded to Tal's sporty style. It had been easy for them to get a residence permit, and even easier for Talas to obtain a driver's license. He only had to answer twenty-five questions regarding local traffic regulations and take a short spin around the block. No problem for a decorated pilot of the Alliance military.

Melina wasn't surprised when she caught a glimpse of their few worldly possessions neatly packed into the rear cargo area as Talas threw something in and slammed the lid. She glanced at him as he got into the car. Shaking her head, she opened the door and lowered herself into the passenger seat. "Is there any use in telling you that I don't want to leave?"

Talas didn't answer, but tightened his lips and jammed the key into the ignition.

"Please, Tal, can't I at least say good-bye to Carol and Juliana?"

Her husband didn't even look at her as he twisted the key. The V8 engine rumbled to life. Tal would have considered a beautifully tuned, low growl, but to her it sounded more like the vicious snarl of a predator come to tear her away from her loved ones.

Melina looked back at the house as Talas pulled out of the driveway. She closed her eyes when she felt the tears come. A dull ache throbbed in her heart as she thought about the dear friends she was leaving behind. How many friends had she left behind in the past year? She felt very close to Carol and Juliana—especially Juliana—and realized how much she had come to depend on them in the short time they had been here.

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Talas turned onto Highway 20 and headed east. Melina saw the tall, dark outline of Pilot Butte on her left as they fled the town. Tal gently pushed down on the gas, sending them speeding back into the desert along the same route they had traveled two months ago.

The sun was just rising when they turned south on Highway 205. Talas floored the accelerator and the Corvette tore down the road. They had made the journey several times in the past weeks, and Melina wondered if the local authorities were monitoring the traffic. Even if they were, Tal had built a small mechanism that nullified any radar device the police might be using.

Forty-five minutes later, he turned into the Steens Mountain Loop at Frenchglen, and after another half hour, he stopped the car at the side of the road. He switched off the engine, sat back, and sighed.

Melina gazed at him, assessing his mood. “We didn’t have to sneak away in the middle of the night like a couple of thieves. I’m sure they would have understood and probably would have helped us.”

Her husband sat in stubborn silence.

“Tal, nobody is accusing you of anything.” She tried to keep her voice gentle.

“You don’t understand.”

“Was there ever a time when I didn’t understand?”

Talas glanced at her but dropped his gaze and shook his head.

She put her hand on his arm. “It’s not your fault.” She emphasized each word as she said it.

He turned on her, causing her to flinch back. “How can you say such a thing? You’re dying!”

“Yes, but have you heard me complaining?”

Talas stared at her. “You’re the bravest and gentlest person I ever met.”

“No, Tal, bravery has nothing to do with it. It’s just two simple words: *vosaran esa*; I love you.”

Talas glanced at the keys he was playing with and swallowed. “I don’t deserve your love.”

“Do we ever deserve such things? Why can’t you just accept it?”

“I can’t understand it.”

Breathing much too quickly, Melina faced out front, where the morning sun glittered on the dark blue metallic hood of the convertible. “Tal, please don’t push me away. I need you now more than ever.”

He shook his head. “I can’t, Melina, I just can’t. Everything I touch seems to be doomed.”

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She glared at him. “You can’t make yourself responsible for everything that happens.”

“Silana would still be alive if I hadn’t badgered her. And you wouldn’t be dying if I hadn’t insisted on looking for her.”

“It was Silana’s decision to come to Halena Yazoral, and it was the Caldarians’ decision to shoot us down.”

Talas beat his fist against the steering wheel but slipped and hit the horn, making Melina jump. He got out, slammed the door, and stalked off. Melina closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt tears lurking just below the surface but climbed out of the car and followed her husband.

It was only a half-hour hike to the *Mivelin*. Talas replicated a few items in the pattern transformer, then they packed up and left. This time, Melina found it even more difficult to let go. She had no idea where they were headed, and she felt she was parting with the only familiar thing in the solar system. But at least Talas had calmed down enough to hold her hand on the way back to the car.

As Talas eased the Corvette back onto the road, Melina curled up in her seat and fell into a kind of daze. She felt tired, hurt, and confused, and sleep seemed to be the only way to escape the bewildering emotions that were crushing her. She hardly realized when Talas turned east on Highway 20. She took even less notice when they reached Ontario and he took Interstate 84 down to Salt Lake City. By the time he turned east again on Interstate 80 late that night, she had fallen into a self-induced semi-comatose state, floating in a protective bubble of unconsciousness.

When Melina finally resurfaced from her stupor, they were parked close to a lighthouse, looking out at the Atlantic Ocean, with an orange sun rising over the calm water. Still feeling numb, Melina unraveled herself from her fetal position and rubbed her eyes. A light breeze caressed her face, and for the first time in her life, she caught the aromatic scent of sea water. On her right, a seagull cried out. Her long rest must have done her good. A faint smile played on her lips, and somewhere deep down, she felt the joy of life, which had been buried by the strain of the past weeks, bubbling up inside her again.

Talas must have heard her stirring. “I’m glad you’re awake. I was getting worried. You slept for almost two days.”

Melina kept her eyes on the water, enjoying the placid murmur of the ocean’s surf. “Why are we here?” The calmness of her voice surprised her.

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“I don’t know. I just had to get away.”

She sighed and dropped her gaze.

“Melina, can you forgive me for bringing you here, to this illicit planet?”

Her eyes met his. “Of course. I’ll go to the edge of the universe with you, if that’s what you want. As long as we can be together.”

Talas shook his head. “I still can’t understand that. But I’ve been thinking, and I want to learn to be as happy as you are.”

Melina felt her face glowing. “Yes, my love, I am happy, very happy. Although—”

Talas cut her explanation short by leaning over and kissing her. “I love you.”

Melina surrendered to his embrace, then gently pushed him away. “...although I know you won’t be able to understand my happiness. I’ve wanted to tell you for months, but it never seemed like the right time.”

“What is it?”

She hesitated.

“Just say it, Melina.”

She took a deep breath. “I’m pregnant.”

Talas paled. “Oh, god, no.” He buried his face in his hands.

Melina caressed her husband’s cheek, brushing away his tears, while her soul soared with joy over the new life growing inside her.

21. South Bronx, New York: October 1993

The morning dawned cold and gray. When Ellie lifted her shopping cart over the threshold and into the alley, the bitter cold almost took her breath away. It was only mid-fall, and the frosty weather in the area had taken everyone by surprise. Although she was in a hurry to get to the store, she was glad she had taken the time to bundle up in her winter coat. Her shift began soon, and she didn’t want to be late, so she grasped her cart and set out at a brisk pace. But a routine glance toward the wooden crate stopped her in her tracks.

“Jonathan!” She dropped the cart and rushed over. “Jonathan, wake up.” She shook him, but recoiled from his cold, pale skin. Her hand shot to her mouth. She reached out again, caressing his

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thick, black hair and feeling his ice-cold forehead. She dropped to her knees and gathered the little body up in her arms. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

It was over. The Earth had taken its unfeeling toll on the boy's frail body, as with her friend Lina. Why did fate often seem so cruel? But Melina's son might have lived a few more years if his life hadn't been so miserable after she passed away, and Ellie knew who was responsible for that.

She bit down on her teeth and attempted to swallow her bitterness. Instead of yielding to her anger, she let her fingers glide over the boy's cheek as she rocked the lifeless bundle back and forth. "Yonatan. Oh, Yonatan. No one can hurt you now, little one."

Her head jerked up when a window on the fifth floor crashed open and an angry voice rang out. "Jonathan? Jonathan, where—?" The man stared down at the small, peaceful figure cradled in Ellie's lap. He stood there for what seemed like forever. Then a whisper drifted toward her like a vapor in the breeze. "No."

A blood-curdling shriek shattered the reverential silence of the narrow passage. "No-o-o!" He disappeared from the window. She heard him pounding down the stairs, and a few seconds later he burst through the door. Loathing welled up and lodged itself like a lump in her throat when he fell on his knees beside her. He sat there, not daring to touch the child. His shoulders shook and he stooped forward, his hands on his thighs, and rocked back and forth.

Ellie shuddered. The way the man bawled was revolting. He had brought this on himself, so what right did he have to mourn?

Her conscience sent her a subtle answer, gnawing at her resolve. Her immediate reaction was to suppress it. She couldn't sympathize with his anguish, nor did she want to. His childish, self-centered behavior disgusted her. She tried to turn away, but the child in her lap made it a hopeless endeavor. Nevertheless, she wanted to be alone with her grief and tried to shut out the howling. How could she bare her soul in front of such a man?

For a while, she sought relief in silent tears. But the ache and bitterness in her heart kept growing until she knew she would have to vent her emotions before they raged out of control. With her lips pressed tight in determination, Ellie gripped the man's arm. "Tal, listen to me." Her own cold harshness shocked her, but she forced herself to continue. "We can't let the authorities know what happened. You know what the consequences of that would be. And I'm not talking about your being arrested," she hissed through clenched teeth. "We need to act, and we need to do it quickly."

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Talas, still numb with shock, turned his head toward her. Ellie couldn't tell if he was capable of listening, but she had to try. "You know it wasn't right, the way you behaved after Melina passed away. In your selfish, injured pride, you never gave us the slightest chance to—"

She paused. She was allowing her bitterness to control her. Besides, she didn't need to get Bill and Carol involved. She took a deep breath. "You never gave me a chance to tell you the things Melina revealed to me. Don't you think I noticed how you always managed to disappear when Bill and Carol came to visit? I bet you didn't even realize how close Melina and I had become. Did you know she asked me to call her Melina instead of Lina? Well, did you?"

She had to stop again. Her breath was coming too fast, and the hands with which she clasped the cold body in her lap had become two tightly clenched fists.

But at least she had Talas's attention. He was staring at her with his mouth and his mournful puppy-dog eyes wide open. The sight would have been comical if her tears hadn't been so close to the surface.

Ellie sighed. "Melina prepared me well for her revelations. She was a master of manipulation, although, contrary to others—" She gave Talas a sour glance. "—she only used her gifts for the good of those around her. While I thought I was wheedling her secrets out of her, she was strewing mysteries to awaken my curiosity. She finally took me into her confidence, and in the two years before she passed away, she made sure I learned everything. Not that I hadn't suspected much of it already."

Her thoughts turned inward. "At first, I could hardly believe the things she was telling me. Remember that summer a few years back when I packed up and left so suddenly? That was because Bill and Carol came to see us, and Melina informed them of her plans and insisted they take me to Oregon. We left the next day, and when we got there, they showed me everything. I saw the Center for Spiritual Studies in Bend and Silana's cabin in the Deschutes National Forest. And Silana's ship! I can still hardly believe it's all true."

Ellie smiled as a fond memory surfaced. "For some reason, Melina trusted me implicitly from the moment you moved here. She was such a dear. Of course, she didn't want any doctors present when Yonatan was born, so it's fortunate I'm a midwife. It was a smooth home birth, and nobody had any suspicions, except for me. I mean, how many newborns have a blue umbilical cord that glows in the dark?"

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She chuckled. “Do you remember the difficult time you had at the registrar’s office? Melina wanted to name her son Yonatan, after the famous elder who played such a vital role during the great civil war on Piral 4,500 years ago. But everybody thought you were mispronouncing the name Jonathan, so that’s what they put on the birth certificate.”

She felt her face convulse. “Oh, why must such beautiful people be so fragile?” She whisked out her handkerchief and wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her chest hurt when she took a deep breath. “Why did you have to go?” Her fingers traced the silent lips of the boy cradled in her lap, knowing she would never again hear that golden laugh.

Her hand trembled, and she clenched her teeth as her anger swelled. “Why, Tal? Why did you have to treat him like that? Oh, I’d like to—” For a moment, her mind snapped, and she hardly realized what she was doing. As she pounded his shoulder, the handkerchief in her fist fluttered like the wings of a dove defending its lifeless nest with the fury of despair.

Talas let it happen. He squeezed his eyes shut and raised his head toward the sky, as if wishing for a cleansing downpour that could wash this nightmare away.

When Ellie had spent her anger, her shoulders sagged and her arm dropped to her side. She looked down at Jonathan’s face and stroked his hair. Fresh tears brimmed in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I know that’s not what Melina wanted.” Ellie’s gaze wandered into the distance. “Her spirit was so close to heaven in the end. I think for her the boundary between this world and the next no longer existed. Believe me, Tal, if she hadn’t told me the things she did, I don’t know if I could endure sitting here with you.” She looked into his eyes, trying to find an ounce of compassion for him, but felt only cold pity. “Melina told me Yonatan had inherited her constitution. Not your constitution. Hers!”

Talas’s eyes opened wide, and he searched her face.

Ellie understood his probing gaze. “Oh, yes. Like I said, she told me everything. But don’t worry; your secret’s safe with me. Although I can’t understand it, Melina loved you, and I could never betray a friend’s trust. She knew how much you would suffer after her death, and how much you would make Yonatan suffer because of it. But she also knew how guilty you would feel.”

Ellie took a deep breath. “Tal, she loved you. And Yonatan loved you. She wanted you to be absolutely sure of that, even though she knew how you would be treating her son after she left.”

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She exhaled. There! She had said it. But would she ever be able to understand a love so deep and forgiving? All she could feel right now was anger and pain. She shook her head. “I knew Yonatan would have to go, but why did you have to make it be so soon?” She pressed her lips shut so none of the other things she wanted to say would slip out.

Talas hung his head. Ellie couldn’t see his eyes because of the thick, black hair hiding his face. But she noticed the dark wet spots that appeared on his thighs as his tears dripped onto his tattered jeans.

“Tal, Melina asked me not to let you go through this alone. We need help, and you know there’s only one place we can go. Don’t let your pride get in the way.” She fixed him with a cold gaze. “I’m sorry, but I just don’t have Melina’s love. Right now, I hate you with a vengeance. But because I know what’s at stake here, and because Melina asked me to, I’ll make a few phone calls. You’d better get your things ready.”

Ellie could no longer look at him. Instead, she gazed at the pale, motionless figure lying in her lap and allowed the awkward stillness to settle around them.

22. Addendum: NYPD Detective Bureau, New York: May 1994

The following three-page memorandum was provided by Antonio Cardez, CEO of Associated Investigation Services, Inc., Portland, Oregon, former commanding officer of the NYPD Missing Persons Squad.



Rudolph W. Giuliani
Mayor

Police Department City of New York



William J. Bratton
Police Commissioner

Detective Bureau
1 Police Plaza
New York, NY 10038

Memorandum

Special Investigation Division
Missing Persons Squad

To : Detective Bureau
ATTN: all involved divisions

Date : 5/12/94

From : Lieutenant Antonio Cardez
Commanding Officer, MPS

Subject : MPS No. 93/6835 - Review Synopsis

OBJECTIVE:

The purpose of this memo is to provide high-level command with an immediate preliminary synopsis of review findings to facilitate preparations regarding a potential internal affairs investigation. A full-length report will follow shortly.

BACKGROUND:

Last Monday, 5/9/94, Chief of Detectives Ronald Tanner received a telephone call from the Bronx Community 4 district manager, who informed him of the community board's intent to lodge a complaint with the Internal Affairs Bureau. Chief Tanner ordered a precautionary case review to clarify the following allegations against the MPS and the 44th Precinct Detective Squad:

1) Fact: The Detective Bureau initially gave disproportionate attention to MPS No. 93/6835 and the three associated cases. Allegation: The victims were all white. The bureau's interest was motivated by racial bias.

2) Fact: The Detective Bureau has not made any progress in the four specified cases. Allegation: The bureau's investigation uncovered bizarre details that would cause embarrassment and shed a bad light on the bureau's performance. The bureau has therefore chosen a tactic of deliberate temporizing.

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Date : 5/12/94

FINDINGS:

Allegation 1: After reviewing the four cases, the class G categorization seems even more justified. The circumstances are highly irregular, and the possibility of criminal involvement was and still is a legitimate concern. The community board's allegation in regard to racial bias is unfounded.

Allegation 2: Because of the lack of traceable evidence and relevant leads (see below), the prospects for clearing these cases by standard investigative methods is remote unless there is an unanticipated break. Although the cases will probably need to be reclassified as long-term, the bureau's difficulties have not been due to temporizing, lack of effort, or inadequate performance.

DETAILS:

Missing Persons

Eleanor Woodsworth: MPS No. 93/6659, W/F, DOB 5/27/36, certified midwife, employed at Lincoln Medical Center OB/GYN. Reported missing 10/21/93. Last known Address: 1058 Nelson Ave, Bronx, NY 10452

Jonathan Peñate: MPS No. 93/6835, H(?) /M, DOB 1/9/87. Reported missing 10/28/93.

Talat Peñate: MPS No. 93/6904, H(?) /M, DOB 8/17/58(?), auto mechanic, unemployed. Filed as missing 10/29/93.

Lina Peñate: MPS No. 93/7021, H(?) /F, DOB 12/9/62(?), housewife. Filed as missing 11/02/93.

Incident Reports

On Thursday morning, 10/21/93, Eleanor Woodsworth, a certified midwife employed at the Lincoln Medical Center OB/GYN, failed to report for duty. Her supervisor contacted her adult children, who reported her missing after discovering that her apartment at 1058 Nelson Ave had been emptied. The woman's data was entered into the NCIC Missing Persons File. The 44th Precinct Detective Squad covered the case for the first seven days and referred it to MPS on 10/28/93.

On the same day (10/28/93), Morgan Denning (B/M, DOB 11/8/17) reported a missing child, Jonathan Peñate, who was last seen on 10/20/93. Detective Gerald Clay immediately entered the boy's data into the NCIC Missing Persons File and discovered that Eleanor Woodsworth lived at the same address.

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Investigation

Detectives Brooks and Clay concluded that the boy's father, Talat Peñate, was also missing. His disappearance went unnoticed because his inclination toward heavy drinking and violent behavior had alienated him from his neighbors. He was unemployed at the time and had no known relatives or friends in the area. Talat Peñate supposedly moved his wife, Lina Peñate, to an upstate clinic because of a long-term illness, but the detectives determined that no such clinic ever existed. Lina Peñate was last seen 2/92.

During a routine background check, inconsistencies led the detectives to believe the Peñates had been living in the Bronx for over seven years under assumed identities. Their real names and prior residence remain unknown. Despite the family's consistent black hair and dark brown eyes, there is considerable doubt as to their Hispanic origin, which is supported by the fact that they weren't accepted as such in their predominantly Hispanic neighborhood.

Evidence technicians from the crime scene unit examined the empty apartments but couldn't retrieve any trace evidence. Lieutenant Jeff Sanders was in charge of the operation and reported that such a sterile crime scene was unprecedented in his experience. The results of his investigation came as a surprise, since Lieutenant Sanders is generally regarded as extremely conscientious in his methods. In a joint task force effort, an FBI crime scene analyst was called in but couldn't discover any form of physical evidence or provide an explanation for the lack of evidence at the scene.

Further Unexplained Phenomenon

During the winter, the Bronx Community 4 board asked the detective bureau to investigate several incidents, which the residents of Nelson Ave living in the proximity of W 165th St believed were related to the four MPS cases under review. I visited the address yesterday for a first-hand look. The alley leading to the back entrance of the building has insufficient lighting and can only be described as dismal. Sporadically occurring dust devils scatter papers from the unsecured waste containers into the street with regular frequency. The observed natural wind phenomenon and generally neglected condition of the neighborhood might offer an explanation for the reported incidents.

The bureau filed at least five incident reports last winter describing situations in which homeless individuals sought food or shelter in the alley during dark nights with moderate to strong winds. Each incident occurred near the same crate by the back entrance to 1058 Nelson Ave, where the concerned parties reported seeing what they described as a "faint glow that wouldn't fade".

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END OF THE ALLEY

Note: The plot of *The Alley* will be continued in *The Willow*, in the third volume of the Selandian Chronicles, *The Goddess of Death*. The following storyline, *The High Priestess*, is a continuation of *The Emissary* from the first volume. Although the plot of the story above seems unrelated to the account following below, the relationship between the two stories will become clear by the end of the series, as promised in the Author's Notes.

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The Conference of Tolares in 1524 TC has long been considered a focal point in history, marking the end of the Millennial Peace and the beginning of negotiations leading to the Quadrilateral Concord of 1533. Today, scholars regard the fourteen-year period between the Conference of Divestelan and the signing of the Concord as the dawning of the Era of the Swordmasters. To the prospective historian, an analysis of this period is essential, since the events surrounding the Conference of Divestelan in 1519 and the equally ill-fated Conference of Tolares—the only two Selanian conferences in Piralian history ever to be held outside of Travis—had such far-reaching consequences.

The highlight of the Conference of Tolares was undoubtedly the public debut of the High Priestess, who was chosen unanimously from the ranks of priestesses only six weeks after the assassination of the High Priestess Halita Penates in 1519. Although the members of the Advisory Council weren't surprised by the conference's initial outcome, the shock of subsequent events effectively immobilized the Council for months, leaving the High Priestess with the formidable task of restoring order after the ensuing chaos. For despite all their prudence, the elders had not anticipated the magnitude of the devastating events that would follow.

—Covatal, *Excerpts on History*

1. The Lone Rider

A corner of Nova's mouth twisted upward in an amused smile. She leaned sideways, nudging Catyana with her shoulder. "There he is again. Do you see him?"

"Yes. I wonder what he's looking for. Oh, such a shame! That wagon's blocking my view."

"Don't worry. I doubt we've seen the last of him." Nova drew in a lungful of fresh air and looked into the deep blue, mid-afternoon sky of the second-to-last spring day of the year. It felt good to enjoy a few simple pleasures with her friend, even if just for a day. When they arrived in

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Tolares, she would have to resume her subtle dance with the advocates of power and intrigue. The thought dampened her mood, and she let her gaze wander past the column of vehicles trailing them. Despite the distance, she could see snow glistening on the peaks of the Tyenar Mountains.

For much of the way, dark conifer forests had beguiled them with the scent of fresh resin. But as they approached their destination, the countryside became less hilly. The forests retreated, and the valley opened up before them. Streams rushed through lush meadows spotted with colorful flowers as the spring snowmelt from the Covasins splashed and foamed to meet its destiny. *Just like me*, Nova thought. The notion didn't help to raise her spirits.

Today was Velavides, the Holy Sabbath. There was less traffic and, as Catyana's father had predicted, they had made good progress. The cottages, taverns, and towns along the way were appearing ever more frequently, indicating they would reach Tolares within the hour. She wished her short sabbatical wouldn't end so soon.

Nova grinned when an immense yawn erupted from Catyana. The young woman's hands shot up to cover her mouth and she stared at Nova with wide eyes, but her glowing cheeks betrayed her. Nova couldn't resist. "Don't tell me you're tired."

"No...I mean yes, I mean...Ugh, that's not fair, Nova. You did that on purpose!"

Nova awarded her a playful smile.

Catyana sighed. "Of course I'm tired. But I don't mean to complain. The Lady Utalya's carriages are exquisite, and even these seats on the back are unbelievably comfortable. I'm just not accustomed to sitting still for so many hours. And you know what little sleep I got last night."

"That was to be expected. The events of the past days have been traumatic, and this was your first night away from your family, knowing you wouldn't return home any time soon. You did well, Catyana." She squeezed her friend's hand.

Catyana managed a smile and turned her attention to the tailing cavalcade. She grabbed Nova's arm and leaned close to her ear. "Look! There he is again."

For the last half hour, they had been watching a lone rider whose strange behavior had piqued their interest. Although it was a warm spring day, he had pulled the hood of his worn cloak down over his face and kept riding back and forth between the carriages and wagons on the road. He held his chyeves at a leisurely gait and was heading in their general direction, but he scrutinized each vehicle as he rode by. Now it seemed to be their turn, because he was gaining on them.

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Nova could hardly contain her amusement. “Have you discovered his secret?”

“It’s quite obvious.”

“So you know who he is?”

“That’s not difficult to guess.”

“Good, then let’s have some fun.” They squeezed hands, and their mischievous grins foretold no good.

They were facing east, contrary to the direction they were traveling, and could easily monitor the rider’s approach. He soon came abreast and turned his hood toward them, but he immediately reined up when he saw Catyana. “Oh, you have golden hair!”

“And *nolavelan mada* to you, too, my friend,” Nova replied cheerfully.

“Oh, uh, sorry. *Nolavelan mada*, my friends.”

“Thank you for complimenting my friend’s hair,” Nova continued. “I’m sorry we can’t return the favor, for all we see is your hood. You must be someone important to be making this journey in such lowly attire.”

Catyana hid a laugh by coughing into her hand. Nova poked her in the ribs.

“I’m no one special, just a lonely traveler.”

Nova opened her eyes wide in mock surprise, but had to suppress an urge to snicker. “Oh, a *Traveler!*”

The hood almost slipped off the man’s head. “No, no! You mistake my meaning.”

“Oh? Then pray tell, what is your meaning?”

“That I’m not important enough for you to be taking this so seriously.”

Nova gave him a solemn look and nodded. “Alright, I promise never to take you seriously.”

“No, you don’t under—”

Catyana burst out in unsuppressed laughter. Nova jabbed her, making her jump.

The man seemed to glare at them from under his hood. “Why are you mocking me?”

It took all of Nova’s self-discipline not to laugh in his face. “Oh, come now, My Lord. How do you expect us not to make fun of you if you come to us dressed up in this fashion?”

The rider jerked upright in his saddle with his mouth agape. Then he reached up and threw back his hood. A handsome, clean-shaven young man with thick, black hair and dark eyes emerged. “How did you know?”

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“Well...”

He nodded encouragement.

“If you wish to be taken for an underprivileged individual on a long, lonely journey, you shouldn’t be riding that particular chyeves. A thoroughbred Tesalian mare would constitute a virtually unattainable aspiration for even a moderately prosperous commoner, let alone a pauper. And it would help if your mare exhibited at least a bit of fatigue after a supposedly long and strenuous journey. But if you really wish to pull off your masquerade, you should think twice about traveling with an heirloom sword strapped to your side, or your family ring on your finger.”

He studied Nova, searching her face. “You’re very perceptive. Are you priestesses?”

“Do we look like priestesses?”

“You’re wearing the robes of the Selanian Order.”

“Do you see any brooches pinned to our robes?”

“No, but that’s inconsequential. The High Priestess would be traveling incognito.”

“Oh, so *that’s* who you’re looking for.”

The color rose to his face, and he dropped his gaze. “Your carriage is the only one I’ve seen today carrying anyone from the Order.”

“Then I suppose it’s only fair to call your attention to the carriage directly ahead of us, which I believe is also carrying several young women in robes. Maybe you’ll discover her there.” She awarded him an impish smile.

The young man’s lips tightened. “You’re making fun of me.”

“My Lord,” Nova replied playfully, “if you insist on disregarding even the most elementary civilities, what would you have us do?”

His jaw dropped and he stared at Nova. Then he acknowledged her with a slight bow of his head. “Indeed, I’ve neglected my duties most disgracefully. Allow me to rectify that mistake. I am Chyardal of the House of Tolares, and I’m pleased to make your acquaintance. You must excuse my discourteous behavior. I keep more to myself, and I’m therefore not as accustomed to such formalities as I probably should be.”

“Thank you, My Lord. Of course, we quickly realized who you must be. Your father would never stoop to such depths as to disguise himself on such an obscure errand. But it’s kind of you to have introduced yourself formally.”

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The young man gaped at her. “You know my father?”

“I had the privilege of staying at His Excellency’s residence a few years ago. My name is Novantina Satural, my friend here is Catyana Faeren, and we belong to the party of the Lady Utalya Revan.”

“The Lady Utalya!”

“Yes. She’s traveling in this carriage, although you couldn’t have been aware of her since the top of the carriage is obstructing your view.”

The young Lord studied Nova’s face and nodded. “I remember now. You’re the acolyte who was called Nova by her friends. I’m very sorry, Sister. I should have recognized you earlier.”

“*Tezatal*. I seem to pale beside my golden-haired friend here. Hardly anyone notices me anymore.”

Catyana poked her in the ribs.

“Now you’re teasing me again, but I gather I had it coming,” the young Lord replied with a grin. “Would you do me the favor of calling me Chyardal? It would make me feel more comfortable.”

“Gladly. And you may call me Nova.”

“Thank you, Nova. Will you forgive my rude manners?”

“Of course. And please forgive us for teasing you. Although I must admit, it was most diverting after this long journey.”

“No worries. It was just harmless banter. Besides, it’s refreshing to meet someone who doesn’t try to curry favor after discovering who I am.” He bowed his head in her direction and turned to Catyana. “And your name is Catyana Faeren, if I heard correctly.”

“Yes.” She tried to return his gaze, but the color rose to her cheeks, and she looked down.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable by commenting on your hair. I know it’s a poor excuse, but we don’t often have the privilege of entertaining guests with your particular features, and your golden hair caught me off guard.”

Catyana’s lips curled up in a bittersweet smile. “I often get that reaction. It was especially unpleasant when I went into town in Nadil. Foreigners stared at me so. But your comment didn’t make me uncomfortable. Please, don’t let it trouble you.”

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“You’re both most gracious. It was a pleasure meeting you, and I hope we’ll be seeing more of each other. But if this is truly the Lady Utalya’s carriage, then you must excuse me, for I must attend to her immediately.” He bowed and nudged his chyeves forward.

Catyana turned to Nova. “He’s quite pleasant after he gets warmed up, isn’t he?”

Nova stared into the distance, not really seeing. She realized an instant too late that a response was required. “Oh, yes, of course, he is at that.”

“You were amazing. I wish I could tease people the way you and your sister do. It was so amusing.”

“I suppose so.”

Catyana didn’t reply. When Nova looked at her, Catyana was staring at her with a puzzled expression on her face. Nova tried to shake the cobwebs out of her head. “I’m sorry, I was daydreaming. You were saying? Oh, right, you wish you could tease people. Didn’t you ever tease your siblings?” She had to restrain herself from biting her lip since Catyana would undoubtedly detect body language that was so telling. But Nova hadn’t anticipated the effect seeing Chyardal again would have on her.

Catyana hesitated, peering at Nova from the side. “Of course we did. Mother always encouraged us to develop a sense of humor. She said if we couldn’t learn to laugh at ourselves and one another, we would probably all go mad. But I was never able to apply it in such a spontaneous fashion. Nova, why are you—?”

Nova grabbed her arm. “Look!” She pointed at the buildings springing up on both sides. “We’ve reached the outskirts of the city. My, but we have made good time. We covered the forty-seven leagues from Nadil to Tolares in less than eight hours. I remember when it took twice as long.” Did her voice sound casual enough?

No, of course not, and Catyana rewarded her with a sidelong glance as a result. “I thought a coach could travel from Travis to Tolares in less than two days.”

“Commercial coaches, yes. They have teams of six chyevi and change them every ten to fifteen leagues. They travel for sixteen hours a day and can cover 150 leagues in one day at this time of year. But they don’t have to contend with all this conference traffic.”

Catyana sagged down in her seat as she looked around. “Is it true that Tolares has more than two hundred thousand inhabitants?”

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Nova nodded. “A lot more with the conference coming up. It’s the largest city of the eastern provinces.”

“I’ve never been to a place so huge. Actually, I’ve never been anywhere except Nadil, and that seemed large to me. This place makes me feel so...insignificant.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it soon enough. Although I don’t know how often we’ll be going into town. The assembly hall Lord Tolares built for the conference is near his private residence just south of town, so you won’t have to exert yourself if you don’t want to.”

“I know Tolares is too large for me to see very much of it in the brief time we’ll be here, but I’d at least like to get a look at the Old Town, if it’s alright with you.”

“I’d be happy to show you around. Oh, Catyana, it’ll be so wonderful, being able to do all these things with you.” She squeezed her friend’s hand.

Catyana linked arms with her and put her head on her shoulder. “I’m so glad we’re together.”

“Don’t you miss your family?”

“Yes, dreadfully.”

Nova put her arm around Catyana’s shoulder. “It’ll probably take a while for you to acclimate to the new situation.”

“I know. But it was my decision, and even if it hurts, I don’t believe I’ll ever come to regret it. All I ask is to stay with you. You won’t ever send me away, will you?” Nova saw uncertainty in her eyes.

“I’m not planning on letting you get away from me, if that’s what you mean. On the other hand, we never know what fate Anae has in store for us. I think it’s dangerous if we set our hearts upon something too fixedly.”

Catyana sat up and stared at her. “Whatever do you mean?”

Nova looked into her friend’s eyes. “Simply that it would be arrogant to think we know what will happen tomorrow, or next week, or next month. Some people believe things will always happen the way they’ve planned them, but they’re deceiving themselves.”

Catyana’s expression was thoughtful. “You’re right. That’s why we’re taught to say, ‘Anae be willing.’ But you’re like the big sister I’ve always wished for, and I just don’t know what I’d do if we were separated.” She leaned against Nova and put her head on her shoulder.

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Nova regretted having changed the subject on Catyana the way she had, but she didn't want to talk about her feelings for Chyardal right now. She needed to sort things out for herself first. There was still so much to do, so much to think about. What worried her most was the anxiety she had sensed in Catyana for weeks now. Yes, the events of the past days had been traumatic, and this was the first time Catyana had ever been away from home. But Catyana's anxiety went deeper than mere disorientation or recent trauma. What was wrong and how could Nova help her?

Despite her disturbing thoughts, the buildings of the city caught her attention. She had seen them many times before but still found them fascinating, and the artistic skill with which they had been constructed intrigued her. Although Tolares was large, it didn't seem crowded. As in Nadil, there was plenty of space between the shops and houses, and even more parks and fountains. Because Tolares was so prosperous, the structures were exquisite and generously proportioned. The paved road leading through the city was so broad that four large wagons could pass abreast of one another with ease.

Nova blinked when Chyardal dropped back on his chyeves. His eyes wandered back and forth between the two women huddled together. "I hope I'm not disturbing anything." He said it politely enough, but his voice carried a hint of curiosity.

Nova smiled up at him. "It's quite alright. Catyana's just very tired. She's not accustomed to such long trips."

Catyana kept her head on Nova's shoulder but awarded Chyardal a quick smile.

He lifted his chin in an understanding nod. "I'm sorry your journey's been so strenuous. But that will soon be remedied. Your party will be lodging at our residence, which is another reason I'm glad I ran into you. You'll arrive at the house in half an hour. I assume you're aware of the other distinguished guests in this carriage?"

Chyardal was undoubtedly referring to Nova's sister Vodana, who was renowned as a vocalist and musician across the entire Suviltan Plateau and beyond; and Vilam, the man who had put the Prophet's Bow to such momentous use in Folan's tavern two nights ago. Nova felt the urge to exploit Chyardal's inquiry for a playful repartee but decided she had teased the young Lord enough for one day. She swallowed the witty remark on her tongue but couldn't quite restrain an amused smile.

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Chyardal returned her smile with a deliberate grin. “Alright, if that’s how the matter stands. I’ll ride on ahead and announce your arrival. Good-bye, my friends. I look forward to seeing you shortly.”

Somewhere in her mind an alarm went off, and her tone became more formal. “Good-bye, Chyardal. It was a pleasure seeing you again.”

With a quick wave and a roguish grin, the young Lord nudged his chyeves and galloped away.

Why had he grinned like that? Had she been so transparent? Had a playful flicker in her eyes betrayed her? As she leaned toward Catyana, she resolved to be more careful. “Did you notice the gentleness with which he directed his mare?”

“Yes. It reminded me of what you told us the evening before last. I’d rather not think about that horrible evening, but do you remember that awful guard who was beating his poor chyeves?”

“How could I forget?”

“When we came upon him you said, ‘If you want to know what a man is really like, observe the way he treats his wife or his animals.’ I don’t think I’ll ever forget those words.”

“The actual proverb is, in fact, more general. As the Prophet says, ‘Observe the malignant fool, for he cannot hide his malice. When he attends to those he believes are beneath him, he will not fail to reveal his true nature.’ That should give you a good indication of anyone’s character.”

“Nova, why wouldn’t you allow me to treat the poor animal? I felt so sorry for it.”

“Yes, dearest, I know. But there are some things you need to understand. One is that we should never force our advice or talents on others unless the situation absolutely requires it. There are already enough people who want to impose their uninvited counsel on anyone and everyone they meet. Those guards knew who we were, and they knew we could treat the injury. If they had wanted our help, they would have asked. Do you understand?”

“I think so. It has to do with our freedom of choice, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. Love means being able to let go and allowing others to make their own choices. It was our duty to ensure they stopped abusing the chyeves, because it was a sentient being and could feel pain. On the other hand, the chyeves was their property, and we couldn’t impede upon their ownership.”

“I understand.”

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“But there was another reason, one even more important to me than the chyeves’s well-being, and that was your safety.”

Catyana gaped at her. “My safety?”

Nova looked into her eyes. She tried to make her words as gentle as possible. “There aren’t many people who know about your abilities, dearest. And in these increasingly difficult times, I wouldn’t want that information to fall into the wrong hands. Who knows what they might do to you, or your family.”

Catyana shuddered. “I never thought of that.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. But you’re with us now. Most people will think twice before attacking someone from the Order.” Nova sniffed to herself. Most people, yes. If only the threat hadn’t already gone well beyond that. But it was time Catyana knew the truth. She just didn’t quite know how to tell her.

“Is that what you and Mara were talking about the day before yesterday? When we were at the pond with her and Soshia?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, why did I have to bring up Soshia? Now I just feel miserable again.” A tear actually slipped down Catyana’s cheek and she dabbed it away with her sleeve.

Nova put her arm around her and pulled her close. “It wasn’t your fault, what happened at the artifact.”

“Oh, really! Well whose fault was it then?” she said, sniffing back a tear and shooting a bitter glance in Nova’s direction.

“What I meant to say was, you didn’t know it would hurt her. I’m sure you would have stopped right away if you had known.”

“She was so angry with me afterward!”

“That’s understandable. She had never felt anything like that before, and it scared her to death. But you saw how quickly she recovered.”

“Yes, she was such a dear about it. She even called herself a...well, you know, a...” Catyana’s voice dropped to a whisper, “b-i-t-c-h.”

“Still can’t bring yourself to say it?” said Nova with a smile.

“No...I mean yes, I mean...O-o-h!” She shot Nova a dark glance. “Stop doing that!”

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“I didn’t do it on purpose...this time. No, really, I promise,” she added with a laugh when Catyana’s eyes narrowed.

“But you still think it’s funny.”

“Of course I do.”

“I don’t think it is.”

“Oh, Catyana, you need to stop taking yourself so seriously. Everyone has their little quirks, and this one just makes you particularly adorable.”

“You really think so?”

“I do. The other girls love you for it.”

“They’re not just laughing at me?”

“They wouldn’t dare. And you don’t believe for an instant that they would, anyway.”

Catyana pondered Nova’s statement. “You’re right, I don’t. At least I’m sure Tanola, Natilya, and Hyelisa wouldn’t laugh at me. And, although I don’t know Fatasa, Redina, and Sitenayla all that well, they do seem like really sweet girls. I can’t see them making fun of me, either.”

“See? So don’t worry about it so much.”

Catyana took a deep breath. “Soshia’s funeral is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m so sorry we have to miss it.”

“So am I. But we really had to leave. The Lady Utalya is the sole representative of a Great House, so she can’t miss the first day of the conference. And since the conference begins day after tomorrow, that leaves only tomorrow for final preparations.”

“I understand. But I really would have wanted to be there for Mara. She’s absolutely devastated.”

“I know. Mara and Soshia were very close.” Nova sighed. “Dearest, I’m sorry to bring it up, but I need to talk to you about Soshia. I mean, about how she died.”

“I know how she died. I was there, remember? You asked me to scan her to find cause of death.”

“Yes, I’m sorry I did that. It must have been very difficult for you. But there’s more to the situation than you know, and it’s important I tell you. What do you remember?”

Catyana stared into space. “It was strange. We had just come out of the tavern after Vilam used the Prophet’s Bow to pin that corporal’s arm to the post. You were talking to your sister, and

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suddenly, I just knew for a fact that Soshia was dead.” She shuddered. “It was as if an icy hand had torn my heart from my breast.”

Nova targeted her with a concerned glance. “That really was very strange. I wonder how you knew.” And she did wonder at it. But what roused her curiosity even more was Vilam’s reaction. Nova had sensed he was familiar with such impressions. He had immediately believed Catyana and was shocked to the core at her pronouncement that Soshia was dead.

“I don’t know how I knew. I just did. And then we heard the explosion.”

“Yes, but see, that’s just it. It took about a minute or so after you had your impression before we heard the explosion.”

Catyana’s brow folded into creases. “You’re right, it did take a moment.” She looked at Nova. “Mara said an enchantress killed Soshia.”

“Yes.”

“You were alone with her for quite a while yesterday afternoon after her meltdown in the dining room. I wanted to ask you about it, but I knew you would never betray Mara’s confidence.”

“It’s true, I wouldn’t. But there are a few things Mara told me that you really need to know, and I’m sure Mara would want you to know, too.” The bigger problem was the things Nova couldn’t tell Catyana. For instance, that Mara had killed the stable boy they had found dead by the side of the road, or about Mara’s feelings for Catyana. “You already know that Mara is an enchantress, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Catyana, “that became evident when Natilya barged into the study trying to save you from her, and we all saw the ruby pendant hanging around her neck. Not that you needed any saving. You both looked quite, um...cozy on that sofa.” They exchanged a sad smile.

“I was just comforting her. She really was very distraught,” said Nova.

“I know. Mara had just lost her best friend. It breaks my heart, thinking about the pain she’s in.”

Nova took a deep breath. “Catyana, Soshia wasn’t just Mara’s best friend. She was her daughter.”

“What!” Catyana stared at her. “Soshia was Mara’s daughter?”

“She was.”

“Oh, no! No wonder Mara was so devastated. She...oh...” Tears started streaming down her face, and she tried to wipe them away but could hardly keep up.

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Nova touched her arm. “Oh, honey, are you alright?”

“Does it look like I’m alright?” Catyana shook her head. “Oh, Nova, she was in so much pain, and I didn’t even know why.”

Nova sighed and let Catyana sob on her shoulder. When she felt her friend had calmed down enough, she said, “I’m so sorry, but I’m going to have to qualify my previous statement. You see, Soshia was Mara and Lord Marusen’s eldest daughter.”

Catyana just stared at her for a moment, her eyes red and puffy and her mouth agape. “But...Lord Marusen isn’t married to Mara, he’s married to the Lady Lusina.”

Nova grimaced. “That may be true, but things aren’t always so simple.”

Catyana shook her head. “I’ve heard of such things, but I don’t know if I can understand it. I...think I’ll need some time to process it all.”

“I know. Just take all the time you need, dearest. There’s no rush.”

Catyana looked into Nova’s eyes, searching. “You seem so calm about it. I suppose you see things like this all the time.”

“Not all the time, no. But I’m certainly more familiar with such situations than I’d like to be.”

Suddenly, Catyana’s hands shot up to her mouth. “Oh, no! Soshia was a princess?”

“She was.”

Catyana flung up her hands. “I can’t believe I’ve been such an idiot!”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I should have known something like that was going on. Soshia always seemed so well informed, and so well educated. Much more so than a domestic servant had any right to be. Even the way she moved seemed so...elegant.”

“You’re right. Besides being a very bright and spirited girl, she was all that.”

“So, she wasn’t from House Rotasen?”

“No, and just so you know, Mara’s House isn’t Cemasena, either. It’s Novesta. She’s Lord and Lady Novesta’s eldest daughter.”

Catyana stared at her. “Mara is a princess, too?”

“And as the eldest, she’s the heir apparent to the office of Head of State, just as Soshia would have been.”

Catyana looked dazed. “I...don’t know what to say.”

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“It is a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I can digest it all. My head feels like it’s going to explode.”

“Do you have room for a bit more?”

“Oh, no, there’s more?”

“Much more, but I promise I’ll only burden you with what you need to know right now.”

Catyana took a deep breath. “Alright, I’ll try.”

Nova took her friend’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “It’s important for you to know that Lady Novesta and Lady Marusen are sisters.”

“I...didn’t know that.”

“Neither does anyone else, except their coven sisters.”

“Lady Marusen and Lady Novesta are enchantresses, too?” Catyana sighed. “I don’t think anything will surprise me after this.”

“Yes, well, the thing is that Mara and Soshia broke away from their coven and have been on the run for more than twenty years.”

“No wonder they were always so secretive. They’re fugitives! I wish I had known. Maybe I could have done something for them.”

“You did. You befriended them.”

Catyana nodded. “Thank you, Nova. I’m so glad you told me. You know, I somehow couldn’t imagine Mara and Soshia being enchantresses. Enchantresses have such a notorious reputation, and Mara and Soshia are so nice. I mean, Soshia...was...nice. I still can’t believe she’s gone.”

“Well, yes, it’s true that enchantresses seem to have a reputation for being notoriously evil. Personally, I think it’s more of a cliché. But from the little Mara told me, Soshia’s stepmother really does seem to fit the stereotype of an enchantress who is evil to the core. And that’s the problem, Catyana. Soshia’s stepmother killed her.”

Catyana gasped and her hand shot up to her mouth. “Lady Marusen? No! Why?”

“It seems Lady Marusen regarded both Soshia and Mara as traitors for running away from their coven, and she wanted them both dead.”

“Oh, no! So she killed Soshia? How did Mara survive?”

“It was more an act of desperation. She used her powers to blow up the building they were in. The blast threw Lady Marusen clear over to the neighboring structure. It seems she hadn’t realized

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Mara had unlocked the power of a ruby, but I'm surprised she was able to walk away. She was thrown quite a distance."

"Natilya and Tanola told me about rubies. Enchantresses usually use amethysts, right?"

"Yes, because they're the easiest to focus with. Mara called amethysts class one gemstones. After amethysts come emeralds, then rubies, sapphires, and finally diamonds, which are class five. But Mara said she doesn't know of anyone who has been able to unlock anything more difficult than a class three gem. And it seems, besides her, only one other enchantress was ever able to unlock a ruby."

"Well, good for Mara! And if I ever see that Lusina, I'm going to tell her exactly what I think of her."

"You will do nothing of the sort, Catyana!" The words emerged with much more force than she had intended. But she knew Catyana, and the thought of her confronting Lusina Marusen scared her to death.

Catyana stared at her, seemingly shocked at the tone of her voice.

Nova sighed and took both of Catyana's hands in her own. "Please, listen to me, Catyana. This is going to be difficult for you to hear, but not only is Lusina Marusen a powerful and ruthless enchantress, she also told Mara she was coming after you next."

Catyana stared at Nova and her face went pale. "After me! But...Nova...why?"

"Because of your abilities. Do you remember what happened to Soshia when you transformed the artifact?"

"Of...of course."

"Well, it seems enchantresses can sense when you use your gifts. Whenever you use your inductive influence, it impacts the ethereal currents around us and makes it difficult for enchantresses to access their manasic powers, which rely on those currents. When you changed the artifact so close to Soshia the other day, it must have felt as if you were draining the life from her. That's what it feels like to other enchantresses, although Soshia seemed to be particularly sensitive."

"Nova!" Catyana just kept staring at her.

"I'm sorry I had to be so blunt, but you really needed to know."

Catyana shot Nova a bitter glance. "Well, I certainly do now, and I doubt I'll ever forget it."

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“Good. It’s also the reason I want you to be more careful when you use your abilities. Remember, every time you use them, the enchantresses will know.”

“Will it hurt them as badly as it hurt Soshia?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“In that case, I might want to use my abilities more often.”

“Catyana!”

“If they’re all as evil as Lady Marusen, they deserve it. How could she kill her own—?”

There was a loud thump, and Nova heard Catyana shriek, but she was too shocked to consciously process it. All she could do was stare at the pitch-black arrow that had drilled itself into the carriage’s back exactly between her and Catyana’s heads.

2. Reconnaissance

Vordalin set down his field glasses. Below him, the Lady Divestelan’s residence overlooked a picturesque little mountain lake. The surrounding conifer woods were reflected in its clear, blue waters, adding a certain charm to the serene picture. But this romantic haven seemed to be the only part of the once-scenic Etenolyas Valley the Lady was able to rescue, for beyond the woods, the innocence of the beautiful forest had been savagely violated.

The camp was enormous. Spread across the entire alpine plateau, it had undoubtedly harbored the immense army now leaving the valley. Vordalin had been High Priest for the past twelve years, and a priest for eleven years before that, and he had seen some hideous things during his incumbency. But in all that time, he had never encountered such devastation.

If he closed his eyes, he could imagine the aromatic scent the magnificent conifers emanated at night when Vilatanas shone down on them. In his mind, he heard streams rushing down from the surrounding summits, splashing and sparkling in the sunlight.

But the trees had been felled without distinction and their wooden carcasses abused as fortifications. The streams had been wrenched from their courses and now flowed with murky waters. Meadows, once lush and green, had been trampled into grotesque fields of mud. Vordalin’s heart bled for the ruined beauty that lay before him.

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Here and there, small groups of trees persevered like isles of sorrow in a sea of ruin. Some of them still stood bravely, guarding the hedges that lined the streams. Near the southwest end of the vale, a segment of the forest had somehow managed to survive and cautiously enfolded the rivulet flowing through the valley and into the lake.

Vordalin felt cold fury as he watched the last troops in their dark brown, black, and gold uniforms march into the pass leading down to Catanin and Divestelan. In a few minutes, only maintenance personnel would remain in the deserted camp.

He finally knew why so many young men in the western provinces had disappeared. They hadn't been recruited into the guard, as everyone assumed. They had been drafted into this horrendous army. Vordalin counted at least fifty battalions of roughly a thousand men each.

And now they were on the move. The first two battalions were mounted and consisted of members of the Black Guard. After Corsen's elite legions, the remaining troops poured into the pass like a deadly swarm of insects.

He took up his field glasses and scrutinized the mountainside. He would have a better view of the area from the Lady Divestelan's residence. Getting down there would be dangerous, but he needed to find her.

The quaint three-story villa was hewn directly out of the southern slope of the mountain. The location was sunny since the valley ran northeast to southwest. The main entrance faced the lake on the ground level. The terrace and pergola were on the second floor. The third floor boasted a walk-around balcony and a sun deck on the roof. Elegant columns and arches adorned the villa, and when seen from a distance, the sculptured stone glowed in the sun's rays, transforming the residence into a dreamlike abode.

Just above the terrace, an outcrop of the mountain had been cut back and formed an overhanging ledge approximately twice Vordalin's height. That was where he would gain entrance.

He stashed his glasses away and began the descent. His technique required iron discipline but left few tracks an enemy could trace. He edged forward using only his toes and fingertips. Not once did he allow the rest of his body to touch the ground, bend a blade of grass, or disturb any branches. The slightest flicker of leaves in the sunlight might be observed from below.

On reconnaissance missions like this, he was grateful for the many years he had spent in the wilderness with the famous mountaineer and tracker Renestal Bevelas. Together, they had hiked

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through the majestic Tyenar Mountains, dared the moors of the Chyenesar, and even risked the forests of the Navaren. Renestal had often drilled him to the point of exhaustion during those treks. But Vordalin never regretted the ruthless training, and his skills had proven invaluable when he became High Priest.

It took him half an hour to reach the ledge. After observing the movements of the two Black Guards, one posted at each end of the terrace, he dropped down as close to the northeast corner of the building as possible, breaking his fall with the resilience of a feline predator. He had timed the guards' movements perfectly, for an instant later one of them came around the corner. Vordalin sensed the guard's surprise. But he had his back to the man and was wearing a black cloak. The guard must have mistaken him for a colleague.

"What are you doing here, my brother?" the guard asked. "Shouldn't you be patrolling the west end?" Vordalin heard caution in the man's voice, and his approaching footsteps sounded hesitant. The man stopped and Vordalin heard him grasp the hilt of his sword. "Identify yourself! Who—?"

Vordalin's sword flashed in the sun as his blade swept across the man's neck. The guard dropped to the ground with wide eyes, holding his throat.

It wasn't the first time Vordalin had killed someone. On their wanderings, he and Renestal had come across individuals in remote areas who preferred to employ their swords rather than their tongues. This had become ever more frequent in the past years. He disliked the necessity of killing, but there was often no other way, for in many situations it was either kill or be killed.

Vordalin crept along the north wall until the sunlit terrace merged with the pergola, lending him shadow as cover. He hadn't quite reached the west end when the second guard came around the corner.

The guard flinched but caught himself immediately and whipped out his sword. "*Culen cores eli, nolad hites?* What are you doing here, blasted priest?"

It was just the situation Vordalin had hoped to avoid. Members of the Black Guard were known to be well trained, and this one was no exception.

The sound of clashing steel echoed from the rocks around them. The commotion would alert the other guards, so Vordalin had to dispatch this one quickly. Although the guard's instincts were excellent, he didn't have the benefit of a priest's trained perception. Vordalin sensed the guard's intent and countered his wards and thrusts effortlessly.

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The man became desperate and lunged. Vordalin stepped aside, instinctively analyzing the contact pressure of his opponent's weapon as he sought an opening. His counterattack was sudden and vicious.

The guard lapsed. Vordalin cut in from above and slashed through the guard's uniform. Just in time, because he had to spin around to face three more guards who were racing toward him, brandishing their weapons.

Vordalin ducked the first guard, brought his sword up into the second guard's attack, and sliced through the third guard as the latter attempted a thrust from above. The guard fell, blocking his comrades' line of attack. Vordalin took advantage of the situation by sidestepping, so the second guard stood between him and the first. A quickly parried thrust and swiping cut promptly dispatched his opponent.

Vordalin stayed low, dashing around the two fallen guards. He brought his sword up, cutting through the last guard's defense from below. His sword made one final, satisfying swish as he swung it through the air, signifying the movement had been perfectly timed and executed. The sound was cut short as the weapon found its target. Then there was silence.

Vordalin kept his eyes closed. From the camp below he heard shouts. He turned to the door on his right, through which the three guards had come, and entered the building.

He sensed the woman's presence before he saw her. She had her hands over her mouth and stared at Vordalin's bloodied sword. Her light, elegant gown flowed to the floor, accentuating her slender figure. Her skin was fair and smooth, not the darker complexion native to the Northern Covasins. She had braided her black hair in the style customary of House Bevelas.

"Vordalin!"

"Ilanya." The High Priest wiped his sword and returned it to its sheath. "I was hoping to find you here."

"Oh, Vordalin!" Ilanya threw herself into his arms. He caught her and felt her trembling as she sobbed into his cloak. "Please tell me you've come to take me away from this horrible place."

"My Lady, I'm sorry, but I don't believe this is appropriate." He nudged her in an attempt to liberate himself from her embrace.

Ilanya gasped and took a step back, her eyes wide. "Yes. Yes, of course. Pardon my outburst." She crossed her arms and wiped her eyes. Her hands dropped to her side, and she smoothed her

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gown as she studied the floor. She glanced up at Vordalin, then looked away and interlaced her fingers in front of her.

Vordalin watched her carefully. “We have weightier problems at the moment. I assume the camp has been alerted by the commotion. How many guards were assigned to the villa?”

Ilanya pressed her fingers against her temple and grimaced. “Six, although one left to report a while ago.”

“Do you know how many of the Black Guard remained in the valley?”

“I believe there’s one platoon of three squads left.”

“Thirty men—no, make that twenty-five. And soldiers?”

“Only enough to order the dismantling of the camp. They’ll leave as soon as everything has been taken care of, although I fear the valley will forever be deprived of its former beauty.”

They were interrupted by the clicking of military boots on the stairs and then on the hall tiling. An elderly colonel entered the room. “My Lady, where is your guard? We heard—” He stared at Vordalin. Then he dropped down on one knee and bowed his head. “Your Eminence, does your presence signify what we have all been hoping?”

“Please rise, Colonel. I’m sorry, but we never suspected Lord Divestelan of assembling such a vast army. I’m only here to assess the situation.”

The colonel stood and looked the priest in the eye. “Then may Anae have mercy on our souls.”

“Yes, but there is always hope. I certainly didn’t anticipate finding men in this place who are loyal to the Order.”

“There are more than you would believe, Your Eminence.”

Vordalin studied the man, sizing him up. “Good. Then we’ll at least attempt to salvage the situation here. What is your name?”

“Colonel Rayan Hevaros, and it’s an honor to be of service.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Are your men reliable?”

“If we can overpower the quartermaster, I can vouch for them all.”

“How many do you have under your command?”

“I was left with four companies of eight squads.”

“That’s roughly 320 men. How close is the Black Guard camped to your base?”

“Now that the brigades have left, they’ve pulled back to the end of the valley.”

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“Good. Is it possible they didn’t hear the commotion?”

“Possible, yes, but the echoes often allow sounds to travel far. Besides, the Black Guard is wary. I assume someone will be sent to investigate.”

“Alright, then we’ll need to act quickly. Is there any way I can get down to your camp without being seen?”

“Yes,” said Ilanya. “There’s a concealed exit at the side of the building. I sometimes use it to go down to the stream or the lake when I need some privacy and wish to escape the guards.” She snuck a quick glance in the colonel’s direction. “You should have a good view of the camp from there.”

Vordalin looked at the colonel with a raised eyebrow. Colonel Hevaros nodded. The High Priest set his jaw. “Signal your men from the terrace that everything’s in order. That may gain us the few minutes I need. Ilanya, would you please show me the exit?”

The colonel snapped to attention, slapped his left fist against his breast, and bowed in a crisp military salute, then turned and left the room.

Ilanya led Vordalin to the lower chambers. She guided him through several winding passages until they came to a door leading outside. Before he could leave, Ilanya took hold of his arm. “You won’t leave me here, will you? Please tell me you’re coming back.”

“Anae willing, I promise I’ll return for you.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes. Vordalin grit his teeth and tore himself away, slipping into the shrubs like a shadow. He rushed through the underbrush, his step so silent not even the animals took note of his passage.

When he reached the stream, he had an excellent view of the camp. Reading the tracks around him like a book, he could tell Ilanya had rested on a tree stump only a few hours before, probably watching the soldiers as they prepared to leave. He observed activities in the camp for a while and saw the colonel returning from the villa.

Vordalin was a good judge of character and knew he could rely on the officer, so he hastened upstream, using the thick hedges as cover. He was just in time, because a member of the Black Guard came strutting down the path toward the camp. As Vordalin watched him, a cold smile touched his lips. If this man’s attitude was any indication, the Black Guard’s arrogance would be their downfall.

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He caught a glimpse of the Black Guard's base but followed the lone guard through the underbrush until both camps were out of sight. Then he closed the distance to his enemy with a soundless leap across the stream. Vordalin didn't draw his sword, since the noise might have alerted his opponent, but grabbed the man by the collar from behind and wrenched him back. A swift blow with the edge of his hand crushed the man's windpipe so he couldn't shout. As the guard held his throat, Vordalin dragged him into the bushes, where he unsheathed his sword and ran him through.

After ensuring the body was hidden and no blood could trickle down onto the path, he took to the underbrush and stole back to the soldiers' camp. Colonel Hevaros was conferring with his men. There was some commotion, but the colonel knew how to keep discipline. Another officer, presumably the quartermaster, lay unconscious near a tent, bound and gagged.

Vordalin stepped out of the bushes. The colonel saw him and pointed in his direction. His men turned. As Vordalin strode into their midst, the company fell silent. At first, they just stared at his robe and the gold-bordered platinum brooch adorning his chest. Then one of the older officers dropped down on one knee. "Your Eminence." The other soldiers followed suit and bent their knees.

Vordalin raised a hand for silence. "I thank you for your kind greeting, my friends. Please rise, for there is much to do and we have little time."

The soldiers obeyed, and the colonel stepped forward. "We must make haste, Your Eminence, for one of the Black Guard will arrive shortly."

"No, I've already taken care of him."

Vordalin heard astonished murmurs.

The colonel looked around, the smug expression on his face declaring, *I told you so*. "We've been led to believe the Black Guard is invincible. If that's true, how do you explain that our High Priest dispatched six of them without assistance?"

There were more whispers, and the soldiers nodded.

Vordalin set his face, knowing his grim expression would command silence. "*Desar*, unless there's more need of persuasion, we must get to work. The Black Guard will presumably mobilize their remaining squads when their comrade doesn't report back. We'll transfer to a position upstream where neither camp is visible and set up on both sides of the path. Although there are only twenty-four of them to more than three hundred of us, I doubt they'll surrender, so we'll have

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to neutralize every last one of them. I warn you: Do not attack them one on one. Keep each guard surrounded by ten men. They may be excellent fighters, but they're only human and can't ward off so many swords at once. As soon as your assigned target has been neutralized, assist your comrades if necessary, but don't crowd one another or you won't have enough room to maneuver. This battle must be over as quickly as possible." He turned to the colonel. "You're in command of your men. I'll watch the enemy's movements from upstream. When you hear my battle cry, attack."

The colonel nodded, and Vordalin disappeared into the underbrush. He quickly reached the Black Guard's camp. They were alert and preparing to move out. His scrutiny of their well-organized actions made him pensive. He turned his ear in the other direction, but couldn't hear a sound of the colonel's preparations.

Vordalin tightened his lips. Colonel Hevaros seemed as efficient as he had assessed him to be. But Vordalin determined never to take such a risk again when so many lives were at stake. Hereafter, he would have to be sure of the men he was dealing with.

He monitored the Black Guard's activities for another minute, then stole back to the soldiers who were getting in position beneath the trees on both sides of the path. Their preparations were adequate, but they were tense. None of them had ever been in an actual combat situation. He prayed with those who wished it, but he didn't have much time. When he had encouraged the men as well as he could, he rushed upstream.

The stakeout he had chosen wasn't far from their ambush and gave him a clear view of the trail ahead. As soon as he had settled in, he closed his eyes and began to regulate his breathing. Then he reached out with his mind. His surroundings drifted into focus and he let himself merge with them. In this altered state of consciousness, there was nothing but the water gurgling in the clear stream, the birds chirping in the trees, and the wind whispering through the branches as he waited for the enemy to approach.

3. The Black Arrow

The monotonous rumble of the carriage seemed to produce the appropriate ambience to Vilam's musings as he watched the buildings drift by. If the structures hadn't been so fascinating, he might even have given in and closed his eyes for a bit. But the young Lord Tolares had told them they

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would reach the residence in half an hour, and that had been ten minutes ago, so he figured he might as well enjoy the sight of the shops and houses sprouting up all around him.

A sudden shriek from the back of the carriage jolted him out of his reverie. Vodana and Vilam exchanged a shocked glance.

“That’s Catyana!” He vaulted over the carriage door and dashed around the side. His jaw dropped when he saw a black arrow sticking out of the carriage’s back between the two girls’ heads. Without thinking, he grabbed Nova and Catyana, wrenched them from their seat and to the ground, and threw himself over them as protection. The carriage traveled on for a few more seconds, but the Lady Utalya must have told the driver to stop. He saw her and Vodana come around the carriage’s side, but they froze when they saw the arrow.

“Get down!” he shouted.

“Vilam, it’s alright,” said Nova from below him. “I don’t think we’re in any immediate danger.” He lifted his arm so she could get her face out of the road. She propped herself up on her forearm and looked at him. Their faces were just fingerbreadths apart from each other. “I appreciate your attempt to protect us,” said Nova in a low voice, “but may I please get up?”

“Are you sure you’re not in any danger?”

“Let’s find out.” She rose and brushed herself off. Catyana did the same.

Vilam scrambled to his feet and regarded the arrow, then he looked in the direction from where it must have come. “The arrow came from the right, or south side of the road. From the angle, the marksman wasn’t very high up. But it could have come from any of the five buildings behind us, depending on the archer’s skill.”

“I agree,” said Nova, looking in the same direction. She turned back to the arrow and studied the engravings on her side of the shaft.

Vilam dashed around the carriage and grabbed the Prophet’s Bow and quiver from under his seat. He was back in no time and had strung up an arrow while keeping a spare in his right hand. Nova was standing between him and the black arrow, so he aligned himself as best he could and gauged the angle to get a better sense of the direction it had come from.

Nova turned to him, but her eyes opened wide in shock. “Vilam, no! Lower your weapon this instant!”

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He was on the verge of complying when he saw a flicker. “There, look! There’s movement in that window. Just a shadow, but—Damn it!” He released his arrow.

Nova flung up her arms. “Vilam!”

“Whoever it was fired another arrow. Ladies, find cover! Get behind the carriage!” He raced off toward the building, hoping they were smart enough to follow his instructions.

Most people on the road had, in the meantime, stopped to see what was going on. Many of them stared at the bow as he flew by, and he was certain he could hear variations of *Covatal* and *Emissary* as he passed them. He shook his head. Had the news of what he had done in Folan’s tavern the evening before last already reached Tolares? It must have, the way everyone was staring.

The building loomed up before him. It wasn’t very tall, only three stories, and the shadow had been behind a second-floor window just left of the entrance. He rushed inside and up the stairs to the second floor, taking three steps with each bound. At the top, he dashed to the front of the building and pushed open the last door on his right. The window was still open, but nobody was in sight. He looked out the window, then behind him to see where his arrow might have gone.

“Whoa!” he said, staring at it with his mouth agape. His silver arrow was stuck in the wall across from the door, but close to the back wall facing the window. The arrow had sliced into the longbow arrow, but seemingly at a slight angle so his arrowhead had wedged itself into the center of the shaft and pinned the longbow arrow to the wall.

When had he become such a good shot? Of course, he had always been able to hit arrows that were already stuck in a target, splitting them down the middle. But he had never split an arrow coming at him in mid-flight. Granted, there had never been an opportunity to test it, either. He leaned his bow against the wall in the corner and stepped toward his arrow for a closer examination. The quality of the longbow arrow had to be excellent, since it hadn’t shattered when his silver three-bladed arrowhead had penetrated the shaft, but had split around it instead.

Nova rushed into the room with Catyana behind her. They both stared at Vilam’s arrow protruding from the wall. “Oh!” said Nova, shooting him an astonished glance.

“Didn’t I tell you to find cover?” said Vilam, feeling his eyebrows draw together.

Nova lifted her chin, and her eyes narrowed just a fraction. “And I told you, it’s not necessary.”

“You don’t know who or where this archer is. If they had seen you outside, you would have been an easy target.”

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“No, I don’t think so,” said Nova. “As a matter of fact, I’m certain you were the only one who was in any real danger.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We’ll discuss it later.” She approached the wall. “Vilam, how in Anae’s name did you do that?”

“I’m actually surprised myself. But like I said, the Prophet’s Bow does feel good in my hands.”

Nova shook her head but closed her eyes and seemed to be scanning the longbow arrow. Her eyes popped open. “Oh, there’s blood! You grazed the archer.”

Vilam scratched his head. “Huh! I...didn’t expect that.”

Catyana was looking around at the furnishings and decorations and entered the next room. She was only a few steps in when she gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. “No!” she cried.

Vilam and Nova rushed to her side. An elderly couple, a man and a woman, were lying on the floor. Their throats had been slit, the beige-colored carpet beneath them was stained with their blood, and there was blood splatter on the walls. Vilam moved closer and crouched beside the bodies. Much of the blood on the carpet and near the wounds had already clotted and dried.

“I’m sorry, but these people have been dead for hours,” he said. “From the wounds and the positions of the bodies, it seems the couple tried to escape and forced the perpetrator’s hand.”

“Catyana?” said Nova, regarding her with a questioning gaze. Catyana nodded. She was very pale, but she walked over to the couple. She was going to stretch out her hands when Nova rushed forward and stopped her. “No, Catyana, what was I thinking? I traumatized you enough when I asked you to scan Soshia the other night. Let me do it.”

Catyana nodded and stepped back. Nova stretched her hands out over the couple and let them glimmer for a few seconds but quickly dropped them again. She sighed. “You’re right, Vilam, they’ve been dead for hours. They were so frightened. They tried to make a break for it, but they didn’t get far. I’m afraid I can’t get through to whoever did this. I sense a similar shielding as I did from the boy on the road the other day.”

“This was done by an enchantress?” said Vilam.

Nova shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t understand—Catyana, no! What are you doing?”

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Catyana had approached the couple again and stretched out her hands. She regarded Nova with a weak smile. “I have the feeling I’m going to have to get used to things like this, so I might as well start now and make myself useful.”

“Oh, Catyana.” Nova put her hand on Catyana’s back and stroked up and down as Catyana concentrated on the couple on the floor. She didn’t drop her hands for at least ten seconds.

“I sense what you sensed, Nova,” said Catyana when she opened her eyes. “But I also sensed something from whoever did this.”

“Any remorse?” said Nova.

Catyana shook her head. “I don’t know. More sadness than remorse, maybe? It’s strange. And they were angry and annoyed with themselves, probably for not realizing the couple was trying to escape and...and because they had to do this.” She gestured to the couple.

“No remorse, but they were annoyed. Wonderful.”

“I didn’t say there was no remorse. I can’t quite define it. But they were also...disgusted.”

“Disgusted?” said Nova. “With the couple?”

“No, with themselves. I get the distinct sense they didn’t like...” Catyana grimaced. “...didn’t like making a mess.”

Nova gaped at her. “Making a mess?” Her shoulders sagged and she sighed. “*A’mada*, I think I’ve seen enough. Let’s go back to the arrow in the wall.”

When they entered the front room, people were in the hall, peering inside. “This is official business of the Selanian Order,” called Nova. “Please remain outside.” She approached the door. “Would someone please inform the nearest constable?” Vilam saw a man nod and rush in the direction of the stairs. “Does anyone know the couple who lives here?”

A woman nodded. “Zirsha and Talonis. They’re my neighbors.”

“I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid I must inform you that they’re dead,” said Nova.

The woman gasped. “Oh, no! What happened?”

“That’s what we’re attempting to discover. When did you last see them?”

“Last night. They often go to the market together in the evening. I saw them when they came home.”

“But not after that?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

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“Did you see anyone else coming in or out of this apartment?”

“No, no one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I saw their maid. She came in once this afternoon, but I only saw her entering the apartment from afar. Oh, here she is now.”

The maid slowed as she approached, looking at the many people in confusion. Under her cloak, she was wearing the long, black skirt and the white blouse and apron customary for female domestic servants. She was noticeably younger than Nova, had her hair pinned up in a simple bun, and was carrying a pile of clothes. Her eyes darted from the one to the other. “What’s going on here?”

“Would you mind stepping inside for a moment?” said Nova.

The maid cast a cautious glance at Nova’s robes and obeyed. Once inside, she put the clothes on a commode and looked around. She froze when she saw the silver arrow with the longbow arrow pinned to the wall. “O-o-oh! What happened here?” She rushed over. “Oh, no, how am I supposed to get that thing out?” She flung up her arms. “Ugh!” Then she saw Vilam’s bow standing in the corner. She spun around, and her eyes seemed ablaze. “These walls aren’t here for target practice. Who’s responsible for this?”

Nova gave Vilam a glance and suppressed a smile. “I’m glad to see you take your vocation so seriously. Not everyone is quite so enthusiastic about their work.”

“Zirsha has always been kind to me, and Talonis is generous in regard to compensation. They deserve my best effort, and I enjoy helping them keep their lodgings in order.”

“If you don’t mind, may I ask where you were?” said Nova.

“I’ve been running errands all day and just came back from the garment cleaners in the Old Town. They do excellent work, and for a very reasonable fee. See?” She pointed to the clothes on the commode. “Washed, ironed, and dried in less than a day.”

“You’ve been running errands all day? A neighbor reported seeing you enter the apartment this afternoon.”

“That’s not true! Zirsha had me out all day. Ask her yourself.”

Vilam saw compassion in Nova’s gaze. “I sense you’re telling the truth.”

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“Of course I’m telling the truth! I would never lie.” She hesitated and her eyes narrowed. “Where’s Zirsha?” She dashed for the next room. “Zirsha?” Nova tried to grab her, but it was too late. The maid froze and a horrible shriek escaped her lips. Nova turned her away from the scene and brought her back into the front room. “Oh, Goddess, what happened to them?” Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

Vilam took a glance toward the door, where more people were trying to peer inside. Some of them were pale after the maid’s outcry, and most of them were whispering and murmuring.

Nova took a chair and let the maid sit down. “I really didn’t want you to see that.”

“What happened to them?” the maid wailed.

“What’s your name, honey?”

“I...I’m Maridya.”

“I’m Nova, and these are my friends, Vilam and Catyana.” She took Vilam aside and said in a whisper, “I don’t sense any deceit in her whatsoever. She’s as straight as the arrow you shot into the wall.”

“That means the killer dressed herself up as a maid,” said Vilam, “and I think we can assume it’s a woman.”

Nova nodded just as Vodana and the Lady Utalya appeared at the door. Vilam saw the people outside make room for them so they could enter. “We thought we’d better come see what’s taking so long,” said the Lady. “And a constable is right behind us.”

The constable appeared at the door. “What is the meaning of this?” He hesitated when he saw the golden brooch on the Lady’s breast. “Official Order business?”

The Lady nodded. “I’m the Lady Utalya Revan.”

The people outside murmured again, and the constable’s eyes opened wide. “The Lady Utalya! Forgive me, Your Grace, I didn’t realize.” He bowed with his left fist on his heart. “I’m Constable Artanes Sormay, and I’m at your service.”

“Thank you, Constable, but perhaps it’s best if you speak with Nova, my chief of staff. She’s in charge here.” She gestured to Nova.

The constable bowed again and turned to Nova. “How may I be of service?”

“First, let’s close the door,” said Nova and shut the front door. “There, that’s better.”

“May I ask what the problem is?” said the constable.

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“Double homicide,” said Vilam.

“Homicide? I’m not quite familiar with that term, but if it means what I think it means, where are the bodies?”

“They’re in the next room,” said Nova, shooting a quizzical glance at Vilam. “But you may want to brace yourself. It’s a gruesome sight.”

The constable nodded and entered the adjoining room. While he stopped and stared, Nova whispered to Vilam, “Homicide?”

“Yes, uh...it’s a technical term in law enforcement where I’m from and means—”

“Murder, yes, I gathered as much,” said Nova. She sighed. “You keep saying, ‘where I’m from.’ I wish you could trust me enough to tell me where that is.”

“Maybe I will, someday.”

The constable had, in the meantime, disappeared in the direction of the bodies. The Lady and Vodana were going to follow, but Nova held them back. “Are you sure you want to see that?”

“Has Catyana seen it?” said Vodana.

“Yes, she has,” said Nova. “And so has the maid.” She gestured to Maridya, who was still weeping on her chair.

Vodana gave the maid a glance, then she looked Catyana up and down and put her hand on the girl’s arm. “Oh, sweetie, you do look awfully pale.” Turning to Nova, she said, “She’s a bit speechless, but she’s still standing, and she even seems to be doing better than the maid. I’m going in.”

Nova sighed and shrugged. “I know I can’t stop you once you’ve set your mind to something.”

Vodana rewarded her with a playful smile and entered the adjoining room with the Lady right behind her. But Vodana froze in her tracks, and the Lady almost ran into her. “*Tevas’an*,” whispered Vodana with wide eyes.

Nova stooped down to the maid. “Maridya, will you be alright for a moment?” Maridya looked up at her through her tears and nodded. Nova squeezed her arm in encouragement and joined her sister.

Vodana turned to Nova when her sister came up beside her. “How can you even look at this? Doesn’t it remind you of...?”

“Of course it does,” said Nova. “But I can’t allow such emotions to overwhelm me right now.”

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Vodana stared at her. “I admit, you’ve grown, Tinasa. But please, don’t let things like this make you cold and unfeeling.”

“I won’t.”

The Lady’s glance darted between the two sisters. “I...think I’ll sit this one out.” She turned and left the room.

Nova approached the constable. “I’m glad you’re here, Constable, and I’m more than happy to allow you to conduct your investigation. But two people have come to harm, and I’m afraid whoever did this also shot an arrow at the Lady Revan’s carriage, so the case will have to remain in our jurisdiction.”

The constable was pale as he looked up at her. “I understand. So this was an assassination attempt?”

“We’re not sure yet,” said Nova. “We’ll liaise with you after we’re done here. Which precinct are you from?”

“Southeast. But we all report to constabulary headquarters near the Selanian Order’s offices at least once a week. I could meet you there.”

“That’s very kind of you, but we’re going to be very busy these next few days. If I can’t come myself, I’ll ensure you’re contacted and kept abreast of the situation. We’ll be staying at His Excellency’s residence, so it’s not far.”

The constable nodded and continued looking at the bodies.

As Nova, Vodana, and Vilam returned to the front room, Vilam whispered, “Does he even know what he’s doing?”

“I doubt it,” said Nova, “but he can’t do much harm, so let’s allow him to keep busy. I’m grateful for every contact we have in the city.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Could you pull your arrow out of the wall?” said Nova.

Vilam nodded and reached down into the corner to take the rubber cloth from the bow. The arrow had traveled quite a distance and had also lost velocity after hitting the longbow arrow, so it wasn’t quite as difficult to remove as the one in Folan’s tavern. Even so, he was astonished at how deep it had penetrated. When he finally held it in his hand, he stared at it as he brought the arrows to Nova. “There does seem to be blood on the silver shaft,” he said.

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Nova took the arrow and closed her eyes. “Your arrow grazed her shoulder and the longbow arrow’s tip grazed her cheek as it swished by. I know because she was frustrated with herself and couldn’t shield her emotions. There’s blood here and here,” said Nova as she opened her eyes, pointing to the blood stains on the longbow’s arrowhead and shaft.

“So she wasn’t able to shield her emotions,” said Vilam, “like Mara with the dead stable boy in Nadil?”

“Vilam!” said Nova, as Vodana and the Lady exchanged a glance.

“Nova, what are you talking about?” said Catyana. “What does Mara have to do with Normas’s death?”

Nova fixed Vilam with a reproachful glance before responding. “I’m so sorry, dearest. I just haven’t gotten around to telling you yet. But please, let’s not talk about it here.” She nodded to Maridya, who was eyeing them.

Catyana nodded, but she didn’t seem happy.

Vilam studied her for a moment. Catyana usually wasn’t this quiet, and he hoped she would be alright. “I’m...really sorry, Nova,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly.” Nova turned to the maid. “Maridya, may I ask where you live?”

“I share a small lodging with my younger sister in the northwest district of town. It’s all we could afford.”

“I understand. What will you do for work?”

Maridya shrugged. “I’m sure Zirsha and Talonis would have given me a good reference, but they’re gone. I suppose I’ll find something somewhere else.”

“I’ve seen the work you’ve done here, Maridya. I’d be glad to give you a reference.”

She stared at Nova with wide eyes. “With a reference from the Lady Utalya Revan’s chief of staff, I’m sure I would have no difficulties finding new employment.”

“Then it’s done. Leave me your address, and I’ll ensure you receive the reference by tomorrow. But I need something from you in return.”

“Yes, of course. Anything.”

“Please don’t talk about what happened here. We’re still investigating, and it might be detrimental to our efforts if too many people know about it.”

“What about my sister?”

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“Do you trust her to keep this quiet?”

“Yes, absolutely. We’re not really much for gossip.”

“I know this has been traumatic for you, so it really would be good if you could talk to someone. I’m glad you have your sister. But I would appreciate it if you would keep this between yourselves.”

Maridya nodded. She got up and rummaged in a desk for a pencil and paper. When she had found the items, she wrote down her address and gave it to Nova. “Thank you. I can’t tell you what this means to me.”

“*Tezatal*. Do you mind if I ask you a few more questions?”

“No, of course not.”

“When was the last time you saw your employers?”

“This morning when I arrived for work.”

“What time was that?”

“They’re early risers, and Zirsha likes it when I get here betimes, so I arrived at ten o’clock.”

“Two whole hours before *setavelates*. That does seem early for a lodging of this size. What kind of impression did they make this morning?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did they act different than usual?”

“Well, now that you mention it, they did seem a bit reserved, and I thought Zirsha was pale. I remember hoping she wasn’t coming down with anything.”

“So Zirsha sent you on these errands. Did that seem odd to you?”

“Well, maybe not odd, but certainly different. She liked to keep me around, said I livened the place up. So when she sent me on errands, it was usually one at a time so I would be back between them.”

“Did she give you any reason for assigning so many tasks at once?”

“She mentioned something about wanting to get everything done before the conference. I didn’t know they were planning on going, but it seemed reasonable at the time.”

Nova sighed. “Thank you, Maridya, you’ve been a great help. I don’t think I have any more questions for you right now, but if I do, I’ll get in touch with you.” Nova squeezed the maid’s hands and opened the front door so she could leave. As soon as she was outside, people swarmed

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around her. Nova shot her a warning glance. The maid nodded. She pressed through the spectators without responding to their questions and headed for the stairs.

“Good girl,” said Nova as she closed the door. She and Vilam exchanged a glance, and Nova raised an eyebrow.

Vilam nodded. “I agree.”

“What do you agree?” said Catyana.

Vodana laughed. “What? Are you two reading each other’s minds now?”

Nova smiled. “It would seem that way, wouldn’t it? But I think it’s just that Vilam and I have similar thought processes, at least in regard to situations like this.”

“It’s true,” said Vilam. “Nova does seem to be a very rational person, and her thinking is quite analytical. Kind of like what you said on our way to the Faeren farm yesterday, Vodana.”

“I’m glad someone agrees with me for a change,” said Vodana with a chuckle. “But I’m with Catyana on this one. What are you two thinking?”

“Utalya, are you alright?” said Nova.

Everyone turned to the Lady, who was leaning against the wall with her eyes closed. She sighed. “I’m sorry, but seeing those two in there seems to have affected me more than I thought.”

“Why don’t you sit down?” said Nova. She took the Lady’s arm and led her to the chair Maridya had occupied earlier.

“Nova, I have to agree with what Vodana said in the other room,” said the Lady. “How do you do it? The instant I saw those bodies, the scene at Lake Satural twenty years ago popped into my head.”

Nova paled. “Please, not now. I’m trying to hold it together here, and you two really aren’t helping.”

Catyana wrapped her hands around Nova’s arm. “I’m so sorry, Nova. I know that’s a difficult subject for you, so let me change it. Please, tell me what Mara has to do with Normas’s death. Maridya is gone now, and I don’t think the constable can hear us, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Nova sighed. “Alright. Normas was carrying a report to the Videsian Order in Vetena describing how you healed the little girl the other day, the one who had fallen from the swing in the park. Mara knew if the letter reached her brother, it would put you in grave danger, so she tried to entice

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Normas to give her the report. What happened instead was that Normas tried to violate her. Believe me, Catyana, she didn't mean to kill him, but he didn't leave her much choice."

Catyana stared at her in shock. "Oh, Nova, that's horrible! Poor Mara!" She dropped her gaze. A bit quieter, she said, "Mara did that for me?" There were tears in her eyes. One of them slid down her cheek and she wiped it away. "Why would she do that?"

Nova squeezed her hand. "Wouldn't you do the same for her if you could?" Catyana cast a helpless glance at her and drew in a quavering breath, so Nova gave her a hug.

Vodana regarded them with a sympathetic look. "I'd still be interested in knowing what it is you and Vilam agree upon."

Nova took a deep breath. "Yes, well, it seems Vilam and I both believe the couple had already been compromised when Maridya arrived this morning. They were probably told to get rid of the girl for the rest of the day, and I assume they were killed shortly thereafter." She shot Vilam a glance, who nodded.

"So this person, whoever it was, must have known we were coming," said Vodana.

"Yes, I'm sure she did," said Nova. "She was holed up in here all day, waiting for us. If Maridya had arrived any sooner than she did this afternoon, I'm certain there would have been a third casualty."

"This is all so horrible, and I just don't understand," said Catyana, wiping a tear away. "Why did she kill Zirsha and Talonis? And why would she have killed Maridya?"

"I assume they would have been able to identify her," said Vilam. "and she couldn't allow that. If Maridya had seen her, she would have suffered the same fate."

"Yes, but...why? What did she want?" said Catyana.

"I think it's time we returned to the carriage," said Nova. "That's where we'll find our answer."

"Well, one thing's for sure," said Vilam. "This operation was expertly planned and executed, so the girl must have been well trained."

"I agree," said Nova. "Let me finish up with the constable so we can leave." She walked into the next room and Vilam heard her and the constable talking. He used the opportunity to retrieve his bow. Nova returned a minute later, took Catyana's hand, and opened the front door.

Several people stepped back, looking embarrassed. They must have been trying to listen through the door.

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Nova glared at them. “I don’t know what you think you heard, but if I hear even a rumor on the streets about what happened here, I’m coming after each and every one of you.” She pulled Catyana through the crowd, which parted before her to let them all through. Vilam couldn’t help grinning at her resolute manner.

It didn’t take them long to reach their carriage. Nova immediately went up to the black arrow sticking out of the carriage’s back.

“I don’t understand how you can be so unconcerned about this,” said Vilam. “That arrow sure seems to spell danger to me.”

“I never said I’m not concerned,” said Nova. “And we’re definitely in danger, just not right now.”

“How do you know?” said Vilam.

“Because I’ve seen such arrows before. The girl who made it is an assassin of the Order of the Novantan. This arrow is a proclamation of intent, nothing more.”

“Ah, the Order of the Novantan,” said Vilam.

Nova targeted him with a sharp glance. “You’ve heard of them?”

“I have. But where I’m from, they’re more than just assassins.”

“I can’t do very much with that information, Vilam.” She moved around to the arrow’s other side. “But look, here are the five petals, the symbol of the Black Novantan, carved into the arrow’s shaft, and here’s the name of the tar—Oh, no.”

“What is it?” said Vilam.

Nova pointed at the arrow’s shaft. Vilam took a closer look and immediately knew what Nova meant.

“What’s going on, Nova?” said the Lady.

“Yes, Nova, what is going on?” said Catyana.

“I’m so sorry, Catyana, but it’s your name on the arrow,” said Nova.

“My name!” Catyana stared at her.

“Yes, dearest, I’m afraid it is.” Catyana put her hand on her heart and stumbled backward, but Nova immediately took hold of her. “I’m so sorry, honey. I thought it would be best if I just told you.”

Catyana nodded, but she was very pale.

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“This is Lusina’s work, isn’t it?” said Vodana, with a dark and angry look in her eyes.

“I’m fairly sure it is,” said Nova, with one arm around Catyana.

“But how could we ever prove it?” said Vodana.

“We can’t, and she knows it. From what I’ve heard, assassins of the Order of the Novantan take an oath never to betray the names of their contractors, and they never quit once the contract has been accepted. The only way to stop the assassin is to eliminate them, permanently, or they’ll just keep coming.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about it,” said Vilam.

“More than I would like, actually,” said Nova, “but I’m afraid not as much as I really need to.”

“I thought you had peace here in the eastern provinces.”

“We do. All the cases I’ve heard of happened in the western provinces.”

“Ah, I see.”

“But, like I said, this was just a message, Vilam. I’m fairly certain she would never have fired a second arrow if she hadn’t seen you aiming at her.”

“Oh.” He gaped at her. “So you’re saying her second arrow was just self-defense.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying.”

“So, throwing you into the street and telling you all to take cover...”

“Was completely unnecessary.”

Vilam stared at her for a moment longer. “I’m very sorry. It seems my actions were a bit hasty.”

Nova managed a smile. “As I said earlier, I did appreciate that you were trying to protect us. But I wish you would have trusted me and listened instead of rushing headlong into the situation. This time, the only consequences were a few scrapes and a bit of dust on our robes. Next time, we might not be as fortunate. Now, would you be so kind and please remove the arrow from the carriage?”

Vilam shot her a self-conscious glance before taking the rubber cloth from the riser and handing the Prophet’s Bow to Nova. Then he used the cloth to twist the arrow out of the wood. “Longbow,” he said, examining the arrow.

“Yes, that’s their preferred weapon for long range kills,” said Nova, handing the bow back to him.

“This is all my fault, isn’t it?” said Catyana. “That Normas, Zirsha, and Talonis are dead.”

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“Oh, honey, no,” said Nova, rubbing Catyana’s back. “Don’t ever think that.”

“But they’d still be alive if it wasn’t for me,” said Catyana.

“Did you force Normas to attack Mara, or contract the assassin who slit Zirsha and Talonis’s throats?”

Catyana just looked at her. Finally, she sighed. “What does this mean for me?”

“It means we’re going to find this assassin and stop her,” said Nova. “Are you frightened, dearest?”

“It’s strange,” said Catyana with an absent look on her face. “I am afraid. Very afraid, even. But not of the assassin.”

Nova fixed her with an odd glance, but she nodded. “I’m glad you’re being so brave.”

“I’m not,” said Catyana. “Believe me. But there are things that scare me more.” She exhaled. “Maybe it’s because I don’t know what that really means, being targeted by an assassin.”

“Maybe,” said Nova, but she regarded her with a sidelong gaze.

“You’re not getting on the back seat again, are you?” said Vilam.

“No, I think it’s best we join you up front, and we’re putting the top back up.”

“I agree,” said the Lady. She immediately went to talk to the coachman.

As the coachman got to work, Nova stretched out her hand. “Could I please examine the arrow?” she said to Vilam.

“Of course,” he said, handing it to her.

Nova held the arrow horizontally in the palms of her hands and closed her eyes, but she quickly opened them again with a puzzled expression. “That...was strange.”

“Why? What did you sense?” said Vilam.

“Well, she’s definitely shielded herself.”

“Really?” said Vodana. “So you think it might be another enchantress?”

“Possibly,” said Nova. “Or maybe assassins are in league with enchantresses and are trained by them.”

“May I?” said Catyana.

Nova nodded and handed her the arrow, but Vilam noticed the scrutiny with which she observed her friend.

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Catyana closed her eyes, but they popped open again almost immediately. “Oh!” Her mouth remained open. “I...don’t understand.”

Vilam saw that Nova’s lips were pursed. She didn’t seem at all surprised at Catyana’s reaction. “What is it, dearest?”

“Well, I...don’t sense any hatred or anger.” Catyana’s voice was cautious, and her brow was in folds.

“I doubt an assassin would feel any hatred or anger toward you,” said Nova. “They’re just doing their job. But this is...quite the opposite, isn’t it?”

Catyana exhaled. “Yes, it’s almost as if this assassin were...”

“In love?” said Nova.

Catyana just stared at her, but she finally nodded. She looked at the arrow again, turning it over in her hands. “So much effort went into this arrow. Look at the precision of the carving that makes up my name. Whoever this person is, I believe she put her heart and her soul into it.”

“I think it’s part of a ritual,” said Nova. “There’s a reason why the Order of the Novantan is called an order, although I know nothing about their beliefs. I must admit, such a ritual would certainly help the assassin focus on her objective. But, just to be clear, you’re getting a female impression from the arrow?”

“Oh, yes, definitely female,” said Catyana. “But...how is that possible?”

“There are many forms of love, however misguided some of them they may be.” Nova sighed. “I’ll wrap the arrow in cloth to keep it safe. I’m sure we’ll need it again. But let’s get back in the carriage. We’re already late, and there are too many people watching.”

Vilam had to agree. They had attracted quite a group of spectators. The ladies returned to the coach and got in. The carriage was still much too exposed for Vilam’s taste, but at least they now had a certain amount of protection from the front, back, and top. Nova and Catyana took the seats facing the back, as they had when they left Nadil that morning, leaving Vilam, Vodana, and the Lady facing forward toward them.

The carriage started rolling, and a few minutes later, they passed the sign informing them that they were entering the City of Tolares. Several minutes after that, they took a left onto another broad road. But Vilam was already lost in thought, mulling over what had just happened, and hardly realized they were now heading south.

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4. Code of Honor

Nemara stood in the middle of the crowd with her arms crossed as she watched the Lady Utalya's carriage leave. They had passed right by her and never noticed. Of course, she had trained long and hard to remain invisible, and the simple, patched work dress and dark cloak she was wearing helped her do exactly that.

The encounter had been more than she ever could have hoped for. And the contract had been on such short notice, too. Although, when she had seen who had issued it, she had almost refused.

Nemara had been present at Lusina's birth, and at the births of Lusina's sisters, and had been the girls' nursemaid for years. Tragically, the Lady Marusen who had put out the contract bore little resemblance to the sensitive young maiden Nemara had helped through her trials, and some of the things Lusina had done in the past decades were unforgivable. But despite what she thought of the woman Lusina had become, Nemara was aware of her duty to her Order and her faith, and after an hour of struggling with the decision, she had finally accepted the contract and returned the appropriate response.

The request had reached her in the early hours of the morning, informing her that her target would probably be arriving in Tolares sometime in the afternoon today. That didn't leave her much time to prepare. On the other hand, she enjoyed a challenge, and to achieve an objective in such a short time was part of the attraction. She had therefore performed the preparatory ritual and engraved the girl's name in her mind and in her heart, just as she had engraved it on the arrow's shaft, and on the hilt of the stiletto with which she would eventually kill her. But nothing could have prepared her for the first sight of her target, and when the carriage rolled by beneath her window and the girl came into view, her heart skipped a beat.

"Oh, Catyana," she whispered to herself. "Such beautiful golden hair, and those luscious curves. Great Goddess! Do you have any idea how breathtaking you are?"

But that wasn't what caused Nemara to pause. Yes, Catyana might be gorgeous, even to the point of being stunning. But the instant Nemara saw her, she experienced something she hadn't felt in a long time: a surge of such hope it sent shivers through her body.

What did this mean? Could Catyana be the one? She had to find out! Fortunately, Nemara alone had the contract, meaning nobody would dare lay so much as a finger on her target, under punishment of death. Nemara could take as much time as she needed to figure things out.

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It had really been touch and go there for a moment. She got off a clean shot and was pleased with her precision. The black arrow Nemara had prepared for Catyana with such devotion drilled itself into the carriage's back exactly where Nemara wanted it: between the heads of Elana's daughter Novantina and Nemara's golden-haired target. She heard Catyana shriek, and the sound of her voice sent a delicious chill down her spine; another indication there was more to the girl than she knew.

The supposed Emissary came dashing around the carriage and wrenched the two women to the ground, which only made Nemara shake her head. She could have easily picked them off right then and there, if that had been her objective. But the tenets of her Order—an assassin's code of honor—required the first step to be a proclamation of intent, letting her target know their time had come so they could order their affairs and make peace with their fate. The sacred act of releasing the target's soul into the shadows would come later.

But it was rare indeed to find someone with the wisdom and integrity to accept the inevitable. Those were the kills she cherished and were usually quick and clean. She hoped with all her heart Catyana wouldn't disappoint her in that regard. If her target was running around in panic, screaming bloody murder, things tended to get messy, and Nemara hated to inflict unnecessary fear or pain. Such targets she often took out when they least expected it and felt safest, like in their sleep. Of course, even that could be utterly satisfying, feeling the blade slip between the ribs in just the right spot to penetrate the target's heart, and sending their soul into the night on black wings of prayer.

But then that dumbass of a man had to go get his silver Prophet's Bow and take aim. It had been pure instinct to take aim herself and get the shot off, only to have his arrow catch hers up and graze her left cheek and shoulder. Reeling away from the window and out of sight, she barely managed to suppress a frustrated growl.

How could she have been so careless? Remaining at the window to admire her work in full view for all to see? Had she finally taken leave of her senses and become as conceited as Lusina Marusen? Or maybe she was just too exhausted to think straight.

Nemara sighed and shook her head. Yes, of course she was tired, had been for years. But that was no excuse. She needed to be more careful. And what had happened to her arrow?

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She looked around, but then her jaw dropped and she stared. The man's arrow was stuck in the wall, claiming her own arrow as its prize. How had he done it? She had never seen anything like it in her life.

But her training quickly took over, restoring her to that calculating and dispassionate state she had worked so hard to achieve. When she glanced out the window, she saw the man was almost at the building. She snatched up her quiver and sped up the stairs to the next floor without making a sound. Just in time, because the man was already on the second floor. She waited a while longer, listening. The young Lady Satural dashed into the apartment with Catyana in tow. Nemara couldn't wait too long, or people would gather and she wouldn't be able to make her escape.

Another cry from her target informed her they had found the couple's bodies. Oh, that delightful tingle at the sound of Catyana's voice! With a quick glance, she ensured they were all in the adjoining room, so she glided down the stairs, silent as a mouse, and checked the back door. When Nemara was certain no one was watching, she flitted out the back and into the next building, where she descended into the basement.

Here she was fairly safe and could take her time. She opened the compartment under the stairs, which she had jimmed open earlier, unstrung her bow, wrapped it and the quiver in black canvas so they wouldn't attract too much attention when she carried them outside, and stowed them in the very back of the compartment. Then she stripped down to her underwear, folded the maid clothes together, and stored them in a jute bag before placing the bag in the compartment near the bow.

Her next step was to take care of the injuries to her face and shoulder. Her left shoulder was still bleeding, so she cupped her right hand over it and let it glimmer. The wound healed quickly, and she ensured there was no sign of blood. Using a pocket mirror, she did the same for the injury to her left cheek. Only very few people knew assassins of the Order of the Novantan were trained by both enchantresses and former priestesses of the Selanian Order. It was a huge advantage, having insight into both worlds.

With her wounds healed, Nemara pulled the work dress over her head and threw the cloak over her shoulders, fastening it with two hooks near the base of her neck. Then she removed the clip holding her long locks in a bun, mussed up her hair, and bound it together again in a broad pony tail using a simple wooden barrette. The last thing she did was sit on the stairs and slip into socks and shoes that went better with what she was currently wearing.

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Since she had a different appearance from the one her target's friends would be looking for, she climbed the stairs and left by the back door. With nothing but time on her hands, she had strolled over and waited with the crowd until the Lady Utalya's carriage continued on its way to Lord Tolares's estate.

Now that the carriage was gone, the crowd began to disperse, so she headed back in the direction of the building where she had stowed her bow and her bag with the domestic servant attire. Of course, this meant she would pass directly by the building where she had been on stakeout for the greater part of the day.

She shrugged. Not a problem. Nobody knew what they were actually looking for.

A boy in his mid- to late twenties had been eyeing her since she had joined the crowd, and he tried to follow her without her noticing. Nemara walked at an easy pace so he could catch up, enjoying the anticipation of what would ensue. But, *ate 'vides*, how much slower did he need her to go?

With far too much effort on her part, the boy finally reached her and took hold of her arm. "Eh, young miss," he whispered in her ear, "how's 'bout a quick roll?"

She grabbed his hand and swung around, making him cry out by almost wrenching his shoulder from its socket, pinned his arm behind his back, and sent him flying into the dust with a gentle nudge of her foot to his backside. "G' on, now, pup," she said, deliberately employing the same southern district townie accent the boy had used. "Don' try 'n bite off more 'n you can chew, le' alone swallow."

The people around her stopped and laughed at the sight of the boy spitting out dirt and glaring up at her. He scrambled to his feet and ran off. With a smile, she continued toward her destination. If the boy was lucky, she might even track him down later. He looked healthy and well-built, and a "quick roll" after a kill might help her take her mind off things and regain some control, at least for a while.

She reached the building a minute later and took the stairs down into the basement, where she grabbed the items she had stored there. Her fingers glided over the bow wrapped in the canvas. It had served her well today. Of course, had the situation required it, she would have left her bow and quiver in the apartment if it had helped her to escape. But she was glad it hadn't been necessary. It was her favorite bow and had been with her for years. It was six armlengths long, and she had

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made it herself from the resilient yet flexible wood of a rare deciduous tree that only grew on the Tonisian Plateau.

As she walked up the stairs from the basement with the bow and jute bag slung over her shoulder, a constable came in the back door. He looked at her in surprise. “And what are you doing here, young miss?”

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, Constable. I’m just running some errands for my mother.”

“Are you now? And what’s that you have there, wrapped in that canvas?”

“Just a rack. Mother uses it to hang up clothes to dry in our lodgings. We lent it to a friend a while ago, and now I’m taking it back home.”

“I see. Well then, let’s have a look, shall we?”

Nemara unwrapped the top part of the bow and showed it to the constable. “See, a wooden rack with a clothes line running across it.”

The constable nodded. “Alright, be on your way then. And be careful out there, young miss. There’s a killer on the loose.”

She stared at him with wide eyes. “I heard. It happened right next door, didn’t it? How horrible that such a thing should be possible here in Tolares. You...you wouldn’t have time to accompany a young maiden home, would you?”

“Aye, young miss, I’d be glad to be of service. But I’m afraid I have some important business to attend to here in the building. I truly wish you a safe journey home.” He bowed his head and continued up the stairs.

Nemara shook her head as she walked out the back door. “Idiot!” she muttered to herself. Could these constables be any greater fools? Maybe she should present the next one with her dagger and tell him it was a cake spoon or a spatula. No, if the man actually fell for it, she would be tempted to use the dagger on his throat, and she didn’t want another mess like the one in the apartment today.

She sighed. Of course she would never do such a thing. There was enough pain and suffering in the world, and she didn’t want to cause any more if it wasn’t required. The thought made her grimace. Why did the couple have to make a break for it? If they had only given her a little more time, she would have put an arrow in each of their hearts. Quick, clean, and no mess. Instead, she

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had to slit their throats and get blood on that beautiful beige carpet, not to mention the arterial spray all over the walls.

Her shoulders sagged. If she could only have prevented their deaths. But even the fact that she had waited too long was a sign that things weren't well with her. Under normal circumstances, she would have killed the couple instantly, possibly even before they could realize what was happening. But she needed them alive, if only to spare Maridya. If the maid had become suspicious and searched the home, Nemara would have had to kill her, too, and having to console Maridya's brokenhearted sister would have been more than she could bear. But she had explained the situation to Zirsha and persuaded her to send Maridya away, giving Nemara a chance to focus on her task without having to worry about the possibility of a fatal interruption.

And then she had waited. Maybe she had hoped to find a way out of her dilemma and spare the couple. But she had delayed, missing her chance for a quick and clean kill, and the couple had forced her hand. Now their fate weighed heavily on her heart, and she relived their fear and anguish as the shadow of the Reckoning descended upon her.

Using only back streets and alleys, she made her way to her stable where she would change. She hadn't gotten far when she rolled her eyes and turned around. "Seriously?" she said to the boy she had humiliated earlier. "And I see you brought some friends. Not man enough to take care of one young maiden by yourself?"

"Maybe, maybe not," the boy said, grinning to his four buddies. "But this time, I'm getting what I came for. Grab hold of her, boys."

"Oh, you don't need to do that." Nemara put down her bag beside a large crate and stood her bow against the wall. Then she hopped onto the crate with her legs dangling over the edge. "Come on." With an astonished expression, the boy walked into her outstretched arms. She leaned back, pulling him on top of her, and clasped him to herself in a passionate kiss.

While his friends were cheering him on, Nemara gauged the boy's breath. As soon as she knew he was short, her lips enclosed his mouth, and she pinched his nose shut with her free hand. When the boy realized what was happening, he tried to wrench himself away and clawed at her hair and clothes. But Nemara had tightened one arm around his head and jaw and wrapped her legs around his knees like a vise, making it impossible for him to do anything but flail his arms.

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The Kiss of Death was a fairly simple maneuver. The tricky part was getting herself and her target in the right position. After that, all she had to do was lie there and wait. At the moment, the worst that could happen was for them to roll off the crate, which would maybe give her a few bruises or perhaps a fracture. But she wasn't worried. She had locked many more formidable opponents than this young boy in her deadly embrace, and she knew from experience that nothing short of her own demise would get her to relinquish her hold on her victim.

Of course, Nemara had no intention of killing the boy. She just wanted to teach him and his buddies a lesson. His desperate, erratic movements must have made his friends wonder what was going on. But she could feel his strength waning and, after a minute or two, he finally went limp. She loosened her grip and let him slide to the ground before hopping gingerly off the crate. "So, who's next?"

"What did you do to him?" said one of the boys.

"Why don't you come here and find out?" she said with a smile.

"You want to grab her?" said one of the others.

"Yeah, maybe we should grab her," said a third.

"I don't know," said the first.

Nemara rolled her eyes. "*Ate 'vides*, will you boys finally make up your minds? I don't have all day, you know."

They just stared at her.

"Alright, then, allow me." She walked toward the first boy as if she were going to put her arms around him and kiss him. When he tried to reciprocate, she sidestepped, pushed him over her leg with her hand at his throat, and smashed his head into the pavement. The second boy tried to grab her ponytail, but she caught his arm and continued his motion, twisting him around, and wrenched his shoulder from its socket. A measured kick to the head cut his scream short and sent him flying. A third boy tried to take a swing at her from behind but got her elbow in the face. Nemara leisurely turned around, grabbed his shoulders and, with a wry smile, thrust her knee upward. He gasped, staring vacantly, and collapsed at her feet. The fourth boy looked around and, seeing all his other buddies down, lost heart and ran.

Nemara regarded the boys on the ground, sniffed, and climbed back on the crate. As she waited, she swung her legs and hummed to herself. Every now and then, someone walked by and stared at

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the boys. But when she smiled, shrugged, and made the universal gesture of drinking, they grinned, shook their heads, and continued on their way.

After a while, the boy with whom she had shared the kiss began to stir. He opened his eyes, but when he saw her sitting on the crate, he tried to scuttle backward, his eyes wide. He stopped when he stumbled over the first of his friends. Turning around, he scrambled to his feet and stared. He finally turned back to the girl. “*Tev’anar*, what have you done to them?”

“You know, I think they asked me the same thing about you,” said Nemara.

“You killed them!”

“For a while there, you looked a bit lifeless yourself, but I wouldn’t call you dead.”

He hesitated. “So...they’re not dead?”

“I never kill without good reason, and you boys haven’t given me any—yet.”

“I know priestesses learn how to fight. Are you with the Selanian Order?”

“My, now, wouldn’t that be interesting?” she said with a chuckle. “But no, the order I belong to goes by a different name. It’s a bit obscure, so I doubt you’d have heard of it.”

“What...what do you want from me?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I wanted the same thing from you that you wanted from me. You’re a bit of a dumbass, you know. If you had been more patient, I would have found you, and we could have had some fun together. But I never, ever let anyone take me by force.”

“You...wanted to take a roll with me?”

“I was seriously considering it.”

“And now?”

She shrugged. “What’s your name?”

“Daren. What’s yours?”

“O-o-h, no. You haven’t earned that right yet. But I’ll tell you what, Daren. You’re actually quite a good kisser. If you muster the courage to try again, I’ll see what I can do.”

His eyes narrowed, but he edged forward.

“Come on, you can do it,” she coaxed with a playful smile

He took a deep breath. “Aw, what the hell. Even if you trick me again, it’ll still be worth it.”

She smiled as he put his hands on her waist. “Good choice.” This time she was less passionate, but truly invested, allowing herself to actually feel the kiss. After a while, she pulled away and

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caressed his cheek. “Your friends are waking up. At least one of them is going to need my help getting his shoulder back into its socket.”

Daren grinned. “Ouch!”

He helped her off the crate, and they walked over to the three boys stirring and groaning on the pavement. When they saw her, their eyes opened wide and they tried to scramble away.

“Hey, guys, she’s alright,” said Daren. “We talked.”

She took Daren’s arm, showing them they had nothing to fear from her. They shot her suspicious glances, but remained on the ground where they were, nursing their various hurts. Nemara approached the boy who was holding his shoulder and groaning. “Mind if I take a look?”

He ducked away. Daren said, “Don’t be a sissy. She’ll help. Or do you want to walk around with a dislocated shoulder?”

The boy held still but looked up at her with his eyes narrowed and his brow folded into creases. She crouched next to him with one knee on the ground to stabilize her position and touched his arm. He winced.

“I’m going to have to pop it back into the socket,” she said, “but it might hurt. Are you up for it?”

He gave her a dark look but nodded.

“It’ll be best if you stand with one arm against that crate for support,” she said. She helped him up and walked him over to the building. “Alright, lean back against the crate, and hold on behind you with your good arm.” The boy clenched his teeth as she bent his hurt arm, holding him at the wrist and elbow. With expert precision, she turned and rotated his arm until she felt resistance. The boy winced. “You’re doing great,” she said. “Daren, would you please pinch his neck?”

“What?” the boy shouted.

Daren grinned and complied. The boy cried out, and Nemara twisted his arm the rest of the way, popping the joint back in.

The boy stared at her in astonishment. “Hey, it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“I would have kissed you instead of having Daren pinch you,” she said with a smile, “but I’ve found it doesn’t give me enough room to maneuver. But you’ve earned this.” She gave him a peck on the cheek.

The boy reached up to where she had kissed him. “Oh!”

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“Hey, don’t go messing with my girl,” said Daren.

She lifted an eyebrow. “Your girl?”

“Oh, sorry. Did I get it wrong?”

“Believe me, Daren, I’m nobody’s girl, and I’m not sure you’d want me if you really knew me.”

He stared at her. “Who wouldn’t want you? I mean, have you looked in a mirror lately?”

She managed a smile. “Thank you, that’s awfully sweet. But there’s more to a person than just appearances.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “Doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy a few simple pleasures every now and then, right?”

She probed his face. Then she kissed him on the cheek and whispered in his ear, “Alright, let’s go somewhere more private.” Her glance wandered over to his friends and she gave him a subtle nudge.

He nodded and turned to his buddies. “Hey, me and the lady are going for a walk. I’ll see you guys later, alright?”

“A walk, huh?” said the boy whose shoulder Nemara had popped back in. He gave Nemara a knowing glance, grinned, and slapped Daren on the back before sauntering off with the others.

Nemara took her bag and her bow and slung them over her shoulder. Daren put his arm around her, and she guided them in the direction of her stable. His company was a good distraction, and she smiled at some of his more humorous remarks, but the events of the day were catching up with her and it was getting more difficult. Being with an energetic young man like Daren would allow her to replenish her strength and retain some control over herself. But at some point, she would have to face her Reckoning. The thought made her shudder, and she snuggled closer to her companion, knowing he wouldn’t mind.

5. Venora

Their carriage had just passed the southern outskirts of Tolares, and the urban setting would have intrigued Vilam if his thoughts hadn’t been engaged by the disconcerting impression he had received of their trip. He couldn’t quite pinpoint the time and place when the strange feeling began to gnaw at him, but it was definitely well before the assassin’s arrow. Maybe the notion was based

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on the sum of many little things, like that incident he had observed when the Lady Utalya picked him up in Nadil.

As the two carriages had drawn to a halt in front of Folan's tavern around mid-morning, Vilam whistled softly through his teeth at their size and elegance. The carriages glistened black in the bright sunshine, their surfaces polished to mirror-like perfection. Each carriage was drawn by a team of four chyevi and could easily accommodate eight persons. The *vis-à-vis*'s striking royal blue upholstery was of the most exquisite and comfortable he had ever seen. His expert eye admired the sleek body design. Combined with the suspension's efficient construction, he knew he was in for a smooth ride.

The chyevi were splendid animals, all of them sturdy Marusian draft thoroughbreds from the Covasin Mountains. Their light brown coats shone like creamy silk, their necks hidden from poll to withers by thick, wavy manes. Their broad, floppy ears twitched playfully as they scrutinized him with their gentle, intelligent eyes, and every now and then a lively bawl would escape their short, rounded muzzles. The animals had massive fetlocks, their hooves as large as dinner plates, and their legs were covered with a full feather below the hock.

The Lady invited Vilam to travel in her carriage with Vodana, Nova, and Catyana, and told the six acolytes in the second carriage to go on ahead at a leisurely pace. Before the acolytes left, she took Tanola and Natilya aside to give them some instructions. The two young women looked cheerful and excited about the trip.

But when the Lady began to talk, Natilya's smile faltered, and Vilam thought he saw her eyes flash. The acolyte dropped her gaze and glared at the ground, her lips contorted as if she had bitten into a lemon. Tanola kept nodding at what the Lady was saying and seemed to be reassuring her while casting uneasy glances in her friend's direction.

Natilya didn't look up. When the Lady stepped closer and tried to hug her, Natilya twisted away and marched toward the carriage, her back rigid and her head held high. As she climbed in, the other acolytes shrank back. She planted herself in a corner and deliberately looked the other way. Then she crossed her arms and buried her face in one hand in an attempt to hide her tears.

Silence descended upon the group in the carriage. Redina must have discovered her fingernails needed trimming; Fatasa developed a sudden interest in the shop across the street; Sitenayla rubbed

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her eyes, sniffing and searching frantically for a handkerchief in her robe with her free hand. Only Hyelisa slid closer, put her arm around Natilya's shoulders, and whispered to her friend.

At that moment, Folan and Semanta cornered him. Although Vilam and his hosts had been through a lot in the past two days, they had done everything in their power to make him comfortable, and the two nights he had spent in their tavern had been as peaceful and refreshing as they could make them. It wasn't their fault his first night had been so troubled by the tragic circumstances of Soshia's death, and he felt he owed it to them to lend them his undivided attention. Semanta burst into tears and asked him to bend down so she could plant a kiss on his cheek. Folan grabbed his hand and would hardly let go, repeatedly entreating him to keep in touch and to stop by again as soon as possible.

Mara had also come to send them off. Nova discreetly left her and Catyana alone for a few minutes, and Mara had tears in her eyes when she had to part with the girl. Mara had scolded him yesterday for not remembering what Soshia had told him. She had been right, of course. Being so close to Soshia had made it almost impossible for him to remember anything but the beautiful young woman at his side. But he finally remembered what Soshia had said about Mara's problem. It was unrequited love. Watching Mara with Catyana, it was obvious to whom Mara had lost her heart. Catyana, on the other hand, seemed to be truly fond of Mara, but as a very good friend and nothing more, and she didn't seem to be aware of the extent of Mara's affection for her.

Vilam sighed. Even if Catyana could reciprocate Mara's feelings—which he doubted since Catyana's orientation didn't seem to lean in that direction—their relationship would have proven difficult in the eastern provinces. He wasn't even sure how welcome such a relationship would be in the western provinces, despite the populace's proclamations of wanting a “free world.”

By the time the carriage began to roll, the townspeople had lined both sides of the road to bid them farewell. It seemed as if the whole town had assembled to see them off. Nova, who was sitting across from him with Catyana by her side, leaned forward and whispered for him to remain polite, smile, and just wave.

It only took a few minutes to quit the town, but it seemed much longer. When the last straggling buildings disappeared behind them, Vilam took a deep breath and sighed. A pleasant breeze cooled the sweat on his brow. Nova looked over, an amused smile on her lips. Vilam grinned in return.

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As the morning progressed, spirits seemed a bit low. Vodana, who had claimed the seat next to him, remained absorbed in thought, as did the Lady Utalya. Vilam felt that Nova cast a reproachful glance in the Lady's direction every now and then. But he couldn't determine if he had interpreted Nova's expression correctly because Vodana blocked his view of the Lady's face, and the Lady's body language was inconclusive. After a while, he gave up, planted his elbow on the rail, plopped his chin into his hand, and watched the scenery glide by. He would probably never find out what was going on.

Vilam sensed unusual tension in Catyana. He admired her poise, and he was confident no amateur would have perceived her affected reaction. But Vilam's observational skills didn't miss the signs: the slight catch of breath at an unfamiliar sound; a marginal widening of the eyes at an unforeseen event. Nova had evidently trained her well, but the clues were there. It would have been reasonable for Catyana to be excited and perhaps even distressed, since she had never been away from home. But Vilam sensed more than mere disorientation. What was she afraid of?

The mood didn't change until about noon when Nova insisted on switching to the back seat, worried that Catyana would get sunburned. The activity seemed to loosen the atmosphere, and the rest of the journey was filled with pleasant conversation and beautiful scenery, which was as enjoyable as it was uneventful until their ride was interrupted by the black arrow.

Thinking back, Vilam didn't believe the incident with Natilya had anything to do with the impression he was getting. Nor did the other things he had sensed and observed during the trip. There was definitely something going on between the women, but it didn't have anything to do with the odd flurry in his stomach. Whatever was stirring him up, it had to be something approaching from beyond the horizon of his own destiny.

Their present surroundings seemed almost too metaphorical, as if someone meant for him to be in this exact time and place. His mood resembled the tranquil gloom of the woods they were passing through. He knew the shadows would end soon because the trees were thinning out before them, and he could see isolated rays of sunlight falling through the branches farther ahead. The fluttery sensation in his stomach made a similar impression on him, as if he were wandering through misty twilight, but with the hope of morning in his heart.

Vilam almost tumbled into Vodana when the coachman swerved to avoid a low-hanging branch. With a smart flick of his wrist, the driver steered the chyevi onto another well-paved road going

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west. Vilam had a pointed remark concerning the coachman's driving skills on his lips, but he gaped instead at the unfolding view. They were now traveling parallel to the city, and as the trees retreated on his right, an unforgettable panorama of the metropolis opened before him.

If Nadil had seemed like a delicate work of art, Tolares was a stunning masterpiece. Wherever he looked, architectural wonders enthralled his senses. Graceful towers swung up into the sky in the northwest. In the east, a neighborhood of vaulted residential structures on a hillside reminded him of groups of mushrooms clinging to logs in a forest. A fantastical conglomeration of asymmetrical geodesic spheres directly to the north, which he believed to be municipal facilities, redefined his concept of artistic potential. The city's skyline mesmerized him, and he tried to commit it to memory, astonished that each building could be so unique yet create an image of such beauty and harmony in conjunction with the others.

The Lady Utalya leaned across Vodana and touched his arm. "Vilam, look over there."

Vilam turned left. His jaw dropped. A miniature of the Capitol Dome! "Amazing," he said. "What is it?"

The Lady smiled. "It's the new conference building."

Vilam judged the time without letting the structure out of his sight. "The young Lord said we'd arrive at the residence in half an hour, and it must be nearly that, if we take into account the interruption with the, uh...arrow. Is the residence so close to a major facility?"

"Yes. Lord Tolares had it built on his estate and established a trust to manage it. His residence is farther south, so we'll need to take a left before we reach the complex. And in case you're wondering, we were able to arrange it so the first day of the conference coincides with the official opening, so you'll be seeing more of it soon enough."

Vilam couldn't take his eyes off the breathtaking building complex. A huge dome rose from its center, overshadowing the complex and dominating the area not only by its sheer size but also by virtue of its unearthly beauty. Elegant support arches ran down its sides at regular intervals. Each expanded as it curved downward and melted into its companions on the left and right, forming an enclosure of multiple annexes around the assembly hall.

The edifice was clearly an Elinian design, just like its vastly larger counterpart on Chyoradan. But how could that be? There hadn't been any Elinar on this planet for the past one thousand years. They had all been exterminated by—

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Realization hit him like a thunderbolt. For a moment, he couldn't breathe, and his hand went to his throat of its own accord. He made a sound as if he were choking. Somewhere in his mind, a bolted door barring memories he had locked away long ago bulged at its seams, threatening to burst wide open.

The words of the litany came back instantly: "*Pesuvan tezatal, ne pirae venadin; anasin venatirae esa, nevares i lusenires tesal.*"

"Everything's alright, there is no danger; no one is hunting you, stay calm and breathe evenly. Everything's alright, there is no danger, no one is..."

The soothing, monotonous sequence coursed through his mind over and over, as it had in those days after he finally escaped from that endless nightmare. Fascinating, the way something could come back like that although he hadn't thought of it for so long.

"Vilam, are you alright?" Nova was staring at him.

The Lady leaned forward to see what was going on. "Goodness, Vilam! What's wrong?"

He parted his lips and let his breath out. It sounded like the hiss of air escaping from a tire after someone jammed a knife into it. Interesting that this particular analogy should pop into his mind right now. "I'm fine. Just something, uh, bizarre I remembered. Who built the dome?"

The women looked at him askance but were too polite to pressure him. Vodana raised her chin a tad, and her intense, sidelong glare and firm mouth said, *You don't fool me, and I caution you not to try.* "Lord Tolares commissioned the building five years ago, immediately after the Conference of Divestelan. I'm sure he meant it as retribution for what they did to his niece. His primary battering ram always has been his finances, and as Lord of such an affluent province, he can make life quite bitter for anyone who opposes him."

The Lady gave her a friendly nudge with her elbow. "Oh, come now. Cavan would never do a thing like that."

"Wouldn't he? Don't be so sure. You wouldn't believe some of the things Venora told me."

"That may be, but—"

"Excuse me, what's this about the Lord's niece?" It wasn't the question Vilam really wanted to ask, but he couldn't think of anything else on the spur of the moment. Who had Vodana been talking about just now? *Venora*. That was what Soshia had said in his dream the night she had died. He would know his *venora* when he saw her. The name reverberated in his mind, dispelling the

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horror of the past moments. And he felt that flurry in his stomach again. Had Soshia meant *Venora*, with a capital letter?

Nova grinned at Vodana. “You did it again, sister. Did you even realize what you just said?”

“Yes, I said Utalya shouldn’t be so sure about what Cavan would or wouldn’t do.”

“Because she wouldn’t believe some of the things... Go on.”

It seemed as if someone had switched on a light in Vodana’s head. “Oh, no.” She stared at Vilam with an open mouth.

Catyana and the Lady shot puzzled glances at them. “What’s going on?” said Catyana.

Vodana took a deep breath. “My little sister is right. I did it again. I committed one faux pas after the other yesterday on our way to your farm, Catyana, but I had hoped I’d gotten over it. And now I just put my foot in it again.”

“What are you talking about?” said Catyana.

Nova looked at Vilam with a playful smile. “You didn’t really want to ask about the Lord’s niece, did you?”

Vilam felt the color rise in his cheeks. “You wouldn’t consider pretending I didn’t say anything, would you?”

“Certainly not!” said Nova laughing. “This is far too much fun.”

“This may be fun to you,” said the Lady Utalya, “but it’ll just be annoying to the rest of us if you don’t explain yourself.”

“Would you like to do the honors?” said Nova, grinning at Vilam.

“No, I think I’m good.”

Nova looked at the Lady. “Mara and Vilam both dreamed of Soshia in the night after she, um...passed away. In Vilam’s dream, Soshia told him to listen to his heart. It would know his *Venora* when it saw her.”

“*A’mada!*” said the Lady. She stared at Vilam. “Is this true?”

“It is,” he said. Soshia had actually told him a bit more than that. But if what she had told him about *Venora* was true, it would be indelicate of him to divulge that information, even if he had no idea who *Venora* was.

Catyana looked from the one to the other. “*Venora*? Are you talking about Lord Tolares’s daughter?”

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“Do you know her?” said Vilam.

“No...I mean yes, I mean...Ugh! Why do I keep doing that?”

Nova put her arm around Catyana and gave her a quick squeeze. “Please remember what I told you earlier. I would really miss it if you stopped.”

“So would I,” said Vodana with a smile. “I think it’s adorable.”

“Really?” said Catyana.

“Yes, really.”

“So how do you know Venora?” said Vilam.

“From my training,” said Catyana. “I had to memorize the family trees of all the Great Houses, and some of the more important minor ones, such as the house of the late High Priestess. But I have no idea who Venora is, just that she exists.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I also know she’s not really Lord Tolares’s daughter. She’s adopted.”

“Oh! Interesting,” said Vilam. “Nova, can you tell me anything more about her?”

“My sister would be the right person to ask about anything related to Venora,” said Nova. “They’ve been friends for many years. But why don’t you just wait and see?”

“I agree,” said Vodana. “I’m not about to let you put my friend under a microscope. You’re just going to have to discover these things for yourself, Vilam.”

“Alright, it seems I’ve run into a wall here. So how about my original question? What were you saying about Lord Tolares wanting retribution for his niece?”

“Yes, the young Lady Halita Penates,” said the Lady Utalya. “Lord Tolares’s wife Oventya was Lady Norila Penates’s sister. Both were originally from Navaresa, and Halita was Norila’s daughter. Halita became High Priestess after I stepped back in 1508. My deputy chief of staff, Tanola, was her sister and protégée, and the High Priest Vordalin was her brother.”

“Tanola was the High Priestess’s protégée?” said Vilam. “Oh!”

“What are you thinking, Vilam?” said Nova.

“If Tanola was Halita’s protégée, wouldn’t it be reasonable to assume she became High Priestess after Halita passed away?”

“Oh, right!” said Catyana. “I never thought of that. Nova, is it true?”

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Nova, Vodana, and the Lady exchanged sober glances. “I’m sorry, dearest,” said Nova, “but that information is classified. Even if I did know who the High Priestess was, I wouldn’t be allowed to tell you, or anyone else, for that matter.”

“Why not?” said Catyana.

“For the same reason I don’t want anyone knowing about your abilities. Her life and the lives of her loved ones would be in danger.”

“Oh,” said Catyana, her expression now just as sober as that of the other three women.

“But you’re right, Vilam,” said Nova. “It is a...reasonable assumption, independent of whether it’s true or not.

Vilam favored her with a wry grin. “Alright, but what exactly happened five years ago?”

“Of course,” said the Lady. “I keep forgetting you aren’t so well acquainted with our history. Selanian conferences are usually held in Travis. But five years ago, we decided to hold the conference in Divestelan because of the difficult situation in the west. We wanted to demonstrate our willingness to accommodate them, and—”

“—and they thanked us by murdering our High Priestess, those godless villains!”

“Vodana!”

The musician’s eyes flashed. “It’s true! It was no accident, and don’t you deny it, Utalya!”

The Lady reprimanded her with a quick look but made no reply.

Vodana sighed. “Poor Halita. She was such a gentle soul.”

“Halita Penates was murdered?” said Catyana with a look of horror on her face.

“The official statement is still that it was an accident,” said Nova with a reproachful glance at her sister. “But it’s true, there may have been some...irregularities in regard to what happened to her.”

“Yes, but even the thought is just horrible!” said Catyana.

“Let’s not worry about it right now, dearest. There’s nothing we can do about it, and we have enough other things on our minds, like black arrows.”

Catyana looked at her. Her face was pale, but she seemed to accept Nova’s comment with more composure than Vilam would have expected.

He rubbed his chin. “Why are you holding the conference in Tolares, if it’s so dangerous?”

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The Lady switched to the seat next to Catyana, probably so she wouldn't have to strain her neck while talking. "Lord Tolares proposed it. It's possible he was thinking of financial gain, as Vodana suggested. The city is earning a small fortune because we're holding the conference here and, as a result, he is too. But the elders decided to accept his offer anyway. They believed it was their duty to meet the western leaders halfway, despite what happened in Divestelan." She cast a stern glance in Vodana's direction.

Vilam narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin. Talk of the conference had brought his train of thought back to the conference building and its Elinian design. Consequently, he had to ask himself how such a design was even possible in this time and place. Of course, the culprit who had committed genocide on his own people must still be here on the planet somewhere.

A dull feeling settled in his stomach. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He knew now why Elder Yonatan's light sculpture had made him uneasy on that first morning in Folan's tavern. There it was, a vague memory just beyond the confines of his subconscious, like a shadow in the night. He also knew he couldn't go there. Not yet.

But even so, Vilam knew his enemy only too well and doubted he would have offered his dubious services to design such a beautiful and intricate campus as he saw here on his left. Or had he used his knowledge to gain someone's trust? Was Lord Tolares perhaps in league with him? Vilam had no choice but to seek more information. "The conference building looks Elinian in design."

The Lady smiled. "It is remarkable, isn't it?"

"But how could anyone construct such a building? I thought you said the Elinar were gone."

"They are, but they left a legacy. The town of Elinas, for instance, which is a day's carriage ride to the south of here, contains many well-preserved Elinian structures. If I'm not mistaken, the new conference building is the result of the architect's extensive studies there."

"I see." Vilam wondered how often he was destined to make a fool of himself in front of his new friends. His anxiety had prompted him to jump to conclusions, although the solution to his supposed dilemma was simple enough. On the other hand, his nemesis was also here on the planet somewhere. That was invaluable, if not distressing, information.

The coachman turned left, and they headed up an enchanting parkway with the conference building on their right. The Lord's estate was magnificent. The lands had been devised as a vast

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park. Vilam saw watercourses and artificial lakes with clear, blue water on both sides of the parkway. They were arranged around lawns, hedges, meadows, and small woods to form a picturesque composition, demonstrating the exceptional artistic landscaping of which the architects were capable. Vilam admired the magnificent residence looming before them, astonished at its size.

The acolytes' carriage with Tanola and Natilya was parked just ahead at the side of the driveway. It seemed they had stopped to wait for them before continuing to the residence's entrance. When they pulled abreast, Tanola said, "Where in Anae's name have you been? We've been waiting for at least half an hour. We were already thinking of turning around to see if something had happened to you. And why do you have your top up on such a wonderful day? I'd be suffocating."

"I'm afraid something did happen," said Nova. "I'll fill you in later, but we'll drive ahead to the residence. Please follow closely."

Nova's words shocked the acolytes, and some of them turned pale. Tanola regarded Nova with wide eyes and nodded. Natilya seemed to have worries of her own and appeared subdued, as if she were waiting for a judgment. Vilam didn't see much more because they continued toward the residence. It only took them a few more minutes to reach the entrance.

When the carriages came to a stop, Vilam was surprised to see what he assumed was a large part of the Lord's staff assembled to greet the guests. Vilam exited the carriage, pulled down the retractable steps, and helped the Lady Utalya and Vodana down.

The young Lord Tolares, who had changed clothes and looked dashing in his house uniform, came around to the other side of the carriage and did the same for Nova and Catyana. In the meantime, the coachman proceeded to unload their baggage, which was deposited in the storage area beneath the carriage. One of the Lord's manservants met him there to receive it.

The elder Lord Tolares was an impressive man. Tall and stately, he had thick, graying hair and a full beard, and was dressed in the official uniform of the head of the House of Tolares, which was forest green with burgundy and gold designs. He stepped up to the Lady Utalya and took her hands in a warm welcome. "Utalya, how wonderful to see you again. How long has it been?"

They touched cheeks in a formal greeting and smiled broadly at each other. "The pleasure is mine, Cavan," the Lady answered. "I believe the last time was four years ago, when we stopped by on our way to the western provinces."

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“Yes, of course. How could I have forgotten?”

Vilam heard Utalya mutter, “How indeed?” She aimed an anxious glance in Natilya’s direction.

But Lord Tolares didn’t seem to catch Utalya’s remark and said, “We were actually expecting you a bit earlier. I hope the route through the city didn’t cause any difficulties?”

“There...was an incident that held us up for a while, but it might be best if we discussed it later.”

Lord Tolares eyed her cautiously and nodded. “Of course.” He turned his attention to survey her delegation. “I see you have expanded your entourage. Would you be so kind as to introduce me?”

“Gladly. Vodana you already know, and I must add she is most certainly not a member of my entourage.”

“Although I would feel greatly honored if I were,” Vodana replied with a smile, bowing in her customary graceful fashion. “It’s good to see you again, Cavan.”

Lord Tolares pulled her closer and touched both of her cheeks with his. “Thank you for coming, Vodana. You know you are always welcome here.”

“I would like to introduce you to another friend of ours,” the Lady said. “Cavan, this is Vilam.”

The Lord bowed his head and regarded Vilam with an intent gaze. “We have heard much about you, Your Holiness. Your arrival gives us hope. Thank you for honoring our house with your presence.”

“The honor is mine, Your Excellency,” Vilam said, bowing in return and attempting to hide his discomfort at the use of the title.

The Lady touched the Lord’s arm. “I assume Tanola needs no formal introduction. She joined us four years ago, just after we left Tolares.”

“Hello, Uncle.” Tanola, who had been standing behind Vodana, came forward and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Tanola!” He grabbed her by the elbows and looked her over. “But...I thought you were teaching in Gisatena.”

“I was. But the Lady Utalya was kind enough to rescue—um, fetch me.”

“I see. *Te’linos*, Tanola! It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. The last time must have been—” He caught himself just in time.

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Tanola took a deep breath. “Yes. But it’s alright, Uncle. I know you’ve been busy.”

He studied her for a moment with a solemn gaze. “Well, I’m very pleased you’re here.” They touched cheeks. “Please talk to Venora so we can schedule some time and catch up.”

“I’d like that very much.”

When he finally let go of her, the Lady took his arm and pulled him along. “Catyana here is also a new addition to our party, and we are proud she has joined us.”

A timid smile appeared on Catyana’s lips as she placed her left hand on her heart and bowed.

“Sister Catyana, I’m pleased to meet you,” Lord Tolares said.

“The rest of my little delegation hasn’t changed: Novantina, Natilya, Hyelisa, Redina, Fatasa, and Sitenayla.”

Each of the acolytes bowed formally when her name was announced, placing her left hand on her heart. Was it his imagination, or did Vilam see Lord Tolares and Natilya exchange a significant glance? Natilya had an expression he couldn’t identify. She seemed at the same time deeply worried and overjoyed. He wondered what was going on.

Whatever it was, it produced a smile on Lord Tolares’s lips. “Thank you all for being our guests.” He turned to his entourage. “My own house is quickly introduced. From what I heard, you have already met my son, Chyardal.”

Chyardal greeted them with an elegant bow.

“And this is my daughter, Venora.”

Venora was, of course, the person Vilam had been looking forward to seeing most. The analytical part of his mind registered her shy bow and her excellent bearing. She was shorter than Nova and had long, thick, black hair falling down to her waist. Her large, gentle, intelligent brown eyes looked into the world like a timid animal that didn’t quite know if it should stay or bolt, and her features had a soft, delicate kind of beauty that reminded him of Mara in Nadil.

The young woman’s attire emphasized her prominent status in society. She wore a lovely three-piece ensemble of the patrician style, which Vilam assumed could only be found among the wealthier families. Her clothes must have been tailored explicitly for her and were fashioned in a dark, velvety, forest green, corresponding to the house colors. The long, elegant skirt was draped with burgundy inset gores, and her high-necked, long-sleeved blouse was covered by a short, sleeveless vest, which was adorned with intricate burgundy, green, and golden stitching. The

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costume incorporated a silken, burgundy sash around her waist, its ends flowing down her side to the knee.

But Vilam's actual reaction to the young Lady Tolares wasn't in the slightest analytical. At the sight of her, the world seemed to stand still. An isolated and hidden area of his heart, which he had long believed dead and forever silenced, began to hum in a silent song. The voiceless melody swelled and echoed through his soul until he felt his heart would burst.

Yet, in addition to the already chaotic state of his emotions, he was bewildered by a sensation he had never felt before. He couldn't understand why his soul was spiraling toward this beautiful young woman, as if his essence were caught in a maelstrom that swept everything along in its wake.

When Venora's gaze fell on Vilam, her eyes opened wide and her lips parted, as if something inside her had stirred, something with which she had never before been confronted. For an instant, their eyes met: a single moment of perfect clarity.

Then the moment passed, and the young woman stepped closer to Chyardal, as if seeking protection from something frightening and unfamiliar, while Vilam shifted backward to indicate she had nothing to fear from him.

Vodana must have noticed Venora's reaction because she rushed to the young woman and took her hands. "Venora, I'm so glad to see you again."

"*Vela'mada*, Vodana. It's so wonderful you've come." Venora's voice was rich, soft, and pleasant and underlined the gentleness of her features and bearing. But strangely, Vilam heard confidence in her voice, not timidity.

The two women embraced affectionately, touching cheeks. It seemed Vodana was a frequent guest of the house. She remained at Venora's side as Lord Tolares introduced the housekeeper, the caretaker, the gardener, and the equerry. He informed them that his steward was absent, away on business for the conference.

The employees of the Tolares estate had different uniforms, depending on their functions, but all of the uniforms incorporated the dark green, burgundy and gold shoulder panel that displayed their rank. Normal servants had anywhere from one to five stripes on the panel, while the chief servants displayed the symbol for eternity, a gold triphyllon on a black background, surrounded by

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the dark green and burgundy house colors. The chief housekeeper, caretaker, gardener, and equerry, whom Lord Tolares had just introduced, all had the latter panel type on their shoulders.

Venora kept her gaze on her father. Vilam felt that her shyness wouldn't allow her to glance in his direction to see if he was watching her. Of course, he was. When she noticed it, she moved closer to Vodana, a bewildered expression on her face. The latter, sensing her friend's confusion, took her hand and squeezed while leaning down. "What's wrong, dear?"

Venora whispered something in her ear. Whatever the young woman said produced a phantom smile around the artist's lips, which she quickly suppressed while keeping her eyes on the Lord. After a cautious pause, she whispered something to Venora. The young woman looked up at her friend in surprise, cast a fleeting glance in Vilam's direction, and looked back again. Vodana inclined her head in a subtle nod. Venora shook her head and moved even closer to her friend, who put her arm around the younger woman's waist.

Despite, or maybe because of, his pounding heart, Vilam felt guilty, as if he were betraying his memory of Soshia. Granted, he had only come to know and love the girl for a day. On the other hand, it had been a mere two days since she passed away, and he didn't know if he could allow himself to fall in love again so quickly. None of these arguments seemed to matter, though, because he couldn't take his eyes off Venora. Hadn't it been Soshia herself who had told him about her?

Exasperated at his conflicting emotions, he set his jaw and balled his fists, shaking his head at his dilemma as he listened to the Lord's final words.

"My housekeeper has kindly organized a small reception," the Lord was saying. "She will be expecting us in the dining hall in one hour. That should give you enough time to take possession of your quarters, make yourselves comfortable, and freshen up. I look forward to seeing you again." He bowed his head and gestured for the servants to seek out the guests they had been assigned to and show them to their rooms.

6. Ilanya's Lament

Vordalin kept his eyes closed and let his perception reach out beyond the curve of the path. He sensed the enemy before he heard them. This seemingly uncanny awareness was actually a combination of trained Sensation and hearing. As the guards moved toward him, crickets stopped

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chirping and birds interrupted their song, signs he had learned to register during his years in the wilderness with Elder Renestal. As soon as he had visually confirmed the Black Guard's approach, he dashed back to their trap. Colonel Hevaros had done excellent work. None of the soldiers were visible from the path. Vordalin crouched down and waited, his sword drawn.

The Black Guard advanced quickly. Although their backs weren't quite rigid, and their eyes darted back and forth as they attempted to penetrate the thickets on both sides, they weren't so much marching as strutting along the path like vain *lomarani*.

Vordalin smiled in grim satisfaction. As he had hoped, the Black Guard was overconfident and apparently unaccustomed to being challenged. He waited until they were well inside the trap. Then his battle cry echoed from the mountainsides, "*Cel Anae i Selanei s'Ulavan!*"

The soldiers' attack was eerily quiet. Only the surprised shouts of the Black Guards could be heard, then the clash of steel as blades collided. Vordalin waited to see where he was wanted most, but there was little need. Although the members of the Black Guard defended themselves vehemently, the soldiers fought with a resolve and bitterness grown from years of suppressed anger. Soldiers grunted and guards cursed. Blood and sweat glistened on the men's faces as they labored against one another under the warm afternoon sun. Vordalin only plunged into the battle here and there to help someone in a plight.

The skirmish lasted a little over a minute, then twenty-four men in black uniforms and capes lay motionless on the path, intermingled with at least twice as many soldiers. Vordalin admonished several men who kept hacking viciously at the corpse of one of the guards. It seemed he had been an especially sadistic fellow whose methods stopped at nothing short of torture during the two years of their intense training.

The bodies were separated into two rows and counted. The colonel, who was being treated by Vordalin for a minor shoulder wound, shook his head as he glanced at the line of dark brown uniforms. "Fifty-nine good men."

Vordalin adjusted the colonel's bandage. "We were fortunate there weren't more. Your men fought valiantly."

The colonel turned his ashen face toward the High Priest. "Is this what war is all about?"

"What were you expecting? Adventure and romance?"

"I don't know," the colonel replied wearily. "Possibly."

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Vordalin studied him. After a thousand years of peace, none of these men had ever been in an actual combat situation. The colonel had probably received his rank because of his ability as a leader, not because of his experience in battle. Vordalin could understand the conflict of the man's emotions. He sighed. "It's best we set your men to work. Take the ones who aren't wounded and let them dig two large graves under the trees. We'll give the dead their last resting place near the stream where it's cool and shady."

The colonel's mouth stood agape. "The Black Guard, too?"

"Even they were once men with hopes and dreams. Let's not be so quick to judge. Have you taken down the identities of the fallen?"

"Yes, but not those of the Black Guard. They have no identification."

"Then I can only hope their brothers in arms know who was in the platoon. You can tell your men that, after I've tended to their wounded comrades, they may plunder the Black Guard's camp. I would advise you to divide the spoils into equal shares."

"That is most kind, Your Eminence. How much will be your share?"

"I have no need for such things. You and your families have suffered enough and are entitled to this slight recompense, although I fear there's more anguish ahead."

The colonel returned the priest's glance with a grim one of his own. "Then let us hope the Emissary arrives soon."

"There is always hope, but we shall see," Vordalin replied, thinking of the stranger Nova had told him about in Folan's tavern in Nadil the other night. Which name had she given him? Ah, yes, Vilam. He turned to the group of wounded soldiers. Despite their superior numbers, many had been injured during the short battle. He had treated the critical injuries, but there were still so many left.

If only Nova's golden-haired companion were here. He had heard rumors in the Council that her healing powers were so great she could even raise the dead. Could she be the long-awaited Golden Messenger the prophets had foretold? With the Covatal's arrival imminent, anything was possible.

Vordalin took his time. In some cases, all he could do was stop the bleeding and close the wounds, fusing severed veins and arteries. His powers weren't so far advanced that he could grow back entire limbs. Even with the little he could do, the procedure took almost two hours.

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After the Black Guard's camp had been plundered, the fallen soldiers and guards were buried, not without grumbling and black looks in his direction. The six guards Vordalin had killed were collected and laid to rest with their comrades. Vordalin would gladly have performed the Rite of Interment for both graves, but he knew the men wouldn't understand.

Facing the assembly gathered before the soldiers' mound, he raised his hands to the heavens while the living bowed their heads in respect for their fallen comrades. The sun was just disappearing behind one of the western summits as he spoke the words of the ritual declamation.

"Anae piraē, Anae milantaraē. Alicosar vonala s'Anae. Camar tesiranu anam se piralā, enaviranu alin a piralā. Piral a piral, teman a teman, anemar al anemar."

"The Lord gives, the Lord takes. Praised be the name of the Lord. As we were once of the earth, we shall return again to the earth. Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

He addressed the assembled men with a few solemn words and said a prayer, but didn't have the heart to prolong the ceremony. After the congregation had dispersed, he turned to the colonel. "I must speak with the Lady Divestelan. Has she been informed of the battle's outcome?"

"Yes, I sent a lieutenant."

"Good. I'd advise you to take your men and descend the pass as soon as possible. It would be unwise for the Lady Divestelan and me to go with you, in case the enemy has left sentries."

"I agree. What will you have us do, Your Eminence?"

"Do whatever you wish. I release you from your service. If your men believe it's best to return to their families, then Anae be with them. If they wish to join us, we'll welcome them with open arms. We can use any trained men we can get at this point. But in either case, they'll have to flee. If they're recaptured by the enemy, they'll undoubtedly be court-martialed and executed, although I doubt the fiends will take the time for a trial."

"I'll speak with them, but you can rely on me, Your Eminence. Where would you like me to join you?"

"You're a good man, Colonel. I thank you most kindly and hope you won't come to regret your decision. I'm going to Tolares with the Lady Divestelan. Seek me out at His Excellency's residence."

The colonel slapped his clenched fist against his breast and bowed low.

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Vordalin acknowledged the salute, then vanished into the underbrush. Although the sun had disappeared behind one of the peaks, there were still hours of daylight remaining. Many of the summits surrounding them were more than forty thousand armlengths high. Mount Toradeh, which was visible in the northeast behind the pass, was more than forty-four thousand armlengths. For this reason, Velana's warm light was sometimes obstructed by the one or other of the giant summits late in the afternoon, but the sun didn't actually set behind the horizon for several more hours.

When Vordalin arrived at the villa, he could see Ilanya watching for him on the terrace. He stepped out of the underbrush and signaled to her. She saw him and pressed her hand against her heart in a gesture of relief. Then she turned and disappeared into the residence. She was coming down the stairs when he entered. "Vordalin! I'm so grateful you've returned. I was informed of your victory."

"I can't call it a victory. Fifty-nine soldiers and thirty of the Black Guard have perished today."

She eyed him solemnly. "You haven't changed. Always putting the well-being of others before your own interests."

"My Lady, wouldn't it be wiser to use a more formal address?"

Her expression saddened. "Would that change the past or erase our mistakes? Can you really pretend it never happened?"

"Ilanya, what do you expect of me? We haven't seen each other in more than thirty years. You're still married and I'm engaged."

She turned her face away. "Do you have to remind me of my misery? How can I call this charade a marriage, when my own children have become strangers and my husband keeps me imprisoned in this horrible valley?"

"It was your decision to marry him."

She jerked her head back toward him, her eyes ablaze. "That was more than fifty years ago. I was young, and you were constantly off to the wilderness with my brother."

"I suppose it was easier, surrendering to the attentions of the heir apparent of the most influential house of the western provinces than waiting for a young acolyte with an insignificant name." Although he tried, he couldn't keep the bitterness and pain out of his voice. He could hardly believe how much of it was still there after all these years.

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Ilanya stared at him, her eyes wide with shock. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply it was your fault.”

“Oh, I think you did.”

She cast her eyes down. “Yes, it’s true. I’m sorry.” She peered up at him through her lashes. “And yet, you came back for me.”

“How could I not? I couldn’t just leave you here. I came as soon as I heard.”

They gazed into each other’s eyes.

“Have you seen her?” He heard a tremor in her voice. She swallowed. “You can’t imagine how much I’ve thought of her these past years.”

“If you mean our daughter, then yes, I saw her from afar the night before last in Folan’s tavern. She’s chief of security in your sister’s entourage. Nova assured me she’s doing well and can hardly do without her.”

“Nova?”

“Novantina Satural. She’s your sister’s chief of staff.”

Ilanya’s brow furrowed. “The name sounds familiar, but it’s been a long time since I’ve heard from Utalya.” She sighed. “I’m glad our daughter is doing well. What news have you of my sister?”

“I didn’t have time to see her myself, but Nova told me Utalya is in good health.”

“And my brother?”

“You know Renestal, always roaming the wilderness. But the last I heard, he was also well.”

A weak smile adorned her lips. “That’s just like him.” She looked at him, her face grave. “I’m so sorry about your sister.”

Vordalin didn’t answer but clenched his teeth.

“They told everyone it was an accident. But it wasn’t, was it?”

“No. She was murdered.”

“I assume it was Vechiles’s doing?”

“After everything we’ve discovered about your husband’s operation in the past five years, we believe so, yes.”

Ilanya shuddered. “I remember her from when you and I were still...” She glanced up at him through her lashes. “From the time we were engaged. I saw her often when I stayed at your

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residence in Penates with your mother. Halita was such a kind and gentle person, very quiet and thoughtful. I'm sure she made a good High Priestess."

"It seems not everyone thought so."

"I...did overhear some conversations. I believe there were misgivings that a brother and sister were simultaneously High Priest and High Priestess. And then Halita made one of her younger sisters her protégée. Which one was it again? Tanola? I suppose they thought you were attempting to usurp all power in the Council to your family."

"You don't really believe such gossip, do you?"

"No. I know Vechiles only too well. But I'm so tired of all this intrigue. I wish things were simpler." She hesitated and her eyes grew bright. "Oh, that's why the name sounded familiar. Novantina Satural. Wasn't she the priestess in charge of security at the conference in Divestelan? But she didn't follow the required procedures, resulting in your sister's assassination, and was demoted for her negligent behavior. What I don't understand is why the elders covered for her and declared it to be an accident." She sighed. "I suppose Halita's protégée was then elected High Priestess, even though she was quite young."

"I'm sorry, but that information is classified."

"I've always considered that to be a foolish custom. They might as well reveal the identity of the new High Priestess immediately. Besides, the Conference of Tolares will begin in two days, and everyone will then know who she is." She gazed at him. "Do you really love her?"

"Who?"

"Your fiancée."

"Of course I do, very much."

"I've heard she's very gifted."

"I suppose so. But that isn't the reason I'm marrying her."

"So there's no hope for me?"

"Ilanya, what can I say? Even if I wasn't engaged, you would still be married."

She clenched her hands into fists and tears formed in her eyes. "Is there no escape from this accursed prison? You might as well leave me here, because I'll never be free." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Maybe Vechiles is right. Maybe Anae is a tyrannical Goddess who oppresses Her servants and delights in their misery."

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“How can you say such a thing?”

“The only reason I have to remain in this abhorred relationship is because Anae’s Law binds me.”

“Marrying Vechiles Divestelan was your decision, not Anae’s.”

“I admit that. But where is Her mercy? Do I have to pay for this one mistake for the rest of my life?”

“Is your husband so cruel to you?”

Ilanya smiled bitterly. “Cruel? I’ve hardly seen him since he’s been bedding his Marusian whore.”

“I...heard about that. Since when has this been going on?”

“I’m not sure. But I always sensed something was amiss, and Vechiles’s behavior should have given me pause. Thinking back, Lusina must have had him wrapped around her finger for years, but I wasn’t certain until after Natilya was born.” She could no longer suppress her tears. “Oh, Vordalin! It was hideous enough watching him turn Corsen and Gevinesa into monsters while being powerless to do anything about it. Then after I returned, I made an unexpected visit to my residence here and found Vechiles and Lusina...” Her voice failed her.

“I’m so sorry.”

She grimaced and took a deep breath. “For the past twenty years, he’s confined me to this residence and censored my correspondence. But the two of them still come here regularly and perform some mysterious ritual in one of the lower chambers. Oh, Vordalin, there’s a sinister presence in this house, I can feel it. My life has been in darkness for so many years. Please, Vordalin, take me away from this horrible place.”

He took her into his arms. “*Tezatal, Ilanya, tezatal.*” He stroked her hair. He felt her trembling and smelled the scent of fresh pine needles in her hair.

She looked up at him, her eyes soft and pleading. She seemed so fragile and vulnerable as he gazed into her eyes. He leaned in, his lips hovering over hers, and she closed her eyes, giving herself up to him.

It took all his willpower to release her from his embrace. “I’m sorry, Ilanya, but I can’t go through this again.”

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“Yes, yes, of course, I understand.” She gazed at the floor while her hands fidgeted with the folds of her gown. Then she looked up with hope in her eyes. “Was it so painful?” She said it softly, her eyes glued to his lips.

“You know it was. Losing you once was bad enough. The second time—”

“You were the one who sent me back to my no-good husband!” Her eyes ablaze, she whirled away from him, her nose in the air. “I still can’t understand why you had to inform the elders. It was none of their business.”

Vordalin felt tired. “We went over all that back then. I couldn’t reconcile such unconfessed iniquity with my conscience.”

Ilanya turned back, a conciliatory look in her eyes. “I was so sorry when you lost your commission as a deacon.”

“I regained a commission as priest eleven years later.”

“And now you’re High Priest! You can’t believe how proud I was when I heard.” Ilanya looked into his eyes. “You still love me, don’t you?” The directness of her question took him aback, but when he hesitated, she grabbed his hands and squeezed. “Please, Vordalin, I need to hear it.”

He felt his resolve dissipating like so much smoke in the wind. “Yes, Ilanya, and I always will. You were my first love. How could I ever forget that?”

“I love you, too, Vordalin. I’m sorry for all the pain I’ve caused you.” She took a step closer. “Shouldn’t we tell our daughter?”

“I...wanted to wait until she reached the Age of Maturity.”

“That was two years ago. Doesn’t she have a right to know who her parents are?”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“What? You can battle the Black Guard, but you can’t face your own daughter?”

Vordalin dropped his gaze. “It’s not that simple.”

“Really!” She hesitated, then continued a bit calmer. “Please, Vordalin, I need to see her. We could tell her together.”

“I’m taking you with me to Tolares. She’s probably already there with your sister.”

“Are you certain she’s alright? Was her adoptive mother kind to her?”

“Yes, very much so. Utalya’s sister-in-law is a gentle and wise woman.”

“And yet you hesitate. What’s wrong?”

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Vordalin sighed. “Utalya believes Natilya is going through a difficult phase right now. I suppose she longs for the family she never had. But there have been complications. Natilya has fallen in love with the elder Lord Tolares. Utalya thinks it may not be true love, but only Natilya’s need for a father figure.”

“Oh, no. And what are Lord Tolares’s intentions?”

“I don’t know.” When he glanced at her, he could hardly suppress a grimace.

“What’s wrong?”

“I know I was the one who sent you back, but it still pained me when I heard you had another child with Vechiles after we had been together.”

Ilanya’s eyes flashed. “Do you believe I wanted that? He forced himself on me.” Thick tears of rage and helplessness rolled down her cheeks. Her head drooped and she pressed her fists against her eyes. “I couldn’t even look at her after she was born. Poor Yanita! I shudder to imagine what kind of surrogate mother Gevinesa has been to her these past seven years.”

“Why did he do that to you?”

She flung up her hands. “How should I know?” A little more quietly, she added, “I think he might have been attempting some kind of reconciliation.”

“By raping you?”

“It...didn’t really begin that way.”

“Oh?”

She sighed. “I’ve had a lot of time to think. It hurts, but I have to admit, I also made a lot of mistakes.”

“Ilanya, is it possible that you still love him?”

“No. I mean...” She shook her head. “No.”

Vordalin stared at her.

“I’m confused,” she said when she saw his gaze. “I think some time away from all this would do me good. When can we leave?”

“Soon, but I still need some information from you.”

“Well, what do you want to know?”

He gazed at her. “I really am sorry, Ilanya. I would have come sooner, but in the past years it’s been difficult to reach you.”

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She gaped at him. “It’s been difficult to reach me? Well, I wonder why? Or was that just your subtle way of informing the prisoner you’ve finally figured out she’s being held captive?”

Her retort caused him to tighten his lips. “We didn’t have the slightest idea what was happening here. The access into the mountains was being guarded meticulously. We only got a scout in a few weeks ago. He had to come around from the west, which takes a full month. I left as soon as he reported back with the news.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I never meant to leave you alone in this situation.”

“Thank you, Vordalin. That’s a kind thought,” she said wryly.

“How long has this been going on?”

“The Black Guard emerged shortly after you sent me back, about thirty-five years ago. Not long after that, I discovered...”

“It’s alright, Ilanya.”

She took a deep breath. “For quite some time, I lived in what was supposed to be my winter residence. But roughly twenty years ago, Vechiles confined me here. There were always members of the Black Guard around. I could hardly go down to the lake by myself. The activity of the Black Guard increased continually. Then, five years ago, they destroyed the valley, my last refuge and solace. The Crimson Brigade was also stationed here, but they left several weeks ago.”

“Do you know where the various regiments are going?”

She smiled bitterly. “Do you really believe they would tell me anything? It was a relief when Colonel Hevaros was transferred to the valley. He at least treated me with respect, although none of the guards were allowed to touch me. Vechiles made it clear that punishment would be severe if anything happened to me.”

“Why do you think he did that?”

“I have no idea.”

Vordalin sighed. “We need to leave. It’ll be dark soon, and I hope to get out of the valley and through the pass with the moonlight to guide us.”

“I know I can’t take much with me, but I’ve packed a small bag. I’ll go get it.”

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Vordalin followed her to the door of her suite on the third floor and waited while she changed into clothing more suited to their impending task. They left by the terrace and began the steep climb up the mountainside.

7. Impressions

Catyana stared up at the residence, captivated by its size and grandeur. She could hardly take her eyes off of it.

“Sister?” said a voice close by.

Nova touched her arm. “Honey, are you alright?”

Catyana finally tore her gaze away from the building and looked at her friend. “I’m so sorry. What were you saying?”

“Our maid is here and would like to take us to our room,” said Nova. She gestured to the maid who was standing in front of them.

The maid was a bit shorter than Nova and Catyana, but about Catyana’s age, and had large, dark eyes, a friendly smile, and dark hair, which she had put up in a bun. She was wearing the traditional uniform of a domestic servant, which was a black skirt with a white blouse and apron. But Catyana could see that the fabric was of excellent quality, and the blouse had a shoulder board in the Tolares house colors running horizontally along the shoulder, designating the servant’s rank in the household. This maid was rank three, putting her above menial tasks and making her responsible for the welfare of assigned guests.

“Really, Catyana, are you alright?” said Nova. “You’re white as a sheet.”

Catyana shook her head. “It’s this building.” She looked back up at the façade. “It’s just so...I don’t know. Overwhelming?”

“Don’t worry, Sister,” said the maid. “It had the same effect on me when I first started here, but you get used to it soon enough.”

“How long have you been working here?” said Nova.

“Next month will be four years.”

“Do you enjoy working here?” said Catyana.

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“Oh, I love it!” said the maid, beaming. “The only thing that would make it perfect is if my sister were working here with me. But she has a job as a maid in the city and is very happy with her situation.”

“May I know your name?” said Catyana.

Nova and the maid exchanged a glance, and Nova suppressed a smile. “She already introduced herself when she came to get us, but I think your spirit had taken flight.”

The maid gave Catyana a sympathetic glance. “That’s alright, Sister, I’d be glad to tell you my name again. I’m Savinya, and I’ll be at your service for the next day or two. My supervisor, Cortina, sends her most profound apologies. She wanted to be the one to take care of you, since you’re the Lady Utalya’s chief of staff,” she said to Nova, “but she was called away during the night because of an illness in the family and most likely won’t be back until tomorrow or the day after.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” said Nova. “But I’m certain we’ll be more than happy with you, Savinya.”

“That’s kind of you to say, Sister. But Cortina is the senior housekeeper for the fourth and the fifth floors and has been with the estate for ten years now. I must admit, I’ve never seen anyone as proficient as her, and she’s taught me so much.”

“Well, then, I look forward to meeting her,” said Nova.

“I’m Catyana, by the way.”

“Yes, Sister, we know all your names,” said Savinya with a playful smile. “The Lady Utalya’s arrival has been planned for months, and when the Lady realized yesterday that you would be joining her entourage for the journey to Tolares, she sent us a courier. Your name was added to the guest list this morning. May I lead you into the house?”

“You call this a house?” said Catyana.

Nova and Savinya exchanged a smile, and Nova drew Catyana forward, following Savinya to the entrance. Catyana instinctively sought the familiar comfort of Nova’s arm when she ascended the steps and stared up at the building again. The structure towered five stories above her and was tapered like a pyramid lacking its apex. Each story had large windows separated only by slender bracings, so it seemed from afar as if the whole front was made of glass. She almost lacked the resolve to let her gaze wander all the way up, but with a little effort, she was able to overcome her

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inhibitions and discovered that the top two stories boasted generously proportioned balconies. As she passed through the entrance, the massive wooden wings loomed to at least three times her height, and graceful pillars flanked the entrance. Could anyone blame her for feeling intimidated?

Even so, Catyana didn't forget Nova's teachings of the past four years and stored each minute detail so she could recall and analyze it later. For instance, the architecture's design hardly incorporated any right angles, or sharp corners and edges, so the building made a sleek, streamlined impression as it reflected the bright afternoon sun, glowing like a crystal embedded in snow.

If the building's outer facade had impressed her, the entrance hall was staggering! Never before had Catyana been confronted with such opulence. The floor of the hall was tiled with white polished marble that stretched out in all directions. In the center of the floor, black insets outlined the three golden leaves of the triphyllon, the Selanian symbol for eternity. An enormous yet delicately worked crystalline chandelier hung from the ceiling above the icon.

As Savinya led them through the hall, Catyana noticed how fresh the air smelled. But she also detected a subtle fragrance that brought back memories of calm summer evenings and solitary walks in the moonlight, and something else that disturbed her. Could it be a hint of wood flowers? She shrank back from the thought and buried it as deeply as she could.

Nova regarded Catyana's feet with a quizzical gaze but had to turn her head and cough into her hand. Catyana gave her a dark look. Since when did Nova make fun of her? But when she followed her friend's gaze, she realized she was tiptoeing.

Catyana felt her cheeks grow hot, but what could she do? The slightest sound seemed to be thrown back at her, amplified a thousand times as it reverberated from the huge walls. Massive drapery adorned the walls and windows in the house color dark forest green. The fabric was embellished with subtle burgundy patterns and golden embroidery, but the heavy cloth hardly dampened the echo effect.

It seemed to take forever to reach the broad marble staircase leading up to the second floor. Catyana breathed a sigh of relief when she realized her steps would be softened by the plush burgundy carpet that covered the stairs.

When they reached the fourth floor, where Nova and Catyana's accommodations were located, Nova gave her an encouraging smile. Catyana was too worn out to smile back. She wanted to follow Savinya to the left and head straight for their room but felt herself being tugged in the

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opposite direction. Startled, she realized Nova was heading over to her sister. She shrugged and let herself be dragged along. Not that she had much of a choice. Savinya saw them change direction and waited for them at the entrance to the hallway of the east wing.

“So, what did Venora think of Vilam?” Nova whispered to Vodana.

Vodana flashed her a playful smile. “Not the other way around?”

“Oh, sister, stop torturing me. It was obvious what Vilam thought of Venora. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.” Nova hesitated. “Although, he did seem a bit conflicted. I feel sorry for him. He’s probably feeling guilty about Soshia.”

“I’m glad, because it means he has integrity. But he’s going to have to get over it. If Soshia really told him about Venora, then she wanted him to be with her.”

“But back to Venora,” said Nova. “She looked really confused.”

“She was. I’ve never seen her like this. She routinely dishes out rejections left and right, and when I ask her about it, she says she can’t endure half the men who want to be her suitors. Naturally, there have been a number of princes from other houses among them, but she insists most of them are pompous fools.”

“Well, at least she has good instincts, because most of them are. But what were you two whispering about?”

“Tinasa! Do you really want me to betray her confidence?”

“Oh, no, of course not. I’m so sorry.”

Vodana smiled. “Just kidding.”

“Vodana!” Nova jabbed her with her finger. “You better watch it, or you’re getting ambushed in your sleep.”

“Not if I ambush you first.” Vodana used her fingers like talons, tickling Nova in the ribs.

Nova hugged her to pin down her arms, and both of them were laughing.

They stopped when they saw Catyana staring at them. Nova let her sister go and stepped back, clearing her throat. They peered around at the people passing by, who were shooting them curious glances or smiling. Savinya seemed especially pleased and gave Nova a sympathetic look.

“How did that get so out of hand?” said Nova. She seemed to be blushing.

Vodana caressed her cheek. “I think it was long overdue. We need to do that more often, Tinasa, and I’m glad we’re still capable of it.”

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“You’re right. It...almost felt like I was a little girl again, and we were back home.”

“And any moment, Cosina and Lita would waylay us with a pillow fight,” said Vodana.

“Or Tisala and Para would barge in and bombard us with cotton balls.”

“And if things got out of hand, Momma would even join in.”

“Oh, Momma,” laughed Nova. “She could be a bigger scamp than all of us put together.” She took a deep breath and exchanged a pained smile with her sister.

“Do you think there’s more where that came from?” said Vodana.

“I know there is. But it might take some time, and I don’t think we should force it.”

Vodana nodded. “Do you still want to hear about Venora?”

“Oh, yes, sister, of course. But I’m afraid I’ve ruined the mood.”

The sisters continued talking, but Catyana couldn’t concentrate. Why hadn’t she noticed what was going on between Vilam and Venora? Then again, the young Lord had looked so stylish in his house uniform, she hadn’t really taken much notice of anything else. The thought only increased her confusion, and she felt her cheeks become hot. She tried to distract herself by listening to Nova and Vodana’s gossip.

A warm smile lit up Nova’s face. “Well, they have my support if they want it. Let’s hope for the best and see how things turn out.” Nova glanced at Catyana, and Catyana attempted to smile back. But the attempt must have been feeble indeed, because Nova hesitated just an instant, fixing her with that subtle yet intent gaze Catyana knew so well, before turning back to her sister.

Catyana’s ears were buzzing, and she felt dazed. She hardly understood what the two sisters were saying, but realized the conversation was over when Nova squeezed Vodana’s hands, and Vodana awarded Catyana a friendly glance before continuing up the stairs. Vodana, the Lady Utalya, and Vilam had been given accommodations on the fifth floor, which constituted the suites reserved for distinguished guests and the family’s private quarters. Catyana had been paired with Nova at Nova’s request in the guestrooms on the fourth floor, where the other acolytes were lodged.

Catyana took a deep breath when they finally turned into the hallway. Quaint alcoves alternated with large rooms on their left and right. The corridor was lighted by daylight falling in from large windows in the alcoves, and subtle lamps had been let into the ceiling and the walls. The lavish carpet was soft and their steps soundless, which was a relief after the echoes of the entrance hall.

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“I’m so glad you and your sister get along so well,” said Savinya to Nova as she led them down the hall. “It reminded me of my sister and me. We used to frolic about all the time. I really miss it.”

“How did you know Vodana is my sister?” said Nova.

“Oh, the Lady Vodana talks about you all the time when she’s here to visit. She’s very proud of you.”

The Lady Vodana? Catyana shook her head to clear her senses. She was too tired to think about what Savinya meant.

“Why can’t you and your sister play anymore? Don’t you see each other that often?”

“Oh, no, we do. We live together, so we see each other almost every evening and whenever we have the same day off. But our jobs are demanding so nowadays, we’re usually too tired for fun and games.”

“I understand,” said Nova.

“But here’s your room.” They were near the end of the hallway, and Savinya opened a door for them on the right.

When Catyana entered, she momentarily forgot her discomfort. “Oh, it’s beautiful! And look at the view.”

Savinya seemed amused at her outburst, but Nova regarded her with a concerned smile as she let her gaze wander about the room.

“There’s a signal button here by the door if you need anything,” said Savinya, “and the big red one up here is the alarm. If you signal, I’ll be here as fast as I can.”

“I’m sure you will,” said Nova. “Thank you, Savinya.”

“Glad to be of service. I wish you a pleasant stay.” She bowed with a smile and shut the door, leaving Nova and Catyana alone to admire the room.

Their quarters were magnificent, and spacious when compared to what they were accustomed to in Nadil. There were pairs of everything: two double beds, two closets, two desks, and two vanities with mirrors. There was also a little table, several fauteuils, and a small sofa. The furniture was made of white oiled and polished wood, which brightened the room and reminded Catyana of home. She should have felt at ease. Instead, the colorful wood flowers that had been placed about

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the room made her apprehensive. She appreciated the gesture but hoped they could have them removed.

The room was high-ceilinged and faced south, providing a view of the gardens behind the residence. The sun shone through the windows, so Catyana walked over and opened the door onto a large balcony to let in the fresh air. When she stepped out, she saw a table and several chairs. With such an arrangement, they would be able to enjoy the sun all day if they wanted to. She doubted they would have the time, though.

The thought made her frown, and she felt that disquieting knot building up in her stomach again. She approached the railing and wanted to let the spectacular view soak into her soul, as she used to do at home when she saw something worth committing to memory. But as she stood there, an unpleasant tingle chilled her. She tried to ignore it, but the feeling grew and finally made her turn her head to the right.

The dark, snow-capped cones of the Covasin Massif loomed in the distance, stretching across the western horizon like an impenetrable wall. This was the first time she had ever seen them, and the intensity of the impression bewildered her. Why did she feel so threatened? But the longer she stared at them, the more they seemed to oppress her, constricting her throat and diaphragm and forcing her to clutch the railing to keep from fainting.

This couldn't be happening. Not again.

She shook her head. As much as she wanted to clear her senses, she realized it was more a gesture of denial. She didn't want this to be happening. Why now? Why here? Why should mountains she had never seen before make such a devastating impression on her? She shuddered and deliberately turned away, barring the dismal thoughts from her mind. She was becoming quite good at that, barring things from her mind.

But it was difficult to rid herself of the disturbing sensation, and it continued to affect her as she looked straight ahead. Instead of seeing the beauty that lay before her, all she could think about was that somewhere to the south, the gently flowing hills, green woods, and lush meadows suddenly dipped down into the dry, parched basin of the Desert of Vortelan. Nothing could survive there. Nothing ever did. It was death's dominion, and—

She shook her head, violently. This would not do. Her breath was coming much too fast, and she forced herself into a calmer and more controlled mode. Then she deliberately turned to her left.

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She was now facing due east, and there they were, the majestic, snowy peaks of the Tyenar Mountains, which had been her constant companions since her childhood. From this height, she could see the snow glistening on individual summits, as if her old friends were winking at her. She closed her eyes and allowed the images to act as a catalyst, filling her mind with all the pleasant thoughts and memories she could muster.

Gradually, the darkness lifted. She could breathe again and felt warmth spread out from her heart to fill her soul. A gentle breeze rippled through her hair. She lifted her chin and let the bright rays of the sun warm the right side of her face. At this moment she felt wonderful, despite her fatigue and confusion, as if she had reached the top of the world.

She opened her eyes and took a deep breath when Nova joined her at the railing. The two women looked at each other and smiled. For the first time since she had left home yesterday evening, Catyana sensed what it could be like to be completely free and independent. A thrilling and delicious shiver surged down her back. Nova smiled and squeezed her arm, but Catyana sensed her friend's smile wasn't quite as warm and encouraging as it usually was. Nova was concerned about her, but what could Catyana tell her? She sighed, and the two women returned to the room.

It only took them a few minutes to unpack. Unlike most guest accommodations, the guestrooms in the residence were fully equipped with bath and toilette facilities, so Nova and Catyana undressed and freshened up, after which they changed into fresh robes and helped each other brush their hair. While Catyana straightened her things, Nova took care of some paperwork for the Lady Utalya, an urgent matter which she said couldn't be deferred but also wouldn't take very long.

The activity gave Catyana some time to order her thoughts. Not that she was very successful. She knew the whirl of emotions in her heart was probably just a mixture of fatigue and being overwhelmed by so many new impressions. Of course, the fact that an expertly trained killer was trying to end her might have had something to do with it, too. You know, just a little.

But strangely, what worried her even more than being targeted by an assassin was that nagging unease and those dark visions that came upon her so often of late. She had sensed the change for some time now. Her youngest sister, Sinara, had expressed similar sentiments yesterday afternoon.

The recollection of her little sister brought a vague memory to mind, one that had been lurking there in the depths all along, just waiting for the right moment to impose itself upon her thoughts. Why did her darling *porodesa* love the Tinavar so? What did she see in those mythical creatures?

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But Catyana knew. Oh, yes, she knew all too well. And at the thought, an image of her own Tinavar crystallized in her mind, its manifestation so tangible it almost took her breath away. The impact sent her reeling, and she had to sit down on a sofa and close her eyes or she might have fainted. She tried to concentrate on her breathing, as Nova had taught her. But the room had become so hot, and the sweet, sickening odor of wood flowers stifled her senses.

When her surroundings finally came into focus again, she had no idea where she was, but she felt hemmed in, confined to her despair. Through the fog, she perceived a place in which all that existed was pain, shadow, and an overwhelming stench of decay. Only the subtle blue gleam of her love's horn penetrated the thick darkness. But somewhere far away, a friend called her name, breaching the menacing shadows around her like a cool breath of air on a hot summer night.

Catyana...

"*Tevas'an*, Itinales! What have they done to you?" She was appalled at the sight of him. A dull ache spread up from her belly and settled in her heart, filling her with unspeakable sorrow. As she reached out to comfort her friend, all the feelings and images she had suppressed for so long burst upon her in an immense surge of longing, flooding her senses with such sweet pain she could hardly bear it. She wanted so much to give in to her desire, wanted to swoon, forget everything, and just be with him, forever.

"Catyana?"

The second wave hit her with such vicious brutality that everything she had felt before was instantly washed away, leaving nothing but black horror in its wake. Her eyes popped open and her hands shot up to ward it off. "No, no, leave me alone! I won't do it!"

"Catyana."

"Go away!" Something inside her pushed as she had never pushed before, ramming it all down, shoving everything back into the depths of her subconscious where no such thoughts or images could ever bother her again. "Leave me alone, and don't you ever, ever come back!"

"Catyana!"

She hardly felt the stinging blow to her cheek. As if through a misty veil, she saw Nova kneeling in front of her, holding her firmly by her shoulders. It took immense effort to keep her eyes open. Her lips trembled, and she was on the verge of tears. One of them spilled over and slipped down her cheek. Her throat felt sore. Had she been screaming? "What...what happened?"

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“You were completely out of it. I’ve never seen you like this.”

Catyana realized her cheek was stinging. She reached up. It felt hot. “You slapped me.”

“I’m so sorry, dearest. You really scared me, and I didn’t know what else to do.”

Another tear spilled over. “Oh, Nova, could you please just hold me?”

Nova put her arms around her and pulled her close, holding her tight. “Why, my darling, you’re trembling all over,” she whispered in her ear. “Can you tell me what you saw?”

Catyana shook her head. The terrifying images had faded from her mind, and she could hardly remember what the vision was about, only that she never wanted to experience anything like that again, ever. “What’s wrong with me?”

Nova pulled away and studied Catyana’s face. She shook her head and helplessly lifted her hands. “I don’t know. Is it because of the assassin?”

Catyana shook her head. “I thought about it, but I don’t believe that’s the reason.” She put her hand on her chest and realized how heavy her breathing was. “I need to get out, get some fresh air. Were you able to complete your paperwork?”

“Yes, don’t worry about that. We can go if that’s what you want. Besides, the reception is scheduled to begin soon, so we really should be going.” Catyana nodded and Nova helped her up. “If it’s alright with you, I’d like to take the assassin’s arrow with us. I think Lord Tolares and Venora should see it, and so should Natilya and Tanola.”

Catyana nodded again, and Nova took the arrow she had wrapped in cloth before ushering her out the door. The dining hall where they would be gathering was located on the ground level. On the way down, Nova tried to draw Catyana’s thoughts in a different direction by describing what she might expect to find on each floor as they passed it. The third floor, for instance, contained offices, studies, and an extensive library that was well known for its diversity and good taste. It was an established fact that the members of House Tolares did everything in their power to promote culture and literacy.

Catyana felt her cheeks glow at Nova’s elaborations. It reminded her of how gallant and well-bred Chyardal had seemed. If culture and literacy could bring that about in a man, she was all for it. At the thought, a warm feeling spread through her and dispelled some of the blackness that had tried to lodge itself in her heart. The feeling surprised her.

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Adrift in her own musing, Catyana almost missed Nova's description of the ballroom on the second floor, which her friend said also served as the primary reception hall and faced the back. The dining hall on the first floor, the one to which they were headed, was sometimes used for smaller receptions, such as the one they had been invited to.

By the time they arrived at their destination, Catyana was feeling much better. When she tried to remember her vision, all she could evoke was a distant feeling of something being terribly wrong. She therefore stopped trying to remember, but pushed it aside and thought about Chyardal instead.

The large table in the center of the hall had been laid out with drinks in the center and appetizers to the right and left. There were red and white wines, ales, ciders, and juices to choose from. The two young women each selected a glass of fruit juice and a vegetarian hors d'oeuvre. Catyana had switched to a vegetarian lifestyle soon after she met Nova some four and a half years ago, so the choice was almost second nature.

When they looked around the hall, they saw the young Lord standing a bit farther away, deep in discussion with Natilya, Tanola, and Hyelisa, a sober expression etched on his face. He seemed so different from other young men Catyana had known. As she watched him, she felt her cheeks grow hot and the warmth in her heart spread.

Nova decided to join the only other party in the hall, which consisted of the Lady Utalya, who was conversing with Lord Tolares and the young Lady Venora. Vilam, Vodana, and the other three acolytes probably hadn't come down yet, because they were nowhere to be seen. Venora was holding on to the Lord's arm and offered them a smile when they joined the group, but when she looked at Catyana, she paused. It was obvious she had to force herself not to stare, and the inquisitive glances she directed at her were filled with thoughtful concern. Catyana wondered what her problem was.

Nova handed the papers she had prepared in their room earlier to the Lady.

"Thank you, Nova." The Lady turned to Lord Tolares. "Cavan, I don't know if you remember Novantina. She's my chief of staff and manages the affairs of my entourage. I must admit, she's become indispensable to me."

"I remember," the Lord replied. "She made quite an impression on me the last time you were here, very quiet and efficient. Which house are you from, Novantina?"

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“Father, don’t you remember? She’s Vodana’s sister,” Venora replied, smiling at Nova.

“Is that so?” The Lord inclined his head in a subtle nod. “In that case, My Lady, please give my regards to your father. I look forward to seeing him again.”

“Thank you, My Lord. I’ll be glad to pass it on,” said Nova.

“And if I remember correctly, you’re Sister Catyana,” the Lord said, turning directly to her.

Being addressed so suddenly by the Lord himself flustered her, and all she managed was a shy nod in response.

He smiled. “May I ask which house you’re from?”

Catyana hardly dared to look up. “I’m from House Faeren, My Lord.”

Venora didn’t seem surprised and she smiled at her. “So, your family is from the Plains of Tesalin.”

Catyana gaped at her. “How did you know?”

“Father often has to travel on business, and he sometimes lets me accompany him. Several years ago, he took me on a tour of the area west of the Southern Covasins, and we stopped in Faeren for a few days. It’s a beautiful area.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know,” Catyana answered somberly. “I’ve never been there myself.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“*Tezatal*. Maybe I’ll get the chance someday.”

Venora stepped closer and touched her arm. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Father, I hope you don’t mind?”

“No, of course not,” said the Lord with a smile. “You’ve proven often enough that your judgment is sound.”

Venora emulated his smile and turned back to Catyana. “I’m sorry for staring at you earlier. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but...Catyana, did you experience anything unusual while you were in your room?”

Now it was Catyana’s turn to stare. She glanced at Nova, who was watching Venora with that intent gaze of hers. Catyana realized the whole group had become silent, and everyone was looking at her. She turned back to Venora in an attempt to hide the color she felt rising to her cheeks. “Why? Is something wrong?” It came out less friendly than she had intended.

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“I wouldn’t say ‘wrong.’ It’s something in your aura. A kind of...mark.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry to be so insistent, but did you perhaps have a vision earlier, or an impression?”

Catyana glanced at Nova again. Nova nodded. Catyana took a deep breath. “Yes, I did experience something, but I’m loath to talk about it. And I wanted to ask if someone could please remove the...” A ghost of a smile touched her lips. “...if someone could please remove the *venora* from our room.”

Venora sharply drew in her breath.

Catyana felt the blood drain from her face. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“*Sin*, Catyana, *tezatal*,” said Venora, putting her hand on Catyana’s arm. “You needn’t worry. It was a simple word play, and I certainly didn’t take offense. Under different circumstances, it might even have been quite amusing. But I thought for sure my instincts had led me astray, and I was just surprised to discover they hadn’t. I’m the one who’s sorry. I put the flowers in your room believing you might enjoy them. I’m so sorry they had such an adverse effect on you, and I’ll make sure they’re replaced with something more appropriate.”

She studied Catyana’s face. Suddenly, she moved so close Catyana thought she was going to hug her. But Venora only took her hand and squeezed. “I really don’t mean to embarrass you,” said Venora in a whisper. “but you have such lovely hair. Chyardal mentioned it after he returned from his little, uh...quest, and I couldn’t help but admire it since you’ve arrived. Of course, your being a Faeren does explain a lot.”

Catyana’s heart skipped a beat, then doubled its pace. “Thank you, Venora. That’s so kind of you.” She could hardly believe what she had just heard. Chyardal had mentioned her! And to his beloved sister yet, a princess of the House of Tolares! Catyana hoped her interest wasn’t too obvious, and she tried hard not to grin too broadly. Besides, she was beginning to like Venora. She sensed the young woman’s sincerity and felt comfortable in her presence.

“Venora, there’s another issue we need to discuss with you and your father,” said Nova. “Your Excellency, may I?” When the Lord nodded, Nova unwrapped the arrow.

Venora gasped. “Nova, where did you get that?”

“I’m afraid it found us earlier today, which is why our arrival here was delayed.” Nova handed the arrow to Venora.

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Venora took it and studied the shaft. “Oh, no.” She looked at Catyana, her face pale.

“May I?” said the Lord. After he had examined the arrow, he gave it back to Nova. “This is distressing news indeed. But I’m grateful you’ve informed us.” He turned to Catyana. “I’ll have guards posted at your door and on your floor.” To Nova, he said, “My Lady, should I leave a small detail on your balcony?”

“Thank you, My Lord, but I believe it will suffice for the time being if you double your guard around the residence and secure the roof. The assassin delivered her message, so I doubt we have anything to fear at the moment. They usually give their victims time to put their affairs in order before moving in for the kill.”

“Well, thank you for putting it so delicately,” said Catyana, regarding her with a dark look.

Nova gave her a sympathetic glance and squeezed her hand.

“Do you know why Sister Catyana has been targeted?” said the Lord.

“We believe so, yes,” said Nova. “But this might not be the best forum in which to discuss it. If we could find a more private setting later, I would be much obliged.”

“Certainly. I’ll reserve an office on the third floor at *ulavelanetas*.”

“Thank you, My Lord, I very much appreciate it,” said Nova. “But please excuse me, I haven’t found an opportunity yet to inform our chief of security. Utalya, would you be so kind and summarize our adventure for Venora and her father? I’ll be back in a moment.”

Nova took the arrow with her and beckoned for Natilya and Tanola to join her near the table, leaving the young Lord with Hyelisa and the other three acolytes, who had just joined the party. As soon as Nova began to whisper and showed them the arrow, Catyana saw Tanola and Natilya turn pale, and they kept directing concerned glances over at her. The same thing happened with Venora and the Lord as the Lady Utalya filled them in. By the time the Lady finished, Nova had rejoined the group.

“Natilya and Tanola will be joining us this evening, as will the Lady Utalya,” said Nova, “and I hope Your Excellency will allow Venora to be part of our group.”

“Certainly,” said the Lord. “But Utalya’s account regarding your experience this afternoon was truly horrific. I’m very sorry for what happened to you, and in our city, no less. I promise I’ll look into it myself. But please, this is too grim a topic for a reception. Let’s change the subject.”

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“I agree,” said Vilam. “Please, allow me, Your Excellency. Venora, I hope my question doesn’t embarrass you, but I heard somewhere that you’re adopted.”

Catyana flinched at Vilam’s words. She had been so busy with her own affairs she hadn’t realized he and Vodana had joined the group. Besides, what Vilam said was a bit embarrassing because Catyana had been the one who told him Venora was adopted. But what surprised her even more was Venora’s reaction. She stared at him and her face turned the color of ash. “Yes?” The young woman’s voice was very cautious.

“May I ask how you came to be in the Tolares family?”

“Oh.” Her voice sounded so small. “Well, um, I...” She fell silent, biting her lip, and stepped closer to the Lord to hold on to his arm.

Catyana remembered what Nova and Vodana had discussed in the corridor after their arrival, and in addition to Venora’s obviously affected reaction, she noticed how intently Vilam studied the young Lady. Catyana glanced at Nova and Vodana. The two sisters smiled at her, that notorious twinkle of theirs lighting up their eyes. Catyana could no longer help herself and had to conceal the grin that was stretching her lips behind a cough.

“If my memory is accurate, Cavan, I believe you discovered Venora in the orphan’s school, which you founded several decades ago,” the Lady Utalya offered, coming to Venora’s rescue.

“Yes, that’s true,” said the Lord, patting his daughter’s arm. “She was found roaming the woods southwest of the city about twenty-six years ago, alone, disoriented, and with a high fever. Nobody had any idea who she was or where she came from, although we did estimate her age to be between eighteen and twenty at the time. She stayed in the hospital for several weeks, and when she was better, she couldn’t remember who she was or where she was from. I’m afraid her memory never returned, and she has remained a medical mystery to this day.

“The acolytes and deaconesses at the hospital named her Venora, because she had a wreath of wood flowers in her hair at the time she was found. She was placed in the city’s orphanage and attended school there. They soon discovered she was a brilliant student. Although I tried to follow her progress, my schedule wouldn’t allow me to see her again for a year. My wife was still with us at that time, and since we both felt such talent should be promoted, we decided to visit her. Oventya immediately fell in love with the gentle soul, and Chyardal being our only remaining child, Venora

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has been with us ever since. I must confess, we got the better end of the bargain. Nobody could have wished for a more wonderful daughter.”

“Oh, Father.” Venora stood on her toes and planted a kiss on the Lord’s cheek.

“Remaining child?” said Vilam. “I’m sorry if this is inappropriate, but may I ask what happened?”

“Uh, yes, well...” The Lord coughed into his fist. “I’m afraid that is a very sensitive matter, one we don’t often touch upon since it brings back too many sorrowful memories. Let me just say that Chyardal once had a younger sister, Amarya, whom we lost forty years ago this year.”

“Ah, I see,” said Vilam. “I’m very sorry for your loss. But then you adopted Venora.” He gave her a cursory glance.

Venora blushed and cast her eyes down.

“Yes,” said the Lord, “Venora has been with us these past twenty-five years. She has all the rights, status, and privileges of a princess of the House of Tolares.”

“You forgot responsibilities,” said Venora with a smile.

“Yes, of course, those too. Although your mother and I always felt you took them far more seriously than we wanted you to.”

“Thank you for being so candid with me,” said Vilam. “I hope I wasn’t being too audacious.”

“Oh, no, *tezatal*. Nothing we just talked about was anything you couldn’t learn on the street if you asked around. But feel free to ask if something arouses your interest. Answering your questions is a small price to pay for the honor of having you in our house, Your Holiness.”

“I would feel more comfortable if you would just call me Vilam.”

“Thank you, Vilam. You may call me Cavan.”

The Lord reached over and the two men took each other’s hands in a firm grip while Venora shrank back against her father.

Catyana had been stealing furtive glances at Chyardal from across the room. Her heart warmed when she saw how gallant the young Lord behaved toward the acolytes. But she had sensed that Chyardal was overwhelmed at the prospect of having to entertain not just three but six beautiful young women, even if they were as unobtrusive and well-bred as these prospective priestesses. He kept glancing in his father and sister’s direction, as if he were looking for an opportunity to get

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away and join his father's group. Was she mistaken, or had he been looking at her? The thought made her blush.

Chyardal finally bowed himself away from the acolytes and strolled to his sister's side just as his father and Vilam dropped their formality. "I don't mean to be impolite," the young man said, looking at Vilam, "but I would also prefer informal terms if my request isn't too presumptuous."

"On the contrary, I'd be relieved," Vilam said, smiling. "I'm Vilam."

"And I'm Chyardal."

The two men gripped hands.

"Utalya, I would very much like to become better acquainted with the rest of your entourage," the elder Lord said. "Would you do me the honor?"

"I'd be delighted," said the Lady, but her reply sounded strained, and she cast a worried glance in Natilya's direction.

The Lord released Venora's arm. "If you would please excuse us?" He bowed, linked arms with Utalya, and the pair ambled over to the six acolytes standing on the far side of the table. Vodana assumed the Lord's position beside Venora. She whispered something in Venora's ear and put her arm around the younger woman's waist. Whatever she said prompted a weak smile from Venora.

"Chyardal, excuse me, but I was wondering..." Vilam said.

"Yes?"

"When I came down, Vodana and I used the elevator in the west wing. I love the transparent design, but I didn't see any cables and was wondering how it's powered."

"Are you interested in technology?"

"Very much so."

Chyardal's face lit up. "I designed the elevator myself. It runs on magnetic rails, one on each side. The rail in the back is just a safety."

"Well, it seems you two have gotten off to a good start," Vodana declared with an amused smile. "Why don't you show Vilam your workshop, Chyardal? I'm sure he'd be delighted."

"Thank you, Vodana. That's an excellent idea."

"Actually I just wanted to see it again myself," she whispered to Venora, but loud enough for everyone to hear. Venora chuckled.

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“Oh, so that’s how the matter stands,” Chyardal said with a grin. “*Desar*, who else would be interested?”

Everyone in the party was.

“I’m flattered. Let me inform my father where we’re going, and I’ll be right back.”

He left the group and walked over to the elder Lord, where they whispered together for half a minute. Lord Tolares nodded to his son before turning back to the party he was entertaining. He was listening to something Natilya was saying. But Catyana saw the Lady Utalya glancing back and forth between the two, an expression of growing concern on her face.

Catyana saw the Lady’s apprehension mirrored in Nova’s eyes as her friend tore herself away from the scene and spoke into her ear. “Chyardal’s workshop should prove interesting.”

Catyana leaned toward her. “I remember what he told us when we met him on the outskirts of Tolares. Do you think the workshop is the reason he keeps so much to himself?”

“It’s possible. But I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.”

8. The Crate

Pira had to admit, the forest did have a calming effect. She wasn’t as inclined to romance and mystery as Cetila was, but she was capable of enjoying this much-needed break from the usual pressure of their tight military operations. Their recent success had worked wonders on the morale of the Brigade, and the fragrant air was doing its part to restore the spirits of her troops. The journey was becoming ever more pleasant as they approached Navaresa. They were making good progress, the trees were no longer crowding in on her, and Velana was shining directly down on her ever more often. She had felt a bit claustrophobic in the midst of the thick emerald forests of the Navaren.

Pira glanced at her friend. Cetila’s posture in the saddle was immaculate, a true example of military discipline, but she could tell her friend was suffering. Even so, just using the expression produced a delightful tingle in her belly. *Friend*. What a wonderful word! How long had it been since she had used it in terms of their relationship? It must have been a decade, at the least.

During the harsh years of discipline in the Brigade, Pira had felt herself shriveling up inside, as if her soul was being consumed and her body becoming just an empty shell. Oh, she was well

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aware of her physical beauty, which she exploited ruthlessly whenever she felt it would help her achieve her goals. But neither her career in the Crimson Brigade nor her shameless flirtations with men of the high society had been truly fulfilling, and she became more and more desperate as time went by.

Cetila's relationship with Dena filled her with bitter envy. It wasn't fair! Why did Cetila and Dena get on so well, although Dena was an apparent enemy? No matter. Dena wasn't here now, and Pira wasn't about to let anything get in the way of their renewed friendship.

She took another look at her friend. Cetila's face was grave and seemed to be carved of stone. Pira felt sorry for her. No, it was more than that. She sympathized with Cetila's situation, as far as she was able. But wasn't that what friendship was all about?

She nudged her chyeves closer to Cetila's and touched her arm. "How are you holding up?"

Cetila stared at her, unseeing. It took her a moment to realize that Pira was talking to her. Then she took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm sorry, Pira. I'm alright, really."

Pira studied her. "You can tell that to the *jitesi* if you want, but you can't deceive your captain. I'm the one who's sorry. I wish I could do something about it, but we have our orders."

"Maybe orders shouldn't always be followed."

Pira grinned. "So you were telling the truth. You *are* alright."

Cetila attempted a smile. "You said I should always tell you what's on my mind."

"Yes, but we haven't been informed of your mother's reasons. I know how you feel about the Tinavar, but in this particular case, I believe there is a deeper motive behind what we're doing."

"That may be, but is that motive ethical?"

"Isn't that the reason there's a chain of command? Those at the top are the ones who need to make such decisions—and bear the responsibility."

"I don't agree. Just because we're not at the top doesn't mean we should disconnect our brains or amputate our hearts. If we follow an order, we bear part of the responsibility. We have a choice."

"If everyone thought that way, it would be impossible to run any kind of operation. If you disagree with an order, it's your duty to inform your superiors, since you may have valid reasons that could impact their assessment of the situation. But you still need to let them decide."

"Not if their decision goes against my conscience."

Pira regarded her solemnly. "Is it that bad?"

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Cetila took a shuddering breath. “It’s tearing me apart.” She looked back at one of the wagons, visible amidst the mounted columns of their brigadiers.

Pira followed her gaze. It was the wagon that contained the crate with the imprisoned Tinavar. “Why is it so important to you?”

Cetila’s voice was more like a hoarse whisper. “For heaven’s sake, Pira, it’s a Unicorn! It’s the essence of everything wild and free, pure and innocent. And we’re keeping it in a crate and whipping it to death. It’s a terrible injustice. What we’re doing is wrong. I feel it in every fiber of my being.”

Pira didn’t have to look in a mirror to know that her face had gone ashen. “Cetila, please don’t do anything stupid.”

“Why? What would you do if I did?”

“I don’t know. I care too much for you to want to jeopardize our friendship. Please don’t force me to make that decision.”

“What’s the worst-case scenario?”

“Worst-case?” Pira paused, then shook her head. “No, I no longer have any illusions about this organization. I wouldn’t even want to think about the worst-case. But at best, you would probably be court-martialed and executed.”

“We don’t have to go back.”

Pira rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe it. The girl has completely lost her mind!” Fixing Cetila with a bristling gaze, she said, “Do you think the Western Alliance would allow a rogue battalion? I’ll tell you what they’d do: They’d hunt us down and slaughter us like animals. After they’ve crushed the eastern provinces, they’ll have plenty of time to come looking for us. And what’s our little Brigade against Lord Divestelan’s regiments? Cetila, come to your senses!”

“But our small size is our strength. We’re swift, silent, and can hide almost anywhere. We could return to the Navaren. Nobody would ever find us in there.”

“Forget it! I’m sorry, I know how much you love that forest, but a hundred Tinavar couldn’t drag me back in there.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Pira. I forgot how much you prefer wide-open spaces. I can’t believe how selfish I’ve been. There I was, enjoying myself, and all the while you were in anguish.”

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Pira's glance softened. "It wasn't that bad. I've learned a lot in the past fifteen years. But really, Cetila, I beg you not to do anything reckless."

"I'll try. But please, whatever you do, don't let it die. I'm not sure I'd survive that."

"Our assignment is to deliver a live male Tinavar to the Lady in Tolares. The treatment is to ensure it is near death when we deliver it, not dead. But I'll tell you what, if you feel we're going too far, I'll cease the treatment. Under these circumstances, I trust your judgment more than mine."

"Thank you," Cetila whispered. She sighed. "Do you think Davina has reached Tolares yet? She was pretty excited about going."

"Excited? She practically drooled trying to persuade us to give her the assignment. But yes, it is possible she's already there. Knowing her, she probably didn't sleep, but rode her first chyeves to shreds getting to Navaresa. That was at least a ten-hour ride. Since she can use the posts between Navaresa and Tolares to change her chyevi, she could make the 150 leagues in about eighteen hours."

Cetila studied her saddle and patted her chyeves on the neck. Her face was sullen.

Pira squeezed her hand. "Hey, I know how things are between you and your mother. But I'm sure Davina will have only good things to say about you. And even if your mother does think ill of you, I never will."

Cetila threw her a weak smile and squeezed her hand in return.

Pira felt her face glowing. Life was so good right now, and her heart had never been so full. She hoped the impending war wouldn't change that. She couldn't bear it if anything happened to Cetila.

9. Disappointment

Catyana linked arms with Nova and followed Chyardal out onto the veranda, which faced south and was bathed in the rays of the late-afternoon sun. When they stepped into the gardens, Catyana asked Nova to wait so she could take a better look at the building. She wasn't disappointed. The south side of the residence was tiered, like a stepped pyramid. Each floor was set back against the one below, leaving enough room for spacious terraces and balconies. But the structure on her left eluded her.

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Somehow, she found the courage to raise her voice. “Excuse me, Chyardal, but what’s that structure over there? The one that extends beyond the main building?” She had to shade her eyes against the sun to see him and blushed when she saw that he was grinning at her.

He looked in the direction she was pointing. “Oh, that. It is quite interesting, isn’t it? It contains the kitchen and a few other auxiliary facilities used mainly for maintenance purposes. We built it exactly between the two wings of the residence because we figured the design would make it easier to serve the dining hall and parlors located in both wings. We never regretted the decision.”

Cat yana took another good look at the structure and let her eyes follow the elegant curves of its design. A broad stone staircase at its south end swung itself up to the terrace on the second floor, which was connected to the ballroom. Here, as in the front, the architecture of the building was wonderfully organic, avoiding right angles and sharp edges or corners. It was constructed of white polished stone and white glazed wood, but the prominent characteristic was glass, so the residence looked like a brilliant, reflecting tower. The structure’s flowing forms imparted the impression of a living, glowing entity, harmonizing beautifully with the gardens behind it and emphasizing the Selanian concepts of light and life. As on the north side, the walls of each floor were tapered, but here they were also convex, like Folan’s tavern in Nadil, allowing sunshine to fall in from sunrise to sunset.

The gardens themselves were nothing less than magnificent. If the hedges had been higher, the grounds might have been held for a labyrinth. They were arranged in little alcoves of botanic beauty, each retreat expressing its own individual ambiance.

The group had waited patiently, but Chyardal now urged them on, eager to reach his destination. Cat yana faced in the direction they were going, then compared what she saw with the rest of the grounds around her. Set back several hundred armlengths from the residence and a little to the sides were two annexes, one on the east and one on the west. As they strolled toward the east annex, Chyardal explained that the west annex contained mainly quarters for the servants. The annex they were heading for was his workshop. A third building marked the border of the gardens on the far south end. It held the stables and storage areas for equipment and carriages. Several smaller buildings and greenhouses complemented the area.

When they reached the steps of the east annex, Chyardal raced ahead, taking two steps at a time, opened both wings of the portal, and let them enter. The building was easily the size of the Lady

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Utalya's manse in Nadil, but it had been transformed into one huge studio. What remained of the second floor consisted of a spacious gallery that circled the room. Light flooded the main hall through the skylights. The large windows allowed a generous view of the park to the east and the gardens to the west. From the equipment and tools lying around, it was apparent the south wing of the workshop was dedicated to art projects, the north wing to science.

Chyardal led them to the north wing, where an apparatus, which was as tall as he was, stood in the middle of the workspace, clamped into a massive steel rack with a conglomeration of various-sized cables protruding from it. He proudly set himself up before it. "This is our latest project. We've been working on it day and night, so I haven't found much time for anything else in the past months."

Nova and Catyana glanced at each other and smiled.

Vilam gazed at the device in amazement. "It looks like a fusion reactor."

Chyardal stared at him. "It is. How could you tell?"

Catyana almost laughed aloud at the expression on Vilam's face. He looked as if he'd stepped in a pile of chyeves dung. "Well, what other function could such a design have?"

Catyana felt she owed Vilam for attempting to protect her from the assassin earlier, so she decided to draw everyone's attention away from him by saying, "So, Chyardal, is this the reason you keep to yourself so much?"

Nova jabbed her in her ribs, and Venora became pale and shook her head at Catyana. Catyana could feel the color rise to her cheeks. She really needed to stop saying just anything that popped into her head.

Chyardal's face was grim and he stared at the floor. "There are...probably various reasons for that, although this is certainly one of them."

"What exactly does this device do?" said Nova to Chyardal.

He gave Nova a relieved glance. "In general, I would describe it as an energy source. We discharge a pulse into the plasma chamber, which is filled with a dilute gas. I won't explain the process in detail, but what ultimately happens is that an intense magnetic field is generated, which heats the plasmoid to unbelievably high temperatures. This fuses the hydrogen molecules in the gas to helium, resulting in vast amounts of energy. Some of this energy is reinvested to sustain the

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process. The excess is ours to use as we see fit. We're still struggling with a few problems, but we feel we're very close to a solution."

"Who's working on the project with you?" Vilam asked.

"My most trusted assistant is, of course, my sister. She's worked on the project almost as much as I have."

Vilam awarded Venora an appreciative glance, which made her blush and drop her gaze, but this time, she also smiled. Catyana wondered if it was because of her brother's commendation or because she was finally overcoming the shyness and anxiety she displayed in Vilam's presence.

"On the other hand," Chyardal continued, "we both consider Elder Yonatan the head of the project."

Catyana felt Nova twitch beside her. "Elder Yonatan?"

"Yes. He was the one who initiated the project and asked me to work on it with him. I believe he's been here almost more than in Travis over the past two years."

Catyana was surprised at Nova's reaction. She hadn't often seen her fume. "I don't believe this. Chyardal, you're his protégé!"

"Sorry, sister. I should have warned you." Vodana pretended to conceal an impish grin, obviously without much success.

"It's not funny. Why do I get the feeling this isn't the only thing you and Poppa are hiding from me?"

"You must admit, you have been quite busy these past few years. We felt we didn't want to, um...burden you with unnecessary information."

Vilam's glance wandered back and forth between the two. "Who's your daddy?"

Nova's brow furrowed and she gaped at him. "Excuse me?"

"Um..." Vilam's cheeks seemed to be turning red. "That...didn't come out quite the way it was supposed to. But may I ask what the problem is?"

"No, you may not." Nova glared over at her sister in sullen silence.

Chyardal managed to stop staring and close his mouth. "What's this about my being a protégé?"

Venora touched her brother's arm. "We'll discuss it later, brother dear." She exchanged a knowing smile with Vodana.

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“It is a beautiful workshop, though,” Nova said, thawing quickly while glancing up at the skylights.

“You’re also interested in science, aren’t you?” Chyardal said to Nova.

“Yes, very much. Before I assumed my current responsibilities, I was working on various projects with Elder Yonatan in Travis and later in Revan. I’m afraid I haven’t been able to get around to it anymore in the past few years. I really miss it.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather be doing.”

“I must confess I’ve found working with people to be just as fascinating and fulfilling. The world we live in isn’t the result of the scientific knowledge we’ve acquired, although it can make our lives more pleasant. Our world is the result of the little decisions we make every moment of our lives, and those are usually based on our experiences and emotions.”

“I agree,” Chyardal replied solemnly, “although our experiences and emotions are often the result of subtle and unforeseeable events. Our fates could very well depend upon something as inconspicuous as a gentle breeze on a bright spring morning.”

Nova targeted him with a sidelong glance. “Wouldn’t such a view imply it’s almost impossible for us to govern our own fates?”

Vodana clapped her hands in front of her face, smiling playfully. “My, now who would have thought we have two philosophers in our midst?”

“I would say, rather, two theologians,” Nova replied, returning the smile. “The subject quickly drifts into the realm of metaphysics, and I’m afraid my opinion in that regard is quite made up.”

Chyardal grinned. “As is mine. But since I’m speaking to an acolyte of the Selanian Order, I wouldn’t have expected anything less.”

Catyana kept her eyes on her friend. Although she knew Nova as well as anyone could, she also knew Chyardal didn’t. If Nova had looked at her in the way she now regarded Chyardal, she would have either hightailed it out of there or at least proceeded with the utmost caution. Nova hated it when people thought they knew her. Her verbal retaliation in such cases was usually swift and deadly.

Nova’s voice was soft when she spoke, but Catyana held her breath. “If you’re so sure of yourself, Chyardal, I suppose you expect me to have a certain opinion regarding predestination.” Would he be naïve enough to take the bait?

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Chyardal hesitated, and Catyana dared to hope. “I’m sorry, Nova. I didn’t mean to imply being in the Selanian Order requires adherence to a strict theological view, or that anyone, for that matter, can be categorized so simply. But since you brought it up, yes, I do believe Anae foresees everything, as much as I believe He has a plan with which He guides our fates. But I also believe His plan leaves enough room for intercession and freedom of choice. For instance,” he paused for emphasis, then continued while returning Nova’s sidelong glance, “we can choose to forgive, or we can choose not to. Even so, our decisions are by necessity often indiscriminate, since we can’t see the future, or into someone’s heart. We therefore never really have enough information on which to base any decision and are compelled to rely on Anae’s mercy and guidance. On the other hand, when He guides us, I’m sure it’s by such subtle means that we hardly notice.”

Catyana released her breath in relief. *Good, Chyardal. Good for you!*

Nova’s eyes sparkled merrily. “Like a gentle breeze on a bright spring morning?”

Chyardal grinned back. “It seems we understand each other perfectly.”

“Yes, it would seem that way.” There was a soft gleam in Nova’s eyes, and anyone who knew her would have declared the expression on her face to be completely out of character.

In Catyana’s heart, at least a dozen alarms went off at once. This just couldn’t be happening! Why hadn’t she seen it coming? She wracked her brain to find a way to change the subject. “Chyardal, would it be possible to see your stables? I would love to see your mare again.”

Chyardal turned to her. “Of course. Father actually bought two of them just last week.”

“Two! They must have cost a fortune.”

“It does seem a bit extravagant, doesn’t it?”

“But how can such costly animals justify their keep?”

“Come along and see for yourself. Personally, I believe they’re worth every *tseval*. Although I have been told it would be wiser not to use them on certain occasions.” He smiled at Nova, whose eyes twinkled in return.

Catyana wished she could scratch that twinkle out of Nova’s eyes instead of having to hold on to her arm.

Chyardal looked around. “Are there any further questions regarding the workshop? No? Alright, allow me to direct you to the south end of the gardens.”

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Catyana followed, but she would rather have stayed behind and shriek her pain and disappointment into the rafters of the empty workshop.

10. The Apprentice

Lusina adjusted her position on the lavish bed of her suite to ensure her figure was sufficiently outlined by the delicate gown she had put on for just this occasion. Her long, thick hair was sprayed about her on the pillow, framing the seemingly—and for men virtually irresistible—loveliness of her features, just the way Vechiles liked it. With a simple gesture, she opened herself up to him, inviting him in. He leaned down and kissed her neck, where an amethyst pendant on an elegant gold chain adorned her smooth skin.

She gasped with pleasure and arched her back, knowing how vulnerable he was to the soft pressure of her breasts against his arm and chest. Pure desire coursed through her, and she plunged herself into the rising tide of the impassionment, the fifth stage of an enchantress's seduction.

Immersed in the throes of desire, she was hardly aware of her thoughts or actions as her hand brushed her pendant. It was the only piece of jewelry she ever wore and had mere sentimental value. She had long since learned to focus her powers without it. Of course, the amethyst wasn't just any gem, it was a true ascendant with a dark core, one of the most powerful in existence. In recent years, she had encountered only one ascendant of similar quality, and the encounter had been surprising, to say the least.

As Vechiles intertwined his fingers with hers and guided her arms above her head, producing an unexpected but not unwelcome tingle in her thighs and flutter in her belly, she recalled her incredulity that her stepdaughter Soshia had somehow acquired the talent and discipline to control such a stone. Of course, the little twit lacked even a smidgen of experience and had therefore been no serious threat, making it ridiculously easy to outmaneuver and kill her. But she had severely underestimated the stupid bitch's mother, and—

Lusina realized her mistake far too late. Amplified by her own impassioned state, a wave of pure rage seized her. With a muffled screech, she shoved her lover aside and collapsed face-down on the tiled floor, kicking and screaming. It took all her strength to get her emotions under control.

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She was still breathing heavily when she finally sat up and pulled her gown over her knees, staring darkly at the carpet she had only missed by a fingerbreadth.

Vechiles honored her with a compassionate look from his perch on the bed and raised an eyebrow. “Maralena?”

She kept her gaze on the carpet and focused all the bitterness and venom she could muster into that one name, “Maralena.”

“What brought it on?”

Lusina grabbed her pendant and would have torn it from her neck, but a stray glance caught the lovely magenta hue of the rock and stayed her. No, she had sacrificed too much for this stone, and she still associated far too many pleasant memories with it to allow her experience of two nights ago to ruin it for her. She stuffed the pendant back in her gown. Feeling the cold comfort of the precious metal against her skin, she sighed.

“Is there anything I can—?”

Her hand shot up, commanding silence. Without looking at him, she fumed, “No, there’s nothing you can do.” She took a deep breath, and her eyes finally met his. In a gentler tone, she said, “I do appreciate how supportive you’ve been in this situation, Vechiles. Not everyone would put up with it.”

“How could I not? You’ve always been there for me, and I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

A corner of her lips twitched upward. “That is true, isn’t it?”

Since the seduction had been interrupted so suddenly, every corner of her being was still humming with unspent passion, and her desperate longing must have been reflected in her gaze. Vechiles rose and offered her his hand. She allowed him to help her up and slung her arms around him for an ardent kiss. When she finally pulled away, he said, “Do you think a good, strong brandy would help?”

“No,” she whispered. “Today, only one thing will do.” She laid her hand on his chest as if to comfort him and applied pressure, nudging him backward until he fell onto the bed. Then she pulled the straps of her gown away from her shoulders and let the garment slip to the ground.

When she woke up an hour later, feeling refreshed, Vechiles was still sound asleep beside her. She smirked as she reached down to grab her gown, pulling it over her head before getting up.

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Lusina was well aware of the fact that she thrived on her female magnetism's exhilarating influence and reveled in the havoc her stunning beauty wreaked upon male hormones. It was such fun to watch men come drooling to fulfill her every whim. Not that it was necessary with Vechiles. He was hers, had been for many years now, except of course for that one annoying obstacle: his consort, Ilanya, who still held far too much sway over him.

She tried to push the aggravating thought from her mind as she sat down at her vanity, but she wound up pulling the brush through her thick, black locks in harsh, angry strokes, making her grimace in pain. The brush sailed across the room and hit a vase, dislodging the valuable ceramic from its pedestal and sending it crashing onto the tiled floor, where it burst into a thousand pieces.

Lusina was breathing heavily and she felt dizzy, so she clutched the edges of her vanity to steady herself. Maralena Novesta, Ilanya Divestelan, and Catyana Faeren. She had their names committed to memory, but she wished rather they were strung up right in front of her so she could thrust her dagger into their beating hearts and wash herself in their blood as it spilled to the ground. She knew from experience what a glorious feeling that would be.

Those despicable Faerens! What gave them the right to muck up the manasic currents with their powers of induction? If she had the authority and resources to do so, she would wipe out their entire House and end their line forever. But she had at least arranged for the Faeren girl to get what was coming to her. And Maralena and Ilanya, well, she would emerge victorious yet. There were subtler and more satisfying ways of dealing with her adversaries than assassination, and they were so deliciously cruel.

She sucked in her breath when she glanced in the mirror. Her irises had turned purple! Shocked, she closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. She really needed to calm down. There had been several incidents in which coven sisters had gone over the edge. In the end, hatred had washed away even the last shred of their sanity, and each of them had to be put down like a rabid *carulen*.

But that was a danger every enchantress faced if she allowed herself to be touched too often by darkness, and Lusina had followed the call into the realm of shadows more often than any enchantress before her. Her sister Tsenera had warned her countless times to seek balance between the opposing forces of the cosmos. But Lusina had declined to listen, and she feared her stubbornness may have created an irreparable breach between them.

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She opened her eyes when she heard Vechiles stirring. Good, her irises were back to their normal dark brown.

Propping himself up on his elbows, Vechiles glanced into the far corner of the room, where the shards of the vase lay strewn over the tiling. “What happened there?”

“Sorry, I had a little...accident. I’m glad the noise didn’t wake you. I’ll send for a maid to clean it up. Did you rest well?”

He threw back the covers and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “A little accident? Lusina—”

“Be mindful of your next words, Vechiles!”

The intensity of her glare must have given him pause, and he took a deep breath before answering. “It’s just that I’m worried about you. Like I said earlier, I really don’t know what I’d do without you. If anything were to happen to you...”

Lusina’s glance softened. She walked over and sat down beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. “If all goes as planned with the conference, I suppose you’ll be heading back west sometime next week.”

“It’s possible,” Vechiles replied, putting his arm around her and kissing her on the forehead. “Will you be joining us?”

“No, I’m expecting a delivery from the Navaren. The Crimson Brigade seems to be doing excellent work, so I’m sure they’ll accomplish their objective soon. I’ve decided to wait for the shipment here in Tolares. But, my love, do you have any idea how much you’ll be missed?” She took his hand and intertwined her fingers with his.

When he leaned in to kiss her, she responded with expertly controlled passion: not quite enough to satisfy his craving, but enough to keep him coming back for more. At the same time, she conveyed her willingness to surrender herself again should he choose to stay that evening. It was amazing how much you could express with a single kiss. The knowledge of her mastery sent a thrill through her body, which she knew Vechiles would attribute to the prowess of his own feeble lovemaking. She could have laughed at the notion.

But she also felt confused. She was supposed to be in control of every aspect of their relationship, and she usually was, but she had been feeling much too vulnerable of late. Had she been giving him too much of herself during her bequeathal? She knew from experience that

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seduction was a two-edged sword, and you had to be careful not to get too attached to your target or the procedure might backfire. She resolved to be more careful.

As soon as he could catch his breath, Vechiles tried to pull away, but not before his blunt caress had informed her he would accept her silent invitation. “You truly believe they’ve found a Tinavar?”

She smiled as she let her hand run through his hair. It was good to know she could still twist him around her finger. “Yes, of course. Did you ever doubt it?”

“As a rational person, I need to leave room for reasonable doubt.”

“I agree that rationality can be a useful tool. But,” her voice dropped to a dangerous hush, “you should never doubt the source of our power.”

Vechiles took a deep breath and gave her a critical glance.

“I know it’s difficult for you,” she said. “And yet it astonishes me that, after all these years, you’re still not comfortable with these things.”

“You’ve always had a better grasp on spiritual matters than I have, Lusina. I would rather feel the firm grip of steel in my hand than delve into the enigmatic depths of the ethereal world.”

She sighed. “I wish you would get at least those points straight. Spirituality and the ether are the domain of the Selanian priests and priestesses. They can have them for all I care. I refuse to abide by the decrees of a supposed almighty creator to gain access to the invisible world. The arcane arts, on the other hand, allow us to breach the veil that separates us from real power. It will take the Selanian Order ages to unravel these mysteries if they attempt to discover them by scientific or spiritual means.”

“What need have we of the arcane? We can control any population merely by the fact that we are prepared to go beyond the limitations a society has laid down for itself. Brandish a sword, let its cold metal gleam in the moonlight, and you will spark naked terror in the eyes of your victims. Is such power not sufficient to conquer the world?”

She studied his face. He couldn’t be serious! She was about to reply when she saw the slightest of gleams light his eyes. Her own flashed for an instant, but she had herself under control again immediately and eyed him with a cold gaze. “Don’t make fun of me, Vechiles. We both know there’s more to government than suppressing the population by fear. Although, I must admit, that can be enjoyable.” At least it usually was for her.

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She restrained a smile at the recollection of a such an incident, in which she had virtually bathed in the blood of her victims. At the thought, her heartbeat quickened, and darkness filled her soul. Somewhere deep inside, voices whispered in the gloom, and she almost swooned at the touch of such immense and unbridled viciousness.

But the memory of her purple irises made her pause. No, she needed to stay in control. Besides, the voices confused her almost as much as her current vulnerability. They had been echoing through the winding corridors of her mind for so long now, she often couldn't discern between their opinions and her own. The thought that she might one day lose herself in them completely scared her to death.

Vechiles regarded her with a concerned gaze. "Lusina?"

She took a deep breath. "Yes, what I meant to say is that true power lies in the veiled wisdom of the animistic universe. There is such a diverse multitude of beings in the unseen realms around us. If we can salvage their arcane knowledge, the vast forces hidden in even the tiniest pebble will be ours. Imagine how it would be if such power were free for everyone to use. Isn't that the world we envisioned, Vechiles? The world we wanted to create together?"

He regarded her with a diverted smile. "You haven't allowed my discomfort to stop you in the past. Why should it worry you now?"

"It would make me feel as if we were really doing this together," she answered, her eyes pleading.

Vechiles shook his head. "But we *are* doing this together, dearest. Someone must order the affairs of the world or we wouldn't have the Black Guard or our magnificent army."

She smiled inwardly. Vechiles's pet military forces were but insignificant playthings in the broader picture. Nevertheless, they would do for now and help to accelerate their true plans. She could feel her smile echoed in the depths of her soul, where huge wings stirred in the shadows.

There was a knock at the main door of the suite. Lusina twisted away from her lover's embrace and got up. "Who could that be at this time?" She went into the next room and waited at the door, staring at Vechiles until he shrugged and disappeared again into the bedroom. Only then did she open.

The owner of the tavern stood before her and bowed low. "I'm very sorry to disturb you, My Lady, but a courier has arrived for you."

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“Thank you, Anosen, I will be right down.” She closed the door. “Vechiles, I’ll be back soon. I’m certain the courier was sent by the Crimson Brigade.”

“Then you’d better go quickly,” Vechiles replied from the doorway of the adjoining room, swirling a golden-brown liquid in a glass he must have poured for himself from her liquor cabinet.

Lusina would have rebuked him, but she was too excited and didn’t want to deal with his insolence right now. She pulled a silken robe over her gown, blew him a kiss, and hurried downstairs. The guest hall was filled to overflowing because of the approaching conference, even though the tavern was on the northwest outskirts of Tolares, near the botanical gardens.

A hush fell upon the assemblage as she entered the room. She knew how she must appear to them, with her hair thrown about her shoulders, cascading to her waist in wild disarray, and only an elegant bathrobe to conceal what her figure promised lay beneath. The women in the hall were struggling to regain the attention of their male companions, all the while throwing poisonous glances in her direction.

Lusina smirked. She took pleasure in the knowledge that nobody would dare to confront her. Even if the whispered rumors were false and she hadn’t been the mistress of the most powerful man in the western provinces, her position in society was still far above this rabble here. She was Lady Marusen, consort to the head of one of the oldest and most prominent of the Great Houses.

She spotted the courier near the bar. The messenger was wearing an unassuming, dark brown cloak. Only the bottom of her long, black dress showed below it. Nobody would guess that, beneath the cloak, she was wearing a black and crimson uniform.

Lusina recognized the girl immediately. She had long since reached a decision and was hoping for such a development. Her daughter Tavita was well trained and would soon be on her way to Travis, where she needed to gain some experience before Lusina could take her to the next level. For that reason, Lusina would not hesitate if the subsequent interview went at all as she expected.

Lusina winked to gain the proprietor’s attention. He had been watching and immediately scuttled over. “Yes, My Lady, how may I serve you?”

“Do you have a room where the courier and I could speak undisturbed?”

“Yes, of course. You may use the private conference room in the back. I will show you where it is.”

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The proprietor led the way and Lusina gestured for the courier to follow. The conference room was quite large, sunny, and faced the gardens. Lusina found it suited her purposes exactly. “Thank you, Anosen. That will be all.”

The proprietor bowed himself out and closed the door behind him.

Lusina turned to the courier. “What news do you bring me?” There was a pleasant tingle of anticipation in her belly, for more reasons than one.

The brigadier slapped her fist against her breast and bowed. “Captain Pirena wishes to inform you that we have secured a male Tinavar, as you instructed. The steed was captured yesterday afternoon and is on its way to Tolares.”

“Have you commenced with the beast’s treatment?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

Lusina rewarded her with a subtle smile. “Excellent! That’s the best news I’ve received in weeks. Tell your superiors that I commend you all.”

“Thank you, My Lady.”

Lusina took a closer look at the girl. Her niece had delicate features, but she could see no similarity to other members of the Novesta family. Strange. She should have noticed at least a slight resemblance to her sister Tsenera, but there was nothing. Perhaps it was time for another sister-to-sister chat. On the other hand, they needed to keep their true relationship concealed while their plans matured, so it might have to wait. “You’re Lord Novesta’s youngest daughter, aren’t you?”

“Yes, My Lady, I am Davina, and it is a great honor to serve you.”

Lusina waved the comment aside. “Captain Pirena is your older sister, is she not?”

“Yes, Pira is my sister.”

“What is your rank?”

“I am second lieutenant and commander of the second company. Your daughter, First Lieutenant Cetila, is my commanding officer.”

“Ah, Cetila. What news can you give me of her?”

Lusina saw the girl narrow her eyes just a fraction, and her words sounded forced. “Cetila is our champion, My Lady. She captured the Tinavar single-handedly.”

“Did she now? That surprises me.”

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“We are proud to serve under her, My Lady.”

Lusina suppressed a smile. Davina’s voice and bearing stood in direct opposition to her words. “I am glad to hear it. When will the Tinavar arrive in Tolares?”

“Transportation in the Navaren is difficult, but the shipment should be expedited as soon as the Brigade reaches Navaresa. If everything goes as planned, we estimate the Tinavar will arrive in Tolares in a week, at the latest.”

“Very good! But I marvel at your proficiency. It takes more than just courage and stamina to travel the route from the Navaren to Tolares in a single day.” Would the girl take the bait?

“And I am overwhelmed by your wisdom, My Lady, to select a tavern on the outskirts of Tolares. It makes it so much easier for us to convey communications.”

Excellent answer! She was countering flattery with adulation. Tsenera had trained her daughter well. Although Lusina had always admired Davina’s dexterity, which rivaled Tavita’s, she was beginning to like the girl. “Are you presuming to tell me what is wise, Lieutenant?”

Davina’s eyes opened wide. “No, My Lady, of course not. Please, pardon my audacity.”

Good, she could handle a rebuke. Now for the next step. “Tell me, Lieutenant, why are you here?”

Davina stared at her in surprise.

“Well?”

“Because...because I felt such an important message should reach you as soon as possible, My Lady.”

“So why not send a junior officer or a brigadier from the enlisted ranks? What’s a lieutenant doing so far from her command?”

Davina hesitated. “I...I was hoping to be of service to you, My Lady.”

“Oh, were you now? Aren’t things going fast enough for you in the Brigade?” Lusina watched the girl closely. She could see her struggling with herself.

“I was hoping my sister would promote me to first lieutenant when Tavita left,” the girl finally answered, attempting to suppress the bitterness in her voice.

“And instead she chose Cetila.”

“Yes.”

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This was an interesting development. Davina was not only overly ambitious, but she wanted influence, a fact Lusina could easily exploit. Besides, the girl was jealous of Cetila, and Lusina could use someone in the Brigade who would keep an eye on her stepdaughter. It was a pity Tavita had chosen Pirena as captain of the Brigade. Davina would have been a much better choice, easier to control. But it would have been suspicious if they had promoted her directly from junior lieutenant to captain, and the troops probably wouldn't have accepted her as their new leader. At least not yet. "What would you be prepared to do for me?"

Davina stared at her with wide eyes. "Anything," she whispered.

Lusina narrowed her eyes and raised her chin. "I accept. Hand me your sword."

Davina could hardly contain her excitement. She opened her cloak and unsheathed her weapon, offering Lusina the hilt.

Lusina took it. "Kneel."

The girl lowered herself to the floor.

"Stretch out your left hand."

Davina obeyed.

In a swift and smooth motion, Lusina grabbed Davina's wrist and swept the sword's blade across her palm. Davina gasped in surprise but didn't cry out, although the gash was deep. Lusina drew the blade across her own left palm. She clasped Davina's hand tightly in her own, merging the blood dripping from their wounds. With her eyes closed, she raised the sword to the heavens. "Hear me, My Lord, and accept this, the blood sacrifice of your new servant."

Although the day outside was bright, the room filled with the gloom of twilight. Lusina could feel a light breeze caress her face and hair. Her clasped hand was glowing like the amethyst around her neck, the light expanding to consume them. Behind her, she sensed immense wings unfolding, enveloping the two women in darkness. Then the light exploded in a silent flash of magenta.

Davina blinked and stared.

Lusina pulled her to her feet. "What did you see?"

"I...don't know. It was huge, dark."

"Were you frightened?"

"Yes."

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Lusina smiled. “Good. I would caution you to fear him. But you will answer to me for the time being. You are mine now, Davina. And don’t you ever forget it.”

“Yes, My Lady.” When Lusina returned her sword to her, Davina glanced at her own palm and sucked in her breath. The deep gash that had been there just moments ago was gone, and there was no trace of blood anywhere. She stared at Lusina. “Are you a priestess?”

Lusina felt as if she had tasted spoiled milk, and she spat out the words, “A priestess?” Softening her voice, she continued, “No, Davina, I am something much more powerful. But rest assured, as my apprentice, I will prepare you for your trials. And when you’re ready, then let them tremble and beware the wrath of an enchantress.”

Davina’s eyes grew bright with dawning comprehension. “I understand.”

“Your first assignment will be to return to the Brigade. Keep your eyes open, Davina. I’m counting on you. I especially want you to watch Pira and Cetila. Report anything to me when you return to Tolares, anything at all, even if you feel it is inconsequential.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“Very well. You are dismissed. Inform your superiors that I am extremely pleased with their performance.”

Davina rushed forward, dropped to her knees, and pressed Lusina’s hand to her lips. “Thank you, My Lady, thank you.” There were tears in her eyes.

Lusina put her finger under Davina’s chin and raised her head, applying gentle pressure to force her back on her feet. She caressed the girl’s cheek. “You’re going to do very well, my young apprentice. Go now.”

Davina slapped her fist to her heart and bowed, then rushed from the room.

Lusina watched her go with a satisfied smile on her lips. If only Tavita had been so enthusiastic. Gifted, certainly. Enthusiastic, not so much.

When she returned to her suite, she found Vechiles standing at the window, staring outside. Lusina stole up to him and felt him flinch as she put her arms around him. “Where did your mind wander off to just now?” she asked, resting her head on his back.

He took a deep breath and sighed. “I was wondering how things are going at the camp.”

She took a step back and forced him around, searching his face with a penetrating gaze. “You were thinking of Ilanya, weren’t you?” She made sure the venom in her voice couldn’t be ignored.

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He hesitated. "Among other things, yes."

"How much longer will you allow that unrelenting slut to stand between us, Vechiles?"

He clenched his teeth. His words seemed calm enough, but cold as ice. "I doubt you have much to worry about in that respect. What news do you have?"

She eyed him warily before answering. "It's as I thought. They've really captured a Tinavar. Interesting, though. It seems Cetila caught the animal herself. Maybe I've underestimated her."

"I understand your caution. She was very close to Varan. It's always difficult when our children don't share our visions for the future."

"Our children?"

"Sorry, stepchildren."

Lusina sniffed. Except for Vechiles and her coven sisters, not many people knew that none of her supposed children were actually her own. And she could care less about any of them except, of course, Tavita.

Well, two down, one to go. After Maralena's insolence two nights ago, the cruelest punishment she could contrive for her niece was for Maralena to see Cetila gutted before her very eyes. Now, wouldn't that be glorious? She could make it the first trial of Davina's Dedication, which would take care of several problems: revenge on Maralena, and Cetila out of the way, bringing Davina one step closer to leading the Brigade.

She dreamed of the day when she would be rid of Ilanya, Maralena, and Amendel, and there would be no more obstacles standing in the way of a permanent union between Houses Marusen and Divestelan. With Davina in charge, they would be in full control of the Brigade, and she and Vechiles would be near invincible.

"How are things with Gevinesa?" she said, smiling to herself.

"Not good. I believe she may have helped Bejad Tsimerel escape."

"The one you discovered to be a liaison officer of the High Priestess?"

"The same. I can't believe he managed to get away, after delivering so many operatives of the Resistance into our hands by his inept methods."

"Bejad is a fool!"

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Vechiles chuckled. “That’s an understatement. But I’m certain we’ll apprehend him here in Tolares. On the other hand, we might even be doing the High Priestess a favor by getting rid of him.”

They both laughed, but Lusina took Vechiles’s hand and pressed it against her heart as she drew him toward her, and the room grew silent.

11. Lore of Old

The tour of the stables was impressive. Lord Tolares owned eight carriages, the most luxurious of which could easily hold twelve people and was drawn by a team of eight chyevi. Catyana tried to admire all the animals—there were at least four dozen of them—and even commented on the outstanding qualities of the two Tesalian mares. Earlier this afternoon, she would have been overwhelmed by everything she saw, since she had never believed to one day stand in the presence of so much wealth and the symbol of so much power. Now, all she felt was pain and sadness.

She had scolded herself countless times in the past hour for the wicked thoughts she had allowed toward her friend. Of course, she would never scratch Nova’s eyes out, just as she could never blame her for any of this. Her best friend had always been kind to her and never claimed anything for herself if she realized Catyana had set her heart on it.

But Chyardal was a human being of flesh and blood with a mind and will of his own. That changed everything. If Chyardal loved Nova, and Nova Chyardal, how could she stand between them? It wouldn’t be right.

On the other hand, she couldn’t get the warmth she had felt in her heart out of her mind. She wanted so much to feel it again. No, she needed it, more than anything! Chyardal was her anchor, her guiding light. Just the thought of him chased away all the shadows that kept trying to close in on her. She was so afraid—afraid of what was coming, afraid of the thing inside her trying to claw its way out. But she somehow felt secure around Chyardal. Just looking at him, the way he walked or pointed something out as he showed them around the buildings, made the warmth spread and her heart lurch for joy at the thought of so much tenderness.

But maybe there was still hope. She had never felt like this about anyone before. Maybe they really were meant for each other. Wasn’t Anae all powerful? Couldn’t She intervene on her behalf,

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save her from her plight, do something so everyone would come out happy? Catyana knew She could—if She wanted to.

She yanked her hair, hard, taking a fistful at the very end where she knew it would hurt the most. *Stop deceiving yourself, Catyana. You're an idiot, and you know it!* She didn't care that people were beginning to look at her every time she wrenched out a strand of her thick, golden mane. She rather enjoyed their shocked expressions. Sometimes, she just let the locks float to the ground where she had torn them out. Or she collected them in a wad in her hand until she had enough together to throw at something—or someone. Maybe there were less conspicuous methods of punishing herself, but it was no concern of hers. Let them stare. Let Nova squeeze her arm and regard her with that tender, anxious glance of hers. She didn't care. She didn't want to care. She *wouldn't* care!

She could have thrown herself on the ground and bawled right out in front of everyone. Of course she cared! And she knew she was an idiot. The dull ache that had settled in her heart and wouldn't go away had always been her most reliable indicator, if she cared to listen. She had seen the signals, had seen with her own eyes—and especially with her heart—what had passed between Nova and Chyardal. If she ignored it, then she was deceiving herself and deserved nothing less than the bitterest punishment.

But she didn't know what to do. She felt that black cloud of despair hanging over her, as it had been for weeks now. All she needed to do was open up and let it descend. It would be over quickly. The blackness would dissolve her being and leave nothing but sweet oblivion.

She clenched her fists in pain and frustration until her knuckles turned white and her nails cut into her palms, drawing blood. Wasn't there anyone out there who could help her? Anyone at all? Where was Nova's precious Anae when you needed Her?

She had reached the gardens and was wandering toward the residence when the ache and pain she had bottled up in her heart finally overflowed and the first tear spilled over. Luckily, she had dropped behind, so no one noticed when she brushed it away. But more tears followed, and she could hardly keep up with them all. Her vision blurred, and the only reason she realized she might have stumbled into an alcove filled with wood flowers was because of the colorful blotches everywhere—and of course the thick, sweet scent she remembered from her room.

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But contrary to the episode in their suite, the scent wasn't sickening anymore. It was alluring. When Catyana caught a whiff of it, she slowed down. Her head felt groggy, and she seemed to be enshrouded in a strangely evanescent, glowing mist. The clouds billowed around her and then dispersed, fleeing her senses while enfolding her in soft luminescence. It made her euphoric but was somehow so peaceful. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. Warmth spread up from her belly and stole into her heart, driving away all the dark thoughts. It was such a relief, not having to feel all that pain and despair, even if it was for just a moment. And the flowers were so striking, she could hear them calling to her, drawing her like a magnet. She bent down and drew in their mesmerizing scent.

"No, Catyana, don't!" Venora's cry seemed to come from far away, and it came much too late. The blossoms' intense fragrance had already penetrated Catyana's sinuses, bringing tears to her eyes and overloading her senses. She tried to get up, but dizziness and nausea overcame her instantly. If Venora hadn't caught her, she would have slumped to the ground. Venora eased her down and offered her shoulder as support so Catyana could sit up.

Catyana pressed her fingers against her eyes and forehead, which felt as if someone were renovating the inside of her skull with a chisel. "*Teva'lin*, that's never happened before."

"Yes, they can have that effect, especially if you insist on sticking your nose in a batch although you know you're sensitive. Here, put this in your mouth. But don't swallow it, just let it dissolve. I assure you, it'll help." Venora passed her a brown, crystalline object about the size of a marble.

Catyana examined it from all sides. "What is it?"

"Tonisian sugar."

"It's pretty."

"And potent. Believe me, you won't find anything better for your condition."

"My condition? And what would that be?"

"At the moment? I would say acute denial."

Catyana shot her a sour glance but did as she was told and popped the crystal into her mouth. A warm, spicy sweetness spread over her tongue and into her head, clearing her senses. "*Tinataraan esa.*"

"*Tezatal.*" Venora sighed and shook her head. "Catyana, tearing out your hair or intoxicating yourself with wood flowers isn't going to change the way things are."

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Catyana didn't need to hear what she knew well enough herself. "Well, then, Miss Know-It-All, if you're so smart, what do you propose I do about it?"

Venora looked her in the eye. Catyana was surprised not to see any reproach there, just compassion. "I think the more essential question right now is what you *shouldn't* do about it. Believe me, Chyardal won't be able to help you. Even if he didn't love Nova, he's not what you're looking for."

Pain and anger welled up in her again, and another tear spilled over. "How would you know?" she hissed. "How do you know Chyardal and I aren't meant for each other? What if he really does love me? Or have you become so stuck up that a simple farm girl is no longer good enough to become your sister?"

Venora caressed Catyana's cheek and wiped the tear away. "You are no simple farm girl, Catyana, but you're already my sister. Then again, I suppose you'll discover that for yourself soon enough, even if it'll have to be the hard way."

Catyana stared at her. She didn't know if she should laugh at Venora or cry on her shoulder. She sullenly turned her head in the other direction. "Go away. You're only here to pester me."

"I'm here because I thought something like this might happen, so I stayed close when the others moved ahead. Look, I can't assume the responsibility of your burden for you, and I don't want to. I can only help you carry it a bit. I'd really like to be your friend, but I can't if you won't let me."

Catyana whirled around and glared at her, knowing full well the grass would leave an embarrassing stain on her bottom when she got up. She felt the same way she had an hour ago when she wanted to scratch Nova's eyes out, but with Venora, she didn't have quite the same scruples.

Venora gave her a pitying look. "Go ahead. I'm a big girl. I can defend myself."

Catyana's anger skyrocketed like a display of fireworks. Without thinking, she snatched up a fistful of grass and threw it in Venora's face. The blades were caught up by an evening breeze and drifted harmlessly back to the ground.

Venora didn't even flinch and her smile contained little humor as she brushed some of the blades from her dress. "Sorry, Catyana, but I've trained hard to steel myself against such terrifying weapons as fistfuls of grass. Would perhaps one of your wads of hair have been more effective?"

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Oh, and before you squander more of your energy, I'm also quite impervious to poisonous glances and looks that could kill."

Catyana jammed her lips together. "Stop goading me!"

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

Catyana clenched her hands, then threw them up in frustration. Was she so transparent?

"No, not to everyone, but you are to me. Like I said, you're my sister."

Catyana shook her head. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I have three sisters, and you're certainly not one of them. I..." She suppressed a sob, then clutched at her heart, wishing she could somehow keep in the pain that way. She looked up, gasping for air. What was the use? Venora could probably read her thoughts no matter how many mental guards she put up against her. "It hurts so much, thinking about him," she whispered.

Venora nodded. "That, and a nice, strong overdose of wood flowers. Usually does the trick. It's a great combination for people who are trying to drown themselves in self-pity."

Catyana's hand only got halfway to Venora's face. She couldn't believe how fast such a small, delicate-looking person could move. Venora sighed and pushed herself closer to Catyana with her free hand, but instead of rebuking her, she lifted Catyana's hand to her lips and kissed it. Then she stroked her hair.

Somehow, all the fight had gone out of her, and she felt dead tired. But she was sure Venora knew that. And it was probably just what Venora had been aiming for in the first place—to wear her out. How had she known that her tactic of continual provocation was just what Catyana needed?

Venora looked into her eyes. "You should know that by now, little sister. I knew it the same way I've known everything from the first moment I saw you." She shifted to make herself more comfortable. "I'm afraid your emotional stability will continue to be affected for several days. There's not much I can do about it now, you've seen to that. Although I assume your emotions were coming apart at the seams anyway, now that you've been called." She took a deep breath as she gazed into the evening sun.

Catyana stared. She never would have been able to lift her face in that direction without some kind of protection against Venora's brilliance, but Venora wasn't even shading her eyes. Catyana only knew of one other person who could do that.

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Venora's head snapped back, and her eyes opened wide. "What, really?" She grabbed Catyana's hands. "Please, tell me that's not true."

"No, it's true."

Venora probed her face. "When did you see this?"

"Two days ago. It was late-afternoon, just a few hours before Soshia was killed. The sun was already fairly low on the horizon, like it is now, and Vilam just looked right into Velana without blinking an eye. Soshia asked him about it, and he gave her some pitiful excuse about pigmentation. Boy, did she ever call him out on that!"

"Soshia?" Venora dropped Catyana's hands and shook her head. "No, this just can't be happening. It's all so confusing."

"Why? Do you know Soshia?"

"I...know of her. Vodana filled me in."

Catyana aimed a sidelong glance at her. "Now you're not being honest with me."

Venora drew in her breath and raised her chin. She flashed Catyana a bitter smile. "Being your sister cuts both ways, doesn't it?"

"Serves you right. Although I really wish you'd stop saying that. You're not my sister."

A corner of Venora's mouth twitched upward. "I won't quarrel with you on that point. Like I said, you'll just have to find out the hard way."

Catyana was too tired to fling up her hands in exasperation, but she did manage a weak, "Ugh." She shook her head. "I still have no idea what you're talking about."

"You will, and I'm afraid it'll be sooner than you'd like."

Catyana sniffed. "Great, another cryptic doomsday message. Just what I need." She sighed. "And what about Soshia?"

"What about her?"

"You became pretty apprehensive when I mentioned her. Aren't you going to tell me what that's about?"

Venora looked at her for a moment, studying her. "I do want you to trust me, Catyana. Alright, I saw her in a dream."

Catyana's mouth dropped open. "You did? So did Mara and Vilam."

"What, really?" Venora shook her head. "This just gets more and more confusing."

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“When did you dream about her?”

“Two nights ago.”

“The night she died. Mara and Vilam also dreamed about her that night.”

“Do you know what they dreamed?”

Catyana shook her head. “I only know that Soshia told Vilam about you.”

“Oh, no!”

Venora looked so shocked, Catyana almost felt sorry for her.

Venora gave her a weak smile. “That’s kind of you.”

“I said, ‘almost.’”

“Technically, you didn’t say anything.”

“Ugh! You know what I mean. But what did you dream?”

“Well, it was strange. I was in this beautiful park with strange plants and flowers. And there was a large tree in front of me with low-sweeping branches. When I asked Soshia where we were, she said we were on Halena Yazoral, but at a time many years from now. And then she told me that I needed to prepare myself because the Emissary was coming, and she asked me to please take good care of him for her. There was such pain in her eyes when she said that. But then she tried to smile and said she trusted me to open her heart when the time comes. But the strangest part was that she never once called me by my name. She always called me...”

“What? What did she call you?”

“Covasatal.” Venora drew in a deep breath. “Of course, I thought it was just a silly dream. But then I heard the news yesterday morning of what happened in Nadil, that the Prophet’s Bow had been used for the first time in five hundred years, and that a young woman named Soshia Rotasen had died in a fire in the same hour.”

“I was there for both events.”

“Oh, Catyana.”

“Well, I didn’t actually witness Soshia’s death, fortunately, but we did arrive at the fire just minutes later.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“So am I. After Vilam used the Prophet’s Bow, I was both confused and excited, but then the fire happened, and I didn’t even think of him anymore.”

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“Of course you didn’t. That’s understandable.” She sighed and shook her head. “Why is all this happening now? I’m already confused enough as it is.”

“Do you love him?”

“Who, Vilam? I have no idea. I just met him a few hours ago.”

Catyana shot her a bitter glance. “Well, at least you’re getting a chance at love. Where does that leave me?”

“It leaves you with me as your friend, if you’ll let me.” She looked into the sun again for a moment, but she must have sensed Catyana’s puzzled gaze and turned back. “I know I’m a strange girl, but I hope you can see past that.”

“I’d like to, but please tell me how you do that. And don’t give me that pathetic story Vilam dished up the other day.”

“I wish I could tell you, but I just don’t know. What my father told you earlier is the truth. I don’t remember anything before they found me wandering in the woods twenty-six years ago. I have no idea who or what I am.”

“Right. That’s just great. Instead of answers, all I ever get is more confusing questions. Oh, and as a bonus, I also get this huge, dark cloud of doom hanging over me,” she said, mimicking the size of the cloud above her head with her hands. She took Venora’s hand and squeezed. “Can’t you understand? When I look at Chyardal, all the shadows just seem to melt away. That has to mean something. Won’t you help me? Please?”

Venora sighed and brushed a golden lock out of Catyana’s face. “I’m so sorry, but I can’t. I wish you all the happiness in the world, and believe me, I would never begrudge you my brother, if that’s what he—and you—really wanted. But Chyardal and Nova are meant for each other, and they really do love each other. But because of who they are and what they’ve experienced, they both need time to figure things out for themselves. They’ll come around sooner or later, and there’s nothing you can do to change that. All you can do is get in the way, which will make it be later rather than sooner, but I beg you to spare them. They’ve been through enough as it is, especially Nova, and their plight is far from over. Don’t they deserve a little happiness?”

Catyana lifted her hand and let it drop again. “Don’t I?”

“Of course you do. But for some people, there’s no happiness until they reach the end of the tunnel.” She leaned over and put her hand over Catyana’s. “Please, at least think about it.”

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Catyana sighed. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I could give it up so easily, even if I wanted to. My innate stubbornness tends to get in the way of things like that. But I promise to talk to Nova about it. I was meaning to anyway.”

Venora squeezed. “Thank you. I know you’re sincere, despite the confusion that’s tearing you apart, so your word is good enough for me.”

They both turned when they heard someone coming across the lawn. It was Nova and Chyardal. They must have turned back to look for them.

When Nova saw her friend on the ground, she rushed to her side. She didn’t say anything, just gave Venora a grateful glance and stroked Catyana’s hair.

“Are you alright?” Chyardal asked.

“I think so,” Catyana replied, “although I wouldn’t mind getting off the ground.”

Chyardal regarded her with a quizzical glance.

Catyana managed a tired little smile. “Your gardener is doing his job, Chyardal. He’s making sure the lawn gets enough moisture.”

Chyardal’s puzzled look turned to one of shocked understanding. “Oh, yes, of course. Oh, Catyana, I’m so sorry. Here let me help you.”

Catyana’s heart skipped a beat when he clumsily put his arm around her to help her up. She went rigid and closed her eyes. “No, Chyardal, please, it’s alright. My friends will do it.” She stretched out her hands to Nova and Venora, who immediately took hold, nudging Chyardal out of the way.

As they pulled her up, Venora whispered in her ear. “Your friends?”

Catyana looked into her eyes, hoping Venora could see how terrible she felt about the things she had said to her. “Yes, my friends,” she whispered back.

Venora smiled and nodded, her eyes glowing. Nova wanted to lead Catyana away, but Venora stopped her and unhooked her dark green summer cloak, which she draped around Catyana’s shoulders.

Catyana was puzzled. “I’m not cold, Venora.” Venora smiled and gave her a little swat on the rear. The cold, wet sensation back there made her eyes open wide, but then she had to suppress a giggle. No, she really didn’t want to be walking around like that in front of the others. “Thank

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you,” she said, keeping her voice low so only Venora would hear. “I’d completely forgotten about the grass stains.”

“*Tezatal*,” Venora whispered in her ear as she fastened the two hooks near Catyana’s throat. She and Nova led her to a bench and sat beside her, one on each side. They looked up when the others who had gone ahead began to trickle back into the alcove.

“What’s going on?” Vodana inquired.

Nova shaded her eyes against the evening sun. “Catyana was suddenly overcome by dizziness.”

Vilam eyed the wood flowers growing in the alcove. “Uh-huh.”

Nova looked up. “Alright, Vilam, what are you trying to tell us?”

“Well, if you take into account the statue over there, this spot seems to be filled with the lore of old.”

Catyana looked in the direction Vilam had gestured and felt her heart jump. Her words hardly rose above a hush. “I hadn’t even noticed it. It’s lovely.”

They all stared at the statue, which was situated at the center of the south quarter of the garden.

“It’s interesting that you should keep these flowers here, Venora,” Vilam said.

“Yes, well,” she said with a blush, “it’s just a silly bit of sentimentality, because of my name, you know.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Don’t you believe me?”

“Oh, I believe you,” Vilam said, smiling. “But admit it, you’re keeping the best part to yourself, right?”

“Vilam, what are you getting at?” Nova asked. “And how did you know Venora put the flowers there? It could have been the gardener.”

“No, it was definitely her.” He grinned at Venora. “Tell them.”

Venora stared at him. She finally closed her mouth and looked at Nova.

Nova’s gaze was gentle and her voice soft. “Is there anything you’d like to tell us?”

Venora shook her head. “Not really.”

Vilam looked embarrassed, but he also seemed puzzled. “Tell them!” His eyes were practically pleading with her.

Venora’s eyes flashed. “No! You tell them.”

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Catyana could no longer contain herself. “Vilam, leave her alone! What’s wrong with you? Is that how you court a Lady? Oh!” Her hand shot up to her mouth and she looked at Venora with wide eyes.

Venora smiled and squeezed Catyana’s arm. “It’s alright,” she whispered. “I know how to deal with him. But thank you for sticking up for me.” She leveled her eyes at Vilam and met his without flinching. Vilam dropped his gaze.

Nova tightened her lips. “I think we’ve heard enough of this. I still have no idea what you’re getting at, Vilam, but what do you mean by ‘lore of old’? I have no recollection of wood flowers pertaining to any of the ancient legends.”

“Well, it’s lore of old where I come from,” Vilam muttered under his breath.

Catyana looked at the statue. “It really is beautiful,” she whispered. “Could we please take a closer look?” she asked, turning to Venora.

“Yes, of course,” the young Lady answered.

Nova and Venora helped Catyana to her feet, and the group ambled over to the alcove containing the statue. When they had brought her up close, Catyana gazed at it in awe.

“They say the Prophet Cades sculpted it himself,” Venora explained.

Catyana gaped at her. “It’s so breathtaking! What is it?”

“It depicts the Queen of the Elinar and her Demantar.”

Catyana studied the figures. The queen stood more than half again as tall as she was. Her shimmering white hair was braided as a waterfall cascade and flowed over her shoulders and down to her waist in glowing waves. Enormous, silvery, semi-translucent wings spread out behind and over her. They had the elegant curvature of a bird yet the patterned texture of a butterfly and seemed at the same time strong but delicate. The queen possessed finely shaped features, and the skin of her face and hands shimmered in a pale silvery blue. Her white robe swept down to the ground. On her head, she carried a delicately crafted crown of platinum interspersed with diamonds. Her left hand caressed the back of the creature beside her. But her most prominent feature was her eyes. They looked down upon Catyana completely blue in blue, like dark, glowing sapphires, with no whites whatsoever. Catyana shivered at the cold, proud beauty of the queen’s gaze.

The Demantar sitting beside the queen was a magnificent creature. Its skin was smooth and had the appearance of shimmering, jet-black mica. Even sitting, it reached to the queen’s shoulders,

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meaning it towered over Catyana. The creature looked more like a large marine animal than a beast of the land. It had lucent, flowing, crimson crests that reminded Catyana of elegant fins. They surrounded its head like a mane and streamed beautifully along its sleek tail and body. It gazed at her from large, dark, gentle eyes that belied the vicious-looking fangs protruding from its short snout. Its huge webbed paws contained three large talons that could have disemboweled her with a single swipe. The long, muscular tail swept around the beast and its queen, almost completely encircling her.

“Where’s the king?” Catyana asked.

“I’m afraid he was lost long ago,” Chyardal answered. “The statues were meant to stand side by side, the queen at the king’s left, each Elinar with its Demantar by its side.

“She looks so proud, and so beautiful.”

“It’s rumored the Elinar were a proud race,” Chyardal replied.

Catyana couldn’t take her eyes off the wonderful creatures. “Could they really fly?”

“Yes, they could,” Vilam answered. “I must admit, the likeness is excellent. Even the height of the queen and her Demantar is quite accurate.”

“You knew the Queen of the Elinar?” Catyana asked.

“Oh, sorry. Of course not. I’m just judging from other Elinar and Demantar I’ve seen.”

Chyardal gaped at him. “You’ve actually seen Elinar and Demantar?”

“Uh...well, um, yes, I suppose I did.”

Catyana smiled at the way Vilam shuffled his feet in embarrassment. He seemed to have a knack for getting himself into awkward situations.

Nova eyed him curiously. “Where and when did you see them?”

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” said Vilam. Under his breath, he muttered, “I wish I could have kept her away from them when I was on Chyoradan.”

“Did you just say ‘Chyoradan’?” said Nova.

Vilam glared at her. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not important and won’t help us right now. Believe me, I tried to stay as far away from them as I possibly could.”

Nova was wise enough to keep silent.

“Oh, Vilam, why would you do that?” said Venora.

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Catyana was surprised to see how sad her new friend's eyes were. She wished she knew what was going on between her and Vilam. But it didn't seem as if he was in a very conversational mood, and she regretted not being able to hear his reply to Venora's question. Her conversation with Venora earlier had made her curious.

Vodana must have sensed Venora's sadness. She walked over and linked arms with her. "I think it's time we got back to the residence. I'm certain dinner will be served soon."

"You're right," Chyardal replied. "My stomach's growling."

They all laughed and began shambling in the direction of the residence.

As the party moved out of the alcove, Catyana took a last look at the statue. She wished such creatures were living today. Looking at the sculptures for the first time, she had felt her heart move in a way she had never experienced before, even letting her forget her heartache for a short while. The thought reminded her of some of the more profound legends her mother used to share with her and what she had felt then. Would the Emissary's presence really bring these creatures back? She shook her head as she thought of Vilam. But where was her faith? Oh, right! Somewhere back there on the lawn, where she had lost it at some point during her soliloquy.

She felt a gentle nudge at her shoulder. Nova smiled at her, and Catyana tried to find the strength to return it, despite the ache in her heart and the confusion of her emotions. Somehow, she managed it, and they turned and followed the rest of the group back to the main building.

12. The Summons

Bejad tried to go faster. The High Priestess had sent him instructions to be in the botanical garden at 26:00 hours, and he was running very late. She had signed and sealed the letter personally, and he didn't want to disappoint her.

As he hurried down the road toward the northwest end of town, his thoughts returned to Netira. He just couldn't get her out of his mind. He had seen her again yesterday evening when he brought her the money for the chyeves she sold to Hyumosen at the market.

Oh, yes, Hyumosen. He grinned at the memory of the afternoon he had spent with his old friend. They didn't part company after the midday meal. After they were thrown out of Rotesil's, they tried several other taverns and finally wound up in the Old Lantern. They had a lot to catch up on,

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and it was late afternoon by the time they left. Bejad had to admit, he wasn't quite sober. When he appeared at Netira's quarters, her roommate fixed him with a disapproving gaze. Netira rewarded him with a benign smile and thanked him. But it seemed as if there was also a touch of amusement in her expression.

It surprised him that Netira's roommate, Mavena, also had the darker complexion associated with inhabitants of the Northern Covasins. Her story was similar to Netira's. She was a simple mountain girl who had lived southwest of Divestelan and was fleeing from the poverty and terror of the western provinces. It was evident she had a zealous heart for the Order. She was slightly taller than Netira and exhibited a more solemn nature, but she also seemed hardened, and her glance could sometimes be almost severe. Her face and arms were scarred in several places. From the look of them, he assumed she had received the injuries in combat. It would be a simple procedure for a priestess to get rid of them for her, so why would she keep them? He intended to ask Netira about that the next time he saw her.

Since today was Velavides, the Holy Sabbath, he had been very busy, and the time had passed quickly. The Selanian Tabernacle in Tolares was filled to bursting and, as a deacon, he had many tasks to perform to accommodate the needs of the believers who appeared to pray, worship, and receive instruction or counseling in spiritual and personal matters.

During one of the services in the afternoon, he had seen Netira from afar in a group of initiates, together with her roommate. He waved to her and she waved back, smiling. The priest on duty presented a short but moving sermon on the words of the Prophet Cades: "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever." All the young initiates seemed affected by the words. Netira and Mavena left in deep reflection without so much as a glance in his direction.

The summons had reached him just a little more than an hour ago. The sun was already low on the western horizon and he was out of breath by the time he arrived at the gates to the gardens. The botanical gardens in Tolares were famous for their diversity of plants from all over the known world, such as the section dedicated to plants of the Chyenesar, the swamp and moor regions east of the Tyenar Mountains.

In a secluded area of the garden, he saw a solitary figure waiting for him. He slowed his pace at the sight of the man's disheveled white mane, which he would have recognized anywhere. It

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belonged to the High Priestess's liaison officer in Tolares, whom he had met with yesterday. "It's you," he said as he came within range.

"Who were you expecting? You didn't think she would come herself, did you?"

"Actually, I was hoping she would."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Bejad."

"What's the news? Where will she be meeting me?"

"Patience, my friend. Her Eminence would like to meet with you tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow? But this news is urgent."

"Yes, she knows. Since you mentioned an extraction, Her Eminence assumed it could only concern the Lady Gevinesa. She has been anticipating such an event, which is why she gave the Lady your name. She wanted you to come yourself if something like this should happen."

"So, she had the whole thing planned beforehand?"

"Undoubtedly. But she is currently very busy. Since she is already informed, she felt tomorrow evening would be soon enough."

"Alright, when and where?"

"She has reserved an office in the new conference building. Annex *mayav*, room twenty-four. Be there at the same time as our meeting today was supposed to be. And be punctual this time. I doubt she'll be as patient as I was." The officer turned away and melted into the warm evening without another word. All Bejad could see of the man's retreat in the growing twilight was a crown of white hair waving in the evening breeze.

13. Disclosure

Nova looked at the timepiece on her desk. It was almost *ulavelanetas*. She had just finished the last of the letters she wanted to write and sealed the envelope with wax. They needed to get downstairs, so she stacked the letters together and cast a glance at Catyana, who was reading on the sofa. She seemed to be doing better than she had earlier but was still downcast. "Honey, it's almost 28:00 hours."

Catyana looked at her, but her gaze seemed vacant.

"Catyana?"

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“28:00 hours, yes. What about it?”

“We have the meeting with Lord Tolares and Venora at *ulavelanetas*.”

“Oh, right. Well, if I have to.” Catyana threw the book on the sofa and walked over to Nova’s desk, where she absently picked up a pen and used it to tap on a stack of paper.

Nova regarded her with a concerned glance as she pressed the signal button near the door. Catyana wasn’t the nervous type, and she had never seen her tap pens or pencils against anything.

“Why are you signaling Savinya?” said Catyana.

“I had to take care of some conference business, and I’d like to get the letters out,” said Nova. “But I also wrote Mara, and I finished the reference letter I promised Maridya. You remember her, don’t you?”

“Oh, you mean the maid whose employers were brutally murdered because of me? Seems to ring a bell.”

“Dearest, you really need to stop blaming yourself for what happened to Zirsha and Talonis. It wasn’t your fault.”

“You keep saying that, but I find it very hard to believe.”

“Please try. You’ll only make matters worse for yourself if you believe you’re at fault. It might even be part of the assassin’s tactic. She wants you to feel guilty so she can keep you off balance. It would certainly make it easier for her to get close to you if you don’t have your wits about you.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” said Catyana with a pale face. “You’re right. I’ll try, I promise.”

“I’m glad.”

“But why did you write to Mara?”

“Soshia’s funeral is tomorrow, and I wanted to let Mara know that we’re thinking of them. But after everything that’s happened, I believe it’s best if she comes to Tolares for the conference. The way things are developing, it might prove valuable to have her here. And as an enchantress, she might know more about the Order of the Novantan than we do. I’m sending her a voucher for the coach, but if Soshia’s father attends the funeral, she’ll probably be able to travel with him.”

“I’m glad. I would like to see Mara again. And if she’s here, she might not be so sad about Soshia.”

There was a knock at the door and Nova opened. It was Savinya. “Good evening, Sister. You signaled?”

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“Yes, I’d like to dispatch these letters,” said Nova, handing them to her.

“I’ll be glad to get them to a courier for you as quickly as possible. Lord Tolares always has one on call.” She looked at the seals. “Oh, the seal of the High Priestess!”

“Yes,” said Nova, “we’re allowed to use it for official conference business.”

“I see. Well, if you would be so kind and follow me, the Lady Venora asked me to show you to the office she reserved for your meeting.” Savinya smiled and bowed. She stepped aside to let them pass and took another glance at the letters. Whatever she saw made her freeze, and she regarded Nova with her brow creased and her mouth agape.

“Is anything wrong, Savinya?” said Nova.

“Please forgive me, but may I ask why you’re writing to my sister?” She showed Nova the letter addressed to Maridya.

Nova and Catyana both gaped. “Maridya is your sister?” said Nova.

“Yes. Do you know her?”

Catyana turned pale and let herself fall into the chair at Nova’s desk. Nova couldn’t help feeling shocked. “Oh, Savinya, I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? Why would you be sorry?”

“It might be best if you took the rest of the evening off and went directly home. I think your sister could use your support.”

Savinya paled. “*A’mada*, what are you saying?”

“I’m afraid Maridya’s employers were killed today, and she’s probably still in shock.”

“Killed! Oh, no! What happened?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, but it was horrible. Fortunately, your sister wasn’t there at the time of their death, but just seeing them must have been traumatic. If you or your sister need anything, please let me know, and I’ll do whatever I can. The letter I’m sending Maridya contains a sealed reference. If she presents it to the Lady Venora, the Lady might allow her to work here.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” said Savinya. “Thank you!”

“*Tezatal*. But we really need to get to our meeting.”

“Of course. Please step outside and I’ll lead the way.” She bowed again and gestured for them to pass through the door.

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Catyana managed to climb out of her chair and followed Nova into the hallway. Savinya closed the door behind them and took the lead. It only took them a few of minutes to reach the office on the third floor. Savinya stepped aside and beckoned for them to enter.

When they had passed through the doorway, Savinya was going to shut it behind them, but Nova touched her arm. “Really, Savinya, please go home. It’s alright. I’ll inform the Lady Venora.”

Savinya nodded, but Nova noticed the girl was still a bit pale as she closed the door.

The office was quite spacious, well lit, and offered a fantastic view of the Tolares city lights to the north. The room contained two desks and a small conference table on one side that could comfortably seat eight people. The other five participants were already there. Nova took a seat at a right angle to Natilya and Tanola on the one side, and the Lady Utalya on the other, dragging a reluctant Catyana down into a chair beside her. She unfolded the cloth and put the black arrow in the middle of the table.

“Well,” said Lord Tolares, who was sitting across from her, “it seems the topic of discussion is self-evident. Utalya, could you please tell us why you believe Catyana has been targeted?”

“It...might be best if Nova presented the case,” said the Lady. “She’s closer to the subject matter and can fill you in on all the details.”

“With your permission, My Lord?” said Nova.

“By all means,” he said.

“Thank you. To get right to the point, we have reason to believe the kill order was given by Lady Lusina Marusen.”

“I admit, I’m not completely surprised to hear it,” said the Lord. “How good is your information?”

“Quite good. But, My Lord, I must have your assurance that nothing we discuss here leaves this room.”

“You have my word.”

“That’s all I need. And in that case, I can tell you that most of my information comes from the young Lady Maralena Novesta.”

“Really?” said Venora, who was sitting next to her father. “I thought the young Lady had disappeared. No one has heard from her in decades.”

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“She actually did her best to disappear, but the truth is she has been living in Nadil these past eight years. I had a long talk with her yesterday afternoon, in which she disclosed some very distressing information. Did you hear about the fire that occurred in Nadil the night before last?”

“We did,” said the Lord. “The outcome was tragic. I believe a young woman lost her life in the flames.”

“Yes, she did die, but not in the flames,” said Nova. “The victim was the young Lady Soshia Marusen, and she was killed by Lady Lusina Marusen.”

“What?” roared the Lord. “That’s an outrageous accusation! Why would Lady Marusen kill her own daughter?”

“Stepdaughter.”

Venora and her father stared at Nova in confusion, but Nova realized Venora had become very pale and was shooting glances at Catyana.

“I know, nothing here is quite as it seems,” said Nova. “Perhaps it’s best if I start at the beginning.”

“I think we would appreciate that,” said the Lord, giving Nova a dark look. Venora put her hand over his, giving it a gentle squeeze. The gesture seemed to calm him a bit.

Nova summarized the pertinent details of her talk with Mara, especially that Soshia was actually Mara’s and not Lusina’s daughter, and that all three women were enchantresses.

“Enchantresses! If this is true, then it’s most unsettling,” said Lord Tolares. “How can we be sure we can trust this intelligence?”

“You can trust it, Cavan,” said the Lady Utalya. “I’ve verified most of the details myself.”

“And you can trust Nova,” said Venora. “I’ve come to know her through our correspondence these past years, and I’ve always found her to be reliable.”

“Well, if even my daughter vouches for you, who am I to think otherwise?” said the Lord with a smile at Venora. “And since you made her your chief of staff,” he said to the Lady Utalya, “I assume she’s earned your complete trust.”

“Yes, I trust her with my life,” said the Lady.

The Lord nodded. “Hmmm...It’s bad enough that enchantresses are living among us. But Lady Marusen has always seemed to me to be particularly vindictive. If she’s such a powerful enchantress, as you say, then no one is safe. But why would she target Catyana?”

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“Yes, that’s why we’re here.” Nova then recounted the incident at the artifact, how Catyana had learned a new Induction technique that allowed her to transform the structure from steel to granite, and the effect her powers had on Soshia and Mara. “You see, when we induce objects the way Catyana induced the artifact,” said Nova, “we’re effectively influencing the ethereal currents around us, which makes it difficult for enchantresses to access their manasic powers. Catyana has therefore become a real threat to them, which is probably why Lady Marusen wants her eliminated. Although, knowing her, I believe it might also be plain spite because she wasn’t able to accomplish her goals in Nadil.”

“And what exactly were her goals?” said Venora.

“Besides eliminating Catyana, she wanted to kill both Soshia Marusen and Maralena Novesta. It seems the two women fled their coven some twenty years ago and wanted nothing more to do with their coven sisters. Lusina interpreted this as betrayal and must believe death to be the only fitting punishment. But it seems Maralena is more powerful than Lusina, and although she couldn’t save her daughter, she was able to scare Lusina away. This alone was likely more than enough cause for Lusina to feel slighted. And since she probably doesn’t want her name associated with murder, she hired a trained assassin to do the job for her. But I admit, this latter part is mere speculation, although I do feel very strongly about it and believe it to be accurate.”

“I agree,” said the Lord. “But you say the young Lady Novesta has turned away from her coven. Is it possible she might be an asset?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Nova. “For the past twenty years, she and her daughter have tried to follow Anae’s Golden Path, at least as well as they were able with their upbringing. I trust her implicitly. As a matter of fact, I just dispatched a letter to her, asking her to join us here. She will be attending her daughter’s funeral in Nadil tomorrow, but I hope she can be here by the first day of the conference.”

“Very well,” said the Lord. “Thank you for disclosing these things to my daughter and myself. I understand how sensitive this information is, and I truly appreciate your being so candid. Is there anything else we need to address?”

“Not at the moment,” said Nova. “I think the security measures are adequate for now.”

“Alright, then I look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning. You’re all invited to join us for breakfast on the top floor at ten o’clock. I wish you a good night.”

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As the participants wandered toward the door, Nova took Venora aside and told her about Savinya and her sister, Maridya.

“Oh, no!” said Venora. “I knew Savinya had a sister, but I never made the connection. Of course she can go home, and I’ll make sure she does. And if Maridya brings the reference you wrote, I’ll be glad to see what I can do,” she said with a weak smile.

Nova squeezed Venora’s arm in gratitude, but she held on to her when Venora tried to turn away. “You were awfully pale earlier. May I ask why?”

Venora and Catyana exchanged a glance. Venora dropped her gaze. “I...didn’t know Soshia was the young Lady Marusen.”

“But you knew her?”

Venora looked at Catyana again. Catyana nodded encouragement. Nova’s gaze wandered back and forth between them.

Venora took a deep breath. “Soshia came to me in a dream two nights ago.”

Nova felt her jaw drop, and she had to make a conscious effort to close her mouth again. “What? Really?”

Venora nodded and recounted what she and Catyana had talked about in the garden. “The dream seemed so strange at the time, but then we received reports of the events in Nadil.”

“Oh, Venora, you have no idea how strange,” said Nova. “It’s seems almost too fantastic, but the dreams Mara and Vilam had that night were very similar.” Nova then summarized what Vilam and Mara had told them on their way to the Faeren farm.

Venora stared at her, and she seemed even paler than before. Then she reached up and pressed her fingers to her temple. Nova took her arm and walked her over to some chairs, and she and Catyana formed a small triangle with her.

“Soshia told Vilam he would know his Venora when he saw her?” said Venora.

“Yes, and it’s remarkable that he had never even heard of you before. He actually thought Soshia was talking about a flower, not a person.”

“Nova, why didn’t you tell me?” said Catyana.

“Not because I didn’t want to, dearest. It just didn’t seem as important as the other things that were happening, and you know for yourself how eventful the past days have been.”

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“I was wondering why you were all going on about Venora in the carriage just before we arrived. Were you trying to keep the fact that you knew her from Vilam?”

“Yes, we wanted to see for ourselves what would happen. But then Vodana had to go and ruin it for us,” said Nova with a smile.

“Well, at least someone is having fun with this situation,” said Venora.

“Oh, Venora, I’m so sorry,” said Nova. “That’s not what I meant. I promise.”

Venora put her hand on Nova’s arm. “I know. But what am I supposed to think about all this? I don’t even know who I am, and I’m sometimes so afraid of what the impressions and dreams I keep having might mean.”

“Why? What do you think they mean?” said Nova.

“I don’t know. But if even a fraction of what I’ve been seeing is real, then I must be some kind of monster. How can I be the Covasatal?”

Nova leaned forward and took her hands. “Our Goddess knows who you are. And from the little I’ve seen I would trust you with my life. Let’s just take it one small step at a time, alright?”

“One small step is about all I can manage, if that.” Venora looked Nova in the eye. “Do you believe I’m the Covasatal?”

“Well, it is a possibility. I am certain Vilam is the Emissary. But why don’t we just see how things develop? Do you have any feelings for him—at all?”

Venora recoiled. “No!” But then she dropped her gaze. “Well, maybe.” She threw up her hands. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m mainly just confused. And I certainly don’t want to get married.”

Nova squeezed Venora’s hand. “That’s fine, dear. Nobody is expecting anything of you. If you two are meant for each other, you’ll figure that out for yourselves and in your own time. And if you’re not, well, then that’s perfectly alright, too.”

Catyana sniffed. “Yeah, right,” she muttered.

Nova shot her a perplexed glance. “What’s wrong, dearest?”

“Never mind,” mumbled Catyana. Her expression seemed sullen.

Venora stroked a golden strand out of Catyana’s face before turning to Nova. “Thank you, Nova. I’m very grateful I was able to talk to you about this. It’s been like a weight on my heart for the past two days.”

“Anytime, honey. If you ever want to talk again, just pull me aside, alright?”

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Venora nodded, and Nova stood. They hugged, then Nova grabbed Catyana's hand and dragged her into the hallway. Catyana balked a bit, but Nova was tired and wanted to get to their room as quickly as possible, hoping she could free an hour or so for some quiet time to herself. Maybe tonight would be a good night for a couple hundred brushstrokes. She really wanted to untangle some of those knots and snarls and get her hair to shine again.

14. Obsession

Tavita wrapped her cloak around herself as she rushed through the bright night, keeping to the shadows of the buildings. A thrill went through her at the thought of seeing her love again. How long had it been? She could hardly believe it was only two weeks since they had said good-bye near the stables of Lord Divestelan's residence. Her heart pounded at the memory of his passionate embrace.

It didn't take long to reach the park where they had arranged their rendezvous. She sat down on a bench in the shadows near the fountain and waited. The night was warm and peaceful, so she closed her eyes and enjoyed the simple sounds of the fountain's water splashing in the well and the *cerati* chirping in the grass around her. She took a deep breath, sensing the promise of summer on the air while savoring the scent of the blossoming *novantan*.

When she opened her eyes, she observed several couples ambling in the promenades, but in the way of lovers everywhere she was certain they wouldn't take notice of her, being too absorbed in their own amorous affairs. And even if they did, how could she care, with her heart soaring, as if it were rising toward the firmament of the heavens above?

She didn't have to wait long. She soon discerned a dark figure slinking through the shadows on the far side of the fountain. Her instincts told her it was him, and her heart leaped. They had trained together so often during the past few years they could practically communicate without speech.

He must have sensed her presence, despite the darkness, because a shadow crossed over, and she felt herself being drawn into the shrubs. "Tavita, dearest Tavita."

"Oh, Corsen, my love."

And then he was upon her, his warm breath all over her, covering her with fervent kisses. She pulled him down, aroused by his immense longing, and allowed him to do as he willed. But her

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revenge was terrible, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him so tightly he could hardly breathe. They struggled for several minutes as if in some deadly game but were at the same time united in their mutual endeavor. As they incited each other to ever greater efforts, their passionate hunger mounted to an impossible climax, finally exploding in the pure fury of their desire.

Afterward she lay there in silence, taking deep breaths of the clear night air as she recovered from the effects of her infatuation. What had gone wrong? Why wasn't she drinking in the ardor of her young life and enjoying the comforting pressure of her love beside her, as she used to do in the aftermath of their obsession with each other?

She felt him move and looked over.

He chuckled in her ear. "I never thought I'd be doing this with someone in these robes."

She attempted a smile and let her fingers run through his hair. The act didn't give her any pleasure. "Yes, but it's a good cover."

"Is it?"

"Absolutely." She turned her head so she could look into his face in the starlight. Perhaps she would see something there that would lighten her mood. "There are more than a hundred new initiates here in Tolares alone, and at least ten of them are from the Northern Covasins. It would take quite a while to run a thorough background check on each of them, even if they had a reason for doing so. I have them completely confused about where I'm from and what my views are. They probably believe I'm a proponent of Videsian teaching."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not really. Many members of the Selanian Order believe the Council lacks holiness. I'll fit right in."

"You always were an amazing actress. But what about your scars? Wouldn't it be better to get rid of them?"

"I didn't really keep that many, so they probably won't be an issue. Besides, what are mine compared to yours?" She let her finger glide down the long scar on Corsen's right cheek.

"I suppose you're right."

She had no idea when the trend had started, but members of the Black Guard often kept their scars like trophies, as proof of their accomplishments, and at some point, members of the Brigade had begun to emulate them. It seemed childish, but Tavita was actually proud of some of hers. But

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Corsen was right and she should probably get rid of them. They were distinguishing marks by which she could be identified, and that could prove deadly during an undercover assignment such as this one. Of course, her roommate had scars that made hers seem like pin pricks. But she didn't want Corsen asking questions that might put the girl in danger, which is why she hadn't mention her. It was strange, though, that Mavena would keep such disfiguring scars, especially since Tavita knew how she had come by them.

Corsen took a deep breath. "So, you'll be off to Travis soon?"

She sighed. "Yes. The conference begins the day after tomorrow. But knowing your father's plans, I doubt it will last very long, so we should be heading east by the end of the week."

"Tavita, please, I have to see you again before you leave."

"Of course, my love. I would never let you go without ensuring you don't forget me so quickly. How about tomorrow night?"

"Nothing but death itself could keep me away. Why don't we meet somewhere closer to the conference building?"

"No, it's better here, as far away from the conference as possible. There will be fewer people to disturb us."

"You're right, as always."

"And don't you ever forget it." In a sudden rush of rebellion against her own incomprehensible feelings, she hugged him tightly. "Corsen, when do you think we'll be able to marry?" She felt him go rigid, so she drew back. He fidgeted with the buttons of his uniform. "Corsen?"

"When we've changed this world, we won't need to marry anymore. Marriage will have become obsolete. Isn't that what we're fighting for?" He sounded annoyed.

"Still, it is kind of romantic."

He studied her. "Is it so important to you?"

"No, not necessarily." She made sure to keep her voice as casual as possible, and he seemed to relax a bit.

"You are a daughter of a Great House. My parents have nothing against our relationship in general. My father even thinks we're a perfect match, although you know how my mother is."

"Yes, I know." But contrary to Corsen, she liked Ilanya. The woman had been an invaluable source of information regarding the east as Tavita prepared for her mission, and she had come to

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appreciate and even respect her insights. Of course, she never would have mentioned to Corsen how deep her relationship to Ilanya had become in the past two years. “When did you see her last?”

“A few weeks ago. Father wants us to visit her every few months. I can’t understand it. They have absolutely nothing in common. Why doesn’t he just get rid of her?”

“Corsen!”

“Hey, don’t you start moralizing on me. You killed your brother.”

She hesitated. “Yes.” She took a deep breath and gazed up into the star-filled sky. “Corsen, please, tell me again. Why are we doing all this? Why all the bloodshed? Why all the killing?”

He groaned. “Now you’re talking like my mother.”

“Please, just say it. I need to hear it again.”

He rolled over and gazed at the sky. “Look at them, Tavita. Aren’t they magnificent?”

“I’ve never seen anything so lovely.”

“Just think of it, my love. One day, we will shine as bright and as free as those stars up there. No bigot laws, no rigid hypocritical system to tie us down.”

“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just something I picked up somewhere.”

He looked at her and, despite the darkness, must have seen the doubt in her eyes. “Tavita, what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. It’s all so different. I’m a little confused, that’s all. It’s not the way they told us it would be here in the east.”

He smiled at her. “What do you think these easterners would do if they found us here like this?”

She smiled back. “You’ve got a point there.”

He caressed her and she kissed him. Their touches became more passionate, and soon they were again enraptured by the heat of their frenzied lovemaking.

Later, as they were lying side by side, she listened to his steady breathing and stared up into the heavens, marveling at the glittering spectacle above her. But she felt empty and her heart remained uneasy as the prophet’s words coursed through her mind again and again.

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15. Heartache

Nova was brushing her hair when she realized she was humming to herself. Strange. She couldn't remember doing that since—no, that wasn't something she wanted to remember. But it had been a long time since her heart had felt so light. She smiled at the mirror and saw Catyana staring at her. Catyana's gaze darted to some other part of the room while the girl's fingers tormented the unfortunate lace trimmings of her nightgown. Nova tilted her head to the side, took hold of her thick, black hair, and brushed through it, wishing it was as golden as her friend's. This time it didn't snag. "What's on your mind, dearest?"

Catyana hesitated. "Nova, do you...do you have feelings for Chyardal?"

Nova felt herself glowing. She smiled at her friend's reflection. "Well, since you asked me so directly...yes, I believe I do."

Catyana diverted her gaze and muttered something under her breath. It sounded like "I needn't have asked." She looked directly at Nova. "Alright. I promise I won't get in the way."

Nova's heart dropped into her stomach with a dull thud. She spun around on her stool and stared at her friend. "Catyana, are you in love with Chyardal?"

Catyana's cheeks went dark red. At first, she could hardly return her gaze. But then she tightened her lips in determination and looked straight at her. "I'm sorry, Nova, but yes, I believe I am."

The room began to spin. Nova closed her eyes, shaking her head to clear her thoughts. "I can't believe it. This can't be happening."

"My thoughts exactly." Catyana hesitated. "I am so sorry, Nova."

Nova heard the tone of Catyana's voice and looked up at her, startled. She realized how quick her friend's breath was coming and saw tears glistening in her eyes. Seeing her friend's plight, she managed to drag herself over to Catyana's bed and plopped down beside her. "Don't be sorry. I don't believe either of us can help the way we feel." Her voice sounded as if it had come from inside a tomb. She stared straight ahead. When she reached for her friend's hand, Catyana recoiled. The gesture took Nova aback. "Dearest, please tell me what's wrong."

Catyana avoided her eyes. "Do you really expect me to answer that?"

Nova clenched her teeth and pressed her lips together. "Catyana, look, if it's any consolation, our friendship means more to me than any possible love interest. If you're really serious about this, I'll stay away from Chyardal."

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Catyana stared at her with her lips slightly parted. “You would do that for me?”

“Oh, Catyana, of course I would.”

“Right. I should have known that.” Catyana shook her head. “I would never want to hurt you.”

“Nor I you.”

Catyana sighed, lifted her hands, and let them fall back in her lap. “But we still need to decide what to do.”

“What to do? There’s nothing we *can* do!”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

“Chyardal seems a bit shy and withdrawn. If he doesn’t believe a girl is interested in him, he might suppress his feelings and never attempt to court her.”

“I know I’m a bit dense in such matters, but what exactly are you trying to tell me?”

“Nova, I’m sure you would never deliberately want to hurt me, just as I would never want to hurt you. But if we both remain considerate of each other’s feelings, and neither of us shows our interest or encourages him, Chyardal might be too shy to make a move on his own. If we don’t decide what to do, we might both lose our chance.”

“Oh.”

Catyana spread her fingers on her thigh and looked down at them. “How serious are you about Chyardal?”

“I...don’t believe I should pursue a romantic relationship right now.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think it’s time. There’s still so much I need to do.”

“And if it were time?”

Nova sighed. “Well, then, yes, Chyardal would be the one person I’d be looking to as a possible husband.”

“Then you’re certain?”

Nova met Catyana’s eyes. She felt sad. “Yes.”

Catyana dropped her gaze and swallowed. “Whatever shall we do?” Her voice sounded as dead as Nova felt in her heart.

“I don’t know,” said Nova. “How certain are you of your feelings?”

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“I don’t really know him well enough to—” Catyana flung up her arms. “What’s wrong with me? Why am I doing this to myself?”

Nova stared at her and saw fear and desperation in her eyes. Her heart went out to her friend, but she didn’t know what to say.

Catyana must have sensed her helplessness, and she looked away, jamming her lips together and swallowing. She continued, somewhat calmer. “I really haven’t thought about such things in a while. Not since I met you. Of course, I’ve been in love before. Some of the boys in Nadil were kind of cute. But Mother told me to watch anyone I was interested in and wait a few weeks. It always worked. In most cases, my feelings were doused by their behavior.”

“Did they conduct themselves so badly?”

“I’ll say! Remember what I told you about Normas and his friends? You wouldn’t believe the things you see if you watch someone carefully.”

They exchanged half-hearted smiles, but Nova’s curiosity had been roused. “What about the others?”

Catyana shrugged. “I lost interest. Mother said if I met someone who was right for me, my feelings wouldn’t fade away like that. What about you?”

Nova sharply drew in her breath. “Catyana, I’ve always been honest with you about...well, you know...about how anything related to romance makes me feel.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I’m so sorry I brought it up.”

“*Sin, tezatal*. I suppose I was reluctant to allow such feelings into my life after what happened. Until I met Chyardal, that is. He’s different. I don’t feel threatened when I think about him in...in that way.”

“Oh, Nova! I didn’t realize...” Her face turned ashen. “But in that case the situation is clear.”

“Is it? You still haven’t told me how certain you are of your feelings.”

Catyana opened her mouth, then stopped. She swallowed and shook her head. “I have to stop deluding myself, and it’s not fair to you, either.” She glanced up at her. “I can’t even begin to tell you how much it hurts.” Her voice broke on the last word. Her eyes filled with tears, and her hand reached for her heart, crumpling up her nightgown as if she could tear out the treacherous organ inside and stop the pain. “Admitting I feel different about him would be a tremendous understatement. Yes, his manners are gallant and refined, nothing like the other boys I’ve known.

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But...I don't even know how to express it. I mean, I only just met him today. Why does he make me feel the way I do? Why does the thought of him warm my heart and chase away the darkness that seems to be enclosing me from all sides?" A tear slipped down her cheek.

Nova paled as she listened to her friend's confession. "*Teva'lin*, Catyana. I don't know what to say." What was the use of telling her that she felt as if her friend had just ripped her heart out of her breast? Would Catyana thank her for such a revelation?

"No, Venora was right. It's clear that you love him." Catyana jumped from the bed, but she stopped in the middle of the room and buried her head in her hands.

"Venora? What...?"

Catyana shook her head and dropped her hands. "I shouldn't have said that." She swallowed a sob before turning back to Nova. Wet streaks were glistening on her face. "You've never been anything but kind to me, and I'm so sorry I'm doing this to you. But this time, it might have been better if you had challenged or reproached me, like Venora did earlier in the gardens. You know how I am. That would have gotten me all riled up, and I would have put up a good fight." She attempted to chuckle through her tears. "Can't you just see me, giving you what for until even you got annoyed with me? But then I probably would have just turned my back on you, like I usually do." Her smile faded and she took a deep breath. "I don't want to do this, and I don't even know if I have the strength to follow through with it, but I promise I won't interfere. There, now I've said it, and I won't take it back. And you know I can be just as stubborn as you."

All Nova could do was stare at her friend. She felt devastated. Catyana's revelations had been honest, brutally so, in regard to herself as well as Nova. And now she had made a gallant promise, but one Nova knew would be almost impossible to keep. *We always want most what we can have least*, she mused.

Nova knew there was much more going on here than Catyana had just admitted. She didn't know what to think. Was their relationship falling apart? No, she was certain of Catyana's affection. How could their friendship have become so clouded? How had she failed her?

Catyana had been born and raised in a secure and isolated environment. While she was living at home, things had been so simple between them, and Nova felt she had prepared her friend well for what was coming. Then Nova had torn her from her family and thrown her into an unfamiliar

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world of subtle intrigue and intricate machinations. No wonder Catyana had become so depressed and disillusioned, and Nova knew it would take time for her friend to heal and adjust.

But Catyana didn't have time. She was being targeted by a trained assassin and, to make matters worse, Catyana's emotions were coming unraveled, despite her training. There had to be something going on that Nova wasn't aware of. And although Catyana was learning to trust, to open her heart and let her soul reach out to immerse in her creator's tender caress, she lacked the confidence gained only by experience. Whatever the reason, Catyana needed her now more than ever.

The problem was Nova didn't know if she would have the time and strength to give Catyana the support she needed, let alone cope with a relationship obscured by rivalry. All she could do was hope, pray for wisdom, and love Catyana with all her heart, no matter how adverse her friend might react under the circumstances.

Nova got up and put her hand on her friend's arm. When Catyana looked up, the pain in her deep blue eyes reflected the struggle taking place in her heart. Nova closed her fingers around Catyana's forearm, applying gentle pressure. "How are you doing?"

Catyana dropped her gaze and shook her head. "I have no idea. Oh, Nova, I'm so confused, and so scared. What's wrong with me?"

"I'm sorry, dearest, but I just don't know."

"Ever since I left home last night, I've felt as if I'm doomed. It's as if the dark cloud that's been hanging over me for weeks has finally descended and shut out any hope of light. The whole world seems to be coming unraveled, and I just don't know where to turn anymore."

"And you think turning to Chyardal will help?"

Even before the words had slipped out, Nova clutched at the folds of her nightgown. *Nova, you moron! Why did you have to do that?* Had Catyana noticed the tinge of resentment in her voice?

Of course she had. Catyana stared at her as if Nova had drenched her with a pail of cold water. Then she looked away and shrugged. "I suppose I deserved that."

"No, you didn't. I'm so sorry, Catyana."

"Tezatal."

It tore Nova apart, having to see the pain in her friend's eyes and knowing she was at least partly to blame. Catyana had been so happy at home. Why couldn't she have just left her there? Of course,

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after Mara's revelations, that had become impossible. "Is that what you want, dearest? Someone to turn to?"

"I don't know. Maybe." She looked into Nova's eyes, pleading. "All I want right now is to not feel this terrible ache in my heart."

Nova attempted to hug her friend but felt only a tentative return of her embrace. In that instant, the emotional impact of their predicament caught up with her, and she blinked and swallowed to keep the tears from blurring her sight. She realized that, for the first time in their relationship, a wedge had been driven between them.

16. Shattered World

Mara was trying to distract herself by immersing herself in a book but was having little success. The thought of another night alone in her little cottage without Soshia was almost more than she could bear. She had spent most of last night sitting with her daughter and was at the Lady Utalya's workshop again first thing in the morning for a quick visit. But after she had seen Nova and Catyana off for their journey to Tolares around mid-morning, she went deep into the woods south of town where no one could see or hear her.

Mara had come to a decision. Her daughter's death had been the last straw, and she had had enough. She was done hiding from the likes of Lusina and her coven sisters. Of course, that wasn't the reason she wanted to be by herself. But if she wanted to stand up to a skilled enchantress, she needed space to practice.

When she had found an adequate spot, she started with simple, bright red pellets so she could rehearse the basics and learn control. But she kept thinking of Lusina and was soon conjuring larger and darker spheres and putting bigger holes in the conifers around her. As more images of that dreadful night filled her mind, she got angrier and angrier, until she finally obliterated one of the trees with a single ruby red blast that reminded her of fury incarnate. She let herself fall forward to catch her breath, supporting herself with her hands on her knees. Staring at the blackened crater where a majestic conifer had swept the sky just moments before, she wondered if the sphere's color was a reflection of her own state of mind.

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Working with the idea that her emotions affected her power, she surprised herself at how quickly she progressed. By the time she finished for the day, she had refined her control to the point where she was able to disintegrate a single needle or slice off the twig on which it grew. On the other end of the spectrum, she created massive, impenetrable shields to protect herself from falling trees and branches and conjured pulse blasts that burned entire sections of the forest around her to a crisp. It pained her to think that, had she begun training a week earlier, her daughter would probably still be alive. Before she left, she cleaned up after herself by turning all her training objects to ash, so no trace of her enchantments remained.

Mara sighed at the memory of her day and tried to turn her attention back to her book, but she sat up when she heard a coach pull up outside. She lived in a side street and coaches never drove through here, let alone pulled up. Her heart beat faster at the thought of who it might be.

When she looked out the window, she immediately rushed to the door and flung it open. Her guest was already on the doorstep. When he saw her, he hesitated, but Mara could care less about propriety and fell into his arms. “Oh, Amendel,” she whispered, tears coursing down her cheeks.

He kissed her on the forehead. “Where’s our daughter?”

“I’ll take you to her. Let me get my cloak.” She stepped inside and grabbed the garment from the cloak stand before shutting the door behind her.

Amendel helped her into her cloak and fastened the hook at the neck for her. “How far is it? Should we take the coach?”

“Nothing’s very far here in Nadil. But, to be honest, I’m exhausted and wouldn’t mind a ride.”

Amendel nodded as he took her arm and led her into the street, where Mara gave the coachman instructions on how to get to the Lady Utalya’s manse.

Just as the coachman was opening the door of the carriage, a couple passed them on the road, their glances darting back and forth between Mara and Amendel and the Marusen coat-of-arms engraved on the door of the coach. “My Lord,” they said, bowing to Amendel in respect.

Amendel attempted a smile as he helped Mara into the coach. “Is that going to be a problem?” he said, gesturing toward the retreating couple.

Mara returned a weak smile of her own as she slid onto the bench. “Not unless you mind the whole town knowing that Lord Marusen just invited a lowly maid into his carriage.”

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Amendel slid in beside her, and the coachman shut the door behind him. Amendel shook his head. "Small towns. They're the same everywhere." He rapped on the ceiling and the carriage began to move.

"I've come to appreciate the townspeople's gossip. It shows they care."

He put his arm around her and drew her close. "That's my Mara, always trying to see the best in everyone. So, you still haven't told anyone who you are?"

"A few good friends know, but the townspeople still believe Soshia and I are just domestic servants trying to scrape together a living. But I've come to a decision."

"And what's that?"

"I've reached my breaking point, Amendel. What happened to our little girl is just too much. I'm tired of running and hiding, and I'm so angry. At the funeral tomorrow, I'm going to announce to everyone who Soshia and I really are."

"Are you going to tell them the whole truth?"

Mara gaped at him. "I would never dare impose upon you. I'll just tell them that I'm the young Lady Novesta and that Soshia was your daughter, the young Lady Marusen."

"No, I agree with you. This has gone far enough. I need answers, Mara. I know you have secrets, and I assume you had your reasons for keeping them. But if even a fraction of what I suspect is true, then I've had it with Lusina's extortion. I'm going to announce that you're my companion and that Soshia was our daughter, and damn the consequences!"

Mara stared at him for a moment and took his hand, squeezing firmly. "You've always been kind to me, and you know how much I admire and respect you. That will never change, no matter what you do. Please don't ruin your reputation because of me."

He scoffed. "My reputation? Lusina has been dragging that through the mud for decades, and her recent behavior has all but trampled on the little that might have been left of it."

"Alright, if that's truly how you feel, then I promise I'll reveal everything to you. No more secrets! But what I have to say may shatter your world forever."

"I know." He hugged her tight and kissed her on the head.

It only took a few minutes to reach the Lady Utalya's manse, and they spent them in silence. When the carriage stopped, Amendel helped Mara out. She opened the gate and led him to the workshop. The room was dark when she entered. This was a good opportunity to show Amendel

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who she was, so she waited until he had stopped beside her. When she raised her hand, a subtle, red glow filled the room, but just for an instant. Then all the candles lit up.

Mara heard Amendel draw in his breath. She shot a fearful glance in his direction, but he only nodded and took her hand, rewarding it with a gentle squeeze. Mara sighed in relief. If he had already suspected she was an enchantress, it would make the following conversation that much easier.

Soshia was on the table in the middle of the room where Mara had left her. She was so pretty, with her head resting on the burgundy pillow and her long, dark, wavy hair laid out about her head and shoulders. She had a long, black gown on, her hands were folded over her belly, and the silver pearl pendant—with which Mara had replaced the amethyst pendant Soshia had given Vilam—was resting near her heart. The acolytes had done an excellent job of preparing Soshia’s body, and all Mara could smell was the scent of the flowers and the candles around them.

Amendel walked over to the table and looked down at his daughter. His face was grim, but Mara could tell his eyes were glistening. “Hello, sweetheart,” he whispered, bending down and kissing her on the forehead. To Mara, he said, “She looks so beautiful and peaceful. Do you remember how kind she was to Cetila when you visited us two years ago? Cetila could hardly get over Varan’s death, but Soshia had us all laughing again inside of a day.”

Mara walked over to him, attempted a smile, and nodded while trying to restrain her tears.

He sighed. “She was an enchantress, too, wasn’t she?”

Mara took his hand. “She was, yes.”

“Did you train her?”

“I did, although my mother was mainly responsible.”

“I admit, I’m not so surprised the Lady Tsenera Novesta is also an enchantress. You know, I always took your subtle hints very seriously, and I’ve therefore suspected Lusina for decades. But it was mainly Lusina’s familiarity with your mother that made me suspicious of her, too. Although, contrary to Lusina, I do admire your mother’s character.”

“Yes, they are very different. But every enchantress must pledge to train her eldest daughter in the arcane arts, and it’s traditionally one of the enchantress’s siblings who becomes the girl’s mentor, if possible. Since Soshia was my Aunt Lusina’s stepdaughter and I was still quite young, my mother decided to manage her training.”

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“Your Aunt Lusina? Are you telling me Lusina and Tsenera are sisters?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry I never told you this before.”

“Well, you’re telling me now, and I suppose I should be grateful for that, although I can’t believe how deep this treachery runs. Does your father know his wife and eldest daughter are enchantresses?”

Mara winced at his tone. “I’m not sure. I don’t think so,” she said with a weak voice.

Amendel had trained long and hard with members of the Selanian Order to maintain a state of equilibrium. When she asked him about it early on in their relationship, he told her he wanted to be able to remain calm at all times so he could treat people with respect and make wise decisions, an aspect of his personality she truly cherished. She should have realized what an impossible situation this would be for him, standing here, confronted with the body of their daughter.

“Are there any other enchantresses I should be aware of?” he said.

“I’m so sorry, dearest, but Tavita was consecrated two years ago, and I’ve heard rumors that Lusina might take on my sister Davina as her apprentice and prepare her for her trials.”

“What, Tavita too?”

“I’m afraid so. But I had nothing to do with it, believe me.”

He gazed at her, probing her face, his lips taugth and his eyes hard. “You didn’t say much in your letter, but from the little you wrote, I had to gather the circumstances of our daughter’s death were grave. Mara, what happened? Why is our little girl lying here on this table?”

Mara flinched at the tone of his voice and tears streamed from her eyes, but she couldn’t bring herself to speak.

His expression softened, and he put his arm around her shoulder and hugged her. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to be so harsh. Were you with her when she died?”

“Yes, but she didn’t just die, Amendel. She was murdered.” She wiped her cheek.

He drew in his breath. “I thought as much. Please, just tell me outright. Was it Lusina?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Mara gave him an abbreviated account of the story she had told Nova yesterday, that Lusina had surprised them in the warehouse and provoked Soshia to attack her, and that the enchantress

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had brought the loft crashing down on their daughter's head, crushing her skull. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save her," she whispered.

"Don't blame yourself, my love. It seems Lusina manipulated Soshia so you couldn't protect her when Lusina made her fatal move. I'm so relieved that you survived. But, how did you?"

Mara took a deep, quivering breath. "How much do you know about enchantresses?"

"Very little. I've been attempting to research the subject for decades—ever since you nudged me in that direction, actually—but information is difficult to come by. I heard most enchantresses are vile creatures, and that they usually use amethysts to focus their powers. Lusina certainly seems to fit the profile quite well. But I assume it's not that simple."

"Nothing ever is. Yes, many enchantresses use amethysts to aid in focusing their powers, because the gems have a fairly simple structure and are easier to master. But truly skillful coven sisters, such as my Aunt Lusina, learn to use amethyst ascendants, while others even go so far as to unlock the power of an emerald. And then there's this." She reached into her blouse and took out her pendant, leaving it dangling near her heart.

"A ruby!" Amendel lifted it on its chain to get a better look. "A truly remarkable stone. Is this how you learned to focus your powers?"

"Yes, although I had to work my way up from an amethyst like everyone else. But dearest, aren't you shocked or outraged that I'm an enchantress? It's quite a secret to have kept from you."

He shook his head. "You should know me better than that. Contrary to Lusina, you've always opened your heart to me, which is all I ever cared about or expected from a relationship. Of course, I knew you were keeping things from me. But I trust you with my life, Mara. I knew you'd tell me if you could."

"You can't believe how often I've wanted to tell you, but I was so afraid of what Lusina might do if she found out."

"I assume she threatened you?"

"Repeatedly."

"I was so blind. How could I not see the kind of woman I was marrying?"

"Oh, dearest, she seduced and enchanted you. Believe me, there was nothing you could have done."

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“I should have seen through her when she steered me into your arms after our wedding instead of building a relationship with me. I know you, Mara. How was she able to manipulate you into doing such a thing?”

“I was still a young enchantress back then and in the midst of my Trials of Consecration. Do you know what those are?”

“Vaguely. I do know enchantresses must pass several trials before they’re consecrated, but I have no idea what that means.”

“There are seven trials in all, divided into three phases: Accession, Dedication, and Consecration. The latter, which coincides with the seventh and last trial, is the Rite of Consecration itself. Please forgive me if I remain silent on that topic, but it stirs up too many horrible memories, and I can’t bring myself to talk about the event here in front of our daughter, knowing she had to endure it, too.”

“And I don’t want to pressure you. I know you’ll tell me when the time is right.”

“Thank you. I knew you’d understand. The three trials of the Accession are simple enough. You prepare a potion or poison, you enchant an object or person, and you must demonstrate that you can control manasic power at a level at least equal to an amethyst. But the three trials of the Dedication are truly brutal. The first is an assassination, the second a seduction, and the third is the traditional pilgrimage to Covatinalis at midwinter. I’m so sorry dearest, but you were the second trial of my Dedication.”

He gaped at her. “What? One of your trials was an assassination? You actually killed someone?”

She stared at him. “That’s what shocks you? Not that I’m an enchantress, not that I betrayed you by seducing you, but that I killed someone?”

“Mara, you’re telling me you took a life. Is that true?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Who?”

“His name was Nor—” She cringed. “Um, Mertas Catanin.” Why did she have to think of Normas right now? Mara didn’t want to keep any secrets from Amendel, but how could she ever tell him about the incident in Nadil after his reaction to the first trial of her Dedication? She bit her lip to stop it from trembling.

He shook his head. “I’ve never heard of him. Who was he?”

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“A minor nobleman who was getting suspicious of one of our coven sisters and was dangerously close to discovering she was an enchantress. The coven decided he had to be eliminated.”

“I just can’t imagine you as an assassin.”

“Believe me, I hated every second of it. I sometimes still see his face at the moment of his death. He seemed so scared and confused.”

“How did you do it?”

“Oh, Amendel, must I?”

“You agreed to tell me everything, and this I believe I really need to know. So, yes, you must.”

Mara took a deep breath, but she could feel herself shaking. “Alright, well, this man knew enough about enchantresses to fear for his life, so he always had a full contingent of bodyguards surrounding him. That made it difficult to get close to him. But enchantresses are patient. His one weakness was a certain high-quality tavern in Divestelan known for its exquisite gourmet cuisine, so I was placed there undercover as a waitress. It took me months to position myself accordingly, but I succeeded in earning his trust.

“One evening, I slipped an untraceable, slow-working poison into his wine, but only after I had mixed the counteragent into his taster’s aperitif. The poison didn’t take effect until my target was on his main course, so when he suddenly turned blue and slumped over, everyone assumed he was choking on his food. I pretended to help but was just confirming that he actually died. I knew he was beyond saving at that point. And since nothing happened to his taster, there was no suspicion of foul play. The next morning, I quit my job on the grounds that the customer’s death was too much of a shock for me. At least I was being truthful then.”

“I can’t believe you did something so coldhearted and deliberate.”

“Coldhearted?” Her voice almost broke. “Since I was following orders, yes, you could say it was deliberate. But there was nothing coldhearted about it. I thought about disobeying but, for an enchantress, that’s not an option unless you want to suffer the same fate as your target. As I told you, I hated every second of it, and it breaks my heart every time I think of it.” She brushed a tear away, but felt her eyes brimming.

“Alright, I won’t torment you with more questions on that subject, but what about—?”

Mara couldn’t contain her heartache any longer and started sobbing.

He put his arms around her. “Oh, Mara, I’m so sorry. I was much too harsh with you.”

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She shook her head. “No. Maybe. Oh, Amendel...”

“Please, Mara, tell me what’s wrong.”

“I want to, I do. I don’t want to keep any more secrets from you. But you’re making it so difficult for me.”

He sucked in his breath and raised his chin. “What happened?”

She looked up into his eyes, feeling lost. “I killed a stable boy in Nadil.”

He gazed at her, and she could see the conflicting emotions battling inside him. “I am sorry, Mara. I do want you to be able to tell me anything, and I apologize that my reaction to your trial made it difficult for you. But I absolutely abhor anything that causes pain, suffering, or the destruction of life.”

“And you think I don’t?”

He opened his mouth, but it seemed he couldn’t find the right words. Finally, he said, “I’m not quite sure what to think. You’ve been a pillar for me, Mara, and I don’t know where I’d be today if it hadn’t been for your support. But your revelations have confused me, and I’m not quite sure where I stand with you right now.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

He gazed at her for a while longer before he said, “No, I don’t think I ever want you far from my side. But you’ve now told me about two people you’ve killed, and I just don’t know who you are anymore.”

“I can tell you who I am. I’m a grieving mother who has already lost two of her children and is horribly afraid of losing a third. And I’m also the woman who loves and respects the father of those children. But life hasn’t always been kind to me, and I’ve been forced to do things I abhor.”

“There’s always a choice.”

“No, sometimes there really isn’t.”

“You could have chosen not to kill that nobleman in Divestelan.”

“Things aren’t always as simple and clear-cut as we’d like them to be, Amendel. Let me ask you something. If you were served fish for dinner, which knife would you use?”

“Well, the fish knife, of course.”

“Is it possible that you might choose a different knife?”

“Certainly not.”

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“And if you invited a beggar into your home to share this meal with you, which knife would he use?”

Amendel stared at her for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Why? Isn’t it clear he would choose the fish knife?”

“I...think you’ve made your point.”

“Which is?”

Amendel sighed. “The beggar was never taught which utensils to use for which purpose. He probably wouldn’t know how to choose.”

Mara nodded as she dabbed a tear from her cheek with her handkerchief. “When I faced my Trials of Consecration, yes, I was following orders, but I was also just a young enchantress who had only ever known her coven sisters’ way of life. Although I hated the trials, I never even knew other options existed.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that. So, what happened with the boy in Nadil?”

“He was a courier and had a letter he was taking to Vetena that would have put a friend of mine in grave danger. I tried to entice him to give me the letter, but he tried to rape me instead. In the end, I had to use my powers, or he might have killed me.”

“But in that case, it was self-defense.”

“Yes.”

Amendel sighed and drew her into his arms. “You could have started with that.”

“Do you still believe you don’t know me?”

He released her and held her arms so he could look at her. “I can see in your eyes how much you abhor the things you’ve done, and it’s clear how much it pains you.” He nodded. “That is the Mara I’ve come to know and love. I’m sorry I doubted you. Can you forgive me?”

“You know I do.”

He took a deep breath. “What about my seduction? Were you only following orders then, too?”

“At first, yes. But part of a seduction is getting to know someone and bequeathing a part of yourself to them. I never regretted being with you, Amendel. I only regretted not being able to tell you the truth.”

“How is it that you got pregnant from that one time? Was that planned?”

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“Yes, my mother and my aunt prepared me meticulously for the event. There were many exercises, herbs, and potions involved, and I had to adhere to a strict diet. By the time they were done with me, I was more fertile and irresistible than any woman could reasonably expect to be. Of course, the mountain air of the Etenolyas Valley and the sensual atmosphere of Ilanya Divestelan’s summer residence didn’t hurt. Everything came together in just the right way and made it easy for me to seduce you on the day I was at my most fertile. Needless to say, there’s never a guarantee with such things, but the probability that I would become pregnant was extremely high.”

“I never forgot that night, nor was I able to forget you.” Amendel sniffed. “Of course, when I informed Lusina of your pregnancy, she magnanimously offered to raise the child as her own, provided I agree to an open marriage. I soon realized what that meant. To be honest, Mara, I never regretted having our Soshia. But what about all the other times you visited me, and then Varan and Cetila? Were you just following orders then, too?”

“No, that was my choice alone. At first, I mainly wanted to see Soshia, but I also longed to be with you. And Lusina certainly didn’t mind since it gave her even more leverage, in case you ever decided to question her ambiguous lifestyle.”

“I understand. But back to the night before. What I don’t understand is, if you’re so powerful, why is Lusina still alive?”

“Powerful! Oh, dearest, you know that’s not all it takes. I regret that Soshia and I never practiced very much. We were afraid our coven sisters would sense us and track us down. That’s why Soshia never stood a chance against Lusina. Although their stones are both ascendants, Lusina’s skill is unrivaled. And when I used my powers against her, I was so filled with grief over Soshia’s death I couldn’t concentrate enough to finish Lusina off. Instead of a focused, directional attack, my blast went in all directions and blew the building apart, throwing Lusina through the wall and clear of the wreckage. It’s the first time I ever saw that woman afraid of anything, and at least I scared her off. But I swear to you, I’m done hiding. I’ve already started with an intense training regimen.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. But please tell me the truth. Was Lusina also responsible for Varan’s death?”

Mara slowly exhaled to calm herself. She knew she needed to proceed cautiously. “She was.” Of course she was, using Tavita as her reluctant tool by scheduling Varan’s assassination as Tavita’s

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first trial of Dedication. “That’s two of our children for who’s death she’s responsible. Please, Amendel, I don’t want the same thing to happen to Cetila.”

“I’d protect our little girl if I could, but I have no idea where she is. Or Tavita, for that matter.”

“I hope with all my heart they’re both alright.” Mara caressed Soshia’s hair. “It’s strange. I know Tavita isn’t mine, but why do I keep getting the feeling that she is?”

“Are you sure she isn’t?”

Mara smiled at him. “I think I’d know if I had been pregnant with a fourth child. But Soshia and I had just fled the western provinces and were living in Tolares at the time Tavita must have been conceived. I think it’s the longest you and I were ever separated.”

“If only a day would come when we no longer needed to be. But in regard to Tavita, I never saw Lusina pregnant. She was gone for almost half a year, and then she just arrived one day with Tavita in her arms and introduced her as our daughter. I calculated backward, and I had to admit she had managed to seduce me around the time the child must have been conceived.” Amendel shook his head. “I still can’t understand how Lusina could have killed Varan and Soshia. At the least, she’s their stepmother. How cold and dark must her heart be to do such horrible things? But I swear to you, she will pay!”

“Yes, she will. She’s a menace to everyone and everything and must be stopped. But please, dearest, be patient. Who knows what she would do if she sensed you were planning something against her.” Mara shook her head. “My mother once told me Lusina used to be a warmhearted and sensitive girl. I wish I could find even a remnant of that girl in her somewhere. But I’m afraid she’s completely given herself over to the icy touch of darkness.”

“I know. There’s been no form of familiarity—let alone intimacy—between us in decades. Not since Tavita, to be exact. I couldn’t. I shudder at the sight of her. Sometimes, I wish I believed in divorce and could dismiss her.”

“I doubt you’d survive that. She’s elevated resentment to an art, and her form of expression is murder. She doesn’t tolerate any kind of contradiction or rivalry.”

“How was she able to track you down?”

“She wasn’t. It was pure coincidence. She was here in Nadil because she was investigating a surge in the ethereal currents. It was caused by a girl I know who is now in terrible danger. Her name is Catyana Faeren.”

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Amendel must have heard something in her voice and studied her with a cautious gaze. “Catyana Faeren. Is that the girl you told me about two years ago? The one who seems to have stolen your heart?”

“It wasn’t her fault. She never did anything unseemly. As a matter of fact, she has no idea how I feel about her.”

“It still hurts, though, knowing your heart doesn’t belong to me alone.”

“And I’m so sorry to cause you such pain. You know how much I love and respect you.”

“As you would a beloved brother, perhaps, or a father, even.”

“Oh, Amendel, you know it’s so much more than that. How could I have ever borne your children with such joy if it were otherwise?”

“I know. I may have exaggerated, but I want you to understand how your revelations regarding this Faeren girl make me feel.”

“I do. I do understand. But please, dearest, let’s not discuss it here, in front of our daughter.”

“You’re right, this isn’t appropriate. But you mentioned this girl is in danger. Was she the reason the stable boy died?”

“Yes. The boy was carrying a letter to my brother in Vetena describing an incident in which Catyana healed a little girl who had hurt herself very badly. If the letter had reached him, an enchantress would have undoubtedly come to investigate. But I’m afraid one did anyway, despite my precautions.”

Amendel nodded. “Is there anything we can do for the girl?”

“Not at the moment. Her parents have allowed her to join the Selanian Order, and Nova has taken her to Tolares to better protect her. Catyana was a good friend of Soshia’s, by the way. That was how Lusina was able to provoke Soshia into attacking her, by threatening Catyana and her sisters.”

“So, I lost both my daughter and the love of my life because of this Catyana?”

“You haven’t lost me, dearest, nor will you. You’re the father of my children, and nobody could ever change that. But I don’t think Catyana would survive knowing she had caused such distress. She has a good heart. Besides, you know if Lusina hadn’t used Catyana, she would have found some other way to provoke Soshia.”

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“I know. Lusina is a master of deception and manipulation.” He looked into Mara’s eyes. “Do you promise not to leave me.”

Mara swallowed. “I promise.” They kissed, and when she pulled away, she asked, “Where are you staying?”

“I was thinking of staying at Folan’s. It is the best tavern in Nadil.”

“Is there any way I could persuade you to stay with me? I know our cottage isn’t as luxurious as what you’re used to, but it is comfortable, and I can’t stand the thought of spending another night alone.”

“Oh, my darling, of course I’ll stay with you,” he said, kissing her on the forehead. “But aren’t you afraid of what people will say?”

“To be honest, I just don’t care anymore.”

“Then neither do I,” he said, hugging her tightly to himself.

17. Guilt

Chyardal knew he was dreaming. This, in itself, was peculiar because he usually didn’t realize he was dreaming until he woke up. The same dream had pursued him often in the past months and seemed surreal, as if he were in a state somewhere between sleeping and waking. But none of that really mattered since he was too busy being terrified by what he saw.

He was in his bed, and the room was dark. But he wasn’t alone. A ghastly figure stood at his bedside, staring down at him. Alone the sight of it paralyzed him with fear. All he could do was lie there and gaze up into its eerie, glowing eyes, hoping the nightmare would finally end.

Why had his little sister come back now to haunt him? Hadn’t he already punished himself enough for letting her wander out into the forest on that last, dreadful evening? But what was even more shocking was that her eyes were no longer the warm and lovely dark brown he remembered. They had turned completely blue, even the whites, as if this apparition were glaring down at him through glowing sapphires.

Gradually, the specter melted into the darkness. He tried to move, but his body felt numb, so his consciousness slipped back into the shadowy realms where such disturbing images couldn’t reach him.

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Chyardal bolted into a sitting position in his bed, breathing heavily. His glance darted around the room. The sun's rays were piercing the cracks in the curtains, creating bright strips of sunlight along the floor tiles and carpets. He listened. Outside, birds were brightening the day with their song.

How was this possible? Hadn't he just seen that gruesome figure in the dark? But if the sun was up, that must have been hours ago. Had so much time passed? It felt like just an instant.

Shaking his head in confusion, he looked down at himself. His sleeping garment was soaked, and he felt sweat running down his face. When he wiped his forehead and looked at his hand, his fingers and palm were dripping wet. Disgusted, he wiped his hand on the duvet. Had it really been just a dream? It felt more like a trance.

Chyardal threw back the covers and got up. He winced at the sensation of the wet shirt sticking to his chest and back, so he eased it over his head and dropped the soggy rag on the floor. Sunlight streamed into the room when he pulled back the curtains.

He stepped into the adjoining chamber, turned on the faucet, and splashed cold water on his face. When he straightened, he paused and looked at himself in the mirror. His father had always required him to keep up his training, and he didn't look bad. Of course, there was no comparison to the lethal, muscular build he sensed under Vilam's uniform.

He shook his head. Why would he wish to compare himself with a person everyone considered to be the famed Covatal, anyway? It was ludicrous. Just because some pretty acolyte was staying over for the conference didn't mean he had to go acting like a schoolboy.

But Nova intrigued him. He had been impressed by her quiet and competent manner four years ago, but he had been so busy he didn't really get the chance to know her better. Now that she was back, he had to admit he again felt very attracted to her. And if not her, then there was always that pretty companion of hers, Catyana. He had never before seen such lovely, thick, golden hair.

He shook his head again. This was becoming ridiculous. He was one of the most eligible bachelors in the world. Whenever his father arranged a ball, the daughters of the Great Houses practically threw themselves at him. Or, if he preferred, he could probably have the pick of any priestess he wanted. Maybe the High Priestess herself would fall in love with him! So why squander his valuable time with an insignificant acolyte like Nova?

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He took a good look at his face. Who was he? What did he want? What was his destiny? He had to admit, he despised all the young women who kept throwing themselves at him. In those cases where it became unbearable, he could at least retreat to his science projects, which he did as often as possible. None of the young women ever followed him there. He knew his father wasn't comfortable with his preference for science and was becoming worried over his negligence of acquiring a suitable mate. Chyardal wasn't worried, though, since he didn't want anyone to marry him because of his wealth, his power, or even his good looks.

But Nova didn't seem to be like that. She was genuinely interested in him as a person and in the things he did. He could feel that. She could easily follow any conversation they had no matter how deeply he delved into the scientific details. She was intelligent, witty, never seemed to be put off by his rank or position, and even had the audacity to make fun of him. Besides the fact that she was astonishingly beautiful, she was also the kind of person he could respect.

The grim expression on the face of the man looking back at him from the mirror made him sniff. What was the use of deluding himself? He knew he wouldn't make any real attempts at getting to know her, no matter how he felt. And it was so much easier to hide behind his science projects than to confront the reasons for his self-appointed isolation.

It had all started forty years ago. They had been a more or less happy family, but his mother had always been fearful of the woods, especially at night. Until they reached their Age of Confirmation, she never let Chyardal or his little sister out after dark. But it was difficult to keep Amarya indoors. She was always especially lively and needed to be outside in her beloved forests, exploring every fingerbreadth of the woods to the south. It got even worse in the spring of 1484 after she turned sixteen, and their mother made sure the servants always kept the doors locked tight as soon as the sun had set.

Chyardal had celebrated his Age of Confirmation in the previous winter and couldn't understand why his mother acted so strangely. Why didn't she just let the girl out, for god's sake! They were in the eastern provinces, so what was the worst that could happen to her? Fall over and scrape her knee? But he didn't really worry much about his mother's behavior since he was usually too busy being out with his friends and enjoying his new-found freedom.

But one night in the late summer of that same year, Amarya did get out, and she didn't just scrape her knee. Their parents had gone to a concert in the city for the evening and left him in

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charge of his little sister. He had a few friends over, and they sat on the veranda outside the dining hall for a while, drinking cider and telling tall tales of their supposed escapades. When it got dark, they moved into the parlor and played a game.

After Amarya had prepared for bed, she threw a bathrobe over her nightgown and came down to watch them for a while. But at some point during their game, Chyardal realized there was a draft, and he stared in shock when he saw the door to the veranda open, and his sister was nowhere to be seen. They had forgotten to lock the door.

The alarm was sounded, and all their personnel helped search the grounds using pulse torches. But Chyardal feared he already knew where she was, so he grabbed his hunting bow and quiver and sped in the direction of the southern woods. His heart sank when he found her bathrobe near the edge of the forest, and he rushed headlong into the darkness. He hadn't gone far when he saw a mysterious glow just ahead, and he thought he heard his sister's voice, but she didn't answer when he called to her.

Suddenly, there was a blinding flash of bluish light. When he was able to see again, he dashed forward and saw his sister lying in the clearing. But something was moving in the dark by her side. Without thinking, he grabbed his bow, nocked an arrow, and shot at the shadow. There was an ear-splitting shriek, he heard something like thunder, and the shadow vanished into the forest on the other side of the clearing. Chyardal immediately rushed to his sister, but he froze in horror when he was just a few armlengths away from her.

He doubted he would ever forget the image of her lying there, looking so beautiful in her white nightgown, and her long, dark hair spread out around her in the moss. She might as well have been asleep, but for the grisly hole in her chest and the inconceivable amounts of blood that had soaked the ground around and under her.

The High Priestess Otisa Deronas and her protégée Utalya Bevelas had come out themselves to investigate the incident, but neither of them was able to discover anything about the killer. It seemed the scene had been wiped clean of any emotional residue but that of his sister. But what the High Priestess did find was astonishing. It seemed Amarya had been very happy at the moment of her death and had died peacefully. This was difficult to understand, since someone had driven a very sharp, round, pointed object of about a handbreadth diameter through her heart. On the other

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hand, it did coincide with what Chyardal himself had seen. When he found his sister, her eyes were closed, her face was serene, and he thought he even detected a hint of a smile on her lips.

It took the family a long time to recover from their loss. But Chyardal was never able to forgive himself, and over time, he found he preferred their library to the taverns. They had already turned the east annex into a workshop because Amarya had loved art so much, and Chyardal began to spend more and more of his time there.

In the fall of 1599, fifteen years after his sister's death, his parents adopted Venora, who only seemed to be a few years older than Amarya had been when she died. But it soon became clear that Venora was very different from Amarya. She was more reserved and serious, but also very affectionate, and she and Chyardal quickly formed a deep and trusting relationship. What intrigued him most was that she seemed to be a brilliant student and was just as interested in science as he was. It was therefore not surprising that they spent much time together in the workshop, contriving different gadgets and doing research into energy technology.

Venora's presence seemed like a catalyst, and the family slowly healed. Their mother encouraged her to explore her spirituality, so Venora enrolled in courses at the nearby Selanian Order campus and began training to become a deaconess. She specialized in biology and forestry so she could help care for the flora on the Tolares estate and earned the title of Protectress of the Woods in record time.

Then, eleven years ago, their mother passed away. Her death was as quiet as it was sudden. She went to bed in the evening and just never woke up again. The priestesses couldn't find anything out of the ordinary and diagnosed heart failure. But the loss tore open many of the old wounds and practically ripped the family apart. Chyardal fled to Elinas and remained there for several years. Venora and his father visited him as often as they could, but Venora coped with her loss by burying herself in her studies and spent more time in the woods than at the residence.

The family didn't recover until after the Conference of Divestelan, when his father commissioned the new conference building and Chyardal returned home to help with the design and construction. A couple of years later, Venora introduced Chyardal to Elder Yonatan, who suggested an interesting new research project. But even today, Chyardal believed Venora had done it mainly to bring them closer together again, and to be honest, he was just as glad as she that her plan had succeeded.

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He took a deep breath to regain his focus. This was happening far too often. Why did he keep getting stuck in front of the mirror, rehashing the past? He clenched his teeth to overcome his reluctance to move and splashed more water on his face. Then he groomed his hair and got dressed. He didn't have to wear the official uniform today, so he put on something more casual. Just as he was closing the door to his chambers, Venora came out of the adjoining suite. "Good morning, sister."

"Good morning, brother dear." Venora strolled up to him, stood on her toes, and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You look tired. Didn't you sleep well?" She took hold of his arm, and they walked toward the breakfast parlor.

"I do feel a bit worn out. I had that dream again."

"Oh." Venora glanced up at him, and he sensed concern in her eyes.

"Listen, sister, what did Nova mean yesterday about my being a protégé?"

"Oh, come now, brother. Are you seriously implying you didn't know what was going on?"

"Venora, do I have to beg?"

She sighed. "Alright. Elder Yonatan filed a formal decree regarding your status with the Advisory Council two years ago."

Chyardal froze, dragging her to a halt. "What?"

Venora turned to him. "It's true. You've officially been his protégé for two years now. He kept it quiet, though. Everyone on the Council has access to the records, but since he never publicly announced it, I suppose most of the members never realized what was going on. I've heard rumors that even the High Priestess didn't know, although I must admit, she has been very busy these past five years and doesn't have time for such trifles."

Chyardal shook his head. "Venora, you astonish me. How do you come by such information?"

She smiled. "I'm not as dimwitted as you would have me appear, brother dear. I can put two and two together. Besides, Vodana is my best friend, and she trusts me implicitly. I'm very proud of you, Chyardal." She squeezed his arm and looked up at him, her eyes bright.

"Does Father know?"

"Of course. He was informed immediately after the decree was filed."

"And what's his position on the matter?"

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“Well, it’s true, he didn’t quite bubble over with enthusiasm. Father wants to prepare you for the responsibilities of head of state and was concerned this would lead in the wrong direction. But Elder Yonatan discussed the matter with him and was able to appease him. Being the protégé of such an influential elder will be very instructive, and the things you learn certainly won’t be detrimental to Father’s objectives, as Father very well knows.”

“But I don’t want to join the Order and become an acolyte!”

Venora stared at him, her mouth open and an expression of exasperation on her face.

“Oh,” Chyardal remarked sheepishly. “I guess I already am.”

“Of course! You’ve been an acolyte of the Order since the moment Elder Yonatan filed the decree.”

“I don’t understand why the person who would be most affected by such a decree isn’t informed.”

“There are several reasons. First, it’s for your own protection. We live in increasingly difficult times, and you can’t betray what you don’t know.”

“Alright, you’ve got a point there. And?”

“The main reason is that, during the initial stages, preparatory training is much more effective if the trainee isn’t aware of the ultimate objective. The High Priestess herself has been employing this method in her protégée’s training for the past four years. But I’m sure Elder Yonatan would have informed you soon if you hadn’t discovered it for yourself. Now that you have, you’ll have to decide if you want to continue.”

“Continue my training? I never started.”

“Of course you did.”

“That’s not possible. The initial stages of an acolyte’s training must be absolved in one continuous block, and Elder Yonatan wasn’t here all the time. How could he have trained me?”

“He didn’t.”

“Oh? Well then who—? Oh.”

She smiled up at him. “You are a bit slow today, aren’t you?”

“I always thought only priests and priestesses were allowed to train acolytes.”

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“If the situation requires it, a deaconess will suffice. Besides, I had lots of help. But think of it, Chyardal. You’re following in the footsteps of the renowned High Priest, Lord Pival Tolares himself.”

“Yeah, right, and look what it got him: a solitary grave amidst the dismal ruins of Malentisa.”

“He was a hero!”

“Do I look like a hero to you?”

Venora regarded him with a solemn gaze. “Dearest brother, never underestimate the valor Anae has placed in your heart. I’m certain when the time comes, you’ll do what is required.”

Chyardal stared at his sister. “Venora, sometimes that uncanny wisdom of yours can be almost frightening.”

She smiled at him and pulled him in the direction of the breakfast chamber. “Come on, I’m hungry.”

They discovered they were the last to arrive. Since the party only consisted of little more than a dozen people, the smaller table had been set and the others had begun without them. The siblings were greeted cheerfully. Chyardal took the seat on his father’s left and Venora the one on her father’s right, next to Vodana. Since they were in the southeast corner of the fifth floor, Velana flooded the room with her brilliant light. It was once again an amazingly clear day, and they could see the majestic peaks of the Tyenar Mountains in the distance.

“My, but you are radiant today,” Vodana said, smiling secretively at Venora.

Chyardal looked up at the tone of Vodana’s voice. Venora was blushing and had her eyes cast down. But it was true. She did look exceedingly lovely. She was wearing a simple but formal cream-colored dress, complemented by a sleeveless, cream-colored vest with burgundy and golden stitching. Although, as a deaconess of the Selanian Order, she usually wore her hair open, she now had her hair dressed in the style of House Tolares: a royal crown braid, with part of her thick hair bound in a generous, broad loop on each side, approximating a triphyllon. She had even woven a few cream-colored wood flowers into her hair to match the dress. He hadn’t noticed her getup in the corridor, although the skylights provided sufficient lighting. Besides, she was his sister. He never looked at her in that way. Now, what would make her dress up like that?

He watched her unobtrusively and saw her sneak a casual glance toward the lower end of the table. He followed her eyes and detected Vilam, who was sitting beside Nova, attempting to study

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Venora offhandedly. But he could appreciate the look in Vilam's eyes. It was probably the same look Venora had teased him about a couple of years ago when he fell in love with Lord Vetena's beautiful daughter. Of course, his infatuation dissolved quickly when he overheard the princess whispering with her friends about how she would cure Chyardal of his obsession with science and make a man of him yet.

Chyardal could hardly suppress a grin. The alleged Emissary was interested in his sister, and it seemed as if Venora wasn't opposed to his attentions. Her behavior surprised him, since he was accustomed to her swiftly and unceremoniously rebuffing any suitor who tried to win her affection. Now, why hadn't he noticed that yesterday? Then again, his thoughts had been occupied elsewhere. Was his father aware of what was going on? Yes, he was observing Venora and Vilam warily.

Chyardal glanced back down the table at Nova. She was conversing across the table with the Lady Utalya. "I agree," the Lady was saying, "but we still need to be at the conference building in two hours for the final inspection."

"Alright. But I hope it won't take too long," Nova said. "I was planning on showing Catyana the city later today."

"I'm certain we'll be finished betimes, and I've ensured that a carriage will be waiting to take us there."

"Oh, I'm sorry you went to all that trouble, but I have something planned and will join you a bit later."

"Alright. But please be punctual. You know Elder Paloren hates to be kept waiting. And don't forget your signets. You won't be able to get into the building without them."

"I know. But since you've already gone over the seating arrangements with Elder Paloren and Elder Livanes by correspondence, you won't need me for the initial stage of the inspection. Please inform the elders that I concur with their recommendation. Besides, I believe we've already caused enough of a stir with me replacing Natilya at the conference table."

Catyana dropped her fork and stared at Nova. "I...I thought we would be sitting together."

Nova's glance was sad and her voice soft. "I'm so sorry. I know we switched things around a few times, which may have confused you. But a few days ago, we decided to stick to our original plan. Since I'm the Lady Utalya's chief of staff, I am the more obvious choice for conference

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adjutant. And as head of one of the Great Houses, her presence is required at the main table. Maybe we should have talked about it, but I didn't realize you had set your heart on our sitting together."

"Do you have any other surprises in store for me?"

Chyardal perked his ears. What was this? Yesterday, the two women had seemed inseparable. But now Chyardal sensed tension and even bitterness in Catyana's voice. The conversations at the table had quieted considerably. Everyone seemed to be following this exchange, and Vodana, Tanola, and Natilya traded meaningful glances across the table.

Nova searched her friend's eyes. "Catyana, I really am sorry if I hurt you through my negligence. It's not what I intended. Please keep in mind what I told you yesterday."

Catyana paled. "What are you talking about?"

Nova looked taken aback. "No, not...I mean..." She looked around, and when her eyes met Chyardal's, she seemed to blush and quickly turned back to Catyana. "Remember yesterday afternoon, in the carriage? I said that we can't always be holding on to the way things are. We must expect change."

"Yes, but—"

"Hush now. I don't think this is the best time. Let's talk about it later, *desar*?"

Catyana dropped her gaze and nodded. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"My son, you appear a bit fatigued."

Chyardal wrenched himself away from the conversation and looked at his father, who was dabbing his mouth with a napkin. "Yes, Father, it's true. I didn't sleep very well."

"Oh?" Lord Tolares raised an eyebrow. "Was it that dream again?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That's interesting," Vodana said. "Catyana's little sister is also having nightmares. What kind of dream, Chyardal?"

At the mention of her name, Catyana rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger and glanced at Chyardal.

"In the dream, I see a figure standing by my bed, looking down at me. But it's strange, because all I can see of this person are the eyes, and they're completely blue."

"Like Catyana's?" There was a smile on Vodana's lips.

Catyana blushed and stared at her lap.

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“No, nothing like Catyana’s, although Catyana’s eyes are beautiful,” Chyardal replied.

Catyana’s cheeks turned dark red. Not wishing to embarrass her further, Chyardal continued quickly, “No, the eyes are completely blue, even the whites.”

“Like the Queen of the Elinar!” Natilya said.

Chyardal’s father smiled at her, and Natilya returned it, but her eyes emanated something he couldn’t quite put in words. Was it love? Chyardal was amazed at how beautiful and vibrant she looked when she lit up like that. He saw Nova and the Lady Utalya exchange a glance, and Chyardal raised an eyebrow. “The Queen of the Elinar,” he said. “You might be right about that.” There were so many strange undercurrents at the table today. And Natilya and his father! What was going on there?

“Is the shape feminine or masculine?” Vodana inquired.

“Definitely feminine,” said Chyardal.

“I wonder what it could mean,” Vodana said.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I have some things I need to prepare before I leave,” the Lady Utalya said. “Would you please excuse me?” She rose from her seat with a stern glance in Natilya’s direction. The acolyte dropped her gaze and her expression became somber.

Chyardal’s father rose and bowed to the Lady. “Of course, My Lady. I hope to see you later.”

As more people left the table, Chyardal realized his sister had become very quiet. When she noticed his gaze, she returned it, and he saw she was disturbed by something. He was on the verge of inquiring about it when his father interrupted him. “My son, you have a dueling lesson now, don’t you?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Will you promise not to cut it short this time?”

Chyardal sighed. “I know how important it is to you, sir.”

His father eyed him evenly. “I was hoping for more enthusiasm on your part.”

“I’m doing the best I can.”

“Son, you must grasp your destiny with both hands.”

“Excuse me, Cavan, but I overheard something about dueling,” said Vilam. “May I ask what kind of dueling?”

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“My son has been taking lessons in swordsmanship for several years and has a lesson scheduled after breakfast.”

“Very interesting. Would you mind if I joined him?”

Chyardal’s father shot his son an inquiring glance.

“I would be delighted,” Chyardal answered with a grin.

“Where shall we meet?” Vilam asked.

“I’ll come get you. I’ll be at your suite in fifteen minutes.”

“Excuse me, Chyardal, but may Catyana and I join you too?” Nova asked.

Chyardal looked at her in surprise. “Yes, of course. I would feel honored.”

“*Desar*, we’ll meet you at the training hall in twenty minutes.”

The party at the table was quickly breaking up, so Chyardal hurried to finish. Every now and then, Venora cast a concerned glance in his direction, and she seemed pensive. But he needed to get back to his suite to change for his lesson, so he excused himself as soon as he was done and rushed out. Talking to his sister and figuring out what was going on would have to wait until later.

18. The Funeral

Mara and Amendel arrived early at the Lady Utalya’s manse. Nova and the Lady had arranged for members of the Selanian Order based in Nadil to help with the preparations for the funeral service and they soon arrived. It didn’t take long to put up the chairs. Someone had brought a beautifully worked coffin lined with soft padding, and Soshia was laid inside and placed behind the podium.

The first guests began arriving well before *setavelates*, among them the Faeren family. Mara greeted Matila with a hug. “Thank you so much for coming. May I introduce you to Soshia’s father? This is Lord Amendel Marusen.”

Amendel took Matila’s hand and kissed it. “I’m honored, Madam Faeren.”

“As am I, My Lord,” said Matila.

“There’s probably something I should tell you before the ceremony begins,” said Mara in a whisper, taking her aside. “I don’t want you to be caught by surprise when we announce it later.”

“Of course,” said Matila.”

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“Soshia...” Mara had to take a deep breath before continuing, “Soshia was my daughter.”

Matila gasped. “Oh.” She had to visibly restrain herself to keep from gaping. “Oh, no. Oh, Mara, I’m so sorry.” She really did have tears in her eyes, but she gave Mara another hug and a peck on the cheek. Taking Mara’s hands, she said, “How are you holding up?”

“I’m getting there. I...think I’ve found a way of coping with all my pent-up anger and sorrow.” An image entered her mind of the many trees she had felled early that morning with dark red spheres of pulsing energy, while Amendel had looked on in amazement. They had driven out to the forest south of town before sunrise, because she had wanted to get in some practice before the funeral and give Amendel an idea of what an enchantress was capable of.

“I’m so glad.” Matila gave Mara’s hands a quick squeeze before letting go. “Would you like to join us for dinner this evening?”

“I really would, Matila, thank you. But a courier brought me the strangest letter from Nova this morning.”

“Really! What did she say?”

“She wants me to join them for the conference tomorrow. Since Lord Marusen needs to be back in Tolares by tomorrow morning, I think I’ll ride with him.”

“I understand,” said Matila. “Did Nova say anything else? Did she mention Catyana?”

“She did, yes, but all she said was that they arrived safely at the residence and that they’re all doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances.”

“Those...seem to be very cautious words.”

“I agree. I think there’s more going on than she was able to convey in her letter.”

Matila took a deep breath. “Well, I’m sure she’s being truthful when she says they’re all doing well. Thank you for telling me, Mara.”

“Of course. But I see the rest of your family is already seated. You might want to join them. There will be a wake here in the workshop after the burial. Will you be joining us?”

“Yes, but we won’t be able to stay very long. There’s too much work waiting for us at home. But I’ll be sure to come say good-bye before we leave.”

“I would like that very much.”

After another quick hug, Matila joined her family, and Mara went to the front and sat beside Amendel. The garden was filling quickly, and although the helpers were constantly bringing out

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more chairs, most of the guests had to remain standing. Mara assumed they had all heard that Lord Marusen would be attending the service and naturally couldn't stay away.

When Mayor Menirel Sitenan and his wife Culisa arrived, they greeted Mara and the Lord most cordially. Culisa took the seat next to Mara, with her husband beside her.

It was fun to see Lutrisya Cemasena's expression when she saw Mara sitting beside Lord Marusen. After she had greeted the Lord, she said to Mara, "I...wasn't aware you were acquainted with royalty. Did you and Soshia previously work for Lord Marusen?"

Mara couldn't quite suppress a smile. "I did sometimes labor under him, although I wouldn't quite call it work. But we have known each other for many years."

Lutrisya fixed her with an odd glance before nodding and taking her seat. Amendel grinned at Mara with a shake of his head, and Mara returned a weak smile, giving him a quick nudge with her elbow.

At *setavelates*, Mayor Sitenan stood up and went to the podium. "Dear friends and citizens, we have come together today to say good-bye to a young woman who has grown very dear to our hearts. Soshia worked in our household for eight years, and we've come to know her as a warm, reliable, and spirited girl. I could go on for quite some time and tell you many wonderful stories, but Lord Marusen has asked if he could say a few words. Let me therefore close by saying that Soshia will be sorely missed. Lord Marusen, if you please."

Amendel nodded to the mayor and shook his hand as he passed him on his way to the front. "Dear friends and guests, I know you're all wondering why I'm here today, so let me come directly to the point. You see before you a grieving father, for the young woman you all knew as Soshia Rotasen was in truth my eldest daughter, the young Lady Soshia Marusen."

All around her, Mara could hear people gasping, murmuring, and whispering. When she took a furtive glance around, she realized many people were sneaking glances in her direction. *Of course*, she thought to herself. Everyone knew Mara and Soshia had been inseparable, so if Soshia was a princess, who exactly was Mara? Her handmaiden? Her nanny? Well, they would find out soon enough.

"At home in Marusen, we all knew Soshia as a loving daughter and sister," Amendel continued. "When her brother, my son Varan, passed away two years ago, she came home to grieve with us and console us. Despite our heavy hearts at the time, she was a great comfort to us, and with her

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warm heart and sharp wit, she always found the right words to put a smile on our faces. Yet, although I could share many more such wonderful memories of her, I think the person best suited for the job is the one Soshia was closest to, and that is her mother. I would therefore like to ask the love of my life and companion of many years, the young Lady Maralena Novesta, to please come and join me.”

Mara could almost feel the shockwave propelling her forward as she strode to the front. When she reached the podium, Amendel gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before taking up a position behind her right shoulder as support.

Although she should have known better, Mara was surprised at the bewilderment in the faces of her friends and neighbors. Many of them were still whispering, but they quieted down when she began to speak. “I know this must come as a shock to all of you,” she said, “and I’m truly sorry that our situation required such duplicity on our part. But Soshia and I didn’t conceal our identities for our amusement, nor was it our wish to deceive you.”

She took a deep breath before continuing. “Most of you have heard of the horrifying conditions in the western provinces. Well, the truth is that our own circumstances had become so perilous we had no choice but to flee, first to Tolares, then here to Nadil. Yet, despite our caution and vigilance, our enemies found us, and our beloved Soshia—”

Mara’s voice broke when she spoke her daughter’s name, and she had to drop her gaze and swallow to keep from bursting into tears. Amendel put his arm around her and handed her a handkerchief, with which she attempted to wipe away the wet streaks under her eyes. It took her a moment to regain enough composure to continue.

“But it’s not our need for secrecy or the resulting tragedy that Soshia would want us to remember, because that’s not who Soshia was. What she would want us to remember is the remarkable gift we were granted: the opportunity to become members of this wonderful community, unhindered by the imposed veil of social privilege that so often separates us, allowing us to know one another for who we really are. Believe me, neither Soshia nor I will ever regret our time here. So many of you have become our friends, and Soshia always cherished that. So please don’t remember her as the scared girl who was running from her enemies in the west, but remember her instead as that affectionate and spirited young woman who loved nothing more than being here and living among you. And that is why Nadil, and not Marusen, will be her final resting place,

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because this is where she truly felt at home. All I can say is thank you for welcoming her into your midst with such warm hearts and open arms. Amendel and I will never forget the kindness and friendship you have shown her.”

As she spoke, Mara saw the expressions of the people before her grow softer, and by the time she finished, many of them were nodding in agreement or dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs. She stepped away from the podium and Amendel accompanied her back to their seats.

A priestess of the Selanian Order held a short sermon, after which the assembly lined up to pay their last respects before Soshia’s coffin was closed. Mara and Amendel remained beside her and shook hands with the other bereaved.

When Lutrisya came forward and took Mara’s hand, she said, “I...I’m so sorry for your loss, My Lady.” Then she leaned closer and whispered, “And I beg your forgiveness if I wasn’t always as friendly as I might have been.”

Mara regarded her with concern. “You know what the Prophet says: ‘When a malignant person attends to those they believe are beneath them, they will not fail to reveal their true nature.’ I was surprised, Lutrisya. I’ve come to know you as a reliable woman of good faith, yet your principles always seemed to elude you in your dealings with people you believed to be of a lower social standing than yourself.”

Lutrisya stared at her and her mouth seemed to be jammed into a straight, thin line, but Mara believed it was mainly to conceal her trembling lips. “I...know,” whispered Lutrisya, “and I’m very sorry. I promise, I’ll try to do better. And thank you. It was kind of you to misquote the Prophet.”

Mara drew in her breath, leaned forward, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You’re no fool, Lutrisya,” she whispered in the woman’s ear. “Let’s talk when I get back from Tolares.”

Lutrisya gave her a surprised glance but nodded.

It took more than an hour before they had greeted everyone and accepted their condolences. Afterward, Soshia was transported to the cemetery, where she was interred in a provisional plot until Amendel and Mara could make better arrangements. Amendel wanted a small tomb, but Mara felt Soshia would prefer a pretty sculpture of an angel to mark the grave. They would have to defer the decision until after the conference. The wake lasted several hours, and many of the townspeople

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took it upon themselves to stop by. Mara and Amendel left for Tolares toward evening. They knew it would be a long ride, about eight hours, to be exact, and they hoped to arrive before midnight.

19. Training

Nova studied the ground as she and Catyana followed the walkway to the training hall. The mood between the two women was anything but pleasant. Their conversation after breakfast had been strained, and Nova didn't know what to think. Despite what had passed between them last night, she loved Catyana with all her heart and could understand how difficult the situation must be for her. But there wasn't anything Nova could do about it right now. There was too much going on, too many details to take care of, and too much that had to be kept quiet.

Nova hated concealment, but she knew it was necessary. So much was at stake, and a single misplaced word might have dreadful consequences. It was a good sign, though, that Catyana was holding on to her arm. Holding on for dear life might have been a better expression. Nova was accustomed to ignoring pain or she might have cried out at the way Catyana was clutching her. She slowed her pace and placed her fingers over Catyana's clenched hand, squeezing gently. "Hey, I might have need of that arm later."

Catyana's mouth dropped open when she realized what she was doing. She loosened her grip. "Oh, *votalaran*."

"*Tezatal*."

They walked on in silence. When they rounded a corner of Chyardal's workshop, Nova saw the training hall ahead. The building was set back against the woods and had a good-sized lawn in front that could be used for exercises when the weather allowed. Chyardal and Vilam were standing on the walk between the lawn and the building, conversing with a white-haired gentleman, who was apparently the swordmaster.

Nova recognized the man instantly, but she had the advantage since she thought she might be seeing him here, and she smiled at the familiar sight of his snowy, disheveled mane. But the main question was, how would he react when he noticed her? Gelanes Cemasena was her uncle, the brother of her deceased mother. She was sorry since she was extremely fond of him, but she knew they couldn't possibly acknowledge each other in front of her friends. It was too dangerous, and

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the risk too great that either of them might compromise the part they were expected to play in this unnerving game.

When her gaze wandered to Chyardal, she tightened her lips and shot an anxious glance at Catyana. She still wasn't sure if taking her to the training hall was a good idea, despite the many benefits it might hold for her. She didn't want to cause her additional grief by exposing her to Chyardal's presence any more than was necessary.

With her own heart in turmoil, Nova hadn't been able to sleep at all that night and had therefore been painfully aware of Catyana's solitary martyrdom in the neighboring bed. She wished their relationship had been such that she could have gone over and comforted her. After spending half the night weeping quietly into her pillow, her friend now seemed to be holding up quite well, but how long would it last? Of course, it would be best if she didn't have to take any special steps and Catyana could learn to embrace the rhythm of daily life, letting events fall as they would, including encounters with Chyardal. But that wasn't an attitude or an ability anyone could force on her.

Nova turned her attention back to the three men, who had just ended their short conversation. Gelanes took Chyardal into the field. Vilam watched them go, looking skeptical, but finally sat on one of the stone benches lining the walk. Nova took a seat beside him, and Catyana took the seat next to her.

"You don't look very happy," Nova said to Vilam.

He cast a quick glance in their direction and gazed back to the field with an expression that looked as if he had just spewed out a mouthful of spoiled milk. "We'll see. I don't think that guy has the slightest idea what he's talking about, but we'll see."

Nova smiled and turned her attention to the duelists in the field. They saluted and stood en garde. The swordmaster initiated a direct attack, chopping into the younger man's blade from all sides.

Vilam shook his head. "I don't believe this."

Nova knew exactly what he meant. After a thousand years of peace, their culture no longer possessed the expertise associated with the gruesome routine of warfare. Yet even so, Nova had an intuitive sense for the beauty of smooth, accurate movements or, as in this case, the complete absence of them.

"*A'mada*, that's terrible," Catyana whispered.

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The two women smiled at each other. No further words were necessary. Nova felt a wave of joy surge through her at the realization that they could still communicate so well, despite the discord that had entered their relationship.

The sound of clashing steel filled the air as the two men continued to hack away at each other. Grasping the hilt of his sword tightly in both hands, Chyardal attempted to traverse his opponent's blade to sneak in a thrust. But he found his attack preempted as the swordmaster lunged at him, overstepping and barely managing to regain his balance as Chyardal tried a sweeping cut from upper left. The swordmaster managed to clumsily ward off the stroke, knocking Chyardal's blade away but exposing his own defense, leaving him wide open.

"Alright, that does it." Vilam leaped to his feet and stomped out onto the field. "I don't know what kind of clown you think you are, but if you're a swordmaster, then I'm the Princess Bride."

Nova awarded him a puzzled smile as the two men stared at Vilam in consternation. The man sometimes had such an odd way of expressing himself.

"I assure you, his credentials are impeccable," Chyardal declared.

Vilam glared at the young Lord. "Has his expertise at least been verified by someone from the Order?"

"No-o-o," Chyardal replied, drawing out the syllable as he considered the question.

"Listen, young man," the supposed swordmaster lashed out, "I have no idea who you are, but what gives you the right to speak to me in this fashion? Let's see your credentials," he added with a smug grin.

Chyardal took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Master Gelanes, but he does have one very significant point in his favor. It seems he can pin a guard's arm to a wooden post with an arrow dispatched from the Prophet's Bow. I assume even you would have a difficult time surpassing such a feat."

The swordmaster gaped at Vilam. "You...you're the Emissary?"

"I have no idea if I am or not, but I do know you're no swordmaster." The color rose in Vilam's face, but Nova doubted it was because he was blushing.

Gelanes looked around as if for support and paused when he saw her. She clenched her teeth, but all he did was raise an eyebrow. Then he nodded to himself, lifted his chin, and assumed an expression of arrogant confidence as he addressed her. "You seem to be in the Selanian Order. What say you and your superiors regarding this man?"

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Nova had to jam her teeth together to keep from laughing, and she swallowed the amused smile that tried to commandeer her lips. Her uncle was a more talented actor than she had ever given him credit for. “It’s true, I am the Lady Utalya’s chief of staff,” she responded carefully. “I know the Lady herself believes him to be the Emissary, and I can testify to his expert use of the Prophet’s Bow in Nadil.”

“I don’t care who you think I am,” Vilam said in cold fury. “But if you’re interested in a trial, I assure you I will defeat you in a fair duel inside of five heartbeats. Do you accept?”

Gelanes eyed him warily. “If you are the Emissary, I have no doubt you’ll do as you say. And if not, then I’ll have exposed a fraud.” He shot Nova a fleeting glance, who inclined her head in a subtle nod. His nose shot up in a flawless show of audacious determination, almost causing Nova to choke on a suppressed giggle. “I accept.”

Chyardal shrugged, handed Vilam his sword, and walked back to the bench, sitting down next to Nova. Nova stared at the two men facing each other in the field. She was certain her training made it impossible for anyone to detect the flutter of her heart when Chyardal sat down beside her. But Catyana must have sensed it anyway. She gave Nova a quick glance and sighed before directing her gaze back to the field as the two men saluted each other.

Gelanes struck from above, as he had done with Chyardal. Vilam smoothly blocked the attack while sidestepping his opponent. He traversed hilt forward across the swordmaster’s blade, knocking Gelanes senseless with the pommel. Nova felt her fingers tighten around the folds of her robe. As the man fell, Vilam facilitated the drop by pushing him across his leg. There was a dull thump as Gelanes landed heavily on the ground.

Vilam brought up his sword with the point down and plunged it into the earth beside the alleged swordmaster. Then he turned and, ignoring his fallen opponent, stalked off the field as if nothing had happened. Nova noticed his breath hadn’t even quickened.

Catyana seemed shocked.

Chyardal just stared. A muted “Whoa,” was all he could muster.

But Vilam didn’t seem to care about his audience’s reaction. He went to the rack and took down another sword. His disgust with the instrument was evident. He leaned it against the wall with the hilt to the ground and stomped on the blade. The weapon shattered into pieces. He took down another sword and proceeded to do the same. Nova and Catyana exchanged baffled glances.

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Chyardal finally came to his senses and jumped to his feet. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Vilam looked up. “Isn’t that obvious? I’m leaning this sword against the wall and stomping on it. Would you like to try? It’s fun.” But Nova couldn’t see any indication of humor in the way he regarded Chyardal.

Chyardal just stared at him. From the expression on his face, Nova could tell he thought Vilam was out of his mind.

Vilam sighed. He turned back to the metal shards at his feet, picked one up, and examined it closely. Then he handed it to Chyardal. “Here, take a look. What do you see?”

Chyardal hardly glanced at it. “I don’t know, Vilam. Perhaps a steel shard? One that used to be part of a perfectly good and very expensive sword?”

“Take a closer look. Do you see any layers in this metal?”

Chyardal’s expression was sullen, and at first it wasn’t clear if he would dignify Vilam with an answer or just stare at him. “No, I don’t see any layers.” The tone of his voice seemed to add a few unspoken colloquialisms. Nova didn’t think his patience would hold up much longer.

“And what does that mean?”

Chyardal’s face turned red. “Who cares what that means? I’ve had it with you! Who do you think you—?” His features froze. Nova could practically see the light in his head turn on. He drew in his breath. “The metal wasn’t folded,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Does it look as if it’s been hammered?”

“No,” Chyardal answered meekly.

“And what do you deduce from that?”

“That the sword was cast in one piece.”

“Good, Chyardal. I see the scientist is finally coming out. Now, look at the way the sword shattered. What do you deduce in regard to the metal content of the alloy?”

Chyardal considered the question carefully before answering. “The alloy was hard and brittle, but not tough or flexible. I would say they probably used far too much carbon, maybe even some chromium, and little or no silicon.”

“And the heat treatment?”

“Hardly deserves the name.”

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Vilam grinned. “There is hope for you yet, my friend.”

Nova smiled at the boyish excitement apparent in Chyardal’s face. “I’ve never considered it from this point of view,” he said. “Is there so much science in a sword?”

“More than you realize.”

Gelanes regained consciousness. He sat up and stared around in a daze. Nova nudged Catyana. “Could you please take a look at him?”

Catyana nodded and approached the man. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. What happened?”

“Vilam was true to his word. You were down inside of five heartbeats.”

“Oh.” He gazed over at the two men with dawning comprehension. “Oh.”

“Let me help you up.” Catyana supported him to one of the benches. Nova wished she could do more for him, but she knew he was in good hands. She sent him a weak smile when he glanced in her direction. He nodded and supported his head in one hand while cautiously feeling a certain spot on his skull. Nova winced at the sight. When Catyana had ensured there was no serious injury, she left him there to recuperate and returned to Nova. “I didn’t heal him because he didn’t ask me to, just like you said.”

“That’s fine, Catyana. You did well.”

“Do you know what the others were talking about before?”

“No, I didn’t quite understand everything.” She leaned forward. “Vilam, could you please explain that again in simpler terms? It’s been a while since my studies in metallurgy and I wasn’t quite able to follow.”

Vilam glanced at Chyardal. “Would you like to give it a try?”

“I’d be glad to.” He turned to the women. “You see, there are countless types of alloy, and various methods are used to treat them depending on the application they’re intended for. For a good blade, you’d probably need an alloy that’s hard and tough, but also durable. To this end, the forging process—but especially the final heat treatment—is crucial. During the forging process, steel is usually folded and hammered, which adds strength and durability. But if you skip the forging process and cast the sword in one piece, the heat treatment would have to be pretty extraordinary or all you get is a nice showpiece for your wall. The bottom line is...these swords are worthless.”

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Gelanes raised his head. “They are not!” But there was little conviction in his voice, and his hand immediately shot up to his head although he managed not to grimace.

“I would advise you to remain silent, Gelanes. You’re already in enough trouble as it is. Vilam, I must thank you for enlightening me. I never realized it was possible to know so much about swords.”

“That’s because you never turned your scientific mind upon the subject. You probably always felt it was just physical exercise. But there’s much more to know, and I’d be glad to show you if you’re interested.”

Chyardal looked skeptical. “Why? Does swordsmanship have anything to do with science?”

“As a matter of fact, it’s a science unto itself. Let me demonstrate.” Vilam turned to the rack but hesitated. “Uh, do you have any swords that would be worth the name?”

Chyardal grinned. “Let’s check in the training hall. We might have some older specimens left from before Gelanes’s time.”

As they walked into the building, Nova turned to Catyana. “Do you remember the swords in Folan’s tavern?”

“Yes. There were some absolutely lovely ones.”

“Do you remember their patterns?”

Catyana thought about it for a moment. “There was one I remember quite well, mainly because it was my favorite. Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“Probably. Would you like to give it a try?”

“Is that really such a good idea? What about the enchantresses?”

“A sword isn’t anywhere near as large as the artifact was. And to develop your abilities, you really do need to practice. Besides, we’re in a secured location here on the estate, so I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Alright.” Catyana went to the rack and took down one of the swords. “Here goes.” She closed her eyes. The sword began to glow, then throb. Gelanes, who was watching the two women, caught his breath. The sword’s form was changing, its patterns flowing together. The metal grew bright and gleamed dangerously in the sun. After a while, Catyana let the glow dissipate.

To Nova, the sword looked like an exact replica of the Tesalian blade in Folan’s tavern. “Oh, Catyana, it’s beautiful! But only Vilam will be able to tell for sure.”

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The two men were coming out of the building, holding a few swords and laughing at a mutual joke. But when Vilam saw what Catyana was holding, he stopped and stared. “Where did you get that?”

She eyed him bashfully. “From the rack, I suppose.”

He looked the sword over. “Catyana, did you...?”

She nodded.

“May I see it?” When she handed it to him, he hefted the weapon, first in one, then in both hands, and let the blade swish through the air several times. “Superb!” He glanced back at Catyana. “Did you bear the tang in mind?”

“Yes. Torvos lectured me for days last winter on how important the construction of a tang is. The sword should be an exact replica of the one in Folan’s tavern.”

“Well, if this blade is even half as good as I think it is, then it’s going to be worth a fortune. And even more important, an invaluable asset in battle. Do you mind if I break it in?”

“I was hoping you would.”

“I still don’t understand, though. A sword is a very complex instrument. The intricacy of its ethereal pattern must be overwhelming. How did you do it?”

“Knitting a person together must be even more complex, but I never felt it was difficult.”

Vilam eyed her appreciatively. “I don’t think it’s quite the same thing, but alright. Thank you, Catyana. Chyardal, are you ready?”

The young Lord nodded. “But I don’t understand what just happened. How did Catyana get hold of such a weapon?”

“By inductive transformation. She induced it from one of the swords in the rack.”

“She induced it? I didn’t realize that was possible. But why do you feel a sword is so complex?”

“Think about it, Chyardal. A sword is a highly specialized instrument. It must endure an immense amount of pounding in battle, and as a result must be well built and well balanced. Every component must be honed and attuned to the others to facilitate the weapon’s usage, or the person wielding it would be unfortunate indeed. The secret of a quality sword is often passed down from generation to generation, being honed again and again as a result of the exchange of information between the swordsmith and the swordmaster when the latter returns from battle. This in itself is

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a long and complex process, and I haven't yet said a word about alloy composition or the diverse ways in which it can be treated to temper and strengthen the blade."

"And Catyana did all this by Induction?"

Vilam raised his eyebrows, tightened his lips, and nodded. "Come on, let's go."

Chyardal followed but couldn't refrain from shooting Catyana an incredulous but admiring glance. The two men took their positions in the field while Catyana regained her seat next to her friend. Nova smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

"I have no idea what Vilam is talking about," Catyana whispered. "All I did was copy the pattern of the sword as I remembered it from Folan's tavern."

Nova patted her arm. "*Tezatal*, Catyana. Vilam is an engineer, not an expert on the psychological aspects of Sensation and Induction. I'm not sure he quite understands the process involved. Let's watch."

"It sounded more like he was showing off his expertise," Catyana muttered. "It always makes my mind go numb when someone dumps a load of information on me like that, especially if I can't see the use of it."

Nova had to smile, but she gave Catyana an understanding glance and squeezed her arm. The women turned their attention back to the field.

"Alright, Chyardal, attack me," Vilam said.

"What? Just like that?"

"Sure. What are you waiting for?"

"*Desar.*"

Chyardal raised his sword and cut in from overhead. Vilam smoothly blocked the attack and sliced in along Chyardal's blade for a thrust. Chyardal attempted to block the counterattack but overextended and left his guard wide open. Vilam immediately had his blade at Chyardal's throat. "Alright, Chyardal, several problems here. First, never, ever attack or defend against the edge of your opponent's blade with your edge. Do you know why?"

"Because the blade will chip?"

"Exactly! You can take the hardest, toughest, and most durable steel and you will still chip the blade if you duel edge to edge. Take a look at the swords remaining in the rack over there and you'll see what I mean. Always block your opponent's edge with your flat."

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“Alright, I’ll try.”

“Now, another thing. When you attempted the overhead stroke, did you observe my defense?”

“Yes, it was amazing. Your defense was a thrust. I’ve never seen a move like that.”

“It’s actually standard practice, something your supposed swordmaster should have known.”

Vilam targeted Gelanes with a sour glance. “But it caught you unawares and prompted you to open your guard.”

“Yes,” Chyardal admitted bashfully, “which you immediately exploited.”

“Of course. But I hope you’ll be doing the same soon enough. One last thing. You can hear for yourself if your movement is properly executed, because your sword will emit a firm swish when it cuts the air in just the right way, like this.” Vilam demonstrated with his weapon. “See? It’s pretty much the same feedback you get if you execute a smooth, clean swing with your golf club.”

“My what?”

“Oh, um, never mind. Now, it’s going to take a bit of training to get your movements reprogrammed, so we’re going to have to take this nice and slow.”

As the two men continued their training, Nova leaned her head closer to Catyana’s. “Look at Vilam’s movements; they’re so smooth and well-balanced. It’s a true feast for the eyes.”

“Especially after that awful performance earlier. Is that the reason you wanted us to watch?”

“Partly. I feel we can both learn much by just watching them practice. But I was also going to ask Vilam to take over our combat training as soon as we can manage the time.”

“That’s probably a good idea. Although I don’t know how good I’ll be with a sword.”

“Don’t underestimate yourself. If your sister’s talent gives us even the slightest indication, I’m sure you’ll do amazingly well.”

“Are you referring to Mina?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m sure she has a talent all her own, although you may be right. In my family, we all share at least a little of each other’s abilities.”

“I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

They watched the men for another half hour. Then Nova excused herself and, with a furtive smile in Gelanes’s direction, headed them toward the entrance of the residence, where a carriage was waiting to take them to the conference building.

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20. One with the Night

Vechiles stared out the window of his penthouse suite with his hands behind his back. He was so lost in thought he hardly noticed the people promenading through the beautiful park below. The guesthouse he had chosen was in the southwest district of Tolares near the headquarters of the Videsian Order. The suite was on the upper floor of a tall building, and he had an amazing view of the city from where he stood.

One day very soon, all this would be his. He knew it. He could feel it in his bones. And with the fusion of eastern technology and western ideology, it would be a wonderful world indeed. In his mind, his excitement at the prospect wrestled with his anger and regret. But being the man he was, he suppressed the emotions, allowing him to stay calm and in control. He was aware that others would probably regard his expression as cold.

Although Lusina was more gifted in matters of the arcane, she often referred to Vechiles as a brilliant strategist. The thought filled him with a certain pride, and he had to admit his mistress had a remarkable talent for stimulating him to reach his goals. But there was only one goal he felt was truly worth achieving. Ironically, it was the one that had slowly but surely slipped ever further away.

Sorrow mixed with helpless rage swelled up inside him. His jaw muscles tightened. Why couldn't he get Ilanya to understand? What had he done wrong? She was the only woman he had ever truly wanted, but she had drifted out of his reach as reliably as night would follow upon day.

He remembered how happy they had been during the time of their courtship and the first years of their marriage. Ilanya was so beautiful, then and now. Whereas Lusina's beauty had become more divine and was almost ethereal, Ilanya's beauty had received a more mature and tangible quality. He felt somehow fulfilled in her presence; something Lusina had never been able to give him, despite her unrivaled charm and irresistible magnetism.

Longing rose up and mixed itself with the pain and sorrow. When had the rift begun to form? In the early summer of 1468, just a few months after their wedding, they had gone up into the mountains together and Ilanya had chosen the exact site of her summer residence. It wasn't surprising that she settled on a picturesque spot in the Etenolyas Valley. She always was susceptible to beauty. What an untroubled and joyous time that was!

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When they returned to Divestelan, he immediately contracted the architects and craftsmen, and construction commenced at once. He was so excited about the project that he rode up into the valley to oversee their progress several times a month. Until Ilanya became pregnant with their first child, he took her with him whenever possible, although it took a long day's ride to get there from the city. It was fascinating to watch his beloved's villa gradually emerge from the rocks of the mountainside.

Two years into the project, they discovered the tunnel. He never told Ilanya about it. Something inside him held him back. He knew instinctively that Ilanya would never approve. Was that his fatal mistake? Could he have saved their relationship if he had desisted? But the sensation of some mystifying and powerful presence in the tunnel was overwhelming, and Vechiles had never been a man to let sentimental feelings get in the way of what he wanted.

The subterranean passage intrigued him. It had clearly been excavated many centuries ago, although he couldn't say who or what was responsible. The markings he found chiseled into the walls here and there suggested they might be Elinian, and he intended to find out if his assumptions were correct. As a result, the villa was built around the tunnel's entrance, which was integrated into one of the lower chambers and hidden by a concealed door. It was easy to arrange construction so no one knew what was going on, and a handsome bribe ensured none of the handful of people who were aware of it would ever talk. Of course, in the meantime, none of them *could* talk. The Black Guard had made sure of that.

Back then, he had realized the amount of time he was spending in the tunnel was distancing him from Ilanya. But the urge was overpowering. In the enigmatic silence, impenetrable shadows, and soft luminance inhabiting the passages and caverns inside the mountain, his mind flourished. He heard disquieting whispers that inspired him in a strangely exhilarating way, challenging his views and contesting his opinions. And it was there that he conceived his revolutionary economic models. He amazed himself with the breakthrough, since he wasn't aware of when and how he had come by such knowledge. Even more astonishing were the staggeringly profitable applications that flowed from his theories, allowing House Divestelan to prosper beyond his wildest expectations. How could Ilanya not wish to live in such wealth and luxury? Wasn't that worth the sacrifice in time and energy?

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As the years went by, he learned to express his misgivings in regard to the ideology in which he had been instructed since his youth. The doctrine of the Selanian Order fell far short of the actual, pluralistic reality surrounding them. It was infuriating, because the current world view was so completely integrated into the existing culture that the dream he envisioned of a free world was unattainable.

His life changed forever one evening in the late summer of 1477. Corsen was six and Gevinesa but a toddler of fourteen months when Ilanya invited several befriended couples of the high society and their families to the Etenolyas residence for a week of recreation. Among them was his best friend, Merelan Novesta, Merelan's wife, Tsenera, and their twenty-one-year-old daughter, Maralena.

An old friend of both families had also joined them: the eccentric Amendel Marusen together with his young consort, Lusina, who had been married that spring. It was surprising that such a noble dignitary as Lord Marusen should break with tradition by falling for a girl from an insignificant house somewhere high up in the mountains, and then have the audacity to marry her. But then again, who would dare question the extravagant actions of such a powerful Lord? Hadn't their friend Merelan done the same when he married Tsenera?

Vechiles remembered the episode that followed as if it were yesterday. His guests asked for a tour of the less-frequented lower levels of the villa, then displayed an odd tendency to drift off. The first to disappear were Amendel and Maralena, who had been engrossed in conversation all evening. His audience grew smaller and smaller until, in the end, he turned and found Lusina standing there by herself, offering him an elfin smile. She looked stunning in her elegant summer gown, contrasting the dark shade of her skin and emphasizing her enticing figure.

"Where did everyone go?" he asked.

"Vanished like starlight veiled in the mist," she whispered.

"Maybe we should go look for them."

"No, I want you all to myself." She took his arm and coaxed him down the passage. Her movements, her scent, the soft touch of her hand on his arm were so compelling, it was impossible to deny her. When they arrived at his special chamber, she took his hand and dragged him inside but didn't stop until they were by the fireplace. Then she reached up with a smile and pulled on one of the figurines decorating the mantelpiece. The concealed door swished aside.

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“How...how did you know?” he asked.

Lusina reached up and laid her finger on his lips. “Hush, dear. Follow me.” She extracted a phosphorescent orb from her gown, and he followed her into the tunnel, guided by the soft light radiating from the orb she was holding up in her hand. He was amazed at how well she could navigate the underground labyrinth.

He didn't know how long they walked, but it might have been half an hour when she stopped at a wall. When she waved her hand, a door slid aside. He stared with his mouth agape. But she just smiled, took his arm, and led him into what appeared to be a good-sized bedchamber, where she put away the orb and turned to face him.

They should have been in relative darkness, with only the soft luminescence of the cave moss outside to cast minute and obscure shadows around them. Instead, he was bewildered by the purple shimmer surrounding her. “Who are you?” he asked, his voice a mere whisper.

“That's not important right now. I brought you here because it's time you finally met my Lord.”

“Your Lord? Amendel?”

Her eyes flashed and she scoffed. “Amendel? What does that dupe have to do with anything?”

“You...don't love him?”

“Love him?” she said, laughing out loud. “Oh, you're just adorable. No, Vechiles, I may be his consort and am therefore Lady Marusen, but that's all he'll ever get from me. Even as we speak, he's sealing his fate by walking right into my little honeytrap.”

Vechiles drew in his breath and raised his chin. “Ah, Maralena.”

Lusina smirked. “I knew my Lord didn't choose a dimwitted fool. So tell me, who do you think inspired you these past seven years? Where did all the brilliant ideas come from that increased your wealth and boosted your influence? You can't be so naïve as to believe that was you.”

Vechiles swallowed and dropped his gaze.

Lusina nodded. “Good. If you were as conceited as I am, we'd constantly be at each other's throats. But my Lord did say you would be the anchor in our relationship, and with so much power flowing through me, I need someone who can keep me grounded. Now, look over here, Vechiles. What do you see?” She spread her arms.

He raised his head, but his heart started pounding at the mere sight of her. “I see one of the loveliest creatures ever to walk this earth.”

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Lusina's eyes glowed, and a pleased smile touched her lips. "How could I deny you your reward after such words? But you must learn to see beyond the obvious. Try again." Her arms swept up and out, and he realized she wasn't spreading her arms but was gesturing at the area surrounding them.

He strained his eyes to extend his field of sight, incorporating the darkness around her. Something stirred in the shadows. He looked up. What he saw took his breath away.

Lusina approached him and took his hands. "Yes, my love, that is my Lord. You have long since opened your heart to the sound of his voice and profited from his wisdom, for he gives only to those who are worthy. But the time has now come to consummate the pact."

She drew him over to a large bed, got onto it in a kneeling position, and gestured for him to kneel opposite her. After he had complied, she reached into the folds of her gown and pulled out a dagger, which she used to cut across her left palm. Then she presented the dagger's hilt to Vechiles. "It must be your left."

Vechiles nodded and swept the blade over his palm.

She clasped his hand to hers, merging their blood. "*Siran esara, i sires anarae. I camar siranu adaerae, siranu celuvan ana ley neluvilasai i nevelana*; I am yours, and you are mine. And just as we are his, we are forevermore one with the shadows and the night."

He looked into her eyes, and as her luminance swelled to reveal vast wings of darkness enfolding them, he was overwhelmed by the sensation of drowning in the mirrors of her soul.

Later, as they lay together, enshrouded by the subtle glow of her magenta radiance, she caressed his cheek with the back of her hand. "Let me bestow one last gift upon you before we return. Close your eyes."

He obeyed and she placed her hands on his head.

A vision flooded his mind of warmth and light, of a culture filled with the radiance of truth, justice, and holiness, uninhibited by any forbidding social regulations, but pervaded instead by grace and freedom and the fruits that accompanied transcendence to higher ideals and dimensions. The power and fervor of the vision surged through his veins, and a tingling sensation drifted down his spine as he gave himself up to the beautiful world that had been conjured up before him.

"That, my love, is but a glimpse of the future." Her soft lips enveloped his and he tasted her sweet breath. Then her lips were at his ear. "We need to go back."

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“When will I see you again?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find you.”

They parted in a familiar passage with a passionate kiss. He didn’t see her again until the next morning, but nothing in her attitude acknowledged that anything out of the ordinary had passed between them. In the following weeks and months, she would often surprise him by appearing out of nowhere when he sought seclusion in his tunnel, although he had believed her to be many leagues away.

During their long walks through caverns and passages filled with soft luminance and the beauty of the shadows, she revealed the Dark One’s plan, which had been conceived to realize Vechiles’s vision. The plan was brilliant, but it was necessary to disrupt the existing culture, which could not be done without immense and painful sacrifices.

Soon thereafter, Lusina took Vechiles to one of her Lord’s research laboratories. The journey to the cavern revealed that the tunnel under the villa was just one entrance to a vast subterranean network of passageways. By manipulating the Elinian inscriptions in the walls in a certain way, Lusina was able to access hidden panels. These allowed her to unseal portals to new passages and activate lighting systems that illuminated the hallways and caverns through which they traveled. The different areas of the underground network were connected by vehicles that hovered over magnetic rails and were capable of unbelievable speeds. Vechiles was already overwhelmed, but the laboratory itself exceeded anything he could have imagined. When Lusina showed him some of the results of the Lord’s research in genetic engineering, Vechiles was hardly capable of processing the information.

Inspired by what he had seen, Vechiles launched into the job, and after a few years of preparation, they were ready for the next phase of their strategy. To facilitate their plans for a free world, he commenced with the training of his two young children, Corsen and sweet little Gevinesa. They were to become the first fearless warriors of their projected army and the carriers of a new hope.

Standing at the window of his suite in Tolares, Vechiles closed his eyes as he remembered the shocked expression on Ilanya’s face when he told her. She wanted to raise their children on Anae’s Golden Path, as she had been taught herself, but Vechiles insisted. This caused an even deeper rift in their relationship. He attempted to share his hopes and dreams with her, but she didn’t want to

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hear it. On the contrary, he was certain she had sensed his increasing involvement with Lusina. Ilanya grew more and more reserved.

When Corsen was seventeen, Ilanya vanished. Vechiles was mortified. If it hadn't been for Lusina, all their plans would have come to a grinding halt. But Lusina encouraged him in every possible way, and so work on the project dragged on. Vechiles took this occasion to extend his intelligence network all the way to Travis. His main objective was, of course, to acquire information regarding Ilanya, but to no avail.

By that time, Lusina had been his mistress for years. But when she found out what his true motives were for going to Travis, she exploded in a fit of rage and they had their first real fight. Until then, he had never grasped the full significance of his consecration or the extent of the resulting bond with Lusina. The implications regarding his marriage to Ilanya therefore came as a shock.

One and a half years after she had disappeared, Ilanya returned. Although she endeavored to restore their relationship, his commitment to Lusina made the attempt almost impossible. In the early fall of that year, Ilanya visited her summer residence unannounced and discovered him there with Lusina. For several years, Vechiles hardly saw her. Ilanya's behavior made it clear their marriage was more or less over.

The new movement's circle of influence grew, and more people were initiated into their plans. Merelan Novesta and his brother Citenes became two of their most trusted allies. Vechiles commissioned Citenes as lieutenant and delegated to him the task of assembling and training a force he termed the Black Guard. Citenes's levelheaded bearing and his many years of experience in the wilderness made him the perfect candidate for the job.

During the more than twenty years since Vechiles's consecration, the Dark Lord remained an obscure figure, a mere shadow in the night. Then, about a year after one of their genetic experiments ended in bitter disappointment, Vechiles came upon Lusina and the Lord in a sanctuary near one of the laboratories, absorbed in a ritual not meant for his eyes.

Although Lusina had discussed the Elinar with him many times during the years of their acquaintance, nothing could have prepared Vechiles for the sight of this magnificent being. Even the statue of the Queen of the Elinar he had once seen in Lord Tolares's gardens was but a poor imitation of the awesome reality with which he was so suddenly confronted. Vechiles was so

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overwhelmed and embarrassed, he withdrew immediately. He felt like the frightened little boy who had come upon his parents unawares in their private chambers and had hidden, trembling behind the curtains until the ordeal was over. But Lusina reassured him, explained the situation, and disclosed the details of their newest genetic experiment.

When their plans matured and their assaults increased, he found it necessary to confine Ilanya to her summer residence. It was, of course, possible this was only a ploy, an attempt to keep her close so he could sway her, but any attempts at reconciliation always ended in anger and frustration.

He was sorry for what happened on that evening some eight years ago. He usually didn't let his emotions get so out of hand, but excessive amounts of spirits were involved, and he hadn't been himself. He couldn't blame Ilanya for rejecting Yanita, the child born of his lapse, so he asked Gevinesa to care for the infant. Was that when his problems with his eldest daughter had begun?

Vechiles was abruptly brought back to the reality of his suite in Tolares when someone behind him cleared his throat. Corsen stood in the doorway, watching him guardedly. "Have you been standing there long?" Vechiles asked.

"Long enough. You were thinking of Mother again, weren't you?"

"It's possible."

"I can't understand it, Father. If it's such a problem, why don't you just take care of it?"

Vechiles's mouth formed a thin line. "Be mindful of your words, Corsen. She is still your mother."

"Tavita didn't hesitate to deal with her brother when it became necessary."

"I'm not certain Tavita's actions were prudent. What have I been teaching you regarding temperance?"

Corsen's eyes flashed defiantly. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"You've been talking to Lusina, haven't you?"

"She is Tavita's mother, and she's a woman I can respect. Personally, I'd rather choose such a woman over one who doesn't care for me."

Vechiles sighed. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to inform you that I'm going into the city. I'm meeting with Citenes this morning to discuss another problem, one that, contrary to others, is being dealt with efficiently."

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Vechiles ignored the cutting remark. “I assume Tavita’s intelligence regarding Bejad Tsimerel has proven reliable?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I’m pleased you’ve been able to locate him. I wish you success.”

“I don’t anticipate any problems. Farewell, Father.” Corsen slapped his left fist against his breast and bowed in a mock salute, then turned and left without another word. Vechiles watched with apprehension as the young man stalked out of the room.

21. The Abyss

When Catyana stepped out of the carriage and looked up at the conference building’s dome, she cringed and tightened her hold on her friend’s arm.

Nova regarded her with an inquisitive glance. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s enormous,” she whispered.

Nova smiled. “Wait until you get inside.”

All around the dome, graceful symmetrical annexes supported the colossal structure. Seen from above, they would probably look like oversized spokes of a wagon wheel. They looked small and flat when compared to the dome, yet the gate through which they entered one of them towered above her. After passing through the immense portal into a large hallway, she saw what seemed to be an even broader corridor at its far end running horizontally to the one they were in. Catyana assumed this second corridor circled the dome. On both sides of the hallway they were walking down, she could see doors leading to smaller conference rooms and administrative offices.

When they finally reached the broad corridor, she saw her notion confirmed. The corridor curved around the dome on her right and left, and before them loomed a gate into the great hall. Two guards secured the entrance. As Catyana attempted to pass, one of them, a young lieutenant, stopped her. “I’m sorry, Sister, but other than cleared security and technical personnel, only persons with clearance level *anav* may enter the conference hall today. If you are a guest, you must wait until tomorrow.”

Catyana was too flustered to reply.

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Nova stepped up to the guard. “It’s alright, Lieutenant. The Lady Utalya’s entourage has been cleared for level *anav*. You should find my friend’s name on your list. Look for Catyana Faeren.”

The lieutenant eyed the two acolytes with a suspicious glance but checked his list. “Ah, yes, here we are. That’s odd, though. I was under the impression only elders and some priestesses were allowed into the assembly hall today. And you are?”

“Novantina Satural.”

The lieutenant checked his list again. “Alright, the names check out, but I’ll still need to see your signets.” The women were wearing them around their necks and presented them to the guard, who stamped them into his chart and compared the impressions. “Well, *desar*, you’re cleared. But if another Faeren or Satural shows up, I’ll have to come after you.”

Nova awarded him a charming smile. “I understand. May we pass?”

“Of course.” He stepped out of their way and the two women entered the great hall.

“I don’t understand,” Catyana whispered.

“What don’t you understand, dearest?”

“Why should we have clearance level *anav*? That’s the highest level there is. I always thought it was reserved for elders, the High Priestess, the High Priest, and sometimes their entourage.”

“Well, these are unusual circumstances,” Nova replied in a cautious tone. “The Lady Utalya has been cleared because she’s in charge of the primary security preparations. I’ve been cleared since the Lady can’t do without me, and you’ve been cleared since I can’t do without you.”

Nova’s smile was meant to be encouraging, so Catyana attempted to return it but failed miserably. She had spent most of the night weeping her pain and frustration into her pillow. As a result, she now felt tired and irritable, and the dull ache in her heart was beginning to anger her. She wished someone would be merciful enough to thrust a sword through the annoying organ and have done with it. “Who compiles these lists, anyway?”

“Usually the deputies and adjutants of the High Priestess, although ultimately she must approve them herself.”

“My, what an honor.”

“Maybe. I don’t know what exactly is worrying you, my darling, but please, try to keep an open mind and an open heart. You will need to get used to unusual and unexpected situations.”

Catyana rolled her eyes. “There you go again.”

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Nova stopped and faced her. “Alright, what’s going on?”

“Nova, I just can’t understand why you keep telling me that. Your constant insinuations make me feel as if some terrible event is hanging over my head.”

Nova’s gaze was filled with concern. “Catyana, I’m sorry. I...” She looked at the floor, embarrassed.

Catyana’s hands tightened into fists and she tried to relax them. Nova’s tender glance annoyed her more than anything, and she felt a sudden urge to throw a piece of Tonisian sugar in Nova’s face. With any luck, it might get rid of that irritating look in her friend’s eyes.

She loosened her fist and took a quick glance to make sure she hadn’t crushed the sugar in her palm. Why had Venora insisted on giving her a day’s ration of the stuff this morning? And of what value was Nova’s concern? None of these things helped her resist the fear and darkness she felt rising from somewhere deep inside.

With immense effort, she fought the blackness back down into the shadows. The act infuriated her because the thing was wearing her out. She knew the day would soon come when she would no longer have the strength to fend it off. The thought terrified her, and she didn’t want to be terrified. “Well, don’t just stand there looking like a whipped *carulen*. What is it?”

Nova looked her in the eye. “Catyana, these are difficult times. I just want you to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

“For anything. The future is uncertain, and the next days and weeks are going to be difficult. I believe fate has several surprises in store for us, and I fear most of them will be unpleasant.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Of course I do. We’ve been together like this for two days now. Do you expect me to pass on the experience of twenty years in such a short time?”

Catyana dropped her gaze. She was tired of playing hide and seek and just wanted it all to end. “No, of course not. I’m sorry, Nova. I guess I’m just not accustomed to you speaking to me in this way.”

Nova paused. “I understand. But I’m sure things will become clearer in the next few days. Why don’t we talk about it again later?” Nova’s voice sounded overly casual.

“*Desar*, that might be best. It’s just...everything is so new. I feel a bit overwhelmed.” When she looked up, Nova’s eyes were leveled at her. Her friend was pale, and her lips were compressed into

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a thin line. At least that annoying, concerned glance was gone. “Alright, so I wasn’t being completely honest with you. Do you expect me to apologize?”

“I can’t even begin to answer that.”

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“I don’t want you to tell me anything. But maybe you should be more mindful regarding the things *you* tell me.” Nova shook her head. “You’ve always been truthful with me before, Catyana. What’s happening to you?”

Catyana felt as if an abyss were opening beneath her and would swallow her up. She could hardly breathe and felt trapped. As her gaze darted about, looking for an escape, she noticed a movement behind and below Nova. “Oh, look, there’s the Lady Utalya.” But her diversion backfired. Her eyes opened wide and for a moment, she actually thought she had fallen into the abyss.

All around her, the great dome seemed to expand into the infinite. A staircase led down to the conference floor. To their left and right, seats went completely around the hall, like the amphitheater in Nadil. But the size of it was no comparison. Luxurious suites for prominent guests had been built into the seating areas at regular intervals. The dome rose over her in an immense arc that made her dizzy. It was so high she wasn’t sure she could see the ceiling. The dome must have been constructed of some semi-translucent material, flooding the hall with diffuse light from outside and blurring the lines of reality. Catyana believed she could see the shadows of clouds passing by above, but she no longer knew if she was inside, outside, or upside-down.

Nova leveled her eyes at her. “Alright, Catyana, since this doesn’t seem to be leading anywhere, we might as well go down and join the Lady.”

Catyana couldn’t make a sound and nodded in reply. Nova must have sensed her distress and her expression softened. She took Catyana’s arm and guided her down the staircase.

The floor of the conference hall was round. A long table had been set up in the middle for the representatives of the Great Houses. At the head of the table and somewhat closer to them was a small table, at which Catyana assumed the High Priestess would be presiding with her deputy and adjutant. On the far side of the long table, smaller tables had been set up in a semicircle. Those would probably be for the minor houses.

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“Oh, there you are,” the Lady called as the two women approached. “Well, Nova, what do you think?”

“It’s magnificent!”

“And what’s your impression of the security measures?” The Lady, and the priestess and two elders who were with her, watched Nova expectantly.

Nova looked around with a critical gaze. “To be honest, I believe it would be better if the table arrangement were turned so the High Priestess’s table is flanked by two sets of stairs. Since there are staircases coming down at intervals of forty-five degrees, we can hardly avoid her back being to one or the other of them, but I would advise you to use those two, since that is where the least number of guests will be entering the hall. Access to both sets of stairs must be restricted from above, and the three sectors bordering the stairs are to be locked down and placed off limits to anyone but authorized security personnel. I want another two squads of guards there and there.” Nova continued to give instructions, and the priestess beside the Lady Utalya took them down on parchment, scribbling furiously.

As soon as Nova began to speak, Catyana’s jaw dropped. What was going on? Since when did Nova have such detailed knowledge of security procedures? And why were elders and priestesses listening to her, a simple acolyte?

When Nova had completed her comments regarding the hall, the Lady Utalya addressed her companions. “I told you she’s indispensable, didn’t I?” The elders smiled and nodded, and the Lady turned to Catyana. “I’m sorry, dear, I haven’t introduced you yet. Elder Paloren, this is Sister Catyana Faeren. She has been placed under Nova’s direct supervision.”

Elder Paloren put his left hand on his heart and bowed stiffly to Catyana, whose response was just as rigid. The elder was a short man with a sizeable girth. His head was mostly bald, and his expression characterized by harsh competence. Catyana had heard of him. He was a loyal defender of the Order, but his theology was considered quite extreme. Some felt it was almost Videsian in nature. Catyana didn’t feel particularly comfortable in his presence.

“And this is Elder Livanes.”

Again, Catyana bowed, but the elder didn’t. Instead, he came up to her and took her hand firmly in both of his while smiling warmly. “Catyana Faeren, what a pleasure it is to finally meet you.”

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Catyana could hardly get her mouth to open. “Your Beatitude, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

She liked him instantly. He was tall, and although he looked frail, she could sense a quiet power and authority about him. As with Elder Paloren, the pure platinum brooch designating him an elder of the Council glittered on the breast of his robe. But contrary to Paloren, he was clean shaven, and his massive, graying hair seemed to have been groomed by a whirlwind. “Oh, please, call me Livanes.”

Catyana responded with a smile. Yes, she definitely liked him.

“And this is Otisa,” the Lady Utalya continued. “She is the Council’s chief of staff and in charge of administrative tasks during conferences.”

Otisa bowed curtly and gave Catyana a friendly smile but turned immediately back to her writing. She was a slender, inconspicuous, mousy little thing, but she seemed pleasant enough. Catyana’s eyes opened wide when she finally placed the name. Her Grace Otisa Deronas had been High Priestess prior to the Lady Utalya and had been the Lady’s mentor.

“Otisa, do you think we can get these modifications implemented in time?” the Lady Utalya asked the priestess.

“Of course. As soon as we’re done here, I’ll get someone on it. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Make sure you get them cleared first. The guards have been instructed to be very strict about letting anyone through.”

“Yes, it seems the High Priestess has been quite adamant regarding security,” Otisa replied with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

The Lady suppressed a smile and turned back to her handmaiden. “Shall we continue the inspection?”

“Yes,” said Nova, “although I wish you would let Natilya do her job.”

Catyana’s head whipped around at the tone of Nova’s voice. Although she had been wondering when Nova would speak to the Lady regarding the incident in Nadil and her incessant patronizing behavior toward Natilya, she had never heard Nova use such a tone with her before, especially not in front of others. Was the Lady aware of her danger?

“Why? Do you believe she’s as competent as you are?” the Lady asked.

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If Catyana hadn't been holding her breath, she might have gasped. This was going to be very embarrassing.

Nova fixed the Lady with a cautioning gaze, and her voice was gentle yet firm. "My Lady, I chose to mentor Natilya because I felt she was worthy of my trust, and she has never disappointed me. I have come to regard her as a lovely, sensitive, and talented young woman whom I would trust with my life. I have complete faith in her abilities, and I would advise *anyone* to treat her with the respect she deserves."

An awkward silence settled over the hall. The Lady stood there, upright and majestic but rigid as a statue, as if she had been turned to stone. The three dignitaries shuffled their feet, fidgeted with their notebooks, or busied themselves with their robes, but apparently weren't inclined to rebuke the acolyte for her impertinence. It seemed to Catyana that minutes went by before the Lady lifted her chin ever so slightly. Her words were measured. "I...understand. But I feel that, under the circumstances, it might be more appropriate if you evaluated the arrangements yourself."

Nova acknowledged the Lady's statement with a nod. "Please, let's continue."

Nova's inspection took approximately two hours. Using the great hall as their reference point, they toured the entire building. As soon as they left the hall, Otisa beckoned to a priestess and handed her the instructions. She also arranged for someone to meet her every quarter hour, so the modifications were well under way by the time they had finished.

Elder Livanes was a perfect gentleman and remained at Catyana's side during the two hours of the tour. Every now and then, he would ask Nova a question or make a subtle suggestion. Catyana appreciated his quiet competence.

Elder Paloren, on the other hand, became more and more obnoxious. He would often rudely interrupt Nova's instructions, and Catyana felt he was patronizing her friend. She was surprised at how casually Nova accepted this. If Nova disagreed with one of his remarks, she would patiently explain her opposing view. Often, she won out. Sometimes, though, she accepted Elder Paloren's criticism. Catyana was amazed that her friend came across as such a competent official.

When they had finished, the party dispersed. Otisa and the Lady embraced affectionately, and Otisa smiled and waved at Catyana and Nova. Elder Paloren bowed politely but frigidly to Nova and the Lady Utalya and departed in Otisa's company without so much as a glance in Catyana's direction. Elder Livanes took leave of the two acolytes by taking their hands and wishing them a

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wonderful day. He then linked arms with the Lady Utalya, and the pair strolled away, conversing genially.

Catyana glanced at Nova. "Could we please take another look at the conference hall?"

Nova's smile was strained. "Alright, if that's what you want." She linked arms with her, and they walked toward the gate.

"Why was Elder Paloren so condescending?" said Catyana.

"Did you think so?"

"Yes. He didn't even look at me when he left."

"Ah, yes. That's another point I wanted to talk to you about," said Nova.

"What do you mean?"

"Elder Paloren is a man who says what he thinks. That's what I like most about him. He's direct, and he can accept criticism just as well as he can dole it out. He's the kind of man who would never attempt to court anyone's favor. He probably didn't want to give the impression he was playing up to you."

"Playing up to me? Why ever would he?"

"I'm getting to that. But look, we're here."

They were again in the great hall. When they reached the staircase leading down to the floor, Catyana looked up and took a deep breath.

"It can be a bit overwhelming, can't it?" said Nova.

"Yes...I mean no, I mean...Ugh! It's more than that. I feel as if I were floating toward heaven, and the boundaries of reality somehow seem blurred."

"The architect designed it in such a way that the light seems to draw you upward. It's based on the architecture he studied in Elinas. I was able to talk to him about it four years ago, when the building was still under construction. It's absolutely fascinating."

"Who is the architect?"

Nova's glance was cautious. "The young Lord Tolares."

"Chyardal? I don't believe it!"

"He does seem brilliant, which is probably one of the reasons Elder Yonatan chose him as his protégé."

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Catyana sighed. Nova looked at her. Catyana looked back. “It’s alright. I promised I wouldn’t interfere.”

Nova studied her. “But it’s not easy, is it?”

“No, I suppose not. I just don’t know what to do. I’m not experienced in matters of the heart.”

“And you think I am?”

Catyana swallowed. “No, of course not.”

“Catyana, I don’t want this to come between us.”

“It won’t.”

“Won’t it?” They gazed at each other, then Nova’s intense expression wilted, and a look of desperation entered her eyes. “Catyana, please, tell me what’s going on.”

Catyana felt her eyes stinging and suddenly found it hard to breathe. She forced the words out through gritted teeth. “I can’t.”

“You can’t? Or you won’t?”

Catyana pressed her fists into her eyes in frustration. “Nova, please, don’t push me.”

Nova pulled Catyana toward her and hugged her to herself. “Oh, why couldn’t things just stay the way they were?”

Catyana squirmed out of Nova’s embrace and looked her in the eye. “You’re the one who keeps telling me they can’t.”

Nova nodded. She suddenly looked very tired. “I know.” She tentatively put her arm around Catyana’s waist. When she saw Catyana wasn’t resisting, she walked her out of the hall. “Dearest, about our discussion earlier...”

“Yes?” Catyana said sullenly.

“I noticed you were with Elder Livanes during the inspection.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, but I think you need to be more careful in the future. You might find that people’s motives aren’t always so innocent when they seek your companionship. That’s what I meant when we were talking about Elder Paloren’s somewhat distant behavior toward you.”

“Are you saying there’s something wrong with Elder Livanes?”

“Oh, no, not at all. On the contrary, Elder Livanes is one of the kindest and most competent men I know. I’m glad he sought you out the way he did. I’m just trying to sensitize you to a more

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general problem, such as, if someone were to...ingratiate themselves with you to gain a personal advantage.”

“Why ever would they? I’m just a simple acolyte with no influence whatsoever.”

“You never know. Things change.”

Catyana wrenched herself away from her and flung up her arms. “There you go again!”

“I’m sorry, Catyana.”

“We seem to be doing a lot of that lately.”

“What?”

“Apologizing to each other. Nova, you’re beginning to scare me.”

“That wasn’t my intent.”

Catyana drew a long, shuddering breath. That black abyss had opened beneath her again, her eyes were burning, and she knew she would burst into tears if she tried to talk. “Please, all I want is to stay with you,” she finally managed to whisper, choking back a sob.

“Do you want that more than you want Chyardal?”

Catyana stared at her. She didn’t know if she should scream or weep. “That’s not fair, especially after everything I told you last night. But if you must know...yes, I would give up ten Chyardals, as long as we could be together.”

“And I would never allow anything to come between us, even if it meant giving up Chyardal.”

Catyana lifted her palms in frustrated anger, weighing them with the rhythm of her words. “Then why are you constantly attempting to prepare me for change?”

Nova looked down and sighed. “What if the High Priestess took an interest in you? You would have quite a bit of influence then.”

Catyana gaped at her. A deep, dark fear crept up from her belly, through her heart, and into her throat. She tried to suppress it with anger. “Is that what this is all about? Does she want me as her personal assistant? Or maybe even as her protégée? Well, she can go to *sinae te nevilas*, for all I care. I would never leave you. I would sooner resign from the Order.”

Nova’s spontaneous embrace was so fervent it almost forced the breath from her. “That’s all I wanted to hear, my darling,” she whispered. She must have felt Catyana trembling, because she let go and looked into her eyes. “Why, dearest, you’re crying.”

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“Well, what did you expect?” Catyana replied, brushing her tears away in frustration. “First, I’m told I have to let go of Chyardal. And before I have even the slightest chance of getting over that, I’m told I have to let go of you, too.” She suddenly felt exhausted and let herself glide back into the comfort of Nova’s arms. Holding on tightly, she whispered in her ear. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

She registered Nova’s fleeting glance down the hall and looked in that direction. The lieutenant at the gate was watching them with a curious expression on his face.

“Let’s go back to the residence,” Nova whispered. “Our carriage should be waiting for us out front, and we can talk about this on the way.” She directed Catyana toward the exit, and they left the building with Nova’s arm wrapped tightly around her for support.

22. Whisper of a Name

Eratis sat up, the alluring images of his dream already fading from his mind. But instead of drifting through the remnants of his pleasant fantasy, he had to grasp his head with both hands. The pain was so intense, he thought his skull would split open. He dragged himself out of bed and drew back the curtains. The light of the bright spring day that flooded the room caused him to groan and reach for his head again.

It was already noon. A few cups of water helped him to counteract the effects of dehydration. Then he splashed his face and gazed into the mirror. His reflection told him nothing he didn’t already know.

He had ridden hard through the night and stopped in Nadil during the early hours of the new day. The inns were filled to capacity as far away as fifty leagues from the city because of the conference. But there was always a bed somewhere for the steward of the Tolares estate, and Folan had been kind enough to offer him a spare room at the back of his tavern. He had been so exhausted he fell asleep as soon as his head had touched the pillow.

“Bad idea,” he thought to himself as he massaged his temples and forehead. His body had lost a lot of moisture during the ride and more while he was sleeping. He should have attempted to stay awake at least long enough to replenish some of the fluids in his body. The throbbing pain that radiated from his shoulders to the base of his neck and into his head was the price for his neglect.

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He took another look at the ashen face staring back at him from the mirror. What was the use of deceiving himself? Dehydration wasn't the cause of his condition.

It started around noon three days ago when he felt a sudden pang of anxiety and couldn't stop thinking of Zetara. He was almost certain something terrible had happened to her. The feeling was so persistent he thought of sending a message by special courier but then changed his mind. By the time the message reached his sister and she could reply, they would both be in Tolares. Since he had been in Travis at the time, there hadn't been much else he could do but wait.

In the meantime, his trepidation had settled as an aching throb in his heart, as if a part of that precious organ had been ripped out, tearing a festering wound in his bosom. He could feel the trembling uncertainty stiffening his back, shoulders, and neck, cutting off the flow of blood to his head and producing the dull pounding in his brain. There was no need to lay the blame for his migraine on dehydration.

He drank a few more cups of water while he was dressing. It couldn't hurt, and his body did need the fluid. As he pulled on his riding boots, he thought of his sister and smiled. He was proud of Zetara, who had done amazingly well for herself. Fifty years ago, no one would have believed she would one day become the handmaiden of a princess of House Divestelan. Zetara had only been a little girl then, and their House Rotasen so small, it couldn't even be considered a minor house. The little village high up in the Covasin Mountains never yielded enough produce to make anyone rich, since they lived in the shadow of the higher situated Covatinalis, but there had always been enough to go around.

Strange that the sinister place should come to mind now. It was rarely mentioned, and when it was, then only in a hushed voice: *Covatinalis*. He shuddered at the images the name evoked and barred them from his mind.

Many of the younger people decided to flee the shadow and relocate to the more affluent cities of the plateau. After their parents disappeared, Eratis followed suit and took his sister to Divestelan, where he assumed various administrative responsibilities. But he remained unsatisfied. When Zetara was old enough to provide for herself, he migrated east, first to Cemasena, and then to Tolares. His credentials were excellent, his service always outstanding, and through his connections, he was finally appointed steward of the Tolares estate.

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But the mysterious longing and restlessness of his heart remained. When his friends in Divestelan whispered rumors of a new spiritual movement in the west that would change the world, he was fascinated. The opportunity of recruiting an operative in a prominent position inside the most powerful house of the eastern provinces had probably been too tempting an offer to pass by, and it didn't take long for Talenon Novesta to contact him through his agents. A short time later, Eratis met with the engineer of the movement, the renowned Lord Vechiles Divestelan himself. That had been more than fifteen years ago.

In all this time, Zetara never left Divestelan. She went into service for His Excellency's eldest daughter and eventually became her handmaiden, a lucrative position indeed. Eratis was even more thrilled when he discovered that the Lady Gevinesa was a leader of the movement, and Zetara her trusted companion.

It was odd, though, that Zetara never quite shared his enthusiasm for western ideology. Although she seemed satisfied with her position and was devoted to her mistress, her answers were always reserved when he questioned her about her views. It became even more difficult to talk to her when the Lady Gevinesa turned her back on the movement. That had been about five years ago. Was it possible Zetara had something to do with Gevinesa's change of heart? Whatever the cause, it was sad that Vechiles had to place his own daughter under constant surveillance.

But in all other respects, Eratis and Zetara seemed to be molded from the same form. They corresponded almost daily and saw each other as frequently as their responsibilities allowed. It often seemed to him as if he were linked to her in some mysterious way, as if he could sense her presence in his mind and heart.

Then, three days ago, that link had been severed. The eerie silence echoed through his soul like the gentle trickle of sorrowful tears. The emptiness was so intense it hurt. He didn't know what to make of it. Since he was meeting with Lord Divestelan tonight, he would ask him about Zetara. She was most certainly in Tolares with her mistress by now. She just had to be.

But there was another aspect of the situation he found intriguing. Since the bond to his sister had been broken, he could hear another voice whispering in his heart. He realized it had always been there, just at the border of his consciousness, getting stronger every year. But this was the first time he was actually able to hear it. Its alluring call sent a thrill down his spine and left him

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with a fluttery sensation in his stomach. And then there were the strange dreams he had been having in the past days, like the one just before he woke up with his headache.

In his dream, he was staring at the surface of a lake. But it was bizarre, because he was looking at it from below while the sun's rays filtered down through the waves on the surface, creating bright, fluctuating patterns on the sandy bottom. All around him, beautiful but obscure figures hovered in the gentle currents, their long hair drifting in all directions as they sang their enchanting song. One of the figures was particularly bright, and he could see her face distinctly as she floated toward him, calling his name, holding out her arms, pleading with him to come to her. But when the siren embraced him, he awoke, and the images dissolved like shadows disappearing in the fog. All that remained was the whisper of a name: *Enavilara*, the most wonderful sound he had ever heard.

The sensation that accompanied the dream was the same that had triggered his restlessness throughout the years: an irresistible yearning for something that would always remain just outside his grasp. But this time, the impression was much more tangible. He felt as if the fulfillment of his desires was just around the corner, if he could only reach out and open the door.

Poor Cortina! He knew she would be waiting for him when he returned to the residence in Tolares. She had been planted there by western intelligence ten odd years ago. Her cover as a maidservant made it easier for her to get messages in and out of the residence. Through their collaboration, Eratis and Cortina had developed a close relationship, and he had come to regard her as a loyal and competent servant of the cause.

On the other hand, it was almost impossible not to be aware of her feelings for him. What could he say? Cortina was not only a lovely and tender young woman, but she was also experienced and skillful and had long since been promoted to senior housekeeper. Seen from that perspective, she was quite a catch and would make an ideal companion for any young man of humble birth. But he knew with absolute conviction that his destiny lay elsewhere. He hoped with all his heart he wouldn't have to hurt her.

He looked around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, but all his belongings seemed to be packed away. He sighed. It would take him another six to eight hours to reach Tolares, and with the conference beginning tomorrow, he had a full program ahead that would keep him up well into

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the night. He picked up his bag and stepped into the hallway to check himself out and bid Folan and Semanta farewell.

23. Undisputed Authority

Nova quickly draped her summer cloak around her shoulders, excited at the prospect of showing Catyana the city. They were already running late, so she glanced around the room one last time, then stepped into the corridor where Catyana was waiting for her. As they approached the stairs, she saw Vilam coming down from the fifth floor, wrapped in a dark green summer cloak that Chyardal must have lent him. A shiny black leather case of exceptional workmanship hung over his shoulder. Judging from its form, it wasn't difficult to guess what it carried.

"Oh, *vela'mada*, my friends, I'm glad I ran into you," he said.

"*Vela'mada*, Vilam," Nova replied. "What can we do for you?"

"I was just thinking. You mentioned at the midday meal that you would be visiting the city."

"Yes?"

"Would it be a terrible inconvenience if I joined you?"

"I don't know. What do you think, Catyana?"

"I don't mind. As a matter of fact, I believe I would feel more comfortable if a man were present."

Vilam smiled. "I would be most happy to accommodate you."

"Alright, then, let's go," Nova said.

"Um, Nova, would it be alright if we stopped at the headquarters of the Selanian Order on the way?" said Vilam. "I heard it's right by the conference building."

"Yes, it is. But whatever would you want there?"

"Well, I've been thinking..."

"Yes?"

"The only clothes I have seem very much out of place here, and I don't feel comfortable asking Lord Tolares for his assistance. I already feel as if I'm infringing upon his hospitality. I was wondering if it might be possible to...you know... see if one of the robes fits me."

Nova stared at him in astonishment. "Are you serious?"

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“I just thought it would be the simplest solution. They look comfortable and seem to allow full freedom of movement. Besides, getting my own wardrobe made up would take a lot of time, which I would rather spend otherwise.”

“Vilam, we would be thrilled if you donned our robes. It would be an event of overwhelming proportions. But you do realize that, by such an act, you would be telling everyone the Emissary has chosen to affiliate himself with the Selanian Order?”

“Oh, right. I didn’t think of that.” He considered the information. “Well, if you and Catyana are any indication, I would feel honored to be affiliated with the Order.”

Despite Vilam’s kind words, Nova remained serious. “Thank you for the compliment, but I don’t think you should look upon us as characteristic examples. I’m certain you’ll find all kinds of people in the Order, and some of them might not be to your liking.”

He looked at her askance. “Would you rather I didn’t wear your robes?”

“On the contrary, I’d like that very much. But I want to be honest with you, and I want you to know exactly what you’re getting yourself into. The implications could be mind boggling.”

“Well, then, I guess my boggled mind is made up.”

“See? I’m not the only one who wishes to be associated with you,” Catyana said, fixing Nova with a silent challenge in her eyes.

Nova jammed her lips together. She had hoped they had reached a temporary truce, and she didn’t want to bring up the subject again, at least not now. She was too worn out. “Yes, Catyana, I know. You’ve made your point.”

Her friend kept her eyes leveled at her, then turned to Vilam with a familiar gesture that wrung a sad smile from Nova’s lips: a subtle yet graceful toss of the head that sent her thick, golden mane flying over her shoulder. Others often deemed the movement haughty because it accentuated Catyana’s already well-defined femininity. But Nova knew it to be an unconscious act born of necessity. Catyana had honed it to perfection during the many years she had helped her mother in the household, where she was often confronted with situations in which she had to rid herself of annoying golden strands dangling in her eyes while both of her hands were engaged with overboiling pots or squabbling children.

“Vilam,” Catyana said, “I’m sorry if I’m overly curious, but I’m dying to know what you have in that case. Is it what I think it is?”

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Nova saw in his eyes that even he wasn't immune to her friend's unintentional, alluring qualities. How would Chyardal react if Catyana ever decided she didn't want to give him up?

She instantly barred the thought from her mind. If there was going to be any rivalry in their relationship, it wasn't going to come from her.

Vilam grinned as he stroked the leather case. "I'm sure you've guessed what it is. After you left for the conference building, I showed Chyardal and Gelanes the Prophet's Bow. Gelanes immediately offered to fit one of his bow cases for it. He finished the task by midday and presented it to me half an hour ago. I must admit, it really is outstanding workmanship."

Nova had been hoping for an opportunity to learn some news regarding her uncle. "The quality is excellent. But tell me, what happened to Gelanes after we left?" She kept her voice casual, but Catyana gave her a puzzled look. Sometimes, it was a drawback that her friend knew her so well and was so perceptive.

"Ah, yes, that was a bit strange. I was sure Cavan would dismiss him after what happened, but he seemed reluctant to do so—something about formalities in regard to social etiquette or consequences resulting from breach of contract. I've never been any good at that stuff. But Gelanes turned out to be proficient in at least one martial discipline: He's actually quite a serviceable archer. And—listen to this, you're never going to believe it—Cavan used that to reinstate him as Master of Arms, although he's no longer the official swordmaster. The trick seemed to please Cavan immensely. I suppose it helped him avoid an embarrassing situation." He shook his head. "That's why I hate politics. I don't have anything against Gelanes. He seems to be quite a nice guy once you get to know him. But why can't they just call a spade a spade, instead of twisting everything around to fit their little games?"

Catyana shot him a sidelong glance. "Call it a what?"

"Oh, uh, never mind."

Nova used the short exchange to hide her relief. She had assumed her uncle wouldn't be dismissed, since Lord Tolares must have suspected there was more to the situation than he knew. Otherwise Venora, who was responsible for the estate's personnel, would have probably ensured Gelanes could stay on in some capacity. And with her uncle's solid track record, Nova was certain he would eventually become an asset to the royal family.

"Are you going to take the bow with you to the city?" Catyana asked.

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“Yes. I feel more comfortable carrying a weapon. I hope it doesn’t upset you.”

“No, although it does seem extraordinary.”

“I fear such things will become overly common much too soon,” said Nova with a sigh. “We might as well get used to it. Shall we go?”

They descended the stairs and exited the residence by the entrance hall to find their carriage waiting for them outside. The dome of the conference building soon loomed before them, but they left it behind and rumbled toward the multi-faceted complex of the Selanian Order Headquarters. The guards let them out at the entrance, and Nova directed them to the men’s section, where an elderly priest received them. “*Velan mada*, my friends. How may I serve you?” he asked in a friendly tone.

“Good day, Your Grace,” Nova replied in kind. “We have come to inquire if our friend here could be clothed in the robes of the Order.”

“Is he seeking the status of an initiate?”

“No, Your Grace, the situation is a bit more complex.”

“Is he a priest or a deacon who must be refitted?”

“No, this is the first time he will be wearing our robes.”

“Oh, well, this is highly irregular. I can’t outfit just anyone who comes in here on a whim. There is a certain degree of procedure that must be followed.”

“I completely sympathize with your difficulties. Could we please speak with the superintendent?”

“The superintendent? I’m sorry, Sister, but I must remind you of your rank. An acolyte can’t just barge in here with such outrageous requests and ask for the superintendent. Besides, tomorrow is the first day of the conference. Even if you had the necessary credentials, he could hardly find the time to—”

“I understand. Would you please announce that Lady Utalya Revan’s chief of staff would like a word with him?”

The priest’s face turned pale. “The Lady Utalya! Um, well, yes, of course. Please, excuse me. I’ll see what I can do.” He bowed himself away.

Vilam grinned at her. “You handled that remarkably well.”

Nova raised a corner of her lips. “Thank you. I do what I can.”

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“How do you do that?” Catyana asked.

“Do what, dearest?”

“I noticed this morning how competently you deal with even the highest officials. I can’t understand it. I wouldn’t be able to get a word out.”

Nova sighed. “You’ll get used to it soon enough. You mustn’t forget that the Lady Utalya was once High Priestess and is therefore also on the Advisory Council. Since I’m her personal assistant, I had dealings with the highest officials on a daily basis. This priest here is just a little fish.”

They heard the priest returning with a second person. “I’m very sorry, Your Beatitude. I didn’t mean to disturb you, but they did insist and...”

The two men came through the doorway. With the priest was Elder Livanes. “Nova, Catyana, what a pleasure to see you again, and so soon!” He took their hands in a warm greeting. The priest fell silent and remained in the background, astonished at this reception.

“Elder Livanes, what a surprise,” Nova replied, returning his warm smile. “I was expecting Superintendent Pales.”

“I’m the elder responsible for our headquarters here in Tolares, and since I was in the area, I decided on a personal inspection of the premises. It was long overdue, and I wanted to get it over with. I was with Pales when Decarin came to fetch him. Since he is very busy right now, I decided to take care of the matter myself, especially when I heard who was calling.” He winked. “But what are these difficulties Decarin was referring to?”

“Our friend here has asked to be outfitted in the robes of the Order. Do you believe you could accommodate him?”

The elder stared at Vilam in awe. “Is he who I think he is?”

“I believe so. Elder Livanes, may I introduce you to our friend, Vilam?”

The elder put his left hand on his heart and bowed deeply. “Your Holiness, it is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

There was a gasp from the corner where Decarin was listening.

“If I may be so bold, I would feel more comfortable if you would just call me Vilam.” He held out his hand.

Elder Livanes gripped it firmly. “Yes, of course, if that is what you wish.” He attempted a smile, but it was apparent he didn’t feel quite comfortable. “Is it true you wish to wear our robes?”

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“I thought it might be appropriate under the circumstances.”

“But, Your Beatitude, we can’t just do this,” Decarin cried from his corner. “There must be some form of procedure, some possibility to verify—”

“Silence, you fool!” the elder thundered, whirling around. “If the young Lady Satural says he is the Emissary, then he is the Emissary. Let this be a lesson to you, Decarin, to treat guests you do not know with more respect.” He turned back to Nova. “He is the Emissary, isn’t he?” His voice seemed to be pleading.

Nova sighed. “From everything I have seen so far, yes. Only Vilam has ever fulfilled the prophecies in such minute detail. I must admit, I do believe it is he.”

The elder regarded her closely. “No one has studied the prophecies to the extent that you have, and you’ve proven countless times you’re the undisputed authority on the subject. I’m certain your instincts would have warned you if something was amiss.” He turned to Vilam. “Are you aware of the implications if you were to don our robes, Your—um, excuse me, Vilam?”

“Yes, Nova informed me of the possible repercussions. But it would be an honor for me to be affiliated with the Order.”

“I’m very pleased to hear it, although the honor would be ours. Decarin, would you please bring some robes for this gentleman?” He turned to Vilam. “It might be best if we try them on somewhere more private.”

The priest scurried away, and Livanes guided Vilam down the corridor.

24. Nightfall

Bejad was looking forward to seeing Netira again. He couldn’t explain it, but he had never felt this way about anyone before. There was something different about her that he couldn’t quite define. She seemed so gentle, yet extremely determined and practical. And he had to confess, he found her very attractive, despite the seeming plainness of her features.

He had learned not to spend too much time on such questions. In his late thirties and early forties, as he was preparing for his Coming of Age, he had tried to discover why he was attracted to one girl or another. He had pursued several relationships with young women whom he had chosen based on his assumption of what kind of woman was right for him. When none of the

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relationships worked out, he had given up reasoning with himself. He realized there was too much going on at a subconscious level, and much of what constituted attraction seemed to be based on emotional disposition and experiences that were too difficult to classify. He just had to learn to trust his instincts. In this particular case, they were rampant.

As he had foreseen, Velanav was a quiet day. It was the last day of spring, and tomorrow being the summer solstice and the first day of the conference, many people who weren't busy organizing were at liberty to see the town or just take a quiet moment off the beaten track.

His quarters weren't far away from the women's section, and he enjoyed the short walk through the gardens to Netira's accommodations. He rapped sharply on the door. At first there was no response, but he could hear quiet voices inside. He knocked again.

"Come in," a somber female voice called.

He opened the door and stepped inside. What he saw made his stomach knot up. Netira's roommate was sitting next to her with her arm around her shoulder, holding her close. Netira glanced up at him, but immediately dropped her gaze and stared at the wet and crumpled handkerchief in her hands. Her eyes were red, moist, and swollen.

"What's wrong?" Bejad asked anxiously.

Mavena looked up at him. Her voice was hushed. "Netira just received news from Pitaren, Your Reverence. Her parents' farm was attacked."

Bejad paled. He could hardly get the words out. "Any survivors?" What was the use? The Black Guard never left survivors. When Mavena confirmed by shaking her head, Bejad noticed her usual harsh expression was pleasantly altered by tender concern. He thought she might even be considered pretty if she had more opportunities to express compassion and didn't have those horrible scars. "*Te'linos*, I'm so sorry, Netira."

Netira shook her head but didn't look up.

"When did it happen?"

"Probably just hours after you left," Mavena answered. "Those *atezati* burned the farm to the ground."

"Mavena, please don't swear," Netira whispered, squeezing her roommate's arm.

"Sorry, Netira, but they are such animals. The neighbors couldn't save anything," she said bitterly, looking up at Bejad. "The special courier, who was sent to obtain her parents' voucher,

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brought the news. When he arrived in Pitaren to ask directions, they told him of the tragedy. They were relieved to hear that Netira was safe. They had assumed she also perished in the attack and subsequent fire.”

Bejad felt numb. “Her decision to join me was spontaneous, and she didn’t have time to inform the neighbors. Her parents were going to take care of that. When did you receive the news?”

“Her Grace, the head priestess, came by about an hour ago. She was very kind and broke the news as gently as she could.”

“She’s always been good at such things. Netira, don’t worry, we can reschedule if you want. It’s not a problem.”

Netira looked up at him and sighed. She shook her head. “That’s alright, Bejad. It might help me get my mind off things.”

Mavena’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t be serious. Not after a loss like this. You need more time.”

“No, Mavena, I just need to get out a bit. I feel I’ll suffocate if I don’t. Please don’t worry about me.”

“But I do worry.” She looked up at Bejad, the tender expression supplanted by her customary harshness. “Even if you are a deacon, I must tell you that I don’t approve of your going out with my roommate, Your Reverence.”

“Why is that?”

“It doesn’t seem...chaste. And if a girl doesn’t have her virtue, what does she have?” Her eyes seemed to be brimming.

“It’s alright, Mavena. I can take care of myself,” Netira replied softly.

“Your concern is kind, although your position seems somewhat narrow,” Bejad remarked coolly.

“That may be,” said Mavena. “But as representatives of the Selanian Order, I believe we are held to lead holy lives, if not for our own sakes, then at least as an example to the general populace. You two aren’t even engaged. What will people think if men and women of the Order are seen together like that in broad daylight?”

“I believe we must be particularly careful not to fall into extremism. Your views seem almost Videsian in nature.”

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Netira's eyes flashed. "Bejad! You have no idea what she's been through." She put her arm around her roommate, who seemed about to burst into tears.

Bejad gaped but managed to close his mouth. "You're right. I'm sorry. But even the High Priestess encourages fellowship between Brothers and Sisters, as long as the relationship remains innocent. How do you expect us to find the right person to marry if we aren't allowed to socialize?"

Netira rewarded him with a sorrowful smile, but there was also a soft glow in her eyes.

Mavena's face had gone purple, and the words that erupted from her mouth sounded more like shrieks. "Innocent? How can you call that innocent? Is that what your beloved High Priestess teaches you?" Tears coursed down her cheeks.

Netira recoiled at her roommate's outburst and gaped at her.

Mavena was breathing heavily, and her eyes had become dangerous slits as she brushed at the glistening streaks on her face. "I've heard of that little witch and her liberal notions. Why else would she beguile the Council into electing her at such a young age? She wheedled her way in for the sole purpose of defiling all that is holy!"

"How do you know such things about the High Priestess?" Bejad's voice was cold and harsh.

If the context hadn't been so distressing, Bejad would have laughed at the way Mavena's nose shot up in the air like a beacon, sniffing back a few tears. "My parents are good friends of Elder Paloren. He's asked that I be assigned to his entourage as his personal assistant, and Her Grace has already approved the transfer."

"That explains everything! In addition to what I think of him personally, it's dangerous—and illegal—for Elder Paloren to talk about the High Priestess outside of the Advisory Council. I'm going to have to report this."

The speed with which Mavena's face changed from red to ashen gray was fascinating. "No, please! He...he didn't mean any harm. He knows we're dedicated to the Order. Please don't make any trouble for him."

"He's an elder. It would take much more than my report to get him in trouble. But I will have to report it. He not only risks the High Priestess's life with such careless remarks, but many others as well."

Netira gave him a look as if she was going to pounce on him. "That's enough, Bejad! Stop being such a hypocrite!"

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Bejad involuntarily flinched back at the ferocity of her attack. “Hypocrite? What...?”

Netira shook her head and turned to her roommate, taking her into her arms. “Don’t worry, Mavena, it’ll be alright. And thank you for being there for me.” She planted a kiss on her forehead.

Mavena pulled back a bit and caressed Netira’s cheek. “No, thank *you*. I know you don’t agree with everything I believe, but it was so kind of you to stick up for me, despite...” She let her head droop in resignation. “I’m so sorry, Netira, my outburst was completely inappropriate, and I feel so foolish. It’s just that I...” A tear slipped down her cheek.

Netira wiped it off. “Hush, now. We can talk later.” She cast a glance in Bejad’s direction.

Mavena followed her gaze and nodded. “Thank you. You’re a real friend. Now, go have a nice time with your...acquaintance.” She glowered up at Bejad as she brushed away another tear.

Netira gave her a hug and turned to Bejad as she rose. “Please give me a minute. I need to freshen up. I’ll be right with you.”

“Yes, um...of course,” he said, feeling a bit flustered.

Netira disappeared into the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” Mavena asked skeptically.

“Well, there’s a romantic little tavern in the older part of town called the Old Lantern. I very much wanted Netira to see it.”

“Romantic!” She sniffed. “I should have known.” She gave him a dark look.

A few minutes later, Bejad and Netira were walking through the gardens in the direction of the city. Bejad could tell Netira was still feeling weak from the shock of her loss because she shifted her weight to the arm Bejad offered her as support.

He was conscious of Mavena’s eyes following them from the window. He knew what she was thinking, but he didn’t let it bother him. The intimate closeness of the attractive young woman beside him easily compensated for any qualms he might have felt. He turned to look back but was startled by a shadow.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I thought I saw someone disappearing around the corner.”

“You must be mistaken. It’s such a beautiful day, and even if I’m not trained as a spy as you are,” she said in a bantering tone, “I think I’d notice any suspicious shadows.” She awarded him a tired little smile.

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He shrugged. She was right. There was certainly no use in chasing shadows. But he still needed to know what she had meant earlier, so he said, “I’m surprised you wanted to come with me, despite your reservations.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Why wouldn’t I want to come with you?”

“You...you insinuated that I was a hypocrite.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did.”

She shook her head with a wry smile. “No, Bejad, I didn’t *insinuate* anything. I outright told you.”

He stared at her, aghast. “You...you think I’m a hypocrite? Why? What did I do?”

“Seriously?” She shook her head again. “Have you ever heard of introspection? You might want to look it up.”

He sucked in his breath and stared straight ahead. “Alright, I may have deserved that. But I still don’t understand.”

“You accused Mavena and Elder Paloren of endangering the High Priestess by talking about her outside of the Advisory Council.”

“So?”

“Well, when I first met you, you never once hesitated to answer my questions about her, or about your own role as her liaison. You had no idea who I was, Bejad, and I wasn’t even in the Order then. And yet you accuse two devoted servants of the Order of endangering Her Eminence because they spoke about her to other loyal members? What am I supposed to think?”

Bejad caught his breath. “Oh.” He could feel the color rising to his face. “I’m sorry. I suppose I really should be more careful about what I say, and to whom.”

She grinned up at him. “That might be a good idea.”

“But if I’m such a hypocrite, why would you want to socialize with me?”

“We all have our faults. You don’t know me very well, although that’s something we might be able to rectify over time. How do you know my faults aren’t graver than yours? Besides, I think it’s adorable when you act silly. Although I’d really appreciate it if you’d refrain from criticizing my friends. That’s a bit too bigoted for my taste.”

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He felt his heart beating faster at her words. Was she implying he might have a chance with her? He was certainly willing to find out.

They continued their conversation as they walked into town. The trip was pleasant, and the exercise seemed to liven Netira's spirits. He had already discovered that her knowledge was quite diversified, despite her simple heritage, and she was able to converse well on many different subjects. Because of the incident in her quarters, Netira had gotten onto the topic of Videsian teaching in an attempt to defend her roommate. "I understand that you find their teaching extreme, but you must admit the basis for some of their doctrines is justified."

"Well, yes, of course. I also believe Anae wishes us to lead holy lives. But how do you define holy?"

She closed her eyes, and her words were hushed. "It means to be set apart, to be pure. I always envision it as pure, warm light flowing through us." A shudder passed through her. When his hand involuntarily brushed hers, she opened her eyes. He was surprised at the warm glow in them, and her smile seemed to radiate from inside her.

"I think I understand what you're saying. Although I doubt that's the way the Videsian Order sees it," he said.

"Maybe not. But I would like to believe we could find some way to compromise and live together without the incessant conflicts. I feel the Videsian Order does fulfill an important purpose, even if it's only to teach us the value of dialogue and dialectic."

"I agree. But since you mention conflicts..."

"Yes?"

"I'm almost reluctant to ask, but do you know why Mavena has those scars?"

She fixed him with a sidelong glance. "I'm not sure that's any of your business."

"Well, maybe, but it seems as if she was involved in some kind of skirmish."

"Is that a problem?" Her words sounded cautious.

"That depends on the reason. We live in difficult times, and it's my duty to investigate anything that might be suspicious."

"Your duty? Really! So, you're playing the High Priestess liaison card again, are you?"

"You...could say that."

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“Alright, I don’t want to quarrel with you about what you should investigate and what not, and Mavena does wear her scars for a reason, so I assume she wants to make a statement. But from what she told me, I believe someone assaulted her, and she had to defend herself.”

“Why was she attacked?”

“We...didn’t get into that. She was extremely hesitant to talk about it. I did receive the impression, though, that it concerned some deep, emotional hurt in her life. But speaking of the High Priestess, may I ask what your status is? Were you able to see her yet?”

“Won’t you think I’m a hypocrite if I tell you?” He grinned at her.

She countered with an amused smile. “As long as you don’t go around chiding others for talking about Her Eminence, I really don’t mind. I’m probably just as curious about her as everyone else.”

“Well, in that case, no, I haven’t been able to see her yet. But she seems to be informed of the situation and has scheduled a meeting for this evening.”

They entered the alley in which the Old Lantern was located. This part of Tolares was one of the oldest and most romantic, containing narrow, shady passages that dated back almost 1,200 years.

Coming out of the sunlight, they were startled when a young man in an unobtrusive tunic emerged from the crowd to confront them. “Are you Bejad Tsimerel?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then I have a message for you.” The man’s dagger disappeared to the hilt in Bejad’s robe, thrusting upward and forcing Bejad’s breath from him. The stranger immediately turned and dashed down the road, wiping the blade on the backside of his trousers as he ran.

Shock made time slow to a crawl. Bejad felt his breath coming in small, painful gasps, and the agonizing wound in his belly made him double over, but he couldn’t help staring at himself in fascination. Although his senses told him everything was real—the sounds, the smells, his hands clutching his stomach—the dark spot spreading outward so quickly on the front of his robe somehow had a dreamlike quality to it.

As if from a distance, he heard someone screaming. Others cried out, but it all sounded muffled. He staggered to his knees. The world spun around him, enveloped in shadows. He tumbled to his side and onto his back. Night fell, cold and dark, and the stars came out. Somewhere far above him, the icy firmament outlined a vague figure with long, dark hair, its form, like everything else,

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drifting away. "I'm sorry, Your Eminence," he managed to whisper, "I have failed you." Then the last strands of his consciousness melted into the darkness.

25. The Old Lantern

Nova smiled to herself as they drove into town. It was a pleasant day, and she was glad Vilam had been able to take care of his problem. In the overall picture, it might not be that important, but it was still good for morale.

Vilam immediately donned his new clothes, unceremoniously stuffing his light gray uniform and Chyardal's dark green cloak into the bag he had brought with him for that purpose. Nova felt the cream-colored robe and black cloak fit him well, in more ways than one, and when he saw he was no longer receiving the curious glances he had drawn with his foreign attire, he sighed contentedly.

It didn't take them long to reach the first buildings of the city. Nova felt excited, thinking about all the things she was going to show Catyana. When they penetrated the city's outer ring, she smiled at her friend's amazement as structures shot up around them and towered over them, throwing their massive shadows across the visitors' path. Catyana leaned out the window to look up at them. Vilam almost grabbed her to pull her back in, but Nova put her hand on his arm and shook her head. Soon, the number of buildings lining the streets became denser, the traffic thicker, and Nova's anticipation more acute as she looked around, wondering what they should do first.

Nova asked the coachman to let them out a few streets from the market. The guards objected, but Nova felt Catyana had enough protection with both her and Vilam watching out for her, and she sent the carriage back to the residence. She also suggested Catyana put up the hood of her cloak so her golden hair wouldn't attract attention.

As they ambled down the street, she looked around, puzzled. She knew these buildings so well, but something was different, and Nova sensed it wasn't good. The sensation had been there on their approach, even before they had reached the first buildings, but she had allowed her own thoughts and expectations to distort what her heart was trying to tell her. It wasn't much, was hardly noticeable, but what was there felt as if a slight shadow, a mere smudge of darkness, had defiled the city's pure, warm aura.

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“What’s wrong?” said Vilam.

“We’re being followed,” she whispered. She threw a glance in Catyana’s direction, but the girl was too preoccupied with all the new sights, sounds, and scents to notice.

Vilam dropped back so Catyana was between him and Nova, then he stopped them and shaded his eyes to look up at one of the buildings.

Catyana grinned at him and jabbed him with her elbow. “So, we’re shading our eyes again, are we?”

Vilam also grinned but dropped the hand with which he had shaded his eyes and kept his gaze directed upward.

“I wonder how you and Venora do that.” As soon as the words were out, Catyana’s eyes widened and her hand shot up to her mouth. “Oh, no!”

Vilam and Nova both gaped at her. “Really!” said Nova, exchanging a glance with Vilam.

“Oh, why did I have to go and say that?” said Catyana. “I am such an idiot!”

Nova put her hand on Catyana’s arm. “Maybe it’s just all the excitement.”

“Yeah, right. And maybe I should just keep my big mouth shut from now on.”

“Catyana, when did you see this?” said Nova.

“Please, Nova, Venora is my friend, too,” said Catyana with a pained look in her eyes. “I don’t want to betray her confidence any more than I already have.”

“I understand, honey,” said Nova. “You do whatever you think is right.”

“But...she did say she doesn’t know how she can do that, and I believe her.” Catyana gazed up at the building Vilam was looking at and awarded him a weak smile. “The building is pretty amazing, though, isn’t it?”

“I thought so too,” Vilam said with a grin. “But what you said about Venora is even more so.”

“No...I mean yes, I mean...Ugh! Would you please just drop it?” said Catyana with a sullen expression.

Nova exchanged a quick smile with Vilam, which earned her a sour look from Catyana. But when Vilam gestured for them to continue, Nova took Catyana’s hand and glanced back at him. He shook his head but held his position behind Catyana.

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Nova was astonished. There had been no indication that Vilam was scanning the area, and yet she was certain he had been attempting to identify whoever was trailing them. Where had he learned such skills? But she also wished she had brought a sword.

Catyana's lapse of discretion gave her pause. Her friend was usually very reliable in regard to such matters, which proved once again how overwhelmed and unpredictable she had become since the incident with the wood flowers yesterday evening. On the other hand, her revelation was intriguing. So, Venora was able to gaze at the sun without protection, just like Vilam. It did seem more and more as if there was some mysterious connection between those two.

But their immediate situation demanded her attention, and she tried to focus on whoever was following them. As they moved on through the streets and deeper into the city, Nova's heart grew heavier and her face more solemn. The blemish she had sensed earlier seemed to grow as they advanced, and she felt as if the thing was searching for her, toying with her, singling her out. When they rounded a corner, it tightened its noose, first gently, as if testing its own strength, then with sudden, crushing force, smashing her against the pavement, stifling her in its grasp, and finally crushing her body to a bloody pulp in the street for all to see.

When the impression dissipated and she came to her senses, Catyana was holding her by the shoulders, eyeing her with concern from beneath her hood. Nova could hardly breathe, and her head was pounding. The pain was so great it brought tears to her eyes.

Catyana squeezed her arm. "Nova, what's wrong?"

Nova shook her head and pressed her fingers against her temples. "Terrible headache." It wasn't a lie, but she didn't think it was wise to tell her the whole truth. Catyana's powers were still untested, and who knew what would happen if her friend got it into her head to retaliate against whoever had attacked Nova?

Vilam pointed to a fountain. "There are some benches over there. Let's go sit down."

Nova gave him a grateful look and let Catyana pull her. When Vilam realized she could hardly walk, he took hold of her other arm. She let herself flop down on the first bench they came to and closed her eyes. Her breath was coming fast and hard, but she felt the fine spray of the fountain's water in her face and turned her head in that direction. She reached out, searching for the water's source, letting it cool her burning senses and hoping it would help to ease her throbbing migraine.

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But the pounding in her head took on a life of its own, forming an image in her mind of a sea's pounding surf. As the image drifted toward her and gained clarity, she saw the night split apart by a raging storm. The tempest drove roaring flames across the water and dashed enormous waves against the earth. Nothing could stand against the fury of the elements as they clashed against one other. Nova despaired and thought this was the end, but a faint glimmer on the horizon gave her hope, and a soothing voice filled her mind.

Water and Fire, Earth and Spirit, only you can keep them through the dark night. Wait for the morning, my daughter, for it will come.

She knew the voice, had known it all her life. But she didn't know what was expected of her, so she opened her heart and gave everything, baring her life and her soul, knowing it could never be enough. Yet, despite her fear, it seemed nothing else was required, and she was soon able to breathe again. She opened her eyes and tried to smile at her friends, although she still felt very weak. "Thank you."

Vilam leaned closer to her and whispered, "What happened?"

"Mental attack. I wasn't expecting it, or she never would have gotten through. Such techniques are prohibited in the Order, but we do learn to guard against them."

"She? Was it the assassin?"

"I don't know. It's possible."

"What are you two whispering about?" said Catyana, but she didn't really seem that interested since her attention was directed elsewhere.

"Just wondering what to do next," said Nova. She followed Catyana's glance and gazed at the bustling market, which was right in front of them. "I can't believe the state Tolares is in right now. I know there are countless people here for the conference, many times more than this city is accustomed to supporting, but it seems almost ominous. And the market! It's usually just as peaceful as the one in Nadil. Now look at it!"

"I think it's awesome," Catyana said as she watched the pulsating throng.

"It is that," Nova said. "But you should have seen it four years ago."

It seemed Catyana had gotten over her previous sullen mood and was once again engaged by all the sights and sounds. Nova felt that, in Catyana's present, unpredictable state, allowing her to

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observe the goings on around her was probably safer to than putting her in direct contact with too many people. Another lapse of judgment at the wrong moment could prove disastrous.

Vilam leaned toward Nova's ear. "Do you think we should return to the residence?"

"No, I don't want to spoil this for Catyana. Whoever that was, she didn't like that I could sense she was following us, so she tried to incapacitate me. If it was the assassin, she wouldn't reveal her presence like that if she were preparing to strike."

Vilam nodded.

"So, what have you two decided?" Catyana said, her glance wandering between Nova and Vilam.

Nova smiled at her. "Since you seem so fascinated and it's right there, we might as well visit the market first. But could you give me a few more minutes? My head still hurts a bit."

"Oh, of course," said Catyana. "Besides, I could stay on this bench all day, just watching all these people, indulging my sullen mood," she added with a perky smile at Nova. "And there's much less danger of me running my mouth off at the wrong moment. We wouldn't want another lapse of judgement, now, would be? Could prove disastrous."

Nova stared at her. "Were you reading my mind?"

"You know I wouldn't do that. But that mental attack made you as brittle as glass, and just as transparent. And your facial expression a few moments ago spoke volumes."

All Nova could do was gape.

Catyana scoffed. "Oh, come on! Really? I may be green, Nova, and lack experience, I admit that. But I'm not stupid. Percepto girl here, remember? And what are you grinning at?" she said to Vilam.

Vilam chuckled "I think I have a new favorite superhero. Percepto Girl. It's catchy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Catyana.

"That's fine," said Vilam, smiling to himself.

"I really am sorry, Catyana," said Nova. "I don't want to give you the impression that I'm patronizing you. But I know you have a lot on your plate right now, and I don't want to overburden you."

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“I appreciate that. But you’re doing more damage by trying to keep things from me, especially when it’s so evident that something’s going on. And I’m really sorry for what I said about Venora. I promise, that won’t happen again.”

“Alright,” Nova said with a nod. “Believe me, I don’t want to keep things from you. But at the moment, I’m afraid it’s unavoidable.”

“Why?”

“Because there are too many other people involved. You don’t want to betray Venora’s confidence, do you?”

“No, of course not.”

“So you understand?”

Catyana dropped her gaze and nodded. “Thank you, by the way, for not wanting to spoil it for me by taking us home right after the attack. That means a lot to me.”

Nova managed a smile and nodded. When she felt she had recovered enough to continue, they headed into the market. Catyana did seem more in control, but she could hardly get enough sensory input and seemed to absorb everything like a sponge. They finally made it through, crossed the plaza connected to the market, and entered an alley on the far side.

They were now in the oldest part of the city, with its romantic alleys, idyllic little taverns, and alluring craftsmen shops. Catyana stared up at the buildings around her. “This is amazing! I’ve read about the Tolares Old Town, but I never imagined it looked like this.”

Nova tried to smile, but the attack had taken more out of her than she realized. “I’m glad you like it. I was hoping you would.”

Catyana regarded her with concern. “Would you like to sit down somewhere? There seems to be a *deventas* shop on every corner here.”

“No, that’s alright. I’ll manage.”

“Where are you taking us?” Vilam asked.

“Nowhere in particular. But no tour of the city would be complete without a visit to the Old Town.”

“If you don’t have any specific plans, Chyardal mentioned a little tavern called the Old Lantern that’s supposed to be in this part of town. He said it has a unique ambience and would be worth our while to stop by. I wouldn’t mind seeing it.”

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Nova's stomach fluttered and she grimaced. "If it's alright with you, I'd rather not."

Catyana turned to him, but she seemed to be deliberately suppressing her excitement. "Oh, isn't that the quaint little place with the southern specialties? It has such an outstanding reputation they even talk about it in Nadil. I think the proprietor's wife is a friend of Semanta Revan's." She turned to Nova. "You know, if you took us, you wouldn't just be doing us a favor. I'm really worried about you, and I think it would be good if you could rest for a while."

Nova gritted her teeth. The proprietor's wife wasn't just a friend of Semanta's. How would she ever get out of this one?

"Look, isn't that it, right up there?" Vilam pointed to an old-fashioned little building ahead on their left.

Nova glanced around, desperately seeking a diversion to get her companions' minds off the dangerous subject.

Catyana took her hands and squeezed. "I don't know why you're so against it," she whispered, "but would you please do it for me? My list of the places I'd like to see isn't very long, but the Old Lantern has always been on it."

As Nova gazed into her friend's pleading eyes, her heart softened. She knew she couldn't refuse Catyana such a heartfelt request, even if Nova was digging her own grave in the process. She shrugged. "Alright, if you insist." She would just have to be careful. "Do you see a shovel anywhere nearby?"

Catyana peered at her from the side. "A shovel? Whatever for?"

"Never mind."

Although Nova had been here often, the tavern never seemed to lose its attraction. And since she was now committed, she didn't want to be a spoil sport, but rather make the visit as enjoyable for her companions and herself as she could. As they approached, she therefore explained that the ancient lantern decorating the entrance had been one of the first prototypes installed in the city by the renowned Elder Tilantes some two hundred years ago. The tavern itself was snuggled in between two craftsmen shops that had their leather, wooden, and ceramic goods neatly displayed on racks outside. Little round deventas tables invited visitors to sit and watch the easygoing pace of business in the passage.

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When they entered, Nova saw that the interior hadn't changed much since the last time she had been there. The windows were tall, allowing as much light into the quaint room as the narrow alley permitted. Large wooden beams adorned the ceiling, with various farming tools and hunting instruments hanging from them. The walls were decorated with ancient pictures and tapestries. The tables were separated into little alcoves, giving customers a semblance of privacy. A pleasant fragrance of spring flowers, aromatic tobaccos, and appetizing foods filled the air. As her eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, she saw they were in luck. A couple was just quitting one of the alcoves, and Vilam immediately acquired it for them.

Catyana's delight was stamped plainly in her face. Her gaze wandered around, trying to take in as much of the room as possible. When they were seated, she squeezed her friend's hand and whispered, "Thank you, Nova. This place is just adorable."

Nova threw her an uneasy smile as the proprietor came over to take their orders. He was a tall, lanky sort of fellow with a warm smile, but his confident demeanor declared that he took care of any disturbances in his tavern himself. "*Nolavelan mada*, my friends. We are always honored when acolytes of the Order frequent our humble little establishment. As a matter of fact, you look familiar," he said, glancing at Nova.

"Yes, I've been here before," Nova replied, hoping the proprietor wouldn't pursue the subject. She glanced around to see if his wife was anywhere nearby. Nova was relieved to see that she wasn't.

"And what may I bring you?"

"Do you have Tonisian cider?" said Nova.

"Certainly. Two for the ladies?"

Catyana nodded, her face radiant.

"And what will the gentleman be having?"

"I'll take a glass of fresh water, if I may."

The proprietor eyed him in astonishment. "Gladly. Will that be all?"

"A friend of mine told me you have excellent polenta chips," said Vilam. "May I try some of those?"

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The proprietor's face immediately lit up. "Yes, my friend, you have come to the right place. Our chips are a specialty of the house and are unrivaled in the city. Would the ladies also care to try them?"

Nova and Catyana nodded.

"Alright, one large order of chips, coming up." He bowed himself away.

"Did Chyardal tell you about those?" Nova asked with a teasing smile.

"Yes, actually, he did. I'm very curious."

"If they're at all like they were the last time I was here, I promise you won't be disappointed."

The proprietor returned several minutes later with their drinks and a large platter. An oversized bowl filled to overflowing with crispy, oven-fresh chips stood in the center, surrounded by several smaller bowls containing various dips. Nova told her friends that she used to make polenta chips at home. The standard recipe was simple. She and her sisters would combine grain mush with eggs and flour and knead the ingredients until the mixture became a fine dough. Then they rolled it out in a thin sheet and cut out circles, which they salted and roasted. But the proprietor and his wife had a special recipe, which they guarded with their lives, adding to the ambience and popularity of the locale.

After the chips, they ordered Sumelian *deventas*, another specialty that, like the Tonisian cider, was originally from regions south of the desert and were only available in this tavern. As they sipped their beverages, Nova grew alert. Catyana noticed the abrupt change in her friend's mood. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Nova whispered. "Do you hear that conversation in the neighboring alcove?"

Vilam and Catyana listened. The conversation wasn't overly loud, but by some trick of the acoustics, it was possible to overhear every word without having to strain.

"I don't mean to seem overbearing, My Lord," one of the men was saying, "but you were the one in charge of that particular operation."

"Don't rub it in, alright? How was I supposed to know that such a small oversight might have any consequences?"

"That's what established procedures are for. If you abide by them, such mistakes can be avoided."

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“Well, you ought to know, Citenes. You’re the eldest veteran and have been captain of my father’s guard for—how long? Twenty-five years? Thirty? I still can’t understand why you won’t accept a promotion.”

“I feel comfortable where I am. But it’s your guard now, My Lord, and you must therefore assume the responsibility for your actions—and your errors.”

“It wasn’t my guard back then. Besides, we were young and were only following orders. If someone had informed us of the political ramifications of an attack on House Satural, we would have been more careful. Who issued that order, anyway? But, *ate’f*, Citenes, that was over twenty years ago! Will you pipe down about it already?”

“It may have been twenty years ago, My Lord, but I fear we still feel the repercussions of that, uh...miscalculation to this day. Where is she, by the way?”

“I think she’s chief of staff of the Lady Utalya’s entourage. From what I’ve heard, they’re in Tolares for the conference. But what’s your point? Like I said, we were young, and we thought we were just having some fun. You know how it is. With all the ale, we didn’t realize she wasn’t dead. And besides, what of it? Has any real harm come of the fact that we didn’t kill her?”

“We shall see, My Lord, we shall see. Have you forgotten who took her under her wing? Even though she has in the meantime been discredited and decommissioned, she might still be a factor to reckon with. But I was only using that specific mission as an example to remind you how important it is to plan things carefully and to follow through meticulously. I would very much prefer this current assignment to be completed without incident.”

“You’ve made your view of the matter plain enough, but I still believe the measures we’ve taken are sufficient. It’s a simple operation, so why waste time and resources on lengthy surveillance and another pointless examination of the area? What could possibly go wrong?”

A third man, who had just entered the tavern, hurried over to the two men’s table. “My brothers, you must be more careful. The acoustics in this establishment are peculiar. If someone cared to listen, they could probably hear your words on the other side of the room.” The conversation immediately died down to an indistinguishable whisper.

Nova felt the blood drain from her face, and she struggled against a wave of nausea. Shock was setting in. She was still in a weakened state from the attack near the market. This new calamity might just put her over the edge.

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Catyana stared at her, shock in her eyes. “Are they talking about...?”

Unable to bring herself to speak, Nova just nodded.

“What’s going on?” Vilam asked in a whisper.

“It’s Corsen, the son of Lord Divestelan. I recognize his voice.” Nova could hardly control her trembling. “Vilam, could you please walk past their table and see if one of them has a scar on his right cheek running vertically down from his eye to his jaw? That would be Corsen. The older man with the crimson birthmark on his right cheek is Citenes Novesta. He’s Lord Novesta’s brother and captain of Corsen’s Black Guard.”

Vilam regarded her with an odd glance but nodded. He rose and sauntered in the direction of the restrooms. Despite her distress, she marveled at his professional attitude. She was certain Vilam wasn’t doing this for the first time.

“Nova, what did that man mean when he said you were discredited and decommissioned?”

“Oh, please,” Nova gasped. “Not now.”

Catyana placed her hand on Nova’s arm. “What is it?”

Nova was having difficulty breathing. Her hands were cold and her limbs numb, yet she felt as if the pounding of her heart would rupture her chest as rage, pain, and nausea battled for dominance. She closed her eyes. “Oh, Catyana, I know it was them. All the images...I feel as if it were happening all over again.” She shook her head and covered her face with her hands.

Catyana put her arm around her. She must have felt Nova shudder, because she tightened her hold.

Nova took deep breaths. She knew there was only one thing she could do. Almost by instinct, her anguished spirit reached out to the ethereal spheres, where her trembling heart would find comfort. As she opened the door to her innermost being, warmth and light poured into her soul, and a blanket of peace enfolded her like a mantle, protecting her from the onslaught of threatening memories. She could feel her tense muscles relaxing. Her breathing became easier, and a tingling sensation spread through her limbs as she allowed the Eternal’s gentle caress to calm her. Joy filled her heart, and she reveled in the knowledge that she was a child of the Infinite, that the Highest would yet draw near to console a disconcerted spirit.

Catyana stared at her. “I wish I could do that.”

“You will, dearest, you will,” Nova answered in a soft voice as she opened her eyes.

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Vilam returned to their alcove and leaned closer to the two women. “It’s like you said, Nova. It must be this Corsen you were referring to; he has the scar. But there’s more going on here. A fourth person just winked at them from the door. Look, they’re paying and getting up. I’m absolutely certain something’s going down. My instincts have never deceived me. By the way, they’re wearing the same uniforms we saw on the patrol in Nadil that caused us so much trouble. What can you tell me about them?”

Nova was still shaken but had regained much of her composure. “Corsen is the one in the middle.” She nodded in the direction of the men leaving the tavern. “He’s wearing his house uniform. The other two are wearing uniforms of the Western Alliance. The colors are the same: dark brown, black, and gold, but the black and gold designs are different, depending on house, rank, and function. It’s the same with the Eastern Coalition, only our colors are dark green, burgundy, and gold. Although each house has its own colors, the provinces decided to use the colors of the two most powerful houses, Tolares and Divestelan, to save on the cost.”

“I understand.”

“I’m fairly certain, though, that these particular men often wear black uniforms, with capes and masks to match. Come, let’s settle our debt and leave. Maybe we can find out what they’re up to.” She signaled the proprietor, who came over immediately.

“Was everything to your liking?”

“Yes, everything was excellent, as always. May we settle our account?”

“Of course.” He quickly calculated the sum in his head.

Before Nova could reach for her purse, Vilam took out a piece of gold. “No,” she whispered. “That isn’t wise.”

But it was too late. The proprietor had already seen it. He gazed at the piece of gold in amazement. Then he stared at Vilam. “I have heard of such gold. A piece just like it changed hands in Nadil not three days ago. My wife and I are good friends of Folan and Semanta Revan, and you know how women are.” He glanced at Vilam’s bow case. “I am almost certain the contents of that case were displayed in Folan’s tavern until a few days ago and have since been used for the first time in five hundred years.”

Vilam looked at Nova. “Are all proprietors such good observers?”

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Nova gazed back at him, her mouth a thin line. She felt angry, but her voice remained calm. “The ones who are successful have to be, if they want to keep their businesses running smoothly.” She turned back to the proprietor. “Please, my friend, we are in a hurry.”

“Yes, of course, I understand. But—would it be possible to have just a quick look at the bow?” Vilam sighed and glanced at Nova. “What do you think?”

“It’s up to you, Vilam. You’re the one who put your foot in it.” Nova bit down on her lip and rebuked herself inwardly. She had allowed her emotional distress to subdue her, and the words had slipped out before she could think. Through her lack of restraint, they had lost any chance of getting away quickly.

“Thanks a lot,” Vilam replied with a sour look. He looked up at the proprietor. “Alright, but we really need to make this quick.” He placed the case on the table and opened it. The light in the tavern wasn’t bright, but the bow still gleamed dangerously.

The tavern grew quiet as people in the surrounding alcoves realized something unusual was going on. This caused a chain reaction, and it soon seemed as if everyone in the tavern was standing or craning their necks to get a look.

The proprietor dropped to his knee and bowed his head. “Your Holiness, I am honored that you have allowed me to serve you in my tavern. Everything you had is, of course, on the house.”

Some of the customers gasped. The place was so still, Nova could hear her own heartbeat.

Vilam stared at the proprietor, seemingly embarrassed. “Please get up. I’m not one for formality.”

The proprietor looked at him in surprise but rose immediately. “Yes, of course, Your Holiness. And may I add, it’s a relief to see you wearing the robes of the Order.”

“Like I said, you’re a good observer. But Vilam will do fine.” He held out his hand and the proprietor took it. “May I know your name?”

“I am Tecelas, and this is my wife, Jalisa.” The proprietor presented a slender and very pretty woman of approximately Nova’s age, who had come up behind him to see what was going on. She had her hair straight and unbound, as it was worn in the Order.

“*Vela’mada*, Lisa,” Nova said, smiling uncomfortably.

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“*Vela’mada*, Nova,” the woman answered with a shy glance in Vilam’s direction. Her voice was soft and pleasant. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize you were here, or I would have come over sooner.”

Nova turned to her friends. “Jalisa is Fatasa’s older sister and used to be in the Order. We went to school together in Travis as acolytes, but she resigned when she married Tecelas.”

“Yes, and I never regretted it. But I’m still sorry about what happened, Nova,” Jalisa said in a hushed tone. “I felt so bad for you when I heard. You were always such a good friend.”

“What happened?” Catyana asked.

Jalisa stared at Nova with her hand over her mouth. “Oh, no, please forgive me. I assumed you had told your friends, or I never would have mentioned it.”

“Mentioned what?” Catyana urged.

“She lost her commission,” Jalisa whispered, her face shining with reverence as her gaze wandered back to Vilam.

Catyana stared at Nova.

“It was so sad,” Jalisa added in a low voice as she turned back to Catyana. “She was such a gifted student. Would you believe she was one of the youngest priestesses ever? She received her commission when she was only twenty-nine.”

Nova saw shock and hurt struggling in Catyana’s eyes. “You never told me that.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Catyana. Vilam, we really need to leave.” The situation had become extremely embarrassing, and Nova wanted to get out of the tavern as quickly as possible.

“Alright, but I would like to pay for what we had,” Vilam answered, looking up at Tecelas.

“I could never accept your gold.” The expression on the proprietor’s face belied his proclamation.

“But I would very much like for you to have it. Could we, perhaps, come to some understanding?”

“Vilam,” Tecelas declared with emphasis, “you are always welcome here. Bring your friends and you may rest assured that the finest specialties of the house will always be at your disposal.”

Vilam grinned and firmly gripped the proprietor’s hand. “That is a word, my friend.” He stood, closing his bow case and discreetly leaving the piece of gold on the table.

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As the two women followed Vilam, Jalisa put her hand on Nova's arm. "Please come again soon. There have been some...uh, developments at home, and I would really like to talk to you."

"I'll do what I can, Lisa. But we are quite busy at the moment."

"I understand." She seemed disappointed. "Anae keep you, my friend."

"And you, Lisa. Please give my love to your mother and your little sister." Nova felt uncomfortable brushing off a good friend like that, but this wasn't the time to renew old acquaintances.

As they strode to the exit, Vilam leaned back to Nova while the hushed awe of the customers followed them like a silent wave. "How did you lose your commission?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Nova replied. "But now, everyone in Tolares will know by nightfall that the Emissary is wearing the robes of the Order," she added irritably.

Vilam shrugged.

Nova turned to Catyana and gestured at her friend's hood. Catyana nodded and raised the hood of her cloak to conceal her golden hair, but the look Catyana gave her pierced Nova's heart.

The day was still bright when they stepped outside. A man in an unassuming tunic rushed toward them from their right. He was past them in a flash, but Nova saw him sheathe a sword hilt dagger in his belt as he hurried down the alley. A commotion farther down the road where he had come from caught their attention. They heard a few screams while others cried out.

Vilam's reaction was instantaneous. He already had the bow free of the case and was stringing up an arrow.

Nova also responded by instinct. She closed her eyes and allowed her perception to reach out into the alley around them. She immediately grasped the situation. "Try to get him alive," Nova shouted to Vilam as she rushed toward the disturbance, towing Catyana along with her. When she reached the crowd, she heard the firm swish of the Prophet's Bow behind her and a split second later a cry at the other end of the alley. A quick glance showed her Vilam had found his mark and was racing toward the incapacitated offender.

Nova elbowed her way toward the cause of the commotion. When she finally got through all the spectators, she sharply drew in her breath. A deacon of the Order was lying in the street, the front of his robe soaked in blood. But not just any deacon, she realized with alarm. A female acolyte stood beside him, her hands over her mouth and her eyes wide from shock, staring down at him.

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“Everyone, please move away,” Nova shouted. “Give us room to work.” She kneeled beside the unconscious man and pulled Catyana down with her. “Oh, Bejad,” she whispered, “what have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Do you know this man?” Catyana asked, her face white as a sheet.

“Yes, he’s Hyelisa’s older brother. Quickly, dearest, is there anything you can do for him?”

Catyana shuddered, probably remembering the incident with Soshia two nights earlier, but she nodded. Nova made room for her, and Catyana placed her hands over the deacon’s wound. Her hands began to glow. People in the crowd around them gasped and cried out.

“He’s still there, but he’s fading quickly. I think I can help him.” Catyana closed her eyes and concentrated. Nova could sense her friend reaching out for his pattern. The glow from her hands expanded and grew into a brilliant light that completely engulfed the deacon. The people around them stepped back in panic.

After a minute, Catyana sighed and let the glow fade, then removed her hands. The deacon was breathing evenly and began to stir.

The people around them started whispering. Nova heard snatches of conversation from all sides. What mainly caught her attention were the words *Videsana Pora*. Her shoulders sagged and she turned to her friend, whose hood must have fallen back while they were running, exposing her golden hair. “I’m so sorry, Catyana. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Don’t you hear the people talking?”

Catyana listened. “I don’t understand. Why would they think I’m the Golden Messenger?”

“Look at it from their perspective. There is the Emissary with the Prophet’s Bow, just back from the hunt.” She motioned to Vilam, who had come up and dumped the semiconscious perpetrator on the ground beside them. “And here you are, a golden-haired young woman who just brought a man back from certain death. What would you think in their position?”

“I see what you mean,” Catyana answered, stunned at the realization.

Nova looked up at the acolyte standing beside them, who was staring at them in shock and amazement. “Do you know this man?”

The young woman nodded. “Yes. He is Bejad Tsimerel. He...he brought me here from Pitaren so I could join the Order.”

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“Oh, so you are an initiate. What is your name?”

“Netira Cilenas.”

“Was Bejad showing you the city?”

“Yes.”

“I should have known, fool that he is.” She looked up at Netira.

“Did you just say ‘fool’?” Netira asked, hardly capable of suppressing a nervous giggle.

“Never mind. Vilam, we need to get these men away from here immediately. Would you please get—uh, Vilam?”

But he was staring at Netira. The young initiate noticed his gaze and gasped. Her hand reached for her heart.

“What’s wrong, Vilam?” Nova asked.

“I don’t know. I just got the strangest feeling. Do I know you?” he asked, directing the question at Netira.

“I...I don’t think so,” Netira replied.

Bejad’s eyes fluttered open. As he propped himself up on his elbow and looked around, Nova said, “Bejad, for everyone’s sake, keep your mouth shut until we get this mess sorted out, alright?”

“Yes, but—”

“Uh-uh!” Nova raised a warning finger.

“Alright, but I—”

“Bejad, zip it! Or do I have to tell Hyelisa on you?”

“Oh, um, sorry,” he replied meekly. When Nova helped the deacon to his feet, he looked down at himself. “Oh, god, what a mess.”

“That’s what I said. You can thank our Goddess that Catyana was here. I doubt you would have survived otherwise.”

Catyana’s attempt at a smile was strained as she got to her feet, still dazed.

“Vilam, we need to get these men away from here as quickly as possible,” Nova said. “We’ll get a coach in the plaza to take you back to the residence. Tell the Lady Utalya what happened. She’ll know what to do.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

“What was all that a moment ago,” she whispered, “with Netira?”

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“I don’t know exactly,” Vilam answered, his voice just as low. “When I looked at her, I got the same feeling I did when I saw Venora for the first time yesterday. It was bizarre.”

“Ah, Venora.” Nova’s eyes twinkled when she saw his embarrassment and she patted his arm. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” She turned to Netira. “Are you staying at the Selanian Order Campus?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, Catyana and I will accompany you back to your lodgings.”

“Oh, no, that’s alright. I can find my way back.”

“After what just happened, I don’t want an initiate out by herself. We’re going with you. No, Netira, that’s a direct order from a superior. And while we’re at it, I’d like to use this opportunity to show Catyana how to get robe and cloak replacements. You never know when that knowledge might come in handy. Besides, I think we’d both feel more comfortable getting out of these clothes.” She knew Catyana could clean herself up by Induction if she set her mind to it, but she didn’t want to tax her friend with new concepts after what they had just experienced, and the Selanian Order’s campus was on their way.

“I really wouldn’t mind getting cleaned up,” Catyana replied. “My hands are all...” She shuddered as she looked at them. “And I’ll probably need to wash my hair tonight, too.”

The strange group marched back to the plaza, where Nova helped Vilam obtain a coach. As soon as the three men were on their way, the women set off for the Selanian Headquarters at a brisk pace.

26. Desolate Circumstances

Nemara had been trailing Catyana’s carriage on horseback, remaining far enough behind so she would never arouse suspicion, even if they had seen her. A worn cloak covered her patched yet clean dress, her hair was in slight disarray—not too much, and not too little—and her mare had the appearance of a mediocre animal at best. In truth, Rosalina, or Rosa for short, was an extraordinary crossbreed, which she had raised and trained herself. Everything about the assassin was designed to seem unremarkable and unmemorable.

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But even without these safeguards, she wouldn't have been worried because the carriage's top was raised, so the passengers only had a limited view to the left or right. Unless, of course, they leaned out to look up at the buildings, as Catyana was doing now. Nemara smiled at the girl's enthusiasm. She supposed this was Catyana's first visit to Tolares. But most of the other travelers had the tops of their carriages lowered because of the beautiful weather, just as this group had done yesterday when she first saw them. If they were taking such precautions, then her black arrow had fulfilled its purpose.

A contact in the residence had informed her that Catyana and the young Lady Satural would be heading into the city after the midday meal, and Nemara didn't want to forego the opportunity to observe her target from afar. Besides, who knew what might happen during such an excursion? There had been several instances in the past when events had led to a chance encounter, and a spontaneous and very satisfying kill. Of course, the exact opposite had also occurred just as often, resulting in a horrible mess that was a challenge to clean up. But in this case, she hoped she could draw the contract out for a bit. She had a feeling Catyana would prove to be very special, and she wanted more time to get to know her.

Nemara was a bit surprised the supposed Emissary had tagged along and had even brought the Prophet's Bow with him. But this time, Nemara was prepared. He wouldn't get the drop on her again for the simple reason that he would never see her.

When the traffic became too dense, the group abandoned their carriage and sent it back to the residence. Nemara tied her chyeves to a pole in a side street. Rosa was trained not to let anyone near, so she knew her mare would be waiting for her when she came back. After feeding her some grain pellets, she caressed Rosa's muzzle and patted her neck before returning to the main boulevard.

But Nemara soon realized she had underestimated Novantina. Elana's daughter could sense her from afar. There was a moment of excitement when the acolyte told the stranger they were being followed. Nemara walked into a store and waited, perusing the shopkeeper's wares, until the group continued toward the market.

This called for a change in tactics. Turning into an alley, Nemara leaned with her back against a wall and closed her eyes, placing her palms against the wall behind her for added stability. She

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needed to concentrate for what she had planned. With subtle yet accurate precision, the assassin probed the acolyte's mind.

She was astonished at the many secrets she sensed in there, some of them horribly tragic and heartbreaking. Of course, that was to be expected. Nemara knew very well what had happened to Elana and her daughters, and she could hardly contain her anger and outrage whenever she thought of it. But exploring the young Lady's mind wasn't her objective so she squeezed, increasing the acolyte's discomfort little by little. The group was almost at the market when she gauged her target one last time to ensure she had found the correct angle.

Her attack was sudden and devastating, pounding the young Lady's mind with everything she could muster in order to incapacitate her as quickly as possible.

But the acolyte's resistance was astonishing. Nemara had never felt such opposition to a head-on assault, mainly because her targets were usually immobilized on impact. But to attain her objective, it wasn't necessary to completely incapacitate the young Lady. Nemara just needed to keep the acolyte from sensing her. She therefore gave Novantina's mind one last viscous twist and let go.

Gasping from the effort, she let herself drop forward, supporting herself with her hands on her knees, and took a couple of deep breaths. Then she reached out again to assess the extent of the damage she had caused.

A moment later, she nodded. The result was satisfactory. The acolyte wasn't completely disabled, but as good as. Nemara's attack had weakened her considerably and left behind a severe migraine. She hadn't meant to hurt her, and if Nova hadn't resisted, Nemara would have been able to incapacitate her quickly and painlessly. But she had accomplished her objective, and she doubted Nova would be sensing much of anything for the rest of the day. As long as Nemara kept out of the stranger's line of sight, she should be safe.

It didn't take her long to reach the market. The group was sitting on a bench near a fountain, giving Nova a chance to recover, so she passed them and stopped at a stand with handcrafted artifacts. Of course, mind probes could be just as problematic as seductions. They were both double-edged swords, and remnants of the target always remained. Seeing into the acolyte's mind made Nemara pensive. Although the young woman harbored many secrets, Nemara had seldom sensed such purity of spirit or compassion for others, and she was amazed the acolyte hadn't

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become embittered and disillusioned by her experiences. Despite the circumstances, she truly regretted that it had been necessary to do what she had done to her, especially since Nova's mother, Elana, had been such a dear friend of hers.

Nemara suddenly spun around and stared at Nova. She immediately forced herself to turn away again lest anyone in the group saw her. Staring at someone was the surest way to compromise yourself.

How was this possible? Nemara's onslaught had been massive, yet Nova's power of sensation was almost fully restored. Yes, she was still very weak, that hadn't changed, but she could already sense everything in her vicinity. On the other hand, Elana had been unique. Nemara shouldn't have been surprised that Elana had passed some of her aptitude on to her daughter.

Nemara plunged into the masses and severed the connection to Nova's mind as thoroughly as possible. With so many people around her, it would be difficult for the acolyte to single her out. She sighed. It seemed she would have to do this the old-fashioned way.

Fortunately, she still retained a weak connection to Catyana. The girl was easy to read, even from a distance. Her mind was normally stewing with conflict and anxiety but was currently enriched with both excitement and pensiveness. What was thrilling, though, was that none of Catyana's apprehension seemed to stem from the fear of her own death. With most of her targets, Nemara could sense their terror of her from leagues away. More often than not, this meant she was looking at a mediocre or even disappointing kill. But Catyana, no, Catyana was different. Not for the first time since yesterday, Nemara felt hope.

After a while, the group continued their excursion. It was easy to follow them while they were in the market. But when they entered the plaza that separated the market from the Old Town, Nemara had to wait at the edge of the throng until they disappeared into one of the alleys on the far side. Only then did she follow. The group didn't seem to be in any particular hurry, and it was easy to catch up with them.

Nemara smiled when they entered the Old Lantern. She should have guessed the tavern was on their list of places to visit. She waited a while to make sure they were staying before she started on a quick inspection of the neighborhood. Securing an area was pure instinct, and she didn't think there would be any problems. But contrary to her expectation, her inner alarms went off as soon as she turned into the first alley.

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The Black Guard! Although they were dressed in uniforms of the Western Alliance, she would recognize the stench of their arrogance anywhere. Besides, they had a particular way of handling themselves, and the way they studied their surroundings, and especially the women, was much too conspicuous.

As she circled around, she realized the pattern of their deployment was centered on the Old Lantern. Whatever they had planned, it would probably happen in the vicinity of the tavern. She hurried back to the alley where the building was located and melted into the shadows of a corner where she had a good view of two additional side streets. If they dared to touch even a hair on Catyana's head, she would slaughter every last one of them!

After a while, one of the guards entered the tavern. Before long, a second one came running up the alley and went in, but soon came back out again. She raised an eyebrow when he was followed by Corsen Divestelan and Citenes Novesta. The group disappeared into a side street, where they lingered in the shadows, remaining close.

Her eyebrows shot up. What was Tavita doing here? Was the Crimson Brigade in Tolares? No, that couldn't be it. The princess and her companion were wearing the robes and cloaks of the Selanian Order, so this was most likely some kind of covert operation.

Finally, there was movement from the alley where Corsen and Citenes were waiting, and she could sense the expectation in the guards. A man, who was almost certainly not a member of the Black Guard, came around the corner and steered toward Tavita's companion, a Selanian deacon, who was undoubtedly his target. After a few words, he rammed a sword hilt dagger into the deacon's belly, twisting and thrusting upward.

Idiot! The blades of those types of daggers were too short for that purpose, and the man's aim was much too low, missing the heart by several fingerbreadths. He should have killed his target instantly. Now it would take the deacon minutes to bleed out. The man was either an incompetent fool, or this was his first kill. For his own sake, she hoped it was the latter.

The deacon seemed familiar, but she was too far away. Nemara didn't think anyone but her former student would notice another spectator during the commotion following the attack, and she really wanted to talk to Tavita, even if it was just a few words. After a quick look around to ensure there weren't any unwelcome surprises, she stepped out of the shadows and walked over to the deacon, who was lying on the ground, gasping like a fish out of water.

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Tavita saw her immediately and her mouth popped open. She pulled her aside and whispered, “It’s wonderful to see you but, Nemara, what are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Tavita gestured toward the deacon. “I’m on a job.”

“I thought as much. So am I.” Nemara stepped closer to the deacon and squatted down to study his features. A grin stretched her lips. “Bejad Tsimerel. The only thing that surprises me is that it’s taken this long for a blade to find you.”

The man stared up at Nemara, his eyes glazed. “I’m sorry, Your Eminence,” he whispered, “I have failed you.”

“Your Eminence?” Nemara smirked. “I really don’t have time for this nonsense, Bejad.” Glancing at his wound and seeing the amount of blood he had lost, she added, “And neither do you.”

Her words were spot on, because the deacon’s head drooped to the side as he lost consciousness.

With a sigh, she stood up. “Looks like your work here is done.”

“I suppose so,” said Tavita, still gazing down at Bejad. But her expression seemed just a tad too somber.

Nemara looked at her with concern. “Oh, Tavita. You know better than to get attached to your target.”

“Yes, I know. But I was really starting to like him.”

Nemara knew from experience how quickly that could happen. She took Tavita’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. The princess rewarded her with an appreciative smile. But Nemara’s glance in the direction of the Old Lantern revealed that their time was up. The young Lady Satural was quickly approaching with Nemara’s target in tow, the girl’s golden hair streaming out behind her.

“I’m sorry,” said Nemara, “but I have to go. Are you coming?”

“No, I need to remain close by. But don’t worry, I’ll be completely ‘invisible.’”

Nemara looked her up and down and a corner of her mouth twitched upward. “Understood.”

“Oh, by the way, I’m sure you scouted out the Black Guards’ positions, but be careful, they’re being particularly obnoxious today.”

Nemara awarded her a wry smile but gave her a kiss on the cheek and whispered, “It was wonderful to see you, too. Take care.”

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She hastened down the alley, but she turned back for a moment at the corner of a narrow and seldom used side passage to see what her target was up to. Neither Catyana nor Nova were visible through the crowd, but she almost gasped at the intensity of the glow emanating from the area around the deacon. Oh, no. Poor Tavita! If Catyana was able to save Bejad, Nemara's former student would be in a bit of a pickle.

Slightly distracted by the thought, she wasn't paying enough attention as she rounded the corner and almost bumped into one of the guards Tavita had mentioned. Damn it! She really didn't have time for this right now. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, with an expression as shocked as a young maiden should be.

She stepped around him and proceeded on her way, but the guard caught up to her and grabbed hold of her arm. "What's the rush?" He kept moving forward, forcing her further into the alley toward his colleague.

She stared at him with large, frightened eyes. "Please, sir, I need to get home. My mother is waiting for me. She'll be so worried." Before Nemara even finished the sentence, she knew it was the wrong response. Members of the Black Guard loved nothing more than to violate frightened young maidens.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the guard said, letting go of her arm, "but I'm afraid I can't let you go just yet. There's a toll on this alley."

"But...I don't have any money."

"Oh, I'm sure we can find a suitable form of payment."

She had walked right into that one, hadn't she? As the second guard maneuvered himself into position behind her, Nemara saw the guard in front of her exchange a grin with his colleague. She had seen that expression on countless men's faces and knew exactly what it meant. But better her than some poor girl who couldn't defend herself.

Her eyes narrowed, and she switched to her normal voice. "Alright, since your captain has done me a few favors, I'll do you one. Walk away right now, and I'll pretend this never happened. But this is your only warning."

The guard gaped at her for an instant and then roared with laughter. "Never heard that one before. Grab hold of her, would you?" His last words were, of course, directed at his colleague, while he loosened his belt.

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Nemara plunged her stiletto into his chest just below the sternum, driving it upward with a slight twist. Contrary to the man who had stabbed Bejad, her aim wasn't low, nor was the long, thin blade of the stiletto too short, since this was exactly the kind of work it was intended for. Using the guard's momentum as he slumped to the ground, she liberated his sword from its sheath by grasping the hilt with both hands. Without turning, she thrust the sword back along her left side and through the guard behind her, who probably didn't even know what hit him.

With a sigh, she turned and gazed at the two bodies. "Damn it," she muttered under her breath.

Just then, Corsen Divestelan and Citenes Novesta came around the corner but stopped near the entrance. They were deep in conversation and hadn't yet become aware of her.

"...and with all the other stuff they've been screwing up lately," Corsen was saying, "why should I have to take the blame for their incompetence?"

"A leader must take responsibility for both the successes and the failures of his men."

Corsen scoffed. "Yeah, right. If they really were my men, things like this would never happen."

"No one can prepare for every eventuality," Citenes answered dryly, "especially if they insist on disregarding established procedures and decline to take the necessary precautions. It was most unfortunate that these people should appear at exactly this place and at this time."

Corsen targeted him with a spiteful glance. "Well, Martan sure blew his chance of joining the Black Guard." His voice was thick with contempt.

Citenes eyed the young Lord soberly. "It was his first kill. Seen from that perspective, his performance was adequate."

"Yeah, but he got caught, didn't he?"

"Wouldn't you have, given such desolate circumstances? Or can you outrun an arrow released from the Prophet's Bow?"

Corsen grimaced. "Whatever. I doubt we'll be seeing him again anytime soon."

"I am certain they will be taking Bejad and Martan to the Tolares residence. I suggest you inform your father and my nephew of the situation so they can coordinate their strategy with one of our agents in Lord Tolares's staff."

Corsen sneered. "My father? Yeah, I don't think so. Let's stick with Talenon for now."

Citenes cleared his throat. "I don't wish to appear audacious, but there is yet the matter of security regarding your sisters to consider."

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“And I already told you they’re coming to the conference with us. I’m not letting Gevinesa out of my sight.”

“I don’t believe that to be wise, especially if we take into account the young Lady Marusen’s intelligence regarding a possible extraction.”

“Repeating yourself isn’t going to change my decision, Citenes. I want—”

Whatever he wanted was cut short when he glanced in Nemara’s direction. His mouth popped open, and he stared at her and the two guards. “What the hell is going on here?” he shouted, rushing toward her. He stopped short of the first guard and gaped.

Citenes had followed him and was staring at Nemara. He took hold of Corsen’s arm. “My Lord, I caution you to stay back.”

Corsen waved his hand away. “Stay back? Are you out of your mind?”

“Citenes Novesta,” said Nemara. “It’s been a while. I’m glad to see there’s still some sense left in the Black Guard.”

Citenes raised his chin in a subtle nod. “Nemara.”

“You know this woman?” said Corsen.

“I do.”

“And who killed my men?”

“I assume she did,” said Citenes.

“What? How is that possible?”

“You have no idea who I am, do you?” said Nemara.

“Why? Should I?”

“It would certainly be to your advantage and might keep you from making a serious mistake.” She gestured toward his hand, which was fondling the hilt of his sword.

“Citenes, are we going to allow this pretender to kill two of our men without consequence? How did she do it, anyway, stab them in the back?”

“Yes, certainly,” said Nemara with a sneer. “From the position of the bodies and the angle of the weapons, who wouldn’t arrive at such a conclusion?”

Corsen glared at her and drew his sword. “Do you really think you can take both of us?”

“Ask Citenes. He knows me well enough to answer that.”

“Put your sword away, My Lord,” said Citenes.

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“Well then, at least tell me who this woman is.”

“She’s an assassin of the Order of the Novantan, and probably one of their most experienced, at that.”

The color drained from Corsen’s face. “Oh.” He fumbled with his scabbard but was finally able to sheathe his weapon.

“Ah, so your arrogance hasn’t completely eradicated every spark of reason,” said Nemara. “There may yet be hope for the Black Guard.”

Corsen gestured at the bodies. “Why did you kill them?”

“You really must teach your men some manners. They seem to believe they can just have their way with anyone they want. I warned them, but they were overconfident and didn’t realize their peril. I only regret having given them such a quick death.” Her last words were, of course, a blatant lie, and she already felt the two men’s fate weighing on her.

Just then, four guards of the Eastern Coalition entered the alley from the far side. They paused, then hurried toward them. One of them cried, “What happened here?”

Nemara and Citenes exchanged a glance. Citenes nodded.

Nemara gave him a nasty look, then smashed the first guard’s knee with a kick, grabbed his sword, and drove it through the second guard’s abdomen. The third guard tried to chop into her from above, but she effortlessly dodged his weapon and commandeered his swing, slashing into the fourth guard’s leg and severing his femoral artery. The third guard was so shocked he loosened his grip. Nemara instantly seized the weapon and spun around, building up enough momentum to decapitate him.

She turned to the fourth guard, who had collapsed and would undoubtedly bleed out within minutes. But there was a slight chance he might survive, and Nemara couldn’t risk it. A quick thrust to the neck finished him off.

The first guard was lying on the ground, nursing his knee, and stared up at her in terror. “No. No, please.”

Standing over him, she considered him for a moment, her mouth tightened into a thin line. Then she grasped the sword with both hands, raised it above her head with the hilt facing upward, and plunged the blade straight down into his heart.

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In the silence that followed, she let her eyes wander over the carnage and shook her head. Something trickled down her brow and she tried to wipe it away. The dark red smear on the back of her hand made her grimace. “Damn it,” she muttered, “I hate decapitations.”

Corsen just stared at her with his mouth agape.

She glared at Citenes. “This wasn’t necessary.”

“It was.” He gestured toward Corsen. “He needed to see for himself. I’ll contact the Order and let them know I ordered the hits.”

Nemara shook her head. “I owe you. We’ll regard this as return on investment.”

“Ah, you have a contract.”

She nodded. When an assassin was on a job, any superfluous terminations performed in the line of duty were considered collateral damage and were usually deemed acceptable. Of course, there were exceptions. Accidental high-profile kills, for instance, could lead to serious complications and were best avoided.

Glowing at Corsen, she said, “This is your mess, you ignorant whelp, and I expect you to clean it up.”

“Why is this my mess?”

Ignoring the question, she said, “If I ever cross paths with any of your men again and they so much as look at me askance, I swear they will share these guards’ fate.”

She left him standing there, staring after her, and started down the alley, but Citenes caught up with her and touched her arm. “Would you really have harmed the young Lord?” he whispered.

“Of course not,” she said so only he could hear. “If the situation had required it, I might have taught him a lesson. But many of the Great Houses are patrons of the Order. If I harmed one of their offspring without a valid contract, I would never be able to show my face again.”

Citenes nodded. “Farewell, Nemara. May we meet again under less desolate circumstances.”

Nemara nodded and turned away but would have stumbled if Citenes hadn’t caught her arm.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you, but I really need to leave.”

“Is it the Reckoning?”

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Nemara's eyes narrowed. "How do you know about that? No, I'm sorry I asked," she interjected when he opened his mouth. "I know in which circles you must run to fulfil your duties, and I don't envy you. Of course you know about the Reckoning."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I just need to get home as soon as possible, but I appreciate your concern." With another quick nod in his direction, she left the alley, hoping it wasn't already too late.

27. Decommissioned

"So, in the end, you were living mainly from the Lady Gevinesa's compensation," Nova said.

"Yes," Netira answered somberly. "We only had a very small farm, and with conditions in the west as they are, it was almost impossible to earn a living from it."

"I don't understand why you stayed on for as long as you did."

"It was their home," Catyana exclaimed. She beamed at Netira, who returned the acknowledgment of her dedication to the place she was raised with a weak smile.

Nova was happy for Catyana. The two girls had hit it off quite well. They were approximately the same age and had both grown up on a farm, two details that would expedite amity under almost any circumstances, let alone episodes as shocking as the one they had just witnessed.

"So, you enjoyed tending the chyevi?" Catyana asked.

"Yes, very much," Netira answered. "I'm going to miss them. Do you also have chyevi?"

"Yes, the few we need for transportation. But they were mainly the men's responsibility. Of course, we had to help with things like tending the livestock and bringing in the hay when there weren't enough hands, but my domain was usually the household. I suppose my sister Vira will be taking over that now," she concluded with a sigh as they stopped. They had reached Netira's quarters.

"Would you like to come in for a moment?" Netira asked timidly.

"Yes, gladly," Nova answered. "I would love to meet your roommate."

Netira nodded and opened the door.

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The girl's roommate looked up from her desk, where she was busy writing. The initiate rose when she saw that Netira had brought guests. But her obliging smile faded when she looked at them more closely. "*Tevas'an*, Netira! What happened?"

"That's a bit difficult to explain. But don't worry, we're not hurt."

"And Bejad?"

"That's a different matter. May I introduce you to some new friends? Mavena, this is Novantina Satural and Catyana Faeren. They walked me home."

"I'm relieved to see you've acquired some sense." Mavena nodded to her guests. "I'm glad to meet you. It's always a pleasure to become acquainted with other initiates, although I must admit I haven't seen you before. Are you new?"

Nova suppressed a smile. "We're not quite initiates anymore. We're in the Lady Utalya Revan's entourage."

"The Lady Utalya! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to presume. I'm honored to have personal assistants of a former High Priestess as my guests."

"It's quite alright, Mavena. Anyone could make such a mistake." Nova took a quick glance around. She sighed at the memories the small room evoked of her own time as a student in Travis. "Well, we don't want to take up any more of your time. It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Oh, please, can't you stay awhile?"

"I'm sorry, but the conference begins tomorrow, and we still have some final preparations we need to attend to."

Mavena managed a sad smile. "I understand. But it was very kind of you to stop by. Please come again soon. And thank you for walking Netira home."

"The pleasure was ours."

"Nova, couldn't we invite Netira and Mavena to the residence?" Catyana asked.

"The next few days will be very hectic. Besides, I wouldn't want to infringe upon the Lord's hospitality. But I'd like to see our new friends again, too," Nova said with an encouraging smile in their direction. "We'll see what we can do."

They took leave of the initiates. As Netira closed the door behind them, Nova heard Mavena grilling her roommate on what had happened. She and Catyana exchanged a knowing grin as they walked to the administration building. "So, what did you think of Netira?"

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“Need you ask? I absolutely adore her,” Catyana replied

“Yes, you two have some essential points in common. And her personality seems pleasant enough, although I did sense a certain closeness of spirit in her.”

“Is that so surprising, after her recent loss?”

“That might be it.” Nova helplessly lifted her hands and let them drop again as she sighed. “I’m just not sure. It seemed to me she didn’t want to reveal too much.”

“Would you be very outgoing if you had grown up under such circumstances? I think she’s turned out quite well.”

Nova shook her head. Something wasn’t right about Netira, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She sighed. “And Mavena?”

Catyana hesitated. “I don’t know. She seemed nice, and I got the impression she really wanted to be friends.”

“And yet you seem doubtful.”

Catyana’s eyes became unfocused, staring into the distance. “I sense deep pain and conflict in her. There is darkness in her soul, and concealment. Did you see the scars on her face and arms?” she whispered. “Why would she want to keep them?”

Nova felt uneasy and glanced at her friend. “Catyana, there could be any number of reasons why she might want to keep those scars.” She kept her voice low and looked down at the path as she added, “But I also sensed the darkness, pain, and conflict you mentioned.”

They had reached the administration building, obliging them to discontinue their conversation. Nova held the door open for Catyana. At the counter, a short, motherly priestess greeted them with a warm smile. “Good day, my dears. How may I—*Tevas’an!* What happened to you?”

“We do look a mess, don’t we?” Nova admitted. She shot a quick glance at the tablet on the counter, bearing the inscription “*Her Grace, Magarena Isoltas.*” “There was a rather unfortunate, um, incident in the Old Town and my friend and I were called upon to administer first aid. We would like to ask—”

But no further words were necessary. In a sudden flurry of activity, the efficient priestess spread forms and quills on the counter while studying checklists she pulled from a panel behind her. Nova could hardly keep up with her. “Alright, dearies, let’s see here. You’ll be needing new robes, that’s for sure. *A’mada*, what a mess,” she exclaimed after another quick glance at their clothes. “But

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since you're acolytes, I'm not surprised you haven't learned to take care of such things yourselves. Advanced Induction techniques usually aren't taught until the higher courses for prospective deaconesses and priestesses. Would you please fill in these forms while I look you up? If you give me your names, I'm certain we'll find all the information we need in the books so we can get you refitted and back on duty in a flash."

Nova and Catyana exchanged a smile. "She's right," Catyana whispered with a pencil in her hand, "I probably could have done it myself. But I never thought of applying my inductive powers in that way."

Nova smiled and patted her arm. "Later," she whispered. Looking at the priestess, she said, "You may look for Catyana Faeren and Novantina Satural."

"Satural, did you say?" The priestess gave Nova a glance over her shoulder as she reached up to take down two books. "Did you know that your sister, Vodana, paid us a visit several months ago? She came by with the Lord's daughter, the young Lady Venora, such a sweet little thing," she continued as she laid the books on the counter and began turning the pages. "They were looking for a friend of theirs who had become an initiate and was still in Tolares at the time. I'm happy to say I was able to help them."

"Excuse me, Your Grace, but how did you know I'm Vodana's sister?"

"Oh, that's simple. I looked up Satural immediately after Vodana and the Lady left. The only female Saturals in the records were an acolyte, a deaconess, and two priestesses, but the most interesting was the acolyte, because she was entered as Utalya Revan's chief of staff and was decommiss—well, I don't need to tell you about that, now, do I?"

Nova glanced in Catyana's direction and saw that she had the same look of astonished amusement in her eyes as Nova was feeling. While she chattered away, the priestess flipped through pages so quickly, they practically became a blur. "Did you know that Utalya is a good friend of mine? I've known her since she was married to her first husband, Zanatol Bevelas, Anae rest his soul. Utalya and I were both third-degree cousins to Zanatol, what a coincidence! Let me see, now. There we go. Novantina Satural, registered as an acolyte by formal decree of the High Priestess Utalya Bevelas on the seventeenth of Ulanatina in 1503. Here's all the information we need: robe sizes, cloak lengths, and so on." She looked up at Nova. "Yes, the similarity is there, beautiful child that you are. You're almost as stunning as your mother Elana was, the poor dear."

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Before Nova could answer, the priestess had bent down with her nose in the pages of the second book. “Now for the other name. Catyana Faeren, wasn’t it?”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Catyana said. “It’s possible my name hasn’t been entered yet. I’ve only been with the Lady Utalya for two days.”

Nova froze. She could have boxed herself for her negligence. She had forgotten all about the entry. Poor Catyana! This would only add more confusion to her friend’s already distressed state of mind.

“Fiddlesticks!” the priestess exclaimed. “Our records are seldom more than a day or two old. The longest delay was in the winter of 1487, when there was so much snow that the couriers from Travis couldn’t get through for a month. Here we are.” The priestess hesitated. “Oh, my, this is interesting. Catyana Faeren, registered as an acolyte by formal decree of the High Priestess on the twenty-fourth of Anasetani in 1520. The decree was confirmed by Elder Yonatan himself on the same day.”

The room fell silent as the three women stared at one another. Nova realized it had been a grave mistake to come here, but it was too late now. The damage was already done. Vodana wasn’t the only one who could call herself an obtuse old *cetesa*. It seemed to run in the family.

The priestess’s eyes wandered between the two acolytes, but she remained silent. Nova bit her lip and looked into Catyana’s ashen face. She could see the fear in her friend’s eyes.

“I...I don’t understand,” Catyana stuttered. “I haven’t been an acolyte for four years. There must be some mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, honey,” said the priestess, her voice gentle. “But for whatever reason, the current High Priestess desperately wanted you as an acolyte in the Order four years ago. The entry is marked *NT*, which indicates that *Nolasa Tina*, the High Priestess, will be making further entries to your record as soon as she’s able, probably sometime after her debut tomorrow.”

Catyana stared at Nova with wide eyes and trembling lips. “Do you know anything about this?” She could hardly breathe and was barely holding back her tears.

Nova took a deep breath. “Yes, I do know about the entry, although I must admit I had completely forgotten about it.”

“Please, Nova, don’t let the High Priestess take me away from you.”

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Nova took hold of Catyana's arms to steady her. She looked into her eyes. "Dearest, I'm so sorry, but I can't tell you very much. All I can say is, please be strong. Keep an open mind and an open heart."

Catyana shook her head. "I can't take any more of this." She closed her eyes as tears began streaming down her face.

Nova embraced her, mainly to keep her friend from keeling over.

The priestess brought Catyana a chair. "There you go, honey," she said as she helped Nova set Catyana down. She quickly produced a second chair for Nova.

Nova awarded the priestess a grateful glance as she sat next to her friend and took her hands. She made a mental note to keep a tab on Her Grace Magarena. Her extraordinary insights and singular perception might come in handy some day. "Catyana, it's my fault. The entry was made at my request, as a precautionary measure."

Catyana raised her head. "So, you do know the High Priestess?"

Nova nodded. "But please bear with me, dearest. Just give it one more day. I promise things will be much clearer by tomorrow." *But probably not easier*, she thought. She felt guilty. Was she asking too much of Catyana? Had she overestimated her friend's strength? She was beginning to fear she had.

Catyana didn't answer, but Nova saw she was struggling with herself. A minute passed, and Nova began to think she might not have heard her. Finally, Catyana took a deep breath. "I'll try. I'll try because you asked me to. But I'll need your help to get through this."

Nova squeezed her hand. "I'll be there for you as much as I can. But please understand, tomorrow will be a very busy day."

The two women hadn't even noticed that the priestess was gone until she suddenly emerged from the hall with a stack of robes and cloaks, which she deposited on the counter next to them. "There you go, my sweeties. But you're not getting into these new clothes until you've cleaned up. Take your things and off you go. Down the hall and around the corner, first door on your right. The hot water's already running."

The bath worked wonders. Nova allowed Catyana the luxury of soaking in silence, and her friend seemed to feel much better as they rode back to the residence, each of them newly clothed

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with a fresh set of robes under their arm. The priestess had been prudent enough to send for a carriage from the residence.

“Nova, why didn’t you tell me you had been a priestess?” Catyana asked as they passed the conference building.

“I’m sorry. I just...didn’t know how to explain things to you at the time.”

“But you told me everything else. Why not that?”

“I didn’t tell you about Vodana, did I?”

“That’s true. Are there any more such secrets you’ve been keeping from me?”

“There might be a few.”

Catyana stared out the window in silence. “I feel like a dupe.” She sniffed. “I’ve always told you everything.”

“I know you have, dearest, and I love you all the more for it.”

“Then why haven’t you been open with me?”

“I’ve been as open with you as I possibly could under the circumstances.”

Catyana sighed. “Since we’ve come to Tolares, you’ve been so different. There seems to be so much I don’t know about you.”

“I’ve never held back on the things that really matter. Independent of my duties and the people I might know, I’ve never acted differently in your presence than what I truly am. Please believe me.”

“I do believe you, Nova, but I’m so confused. Will you at least tell me why you lost your commission?”

Nova sighed. “Well, the official version is that I performed my duties negligently and didn’t follow the elders’ specified security procedures at the conference in Divestelan, ultimately leading to the former High Priestess’s assassination.”

Catyana paled. “She was really murdered? I always thought it was an accident.”

“That was the official report to the public. But it was no accident.”

“That’s horrible!” Catyana shuddered. “I didn’t realize you were in charge of security at the conference in Divestelan.” She glanced at her friend. “Is it true that you didn’t follow the security procedures the elders specified?”

Nova fixed her with her gaze. “I know this isn’t what you’d like to hear, but yes, it’s true.”

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Catyana's shoulders sagged. "Oh, Nova, why?"

"There...were valid reasons for my actions at the time."

"So, you *were* responsible for the High Priestess's death!"

Nova looked at her with a pained glance. "Are you very disappointed in me?"

"I don't know. I'm so confused. Nothing seems to make sense anymore."

"Please, just give it a little more time. I'm sure things will become much clearer in the next few days."

Catyana sniffed. "Right."

When they arrived at the residence several minutes later, a group of people were waiting for them in the entrance hall. Vilam was the first to approach. "The Lady Utalya and one of your assistants, Hyelisa, are in a parlor with the two men we brought."

Nova sighed. "I don't want to talk to them right now. Please keep the prisoner separate and under constant guard. I'd like to postpone the would-be assassin's interrogation and Bejad's debriefing until tomorrow. That'll give the prisoner some time to stew and think about what he's done. But I'm glad Hyelisa is with her brother. They haven't seen each other in years. Has the prisoner's wound been tended to?"

Vilam nodded.

"Catyana, why don't you go on ahead to our room? I need to speak with the Lady Utalya, and you look exhausted." Catyana nodded and dragged herself to the stairs. "Why don't you take the elevator this once?" Nova called after her. She watched her friend with apprehension as Catyana turned, nodded, and shuffled toward the west wing.

Vilam showed Nova to the parlor. When the Lady Utalya answered the door, the two women retired to a quiet corner of the entrance hall. It didn't take long for Nova to acquire the information she needed, allowing the Lady to return to her duties. Nova looked about the hall and soon found Vilam again. She took his arm and pulled him aside. "I'm sorry, but I need your help at the conference tomorrow."

After giving him careful instructions, she returned to her room. She found Catyana sleeping peacefully, fully clothed. Nova caressed her cheek and pulled a blanket over her. Then she sat down at her desk. She had a fair amount of paperwork to finish for the next day and didn't

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extinguish her lamp until late that night. Catyana must have been completely worn out, because she didn't stir once the whole time.

28. The Reckoning

Nemara had reached a narrow alley near her lodging when the Reckoning overwhelmed her. She stumbled toward a building and braced herself with one hand against the wall and the other on her stomach as she desperately tried to keep the bile down that was rising in her throat. Closing her eyes, she swallowed several times and focused on the respiration process. Keeping her mind occupied always helped her get her emotions under control. She wasn't surprised it didn't have quite the desired effect this time.

What was she thinking? Six kills on the same day? And two yesterday? There were bound to be repercussions. And her mental attack on the young Lady Satural earlier had been demanding, so she hadn't even been at full strength when she confronted the guards. She should be grateful she had gotten as far as she had before the events caught up with her.

But then, she doubted she had been thinking much at all. It had required all her strength to keep it together as she trundled toward what she believed to be a safe haven where she could clean herself up and recover. Looking down at herself now, she couldn't help but shake her head. Her hands, her face, her hair, and her clothes were splattered with blood, and she had raised her hood and kept to dark alleys and seldom used passageways to avoid suspicious glances. There was no way she could appear in this state at, or even in the vicinity of her lodgings. Her reputation at her place of residence needed to remain above board for her to maintain her cover. Even the slightest suspicion meant she would have to pack up and move on. But if that was true, how did she think she was going to get home? She would need a change of clothes first.

She tried to concentrate on her clothing, but the Reckoning was making every thought a pain, and she had to struggle to cut through the images battling for dominance in her mind. So, if she had to change her clothes to get home, then she had to have left them somewhere. But where? Her frustration made her want to tear at the rags she had on, wishing she could just rip the stupid things from her body, like she had yesterday when she had taken a roll with that boy.

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At the memory, the scent of fresh hay filled her mind. Hay. Stable. Of course! She had left her clothes in the stable! And with that thought, realization hit her like a thunderbolt. Her eyes opened wide, and her hands shot up to her mouth.

Oh, no! Rosa! How in the world could she have forgotten her faithful companion? Her mare was still tied to that pole in a side street not far from the market. She felt the anger at herself and the circumstances rising up in her and she let her hands drop to her sides, her knuckles turning white as she balled her fists.

But anger was good. If she could keep that up, it might help her keep things together until she could find a place to recover. She wasn't worried that anything would happen to Rosa. Her mare was accustomed to waiting and knew how to protect herself. Once, her poor darling had even waited for three whole days before Nemara was able to return to her. Rosa had been severely dehydrated, but chyevi could survive for up to two weeks without food or water, and Rosa had recovered quickly. Not that Nemara thought anything would happen to her now. They were in the eastern provinces. The worst that could happen was that someone tried to feed her and got kicked or bitten for their trouble.

She thought about heading to the stable but decided it wasn't a good choice. Her current condition made it difficult for her to secure her exit, and she needed to ensure she wasn't seen or followed. She needed someplace closer.

But her previous memory brought the boy from yesterday to mind, Daren. Yes, that seemed like a sensible alternative. It was obvious the boy was infatuated with her and would most likely shelter her if he felt she was in trouble. To be on the safe side, she had staked out his home early that morning, and a few innocent conversations with his neighbors had given her all the information she needed.

As she had suspected, Daren was in his mid-twenties and, being underage, still lived with his parents. He was an only child, but his father seemed to be absent most of the time, spending his days at the tavern with his friends when he wasn't at work. And his mother, well, even if she was at home, she was probably either in bed or too drunk to be aware of her surroundings. No one in the family seemed to be in any way religious.

It didn't take her long to reach the boy's home. Fortunately, the building was on the shady side of the street, so he probably wouldn't be able to detect the blood on her face and clothes. But it

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was important he perceive how vulnerable she was right now. Before she knocked, she wrapped her cloak tighter around herself and pulled her hood further down so part of her face was in shadow. She was in luck, and the boy opened quickly.

His face lit up when he saw her. "It's you! I was just thinking about you."

She put her hand on his arm, almost as if she were holding on to support herself. "I...I'm so sorry to bother you."

His expression sobered when he saw the helpless look in her eyes. "You don't bother me. As a matter of fact, I was hoping to see you again."

"I'm so glad. But I think I did something very—" With a soft moan, she collapsed forward, into his arms, and he caught her instinctively.

"Whoa! Hey, maybe you should come in and sit down." He led her inside and steered her toward a sofa.

She turned to him, reached up, and caressed his face. "Do you have some place that's a bit more private?" she whispered. "Please?"

He gazed at her with a puzzled expression but nodded. "Follow me," he said, emulating her low voice. He was going to lead the way to the stairs, but she caught his arm and took his hand, then gave him an apologetic smile. He nodded, his face lighting up again, and guided her up the stairs and into his room.

When the door had closed behind her, she took a deep breath and looked around. The room wasn't huge but would do. There were a few things lying around, but in general he seemed to keep it clean. Everything, from the moment Daren had opened the door downstairs up to now, had been an act to ensure he would bring her here. Now that she had accomplished her objective, her actual state would best serve under the circumstances.

She walked up to him and placed her hands and her head on his breast. "Please, could you just hold me?"

He put his arms around her. "Hey, you're trembling. Maybe you should really sit down."

He was going to lead her to an armchair, but she gestured toward the bed. "It's kind of you to be such a gentleman, but I think we're beyond such formalities."

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She let him drag her over to the bed where she flopped down on the edge, closed her eyes, and let her breath out in a long sigh. He sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders.

“What happened?”

“I’ll show you, but please don’t be shocked.”

“Shocked? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a bit dark in here. Do you have a light?”

He nodded and got up to switch on a lamp. As he came back, she lowered her hood and unhooked her cloak, letting it glide off her shoulders. He stopped short and gaped at her. “Is...is that blood?”

She nodded.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, fortunately, the blood isn’t mine.”

“What happened?”

“I was in the Old Town this afternoon running some errands. I took a shortcut through a side street and some guards...some guards tried to force themselves on me.”

He lifted his head just a tad. “Ah.” From his expression, he must have been thinking about the incident yesterday, since he and his friends had attempted something similar.

“You needn’t worry. I never would have hurt you like that.”

He shot her a sidelong glance. “That’s...good to know.”

“Really, Daren. What happened today was very different. These men were highly trained. They kill and rape for a living.”

“What? I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“You’ve never heard of the Black Guard?”

“The Black Guard!” The color drained from his face. “But...they’re in the western provinces, not here in Tolares.”

“They can’t always be wearing black capes and masks. When they’re not on duty, they often don the uniforms of the Western Alliance, and with the conference starting tomorrow, Tolares is filled to bursting with citizens of the western provinces, both military and civilian.”

“I...didn’t know that. And you killed them?”

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“Well, there was a bit of a scuffle and some of your guards tried to help, but there weren’t enough of them. Then some western officers, who seemed to be true gentlemen, pitched in. In the end, the two who tried to violate me wound up dead, along with four of the eastern guards.” She was quite certain that was the story Citenes would use to explain the six bodies in the alley, so if Daren heard about it through the grapevine or in one of the daily bulletins, the stories would be similar.

She drew a quavering breath. Daren saw it and sat down beside her again, drawing her close so she could put her head on his shoulder. “What happened then?”

“To be honest, I have no idea. I must have been in shock and wandered off. When I came to myself again, I was in this part of town. I didn’t think I could make it home in my state, so I came here.”

She could see real concern on his face, and he stroked her hair. “I didn’t think you knew where I lived.”

“I just asked around. It seems your neighbors all know who you are.” She took another shivering breath. “Daren, I’m so sorry, but I’m totally exhausted. Do you think I could clean up a bit and then lie down?”

“Of course. The restroom is right down the hall.”

“Won’t your parents mind?”

“Nah, I’ve had girls over before. Besides, they’re not here, and I don’t expect them home anytime soon.” He hesitated. “Does it bother you that I’ve had other girls over?”

“Does it bother you that I’m not a virgin?”

He grinned. “Hardly.”

“Well, then, that settles that.” She stood up but hesitated.

He gestured with his hand. “Like I said, the restroom is down the hall.”

“It’s not that. It’s just...I’d rather not be alone right now. Would you...would you mind coming with me?”

His mouth popped open. “Oh.” He swallowed. “Uh, sure. I’ll come with you.”

She held out her hand and he took it.

Nemara wasn’t a full-fledged seductress, but her technique was adequate. She was already well into the preparation phase and used their time together in the restroom to deepen their bond and

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begin her bequeathal. He had already seen her without clothes yesterday, so she didn't mind pulling her skirt up to her thighs and slipping out of her sleeves to wash herself. When he tried to pass her a sponge, she guided his hand to her neck and showed him how to apply the sponge to her skin using gentle strokes and dabs. Then she let him wash her hair.

When they returned to his room, she was finally able to relieve herself of her soiled clothes. By that time Daren was, of course, so far gone that she could fully immerse herself in the impassionment, which greatly aided her recovery and restored some of her energy. After he had fallen asleep, she wrapped herself in a blanket and sat cross-legged on a rug near the window, using the time of the descension and separation to meditate. The various activities with Daren had suspended the Reckoning's progress for a while, but she knew it would have to run its course, and meditation in combination with mild sedatives was the preferred method in the Order. Since she didn't have her herbs with her, meditation alone would have to suffice.

Most people thought assassins were as cold as ice and could take a life without batting an eyelid. Well, the latter might be true. She had never once hesitated to kill when it was required of her. But that was just training and experience; a compartmentalization technique that was pounded into them during the time of their apprenticeship and had to become second nature before they were ever allowed in the field.

As for being cold, nothing could be further from the truth. Every member of her Order believed in the sanctity of life. Life was precious, in any form. That was the reason the assassins of the Order of the Novantan prepared every mission so meticulously and sent every soul into the shadows on black wings of prayer. And Nemara had never failed her targets in that regard. Yes, even the mediocre and disappointing ones.

The Reckoning was the time after a kill when the victim's spirit cried out and demanded to be heard, and every assassin was required to face what they had done and listen. Taking a life, severing the precious thread between this world and the next, was a profound and irreversible act and a staggering violation of the victim's freedom. A soul that was released into the night in such a violent fashion almost always revolted, and rightly so. The prayer during the kill, and the meditation afterward, were part of the assassin's ritual of sharing in the target's life and their suffering at death. Both were designed to help the assassin come to terms with the event and ease the target's passing into the world beyond the veil.

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The alternative was horrible. It meant hardening your heart and your conscience to the point where you became the kind of cold-blooded killer the assassins of the Order were usually held for. She had met sociopaths who fit that description perfectly, like that young caretaker apprentice a couple of years ago.

Nemara shuddered at the memory. To ensure her suspicions weren't unwarranted, she had conducted a thorough investigation of the boy. His methods were always similar. When he started a position with a new employer, he would begin small, playing cruel tricks on the people around him to test his boundaries and his victims' resolve. But the pranks soon became crueler and more dangerous. And then people started disappearing. Nemara found the lair where he performed his "experiments," gutting his victims alive for his own pleasure. The sight of what he had done there nauseated her, and she burned the place to the ground. After she had punished him publicly as deterrent for others who might want to emulate his actions, she had taken care of the problem quietly and permanently. But in his case, she really did regret having given him such a quick and painless death.

Assassins of the Order of the Novantan were, by definition, something very different. Initiates were vetted exhaustively and had to endure meticulous trials to ensure they conformed to the Order's ideals. This continued through the time of their apprenticeship, because the Order had to verify that the apprentices could handle the severe conditions they would face in the field without faltering in their beliefs or their resolve. Only those candidates who had undeniably proven their dedication to the Order's principles were elevated to the rank of assassin.

But even with the knowledge that her life and faith were based on solid and indubitable principles, she sometimes felt so worn out. The burden she carried was heavy, and she longed for the quiet sounds and scents of the night, where her spirit would finally find peace among her loved ones. She could see their faces when she closed her eyes, all the souls she had released into the perpetual joy of the shadows, and she hoped her Lord would allow her to join them soon. But Catyana was special, and Nemara shivered as a thrill of excitement surged through her. Maybe she really was the one, her final mark.

It was already dark outside when she woke Daren and asked him if she could borrow some of his mother's clothes. He helped her pick them out, and she rewarded him with a passionate kiss,

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dropping her blanket in the process. He carried her back to his room, and they made love one more time before she got dressed.

When she was ready, she kneeled beside the bed and kissed him, letting her fingers run through his hair. “Good-bye, Daren. I won’t forget this.” Nemara picked up the bag with her soiled clothes and walked to the door, turning around one more time in the doorframe to look at him.

Daren propped himself up on an elbow. “Hey, I don’t even know your name.”

She gazed into his face, probing his eyes, trying to see into his soul. No matter. He had aided and sheltered her in her time of need and had more than earned the right. “My name is Nemara,” she finally said.

He nodded. “I like it. And I’d really like to see you again. Sometime soon, maybe?”

She gave him a demure smile before turning away and shutting the door behind her.

The first thing she did was pick up Rosa and ride her back to the stable. The building belonged to her, which was a necessity since she couldn’t have anyone snooping around when she changed her appearance. There were several hidden accesses—at least three was the rule—which she had built herself, ensuring the tunnels were stable and sufficiently fortified. She only used them when she was dressed in the outfit she needed for her cover. Traffic in and out of a stable with a chyeves or in the guise of a stable maid never aroused any suspicion.

After she had taken care of her mare, she dressed in the clothes she had hidden in the stable and returned to her lodging using one of the concealed exits. She wanted to try to get at least a bit of sleep before she returned to her day job in the morning. But after six kills, she knew that was a difficult if not impossible endeavor, so she made suitable arrangements, sensing it was going to be a long night.

29. An Apology

Natilya rushed outside and didn’t stop until she had reached a certain alcove in the garden behind the residence. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, lifting her face to the starry night sky to let the breeze cool her feverish skin. Lord Tolares had asked to meet with her, and she needed to calm down. She didn’t want to appear overzealous. But being so close to the love of her

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life was at the same time exhilarating and terrifying. Why couldn't anyone understand the true reasons for her conflicting emotions?

She didn't have much time to order her thoughts before Lord Tolares joined her. He took her hands in a warm greeting. "Thank you, Natilya, for agreeing to meet me here."

"Of course, My Lord. I'm at your service."

He let her go and they strolled along for a few moments, enjoying the warm scents and peaceful sounds the garden produced on this late spring night. "Are you happy with your accommodations?"

"I am, thank you. They're wonderful!"

"I'm glad to hear it. And are you satisfied with the security measures we have put in place for Catyana?"

Natilya shot him a puzzled glance. "Yes, they're...quite adequate."

"Do you have any suggestions? Anything you believe we might be able to improve?"

Her heart sank. Was that why he had asked to meet with her? To talk about security measures? "No, I believe everything is most satisfactory."

They continued their stroll, and the Lord kept his hands behind his back, as was his custom, but Natilya saw him fidgeting with the lining of his sleeve. She glanced at him now and again, wondering what was going on behind that dear and handsome face of his.

Lord Tolares sighed. "I'm sorry, Natilya. It seems I'm a bit tongue-tied."

Her heart skipped a beat. So, he had wanted to see her for something more than just security measures! "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not unless you have a bottle of courage hidden in the folds of your robes somewhere."

"Courage? I would have gladly brought some for you, My Lord, but it's not something I thought you lacked," Natilya said.

"That's very kind of you to say."

They walked on for a few more minutes, the Lord deep in thought. Could she dare to hope?

Finally, he turned to her and took her hands. His touch made her heart race. "Natilya, I have something very important I wish to ask you, but I feel like a schoolboy who is standing in front of the class and is afraid to speak up. Please forgive me for making this so awkward."

"Always. Would it help if I told you my answer to your question would be 'Yes'?"

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He gazed into her eyes. “But you don’t know what I wish to ask. How could you just blindly agree to my request?”

“Because I don’t believe I could ever refuse any heartfelt request of yours.”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know how I’ve come to earn such trust, but I’m glad for it.”

“And it’s gladly given. But please, My Lord, what is it you wish to ask?”

He tightened his hold on her hands, making her breath come quicker. “Dearest Natilya, I—”

“There you are!” said a voice from behind. Natilya immediately recognized it and groaned inwardly.

The Lord released her hands, and Natilya stepped aside and turned to face her Aunt Utalya.

The Lady stopped short. “Oh, Cavan, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No worries, Utalya,” he said. “I’m always at your service.” But his face had the expression of a boy who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“I’ll...leave you two alone,” said the Lady.

“Oh, no, it’s quite alright,” said the Lord. “You seem to have something important on your mind. How may I help you?”

“Oh, um, I...actually just wanted to steal Natilya away for a few minutes.”

“I see. Well, in that case, I wish you both a very pleasant evening and a good night.” He bowed and left the alcove, but not before shooting Natilya a glance filled with hope, but also just a tinge of disappointment. She felt as if her heart were leaving with him as he walked away.

Her lips were jammed into a thin line, but she managed to say, “Yes, Auntie? What would you like to talk about?”

“Why don’t we sit down here for a moment,” said the Lady, gesturing to a bench. When they were seated, she said, “I’m very sorry I disturbed you and Cavan.”

Natilya targeted her with a sullen glance. “Oh, really?”

She was surprised to see her aunt bite her lips. The Lady took a deep breath. “I suppose I deserved that.”

Natilya couldn’t help staring at her for a moment. What had changed?

Utalya smiled, but Natilya sensed a bit of sorrow in it. “I really need to apologize to you, Natilya.”

Natilya took the Lady’s hand and squeezed. “Auntie, what happened?”

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“Nova happened.”

Natilya’s eyebrows shot up and she sucked in her breath. “Oh.”

“Yes, she talked to me today. Well, I suppose I should rather say, she gave me a good talking to. She certainly knows how to pick her moments.”

Natilya had to restrain a grin. “She does, doesn’t she?”

The Lady took Natilya by the shoulders. “Let me take a good look at you.” Her gaze probed Natilya’s features. “Goodness, you really are all grown up, aren’t you? And so beautiful! Why have I never seen it?”

Natilya reached up and covered one of her aunt’s hands with her own. “You’ve known me since I was an infant, and you’ve always made sure I was well taken care of. But time goes by so quickly, and I suppose you were never able to grow out of your role as my protectress.”

The Lady gave Natilya’s shoulders a good squeeze and dropped her hands in her lap. “I really can be awfully overprotective, can’t I?”

Natilya smiled but dropped her gaze.

“You can say it. As a matter of fact, let’s promise to always tell each other the truth.” She took Natilya’s hands. “Do you think we can do that?”

Natilya beamed. “Oh, I would love that!”

The Lady continued to probe Natilya’s face. Finally, she dropped her gaze and sighed. “I said I needed to apologize, but I haven’t actually done it.” Looking at her again, she said, “You’re a bright and responsible young woman, Natilya, and I had no right treating you the way I did. I’m so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?”

Natilya felt as if a huge weight had lifted from her shoulders. She took the Lady’s hand and squeezed. “Oh, Auntie, of course.”

The Lady nodded. “Thank you. I’m so relieved.” She took a deep breath. “So, you were speaking with Lord Tolares earlier.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t mean to pry, but you looked a tad disappointed.”

Natilya smiled. “Only because we were interrupted.”

Her aunt raised her head just a fingerbreadth. “Oh! I didn’t realize things had progressed quite so far. In that case, are you still of the same opinion you were when we talked in Nadil?”

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“I am, now more than ever.”

The Lady nodded. “In that case, I want you to know I will always support you, no matter what you decide.”

“Oh, Auntie, you can’t believe what it means to me to hear you say that.” She gave her a hug.

“Yes, and I believe it’s long overdue,” said the Lady, rubbing Natilya’s back. When they separated, she added, “May I ask exactly how far along you are in your, uh...relationship?”

Natilya could feel her whole face light up. “To be honest, I think he was on the verge of popping the question when you entered the alcove.”

“What? Really?”

Natilya nodded, feeling as if her heart would burst.

“Oh, Natilya!” Utalya gave her a kiss on the cheek and embraced her. “You really have grown up,” she whispered.

Natilya pulled back and looked into her aunt’s eyes. “Maybe, but I feel as if I still have so much to learn.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. One of the truest signs for coming of age is deep and honest introspection. I don’t know why I didn’t see it earlier.”

“You had a lot on your mind.”

“True, but still no excuse. So you really forgive me?”

“Oh, Auntie, even when I’m angry or annoyed with you, I still love you. Of course I forgive you.”

“Well, then, let’s hope from now on, I don’t give you quite so many reasons to be angry or annoyed with me.”

They smiled at each other.

“What do you think?” said the Lady. “Shall we head inside?”

Natilya nodded and stood, offering the Lady a hand. Her aunt took it, and together they sauntered back to the residence.

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30. Restless

Tavita was tense and her mind in turmoil. That operations weren't going well only increased the spiraling chaos of her emotions. Even the seemingly simple task of terminating Bejad Tsimerel had backfired, and the alleged Emissary himself was now involved. The only encouraging glimmer that day had been the surprising appearance of her former mentor and teacher.

From experience, Tavita knew Nemara needed to stay invisible until she had eliminated her target. It was a true honor that the assassin had broken cover for her, and she was surprised at the amount of trust her former mentor seemed to place in her. She hoped Nemara would be able to complete her contract with less difficulties than what Tavita was currently facing. But it seemed Corsen's incompetence had even impacted Nemara's assignment, resulting in the termination of six guards, including two of their own.

She shook her head. She had relayed the necessary information regarding Bejad in a reliable fashion, but Corsen, in his usual overconfident arrogance, neglected to scrutinize the area for inhibiting elements that might jeopardize their mission. She was surprised Citenes hadn't pointed it out. He was usually very conscientious. Then again, maybe he had, and Corsen just wouldn't listen.

She glanced at Corsen, who was sleeping soundly beside her. Why did the sight disturb her so? She had satisfied her immediate craving, so why wasn't she content? Instead, she felt drained, empty. Her heart was restless, and she felt confused. Her mother had trained her as a seductress, and she was proficient enough in the art. So why couldn't she dissociate herself? Enjoy the carnal pleasures of the impassionment and scoff at the broken hearts that littered her path? Why did everything have to be so different from what she had been told?

Corsen stirred in his sleep and his hand brushed her arm. The touch nauseated her. She rose without making a sound and straightened her clothes. Then she strolled over to the fountain and sat on its edge. The gentle splashing of the water was so peaceful. And when she looked up, she saw the sky filled with stars. Their radiance filled her with hope and soothed her feverish mind. Every twinkling light represented a fresh possibility, the prospect of new life. If she could only grasp them and make them her own, maybe they would tell her what was wrong with her and explain her peculiar sadness.

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She looked at the bushes where her lover was sleeping. Yes, her lover, nothing more. She knew that now. It seemed her decision to accept the assignment here in the east had been a subconscious attempt to jolt herself awake in regard to her predicament. The two-week separation from Corsen had helped her recognize her true feelings in that respect. After the ecstatic fulfillment of her sexual hunger yesterday, there hadn't been anything left, and their feeble attempt at lovemaking tonight had been nothing but an empty ritual, at least for her. It had always been easy to fool Corsen. A slight caress of his puffed-up ego and he would believe she was giving him both moons. The thought made her sick to her stomach.

What was she to him, really? A simple plaything with which to satisfy his urges? A seductress's goal was to make others dependent upon their erotic desires and sexual needs, but it seemed to Tavita she had been just as dependent upon Corsen as he had been on her. Had she bequeathed too much of herself? It had only been two years since her sisters had celebrated her Consecration and admitted her into the coven, and Corsen had been the second trial of her Dedication. Not that he had been much of a challenge. But after her excruciating first trial, her sisters had probably decided to go easy on her. Even so, it was entirely possible she hadn't been careful enough. She could hardly believe how much she had been in love with him. He could be so gallant if he wanted to, and so dashing.

But it just wasn't enough. She wanted more than a superficial, sensual relationship. What if she wanted a family? Could she see him as the father of her children? She shuddered at the thought. In her heart, she knew Corsen would always love only himself. She wondered what he would do if she refused him, provoked him, played with him. But she already knew the answer. And she was just as certain of his reaction if she revealed herself to him, showed him who and what she really was.

She groaned inwardly. Was there anyone who could accept her as she was? She yearned for a bit of tenderness. But who would love her after all the horrible things she had done? Hers was a life of violence and intrigue. It was what she had been born, raised, and trained for.

Oh, her mother had shown her some tenderness. But she was similar in that way to Corsen. Tavita sensed that her mother only loved her because Tavita was the culmination of her achievements. Lady Marusen was proud of what Tavita represented. But in the end, her mother only cared about increasing her own power and influence. She had let the famed Nursemaids—

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Cetila, Dena, and Pira—raise Tavita in all respects that weren't essential to Tavita's training, so Tavita had more tender feelings for them than for her. Tavita didn't know if she could ever truly love her mother.

The memory of Cetila depressed her and made her grimace. Tavita's position obliged her to treat her older sister with caution. If only she could tell her how much she cared for her, how grateful she was for the love and tenderness Cetila had shown her as a child. But that chance would probably never come again, not after her mother had ordered her to terminate Varan two years ago as the first trial of her Dedication.

Tavita took a deep, shuddering breath at the memory. How could a mother arrange her own son's death with such cold indifference? And Tavita knew exactly how Cetila felt about that incident. The only two people left in her family who seemed to accept her as she was were her dad and her eldest sister Soshia, whom she hadn't seen in years. The thought of Soshia wrung a feeble smile from her, and she wondered where she was. She would so much like to see her again and was sure at least she would be able to understand.

Did Varan understand? On that horrible night, with her most trusted officers of the Crimson Brigade around her and members of the Black Guard restraining her brother, she had carried out her orders, mechanically, silently, while her heart cried out in anguish. Did he understand her subtle touch, her grief as her fingers brushed his cheek while his life seeped out of him, the brother who had always carried her around on his shoulders when she was little and found new ways to make her giggle?

Tavita took another trembling breath. The only thing she had been able to do for Varan was to ensure Dena was nearby and found him before it was too late. Tavita couldn't bring herself to leave him and had been watching from the shadows when he passed beyond the veil. But it had been more than she could bear to hear Dena's heartbroken sobs as she cradled her fiancé's lifeless body in her lap, and Tavita had fled the scene. It was several hours before she regained enough composure to return to the Brigade. Of course, Dena now hated her just as much as Cetila did, probably even more.

The muscles in her jaw tightened. She wouldn't shed any tears, she never did, had been trained not to. But Corsen's comment last night had torn open the old wounds and resurrected all the guilt and self-reproach, the disappointment, hurt, and anger. For Corsen, Tavita's actions were an

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inspiration and she a stimulating icon, a person ruthless enough to crush anyone or anything that stood in her way. For Tavita, it was simply a matter of the iron discipline that had been pounded into her. She had done what was required of her. She always did what was required of her. And the knowledge of her heritage, the legacy her mother and her biological father had revealed to her, would guarantee she always did, just as it would always isolate her from the people around her, even those she loved most.

Tavita feared her father. How could she not? Nobody could compare to him. He had taught her to be secure in herself, in what she was and what she would become. But even so, there was no love for him inside of her, only fear. Did he love her? Could he love her? Did he even care? There was no way for her to know. He was a solitary and unapproachable figure, impossible to reach and completely set apart from anyone she knew.

She thought of the people she had met since she arrived in Tolares, such as Nova and Catyana. She envied their friendship. She could see in their eyes and in their bearing how close they were, despite the tension she sensed between them. She wished with all her heart she could be a part of such a caring relationship. Would she ever see them again?

And then there was her roommate, the poor soul. Mavena had been through so much, and Tavita was at least partly responsible for her plight. She felt so sorry for her. But that was strange, because she wasn't supposed to feel sorry for her. She wasn't supposed to feel anything, since she was only doing her job. Even Nemara had reminded her today not to get too attached.

But the problem remained. Although Tavita had finally taken the time early this morning to get rid of her own scars, as roommates, they had both seen each other without their robes. She was relieved Mavena hadn't comprehended the significance of her scars. Had she even noticed them? It would be dangerous if she drew any conclusions or, even worse, recognized her. It didn't seem as if Mavena remembered seeing Tavita up close prior to Tolares. But there was always the possibility that she had and might remember her from her time in the Brigade. That was one situation she would rather not have to take care of. But she knew she would if it became necessary.

She grimaced. What kind of horrible monster was she? Was there no compassion in her heart? Not even for a poor girl whom she hardly knew? If she received the order, could she really take a blade and extinguish a life that had once been so close to her own? But she didn't even need to think about the answer. Of course she could. She had proven it often enough.

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She glanced over at the bushes. She didn't know if she would come back tomorrow, although she had promised Corsen she would. At the moment, she was too confused to know what she wanted. Maybe the conference tomorrow would be a revelation in some way.

She turned her gaze back up into the night sky, so dazzling with its countless twinkling beacons of hope. "Mother, Father, I want to love you," she whispered, soaking up the breathtaking spectacle above her. "You sent me here and trusted me to accomplish my mission. And I want to make you proud of me."

With relentless self-control, she wrenched her eyes away from the beautiful scene and disappeared into the darkness.

31. The Sitanem

Vilam stood in the garden behind the residence, bathed in the light falling from the large, shaded windows of Chyardal's workshop, the bow case slung over his shoulder and the bow press under his arm. Although the brilliance of the night sky above him might have been inspiring, he was too engaged by the uncertainty of his thoughts and the fluttery sensation in his stomach to waste a glance on it. He was grateful his friends were still at work at this late hour, since he didn't need much sleep and sought a diversion. The problem was that he couldn't get himself to move. He would have laughed if it hadn't been so pathetic.

The thought made him angry. He wanted to be in control of his life, not at the mercy of his emotions. But anger! Yes, anger was good. Anger he understood. It was something he could deal with, something clean and simple. Anger could drive you, anger could fuel you. When you were angry, you could do things you normally couldn't—or wouldn't—do.

His anger fueled another step. Then he stopped.

He flung up his arms in disgust. This was ridiculous! Why should he allow his actions to be influenced by some pretty young woman he hardly knew? He was here to see Chyardal, to discuss his projects and examine the Prophet's Bow with him, not flirt with the young Lord's sister. Besides, he was accustomed to consorting with even the highest officials and had done so on a regular basis earlier in his career. What was so unusual about her that he should be acting so foolish?

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Then again, hadn't Soshia told him his heart would know his Venora? And there really was something fundamentally different about the young woman. He still couldn't understand the sensations that had overwhelmed him when he first saw her yesterday. Similar to that girl they had met in the city today—that initiate, Netira. Another strange thing he couldn't understand.

But the impression had been much more intense with Venora. And she seemed so shy. Or was she deliberately keeping her distance for reasons of her own? Soshia had said Venora needed him but was too afraid of herself to realize it. He had no idea what that meant. But he didn't want to intrude upon Venora, scare her away and maybe lose any chance of ever getting to know her, of figuring it all out. No, that wasn't an option. He had to know her! There seemed to be some mysterious link between them, and he had to know what that was all about. Catyana had even told him today that Venora could look at the sun without protection. If that was true, then Venora was probably more like him than either of them realized.

He sighed as he remembered what Vodana had told him on their way to the Faeren farm a couple of days ago: that he should find some pretty girl and court her ardently and passionately. Although Venora was someone with whom he might attempt such a relationship, it wasn't really the way he felt about her. Well, that wasn't quite true. He did feel somewhat passionate about her.

He smashed the heel of his hand against his forehead. *You idiot! When will you finally grow up?* He sniffed. Somewhat passionate, indeed! He could feel his blood boiling in his veins just thinking about her. She was so beautiful, so delicate. And that wonderful voice of hers! Looking at her made him want to reach out and hold her, feel her warmth and softness. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine her in his arms, her head on his breast close to his heart, and the alluring fragrance of her beautiful hair. It all seemed so real. But when he opened his eyes, all that remained was confusion.

He shook his head. No wonder he was so confused. It would have been simple if all he felt for Venora was just physical or emotional attraction. Then he would have at least known what was happening to him. But that wasn't how he felt, not by a longshot. There was so much more going on here, as if her presence was the key to the dark mysteries he kept locked up so deep inside and was afraid to let out. The thought was terrifying. What if the key really fit? How would she react when she unlocked the door, only to have it burst wide open and reveal his past to her, his whole bewildering and horrific history? Would she feel revolted, despise him, push him away?

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As he stood there struggling with himself, the door of the workshop opened and Chyardal stuck his head out. When he saw Vilam, he seemed surprised. His head disappeared back into the workshop. “You’re right, he’s here.” Then his head popped back out. “Why don’t you come on in? Or were you planning on growing roots out there?”

Vilam dragged himself up the steps, feeling somewhat overwhelmed. “I don’t understand. Were you expecting me?”

“No, but Venora was,” Chyardal replied, grinning.

Vilam stopped at the door. “Venora?”

“Yes. It was actually quite bizarre. We were working on the reactor when she looked up and said you were waiting in the garden and would I please let you in. Just like that. She wasn’t even near a window. I asked her if she was sure, but she told me to just go look. And here you are.”

“That’s...interesting.” Did he dare hope?

Chyardal opened the door to let him pass. When Vilam entered the workshop, he stopped in surprise, astonished at the many people. He had expected only Chyardal and Venora. He saw Venora working in the north wing, but she didn’t even look up when he came in, just continued with her tasks as if he wasn’t there.

So much for his hopes. She was probably just perceptive, like Catyana.

In the south wing, he saw Tanola, Natilya, and the other four acolytes working on some swords, but it seemed as if they were just finishing up. Now, what were they up to? Did it have to do with the security measures Nova had talked to him about that afternoon?

“Well, my friend, what can I do for you?” Chyardal asked, leading him to the reactor.

As Vilam approached her workspace, Venora threw him a quick glance, almost causing him to stumble, but she immediately dropped her gaze and continued her work. She must have sensed Vodana gazing at her, and she raised her eyes to look at her friend. They didn’t say anything, but Vilam saw the amused smile on Vodana’s lips. Venora turned her attention back to the task at hand, but the corners of her lips involuntarily turned upward. She aimed a strict, cautioning glance at Vodana through her lashes, but Vodana was unperturbed by the silent reproof, and Venora’s smile broadened as she tightened a screw on the device she was working on.

Vilam’s heart pounded wildly. He had only looked into her eyes for a fraction of a second, and what he thought he saw there had caught him off guard. If not for her smile, he would have thought

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he was dreaming, allowing his mind to play tricks on him by combining fact with wishful thinking. He knew that was always a danger, no matter how well he had been trained as an observer and analyst. Had he really seen love in those eyes? And if he had, why had there been so much sadness in them?

“Vilam?” Chyardal said.

“Oh, right. Sorry. There’s something I’d like to show you; another aspect of the Prophet’s Bow I thought you might find interesting.”

“Oh? There’s more to it than the pulley mechanism you demonstrated this morning? What did you call the bow? A compound? Fascinating concept! I’m beginning to understand how much science there is in the martial disciplines. It’s exciting.”

“Yes, well, I felt Gelanes didn’t need to see this, so I waited until—”

He stopped dead in his tracks. It wasn’t possible! Now, how did that get here?

“What’s that?” he asked, nodding toward a nearby workbench containing a spherical metallic object that would fit comfortably into his palm. It rested on a pedestal and was surrounded by a slender framework.

“Oh, that. It’s just a little project we were tampering with on the side. We used auto-enhanced feedback in a light amplification process to trigger a plasmatic reaction strong enough to produce spontaneous combustion. It’s much simpler than the fusion reactor, since you don’t need to maintain a stable reaction. The aim was to get the temperatures as high as possible during the combustion stage. We were able to use a lot of what we learned from that little device for our fusion project, so it’s fulfilled its purpose.”

Vilam plucked it from the pedestal and turned it over in his hands. It had a soft sheen, like the edge of a sharp blade, giving it a lethal appearance. He threw it in the air and caught it again. It felt as light as he remembered it.

Venora gasped.

“Hey, be careful,” Chyardal said. “That thing’s dangerous.”

Vilam grinned. “Do you use reverse polarization to prime and reset the feedback process?”

Chyardal gaped at him. “Yes.”

“And what kind of trigger do you use? Timed or impact?”

“Timed. How did you know?”

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“A *sitanem*. There shouldn’t be any danger in handling it unless you have a polarizer handy. I assume the metal framework is an inhibitor, so the reaction won’t be triggered by accident.”

“Yes, but what did you call it? Winged death?”

“Never mind. Have you ever thought of the implications of this little device, if you should use it as a weapon?”

“A weapon? *Te’linos*, Vilam, are you out of your mind? Do you know what that thing could do?”

Vilam fixed him with his gaze. “Believe me, my friend, I know better than you could ever imagine. But think about it. If push comes to shove, a weapon like this could give you a significant advantage over your enemies.”

Chyardal’s face was grim. “We live in a time of peace, Vilam. Why would I even want to consider anything like that?”

“Times change. I would advise you to keep your options open.” Vilam realized how quiet the workshop had become. Everyone was staring at him.

Tanola cleared her throat as she walked toward them. “I don’t know what that device is, but from the reaction in this room, it might be advisable to tell Nova or the Lady Utalya about it.”

He gaped at her. He had never realized how graceful and attractive Tanola was, since she always seemed to pale beside Nova or Catyana. But seeing her here in charge was like a revelation. He was finally able to get his mouth closed and said, “Thank you, that’s a good idea. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Turning to Venora, Tanola said, “I suppose we’re done here. Thank you so much for allowing us to use your tools. Our swords have been sharpened, polished, and oiled and are sparkling like new.”

Venora wiped her hand on a rag and approached her. “I’m glad I was able to help.”

“You’re an absolute dear, cousin. But I think we’ll call it a night. We have a busy day ahead of us and need to get some rest. *Nevela’mada* to one and all.”

Venora bowed to her with a grin. “*Nevelan mada*, Your...um, Grace.” She shot a quick glance in Vilam’s direction before adding, “I was glad to be of service.”

Vilam’s brows furrowed. “Your Grace? But...Tanola’s just an acolyte.” He hesitated. “Isn’t she?”

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Tanola returned Venora's grin before answering. "Things aren't always as they seem. But I'm sure you'll discover that soon enough." Turning to Venora, she said, "Stop making fun of me, cousin. Besides, if you continue the way you have, your status will soon be more privileged than any of us could ever dream, Venora *Covasatal*." As Tanola stressed the last word, she glanced at Vilam with a mischievous glitter in her eyes. Venora dropped her gaze, but Vilam could see she was restraining a smile. Tanola beckoned to the other acolytes and the group left the workshop.

Vodana favored Vilam with what was supposed to be a benign smile, but her eyes were still sparkling with amusement over the latest exchange. "I'm quite certain I know what you wish to show Chyardal. I'd love to see it again. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Vilam replied. "Chyardal, do you have a place where I could set this up?"

"Sure. Here's a bench with some room on it."

Vilam set up the bow press. Then he opened his leather case and mounted the bow with the crystals on the riser facing upward. When he was ready, everyone gathered round.

"Now, watch this," he said, and tapped the base of the press. The topographic relief he had discovered in Nadil filled the space above the bow. But this time, he realized the bow must possess some kind of sensor, because even here the image reached to the ceiling, which was at least twice as high as the parlor in the Lady Utalya's manse.

The workshop fell silent. Chyardal approached the bow, his eyes wide with amazement as he inspected the device. "I've never seen anything like it."

Vilam grinned. "I thought you'd appreciate it."

Venora stepped closer to the image, her eyes glowing as she looked up. "Malentisa," she whispered.

She probably hadn't realized how close she was, but Vilam's heart was aflutter, and he thought he detected a delicate, flowery scent coming from her. "I'm not quite sure what to think of it. Do you have any suggestions?"

Venora finally took her eyes off the image and turned to him. She drew in her breath when she saw she was only several handbreadths away, but she looked directly into his eyes and didn't budge. "I suggest you listen to what your heart is trying to tell you." Her voice was soft. As if to underline her meaning, she glided closer and removed a bright fiber that had caught in the fabric

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of his cloak on his chest. Then she gazed into his eyes as her hand drifted down the cloak, hardly touching it, and descended to her side.

Vilam thought he would drown in those beautiful, dark eyes of hers. It took him a moment to realize how quiet everything was. When he looked around, Chyardal and Vodana were grinning at them. He had no idea how long he and Venora had been standing there like that, just looking at each other.

Vodana walked over to Venora and took her arm, flashing him a smile as she passed. “Come along, dear. There’s nothing more we can do here. Besides, tomorrow’s going to be a busy day, and I think the boys would appreciate it if we left them alone with their new toy.”

Venora grinned at her. “Yes, Mommy,” she said, rewarding Vodana with a good poke in the ribs, “whatever you say.”

Vodana chuckled and proceeded to drag Venora toward the exit. “Good night, boys. Have fun,” she called over her shoulder.

Vilam heard the women laughing outside after Vodana closed the door. He and Chyardal exchanged a grin, then leaned over to inspect the bow in more detail. They didn’t quit the workshop until sometime early in the morning.

32. Listening Post

Gevinesa paced back and forth in her suite. Every now and then, she would pause and shoot a concerned glance into the bedchamber at her little sister, whom she had put to bed hours ago. Yanita had fidgeted for a while, fearful of closing her eyes, so Gevinesa had stayed with her, reading her a story while the girl curled up beside her with her head in Gevinesa’s lap. It took her an hour, but she had finally gotten her to sleep.

She could have boxed Corsen for springing the news of Zetara’s death on her while Yanita was listening. But no, just giving Corsen a black eye wasn’t even in the vicinity of what he deserved. Thrusting a sword through him and watching him bleed out, yes, that might approach the just punishment for what he had done to her beloved handmaiden.

Gevinesa balled her fists and took several deep breaths. She needed to relax and stay calm, if only for her little sister’s sake. The sofa looked inviting, so she let herself plop down and closed

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her eyes, focusing on her breathing. It didn't take long. When she felt the tension in her muscles subside, she opened her eyes and looked around.

Their suite was located between her father's quarters on the one side and those of her brother on the other. The rooms were connected, so her father and brother could check in on her any time they wanted from the privacy of their accommodations. Every door in the corridor was guarded by two men, with two more positioned across from them. All other exits were secured by four guards, so escape was virtually impossible. Gevinesa and Yanita hadn't left their suite since they had arrived in Tolares yesterday noon.

Angered by the thought, she jumped to her feet and resumed her agitated pacing while anxious questions raced through her mind. Had the High Priestess received her message? Would she find a way to extract Yanita and her at the conference tomorrow? Had Bejad reached Tolares?

At this thought, she stopped and wrung her hands. The man was clearly an incompetent fool. Why had Her Eminence chosen him to deliver Gevinesa's message? Then again, did not Dame Fortune often smile upon life's fools?

Gevinesa flung up her arms in frustration. She had always been a woman of action, had been trained that way since her youngest years, and it was difficult for her to remain idle. Well, if she couldn't be proactive, she would at least do something passive. She had discovered a spyhole in the wall behind a chest that must have been placed there years ago. The wall separated her suite from her father's.

Gevinesa tiptoed to the door leading to her brother's room and carefully turned the handle. The door was locked. No sound penetrated to her from the other side.

She shrugged. What had she expected? Corsen had probably arranged another rendezvous with Tavita. Gevinesa had heard her former captain was in the city but wasn't aware of her purpose here. She did have a strong suspicion, though.

Her next listening post was the door to the corridor. Every now and then, a guard would clear his throat or exchange a quick word with a colleague. But everything was otherwise quiet.

Finally, she dimmed the lights in her suite and pushed the chest away from the hole in the wall with as little noise as possible. Muted voices reached her ears from the other room. She sat on the floor with her legs crossed, as she had been taught by Lusina Marusen many years ago. This way,

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she could meditate for hours if need be. With her dress tucked under her legs, she slid away the cardboard concealing the hole and leaned forward so she could see through.

The view was perfect. Gevinesa saw three men in the room. Her father was sitting in an armchair with his back to her. Talenon Novesta, the slimy false priest of the Videsian Order and head of her father's intelligence division, sat in another armchair on her father's left. The chair was turned so Gevinesa could study Talenon's profile, if that had been her intent. The prominent birthmark on his right cheek stood out in glowing crimson, a typical characteristic of the male members of the Novesta family. From where he was sitting, the priest could see her father and the man sitting on the sofa facing Gevinesa.

She was barely able to suppress a gasp at the sight of the third man. It was Eratis, the brother of her beloved handmaiden, Zetara. The man was between twenty and thirty years older than Talenon and was clothed in the staff uniform of the House of Tolares. She couldn't believe he was sitting there so casually with her father. Didn't he know his sister had been murdered by the very men he was talking to?

She felt helpless rage building inside her. She would have liked to scream and sob her hurt into the dark room, but she forced herself to let the relentless training of many years take over. She set her jaw, suppressed her tears, and swallowed the emotions. Cold, stubborn rationality replaced her fury and she was soon able to think clearly again. Since she could deduce no further information by sight, she listened intently to the conversation.

"I'm very sorry," Eratis was saying. "We've tried various methods, but she seems extraordinarily resistant to our attempts. I really can't understand it."

"That's alright," said her father. "You're doing your best. It never would have come to this if we hadn't lost her twenty-six years ago, so don't put the blame on yourself. All we can do now is attempt to salvage the situation. I admit, it's no trivial task."

"Have you at least been able to gain some experience from this failure? I've heard the second experiment is running much more smoothly."

"Yes, we don't know exactly what went wrong the first time, although there is some conjecture. But the second model is working most adequately, and we've achieved some excellent results with her."

"And how have you accomplished this?"

The High Priestess

“We embedded her in a setting—a surrogate family, so to speak—that provided her with the necessary emotional backdrop from the outset. She was able to mature in a more stable environment than our first model, and we had the development of her personality under better control.”

“Interesting.”

“Indeed, although we do have a few concerns.”

“Oh? What seems to be the problem?”

“She’s developed a bit too much, uh...empathy for our taste.”

“I see. You mean she has a heart.”

“Yes, but, uh...in regard to our runaway experiment, do you believe you might have her ready by the time our plans have matured?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t guarantee anything. I doubt we’ll be able to induce her to terminate the heir. The emotional bond between them is too significant. I’m afraid we haven’t even been able to influence her enough to create a diversion that would allow us to breach security at the appropriate moment.”

“No matter. It would have been beneficial to have someone in the residence who can’t be traced back to us, but we do have several experienced agents in place who can help us get inside. And I suppose we’ll just have to deal with the heir by other means later. What is vital is that we gain control of the residence with little or no bloodshed. It would make the subjugation of the populace less difficult from a psychological perspective.”

“I still don’t understand your preoccupation with the residence. The eastern provinces hardly have any means of defense. I doubt there will be much resistance when your army takes the city.”

Talenon had been listening with an amused smile on his face, but now apparently felt Eratis required the benefit of his wise counsel. “You don’t appreciate the minutiae of government, my friend. You can conquer a people by force, but that always leads to problems down the road. If, on the other hand, you can win their hearts, you will have gained a faithful following. That will be difficult to accomplish without at least a little assistance from the current administration.”

Eratis gazed solemnly into Talenon’s eyes “You must forgive me, Talenon, for it seems I haven’t given you enough credit. You can’t believe how delighted and relieved I am to hear that you actually care about anyone’s heart. I always thought it was their souls you were after.”

The High Priestess

Gevinesa had to throw herself backward and press her hands against her mouth to keep from squealing with laughter. Oh, how she cherished the look on Talenon's face. *Bravo, Eratis! Bravo!*

It took her only seconds to regain control and resume her post. Nothing much had changed, except that Talenon's face was no longer pale but dark red, and he looked as if he was about to leap at the other man and throttle him.

"We really must proceed, my friends," Vechiles intervened. "We still have several essential issues to discuss before we adjourn for the night. Are there any further questions before we continue?" Gevinesa couldn't see her father's face, but he seemed to be staring Talenon down, and his voice sounded strict.

"I'm sorry to bother you with such trifles," Eratis said, "but I'm worried about my sister, Zetara. We usually correspond on a daily basis, but I haven't heard from her in a while. I'm certain she's here with your daughter, but I would be grateful if you could give me some news of her."

The room fell silent as the other two men exchanged glances. Talenon's expression became surprisingly calm, but Gevinesa knew him well and detected a subtle, malicious smile on his lips.

"I'm sorry, Eratis. I was going to inform you but was hoping for a more appropriate opportunity." Vechiles took a deep breath. "I'm afraid your sister has disappeared. We have no idea where she is."

Liar!

Gevinesa soundlessly released her breath and relaxed her balled fists, with which she would rather have pounded the wall in rage and frustration. At least Eratis was worried about Zetara. Her esteem for her handmaiden's brother immediately went up another notch.

"When did this happen?" Eratis asked.

"It must have been three days ago, while we were packing for the journey to Tolares. We later found a very exhausted mare roaming the estate. It was taken from our stables and fitted with a lady's saddle, but there was no sign of the rider. I'm very sorry, Eratis, but I fear we must assume the worst."

Eratis stared at the ground. He was pale, but he seemed calm enough. He raised his head and regarded his superior. "Thank you for being honest with me, Vechiles. Please keep me abreast of the situation as soon as you return to Divestelan. I want to know what happened to my sister."

"Yes, of course."

The High Priestess

“I don’t wish to hold up our meeting with personal matters. We have more important things to discuss. Please continue.”

“Alright, well, first of all, what shall we do about Bejad and Martan?”

“I doubt you’ll find another opportunity to terminate the High Priestess’s liaison officer while he’s here in Tolares,” Eratis answered. “Now that they are aware of your plans, security will be tight. I’m certain the same goes for Martan. He will be held prisoner and interrogated. I assume they will transport both men to Travis as soon as possible.”

“Is there any way we can get to them before that?”

“I’ll look into the matter as soon as I return to the residence, but I can’t raise any hopes.”

“Alright, thank you,” said Vechiles. “I have some information that concerns you, Eratis. Lady Marusen has ordered the assassination of a young woman named Catyana Faeren. Do you know her?”

“No, sorry,” said Eratis. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“The family is related to Lord Faeren, the head of a minor house west of the Covasins.”

“Ah, yes, I remember now. Golden hair and blue eyes. I’ve heard some strange tales about that area. Isn’t that where the Admonition was supposedly lost? But this House Faeren seems insignificant, and since it’s on the Plains of Tesalin, I doubt it has any bearing on events here on the Plateau. Why has Lady Marusen taken such drastic measures?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it seems the girl has become a threat to some very influential people. The reason I’m informing you is that she’s in the Lady Revan’s entourage and is staying at Lord Tolares’s residence. You may be called upon to provide support if the assassin requires an exit strategy.”

“I’m not sure what I can do, but I’m at their service if they need anything.”

“That’s good to know, although I doubt you’ll even know the assassin is there until the target has been eliminated. I hear the Order of the Novantan has given the contract to one of their most experienced agents.”

“I understand.”

“Alright, let’s move on. Are there any open questions regarding the conference?”

“I assume your only point of attack is the High Priestess?” said Eratis.

“Yes, she’s the most vulnerable link in the chain.”

The High Priestess

“I can’t imagine she’ll survive the ruling,” Talenon said. “I’ve found an excellent candidate who will crush her like a paper doll.”

“And if she does survive?” Eratis asked.

“Then we must discredit her,” Vechiles replied. “Since our designs to plant a reliable mole in the Council in Travis have proven more difficult than anticipated, we still don’t know who she is, and we will therefore have to come up with an ad hoc plan tomorrow. Our friend Lord Novesta has an uncanny brilliance for dealing with such situations. What is essential is that we bring the conference to a close tomorrow or we will fall behind schedule. In the event...”

Gevinesa was torn from her father’s elaborations by the sound of Yanita stirring in their bedroom. She knew her sister would be calling for her, so she closed the spyhole and pushed the chest back to its previous position.

“Vinesa, where are you?”

“Hush, my little darling, I’m right here,” Gevinesa called back softly.

She ran to the bedroom, her footsteps soundless, and sat next to her sister, who buried her head in her lap and threw her arms around her. “Oh, Vinesa, I’m so scared.”

Gevinesa stroked her sister’s long, dark locks. “What is it, Yanita? Did you have a bad dream?”

Yanita shook her head and yawned. “No, but I woke up and was too afraid to go back to sleep.”

“Oh, my little *sutana*, I’m so sorry.” She bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

Yanita turned over and looked up at her. “Will your friend be able to help us?”

“I don’t know, sweetie, although I do trust her.”

“I don’t want to go back to those men in the black masks.”

“The ones you saw in the house the day we left for Tolares?”

Yanita nodded.

Gevinesa didn’t know what to think. Yanita had told her about the men in the black masks and black clothes. But what had the Black Guard been doing at their residence? Their presence there could compromise her father’s operation, and she knew he would never do anything so dangerous if there hadn’t been a very good reason for it.

“Midena was really scared too,” said Yanita. “I never heard anyone scream like that before.”

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Gevinesa stared at her. Why hadn't Yanita mentioned this sooner? Then again, there hadn't been much opportunity for them to talk in private, and Yanita had been unusually quiet the past couple of days. "Midena was screaming?"

Yanita nodded. "I ran out to see what was wrong and saw her running down the stairs. I followed her to see if she was alright, but she didn't stop until she was in the garden. I think she would have kept running, but she fell down and started crying. I asked her what was wrong, but she just hugged me and cried so hard that she got me all wet with her tears. I mean, not that I cared about getting wet. I just really felt sorry for her."

"Of course you did, honey." Gevinesa was breathing heavily, but she clenched her teeth and forced herself to remain calm. She didn't want her sister to notice how much her words had affected her and deliberately kept stroking the girl's hair. "Well, I'm sure she's alright now."

Midena had been a maid with the family for many years, and Gevinesa knew her as a sturdy and reliable woman who didn't shock easily. There could only have been one reason for Midena to scream like that. They had murdered Zetara just a few rooms from where Yanita had been playing. How could they! And in all likelihood, Midena had witnessed Zetara's death. If Gevinesa ever returned to Divestelan, she would have to talk to her, provided they had left the maid alive.

But what truly saddened her was why Zetara had returned to the residence although Gevinesa had strictly forbidden it. The only reason she could think of was her brother's dispatch. Gevinesa had rebuked herself countless times for being so careless. Neither she nor Zetara had thought of it when they parted, and she had wondered why her brother and father never mentioned it. If they had found the dispatch in her room after their operation hadn't quite yielded the expected results, they would have known Gevinesa was somehow responsible. And had that been the case, there was no telling what they might have done to her. Zetara must have realized that and returned later to dispose of it, only to be caught. The thought of her friend risking her life for her forced a tear from here eye, and she wiped it away before Yanita could see.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "What do you think? Can you go back to sleep?"

Yanita shook her head. "Every time I close my eyes, I see those men. They scare me." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And Corsen scares me."

"I know, honey." She rocked her back and forth, trying to comfort her.

Yanita rubbed her eyes. "I'm thirsty. Can I have some water?"

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“Of course. I’ll get it for you.” She carefully put her sister’s head on the pillow and rose. When she returned a minute later, she stopped at the door of the chamber. Her sister was sound asleep again. The sight wrung a feeble smile from her. She put the glass on the nightstand and sat on the bed beside her.

As she stroked her sister’s hair, her thoughts returned to the conversation she had overheard. There was a lot she didn’t understand since many of the details had been out of context, but she believed she had received some valuable and distressing intelligence. All she could do now was wait to see what the following day would bring.

33. The Conference

The day of the conference dawned as sunny and bright as the previous had been. It made Catyana wonder what she was doing wrong. As she drew back the curtains in grim determination and bravely faced the sunshine that flooded the room, she could have given at least one good reason why she had been hoping for a gloomy day of rain; she could blame her irritable mood on the weather. Now she had no excuse.

Although she had slept soundly that night, she felt worn out when Nova woke her shortly before sunrise. She would have slept longer, but there was still so much to do, and the first session of the conference was scheduled to begin at exactly *setavelates*. It might have been easier if she hadn’t felt that cloud of doom hanging over her from the moment she had opened her eyes. And when Venora came to her room after breakfast to bring her another day’s ration of Tonisian sugar, Catyana felt like hurling it right back in her face. Following that up with a few pieces of earthenware wouldn’t have hurt, either.

They left in good time so they would be at the conference building at least half an hour early. Catyana would have liked to walk over, but Nova reminded her why the additional security precautions were necessary. Catyana gave her a sullen look. What did she care about black arrows and assassins? On the contrary, maybe one of the assassin’s arrows would find her heart and finally end her misery.

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During the ride over, Nova seemed preoccupied. Catyana was glad because she didn't know how she would fare in a conversation, and once inside the building the group split up, relieving her of her fear that she might do something she would regret.

Vodana was supposed to take them to their seats but had to excuse herself, leaving Catyana alone with her security detail. With nothing better to do, Catyana watched Nova and the Lady Utalya descend to the conference floor and take their places at the main table. The sight of them sitting there together pained her, and she wondered if Nova really couldn't have arranged for someone to replace her so she could be with Catyana. If she was so busy now, how would things be when they arrived in Travis and Nova had to resume her normal duties? She wouldn't be surprised if she didn't see much of Nova at all anymore. The thought terrified her.

She opened her fingers and stared in dismay at the crushed piece of Tonisian sugar in her palm. How long had Venora said her emotional instability would last?

She knew Nova had worked late during the previous nights, and it seemed her friend felt chilled from fatigue because she kept her cloak wrapped tightly around herself all morning. But when Catyana saw Tanola take her seat in the front row behind the Lady with the other acolytes of the Lady's entourage, she was surprised to also see her wrapped up in her cloak. Was everyone catching cold?

Many seats of the representatives of the Great Houses were already taken, and the seats at the tables of the minor houses were quickly filling up. Only the smaller table at the head of the arrangement remained conspicuously empty. Catyana knew everyone was wondering who would be presiding. To her, the debut of the High Priestess was the climax of the conference. She was certain all the political issues would be utterly boring.

Vodana finally returned and touched Catyana's arm with a smile on her face. When Catyana turned to her, she cried out in surprise. "Mara!" She immediately fell into her friend's arms, hugging her tightly, and a couple of tears slipped down her cheek.

Mara hugged her back, and she could feel her stroking her hair. "*Teva'lin*, Catyana! What's wrong?"

Catyana shrugged. "I don't know. Nothing. Everything." She pulled back to wipe off the tears and saw Mara shoot an apologetic glance at the man beside her.

The High Priestess

“Is this the girl you’ve been telling me about?” the man asked. Catyana’s eyes opened wide when she realized he was wearing the uniform of head of state of House Marusen.

Mara nodded. “Amendel, this is Catyana Faeren. Catyana, this is Lord Amendel Marusen.”

Catyana touched her left hand to her heart and bowed. “My Lord.”

The Lord stretched out his hand and Catyana took it. “Sister Faeren, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” His eyes seemed somber and very sad.

Catyana rebuked herself. She needed to remember that others might also be in pain, not just her. “I’m so sorry for your loss, My Lord,” said Catyana. “Soshia was a good friend of mine, and I loved her dearly.”

Lord Marusen nodded. “Thank you. I’m very grateful to know my daughter had such good friends. It’s a tragic loss for all of us.”

“Will you be sitting with us?” said Catyana to Mara.

“I’m not sure. I’m afraid Amendel needs to be at the main table, and Nova sent me the strangest letter the other day. It seems the High Priestess has requested my presence at the conference, and I don’t know what they’ve arranged for me. Do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“None whatsoever. But it’s nice to see another friend is abandoning me.”

“Abandoning you? Oh, Catyana, why would you ever think that?” She squeezed Catyana’s hands.

“Don’t mind her,” said Vodana. “She’s just upset with Nova.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Catyana thought they would be sitting together during the conference, but the Lady Utalya needs Nova with her at the main table.”

“Well, of course. Nova is the Lady’s chief of staff, so she seems to be the most likely choice. Why would Catyana think otherwise?”

“Hey, I’m standing right here!” said Catyana.

Mara smiled and caressed her cheek. “Sorry. I know how annoying that can be.”

“Don’t worry, Catyana,” said Vodana with a smile. “Mara will be sitting with us, at least during the morning session.”

“Oh!” Catyana immediately fell into Mara’s arms again.

Mara put her arms around her and hugged her but cast a helpless glance at Lord Marusen.

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Catyana sensed it and stood back, not wanting to embarrass her friend. Wiping a few tears away, she said, “Well, we might as well get to our seats.”

“Not quite yet,” said Vodana. “We’re still waiting for someone.”

“Why? Who are we waiting for?”

“Ah, there she is now,” said Vodana, looking down the hall toward the entrance of the annex.

Mara turned in the same direction and paled. “Mom!”

Lady Tsenera Novesta immediately rushed to her daughter and embraced her. “Oh, Mara.” She kissed her on the cheek. “I’m so, so sorry about Soshia.” She brushed a tear away that rolled down her face. She nodded to Lord Marusen without letting go of Mara. “Amendel.”

Lord Marusen bowed stiffly. “Tsenera.”

It seemed Mara wasn’t expecting such a warm greeting and looked a bit taken aback. “Mom, what...what are you doing here?”

“You weren’t expecting to see me? Your father is still head of state of one of the Great Houses.”

“No, I mean...here, with us. To be honest, I was dreading to see you from afar. I didn’t know how I’d react.”

Lady Tsenera took both her daughter’s hands, a pained expression on her face. “But, Mara, why? What have I done that is so horrible that you would distance yourself from me like that?”

“Mom, Soshia and I were on the run for decades. There were innumerable times when you could have helped us. When you didn’t, it was clear to me where your priorities lie. You always taught us that the coven comes first.”

Lady Tsenera gasped. Her glance darted from person to person, but she soon realized that no one seemed surprised. Her eyes narrowed. “Does everyone here know who and, more specifically, what we are?”

“They do,” said Mara.

“So, now you’re just telling anyone?”

“Not anyone, Mom. Just the people I love and would trust with my life.”

Catyana’s mouth popped open, but she closed it again immediately. It warmed her heart that her friend had such faith in her.

Tsenera took another glance around the circle. “This is most irregular, and astonishing. Amendel, what do you think about all this?”

The High Priestess

“I’m reserving judgment for now. Please understand, my daughter is dead, and I want the person responsible brought to justice.”

Tsenera nodded. “I do understand. Please believe me, I want that too. But it’s going to take time and patience.” Turning back to Mara, she said, “Honey, you can’t believe how sorry I am if you ever received the impression that I don’t love you with all my heart. And whatever did I do to make you think our coven sisters were more important to me than you or Soshia, or that I wouldn’t help you if you were in need?”

“I...just assumed. You never said anything.”

“How could I? You know there are eyes and ears everywhere, especially at home. But did I ever give you away or let our sisters know when you came home?”

Mara dropped her gaze. “No.”

“Is that why you didn’t write to me when Soshia passed away? She was my granddaughter, Mara. Even if you didn’t trust me, the least you could have done was let me know she was gone. But I had to hear it from Nova instead.” A tear rolled down her face and she wiped it away.

Catyana raised an eyebrow. Nova? Since when was Lady Novesta on such familiar terms with Catyana’s best friend?

But Mara didn’t seem to notice and fell into her mother’s arms. “Oh, Mom, I’m so sorry.”

Lady Tsenera stroked her back and rocked her back and forth. “It’s alright. There, there, now.”

While they were standing there, Catyana took a better look at the Lady. Like Mara, she had her massive hair tucked under in a loose braid, the traditional hairstyle of House Novesta. She had on a lovely dark blue vest and gown with alternating burgundy and gold inset gores, depicting the Novesta House colors. Her dark blue gloves reached above her elbows. The material seemed to be of a soft velvety texture and looked comfortable. The Lady herself was very pretty, and Catyana could tell from where Mara and Soshia got their looks. What was astonishing was that the Lady hardly looked the age to be Mara’s mother. A decade or two older, maybe, but certainly not the customary four or more decades someone would expect. What especially caught Catyana’s attention was the amethyst gem set in a platinum pendant that was hanging around her neck on a silvery chain.

Mara had changed, too. Catyana was accustomed to seeing her and Soshia in servant’s clothes or simple gowns, but Mara was wearing a beautiful black velvet dress with her golden necklace

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visible around her neck. The ruby pendant itself was tucked into her bodice and out of sight. Her hair was kept together with a golden barrette. She would have looked almost frightening if she wasn't being rocked like a child by her mother.

Mara finally stepped back and her mother caressed her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Mom, you still haven't told us why you're here," said Mara, drying off a few lingering tears.

"Well, when Nova wrote to me and told me about Soshia, she also told me to meet her sister here. It was the strangest thing, because she said something about the High Priestess requesting my presence at the conference."

"Nova? Since when are you two on a first name basis?"

"Oh." The color rose in the Lady's face. "I thought she had told you. But if she hasn't, then I'm afraid it will have to wait."

"Interesting," said Mara, probing her mother's face with a piercing gaze. "Well, she wrote me something similar. Do you think she was trying to manipulate us into a surprise reunion?"

"Would you regret it if she had?" her mother asked.

"No, I'm so glad you're here, Mom."

Tsenera smiled at her. "So am I. But instigating surprise reunions doesn't really sound like Nova. I wonder what she's up to."

"Whatever that may be," said Vodana with a playful smile, "I think it's high time we got to our seats."

Lord Marusen bid them farewell and gave Mara a kiss and a hug. Then he walked in the direction of the gate leading into the great hall. Vodana ushered Catyana, Mara, and Lady Novesta to the other side of the dome hall, where Venora was waiting for them in one of the suites Catyana had seen yesterday. The view from the suite was, of course, outstanding and would allow them to easily follow the event. Catyana made herself comfortable in a chair between Mara and Vodana, who had taken the seat between Catyana and Venora.

When she looked about the hall, she saw several people she knew. Vilam had a seat behind the Lady Utalya in the first row near the acolytes. She also saw Elder Yonatan, Elder Livanes, and Elder Paloren presiding at tables of the minor houses. But the number of people streaming into the hall was overwhelming. A casual estimation revealed there had to be at least twenty thousand

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people present. That was more than the population of Nadil, and the hall wasn't even near full. How many could it hold if it were packed to capacity? Twice that number?

When she glanced back at the main table, Nova was furtively watching Corsen Divestelan. The young Lord noticed and nodded in her direction, his expression blank. Nova diverted her gaze. Catyana could tell her friend was conflicted.

The time passed quickly, and the hall grew quiet. At precisely *setavelates*, Lord Tolares left his seat and approached the High Priestess's table. "My dear friends, Lords and Ladies, honored guests, and participants, I welcome you to this momentous event and wish to express my undying gratitude to you, and to the members of the Advisory Council of the Selanian Order in Travis, for the extraordinary honor of allowing us to host this conference. In the past one thousand years, the Selanian Order has..."

As Lord Tolares continued his speech, Catyana rolled her eyes. "Come on, Cavan, get on with it," she murmured. "No one here is interested in your palaver."

Mara and Vodana both shot her an astonished glance, but Vodana's quickly changed to an amused smile. Vodana turned to Venora, who leaned forward and looked at the girl. "Catyana, have you been taking the Tonisian sugar I gave you this morning?"

Catyana involuntarily reached for a pocket in her robe, where she felt several of the marble-sized spheres. Once again, she felt the urge to fling the sugar in Venora's face, but she was able to restrain herself and nodded obediently. Venora gave her a weak smile and made a gesture of hurling something at her. How did she do it? In the past four years, Nova had taught her various techniques to help Catyana protect herself against just such things. Could Venora read her anyway, despite the guards she had put in place? Venora nodded and made the hand sign for "sister."

Catyana plopped back and shook her head. Would she ever understand what Venora was talking about?

Mara leaned toward her and whispered, "Why is the Lady Venora giving you Tonisian sugar?"

Catyana sighed. "I stuck my nose in a batch of wood flowers the evening we arrived."

"Oh, no, Catyana, I'm so sorry. No wonder I've been sensing such conflicting emotions from you. But I am surprised. How did the young Lady Tolares know about Tonisian sugar?"

"I have no idea. Why? Do you think it's any good?"

The High Priestess

“Oh, yes, for something as potent as wood flowers, Tonisian sugar really is the best remedy. But it’s still going to take a while to counter the wood flowers’ prognostic effects. That’s what’s causing your emotional turmoil. Because of the amount of the blossoms’ active substance in your bloodstream, you’re getting too many impressions for you to process, and it’s overwhelming you.”

“Prognostic effects? Then why aren’t I constantly having visions?”

“Oh, honey, you are. But the flowers only work in conjunction with your emotions, and in your natural waking state, your emotions will just steamroll right over the part of you responsible for your visions. It takes years of training to find the right balance so you can use the flowers properly. Until the effect wears off, your subconscious will constantly be reacting to visions you’re not even aware of, which is why your emotions are currently so unpredictable. And it’s possible that, for weeks after the effect has worn off, your subconscious will continue to process the visions you had as vivid dreams.”

“But I don’t remember dreaming the past two nights.”

“That’s not unusual. Most people don’t remember their dreams.”

“I didn’t know any of that.”

“We can gladly talk about it some more later, if you want. Did the Lady Venora tell you not to chew or swallow the Tonisian sugar, but to let it dissolve in your mouth?”

Catyana nodded.

“That’s amazing. I’d like to get to know her better. Do you think—Catyana, what are you doing?” Mara grabbed her hand.

Catyana gaped at her. She hadn’t even realized she was pulling out her hair again.

Mara clutched Catyana’s hand in both of hers, holding it in her lap. The soft warmth of Mara’s skin against her own was pleasant. “I understand you’re in pain, but please don’t do that. It hurts me when you hurt yourself.”

Venora leaned forward and mouthed, “Thank you,” to Mara.

Mara nodded.

Catyana let herself fall back into her chair, shaking her head. Why was she doing this to herself? But she knew the reason; she felt that inexplicable, horrifying, black fear crawling up from her belly and grasping at her heart. She struggled with herself and managed to squash it back down, if

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only for Mara's sake. When she looked over, she could see Venora's concern as she watched her. She turned her attention back to the Lord, who seemed to be closing.

"...and with such historic precedence, I cannot but express my utmost confidence in its success. Our dear friend and wise spiritual leader of many years, Elder Livanes Navaresa, will therefore ask for Anae's blessing and lead us in prayer, after which I invite the presiding officer, the High Priestess of the Selanian Order, to come forward and initiate the proceedings." Lord Tolares bowed his head.

Cat yana sighed. Although she liked Elder Livanes, she just wanted the formalities to be over. She was sure the prayer would take forever. But she had misjudged Elder Livanes and was pleasantly surprised by his efficiency. The elder stood where he was and said a short prayer in which he asked for Anae's guidance. Then he raised his arms to the heavens and invoked the traditional Blessing of Cades, after which he sat down again.

A hush fell upon the great hall. The most anticipated event of the conference had at last arrived. All the speculation and conjecture of the past years would culminate in this single moment. Cat yana observed many of the participants craning their necks to see if they could discern any signs of activity in the hall, hoping to be the first to catch a glimpse of their new spiritual leader. Who would it be? A protégée of a former High Priestess? An unknown priestess from the ranks of the Advisory Council? Nothing was certain, and the suspense in the dome was so profuse Cat yana could hardly breathe.

But the moment stretched on and the silence became awkward. People grew restless and the great dome filled with echoing whispers. Lord Tolares looked about in anxious agitation.

The Lady Utalya had been assembling the stack of papers before her and now rescued the embarrassing situation by gathering them up. She rose with dignity and proceeded to the front, a solemn expression on her face. As she passed Tanola, she nodded to her. The supposed acolyte straightened her shoulders, stood with her head held high, and followed the Lady with a vibrant step. Animated whispers pursued the two women like waves washing upon the shore.

Cat yana had to admit, Tanola did look exceptionally lovely but also authoritative, and the way she walked was exactly the way Cat yana had always imagined a High Priestess should walk: with the alluring grace of a true princess of one of the more noble houses. With the experience Tanola had gathered during her sister's tenure, Cat yana was sure the girl had made an excellent High

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Priestess these past five years and would continue to be in the future. She actually felt a bit relieved because she considered Tanola a friend, and she was sure Tanola would see reason and allow Nova to spend more time with her.

Catyana saw Nova sigh as she obediently rose and followed her mistress with the remainder of the Lady's papers. She walked slowly, with her eyes down and her arms crossed, pressing the documents against herself. Catyana felt sorry for her. She was probably worn out from all the work of the past days and weeks. On the other hand, the three women now adhered to the traditional order customary at Selanian conferences: first the High Priestess's deputy, which in this case was the Lady Utalya, followed by the High Priestess herself, Tanola Penates, and finally Nova, the High Priestess's adjutant, concluding the procession.

But just before the Lady Utalya and Tanola reached their table, something extraordinary happened. They both turned, stepped back, and bowed their heads with their left hands on their hearts as Nova passed. Nova continued to the front and rounded the table to face a bewildered Lord Tolares. His expression produced a faint smile on her lips, and she raised an eyebrow as she regarded him.

Nova's subtle gesture brought the Lord to his senses, and he turned back to the audience. "Friends and participants: Her Eminence, the High Priestess Novantina Satural."

"Thank you, Your Excellency. You may be seated." Catyana would have been amazed at the calm authority in Nova's voice if she hadn't been so shocked.

The Lord bowed stiffly and returned to his seat at the main table. Nova unhooked the cloak from her shoulders and swung it elegantly over her chair. The silky black ceremonial sash of the Selanian Order draped down from her left shoulder to her right hip and wound itself around her waist, beautifully embroidered by golden stitching. The Selanian brooch of office of the High Priestess, platinum with a golden border, was secured to the sash near her heart.

The Lady Utalya and Tanola raised their heads and joined her. The Lady took the seat at Nova's left, assuming the role of deputy. Tanola stationed herself at Nova's right, taking the seat of the High Priestess's adjutant, leaving Nova the prominent position. As Tanola draped her cloak over her chair, Catyana saw a golden brooch pinned to her robe. Alright, so she wasn't the High Priestess. But since when was Tanola a priestess? Just another little detail nobody had found important enough to mention to her.

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A detached, mechanical part of Catyana's mind witnessed the various reactions in the hall. Several people, such as Elder Yonatan, Elder Livanes, Vodana, Venora, Natilya, and Hyelisa, to whom this was evidently no news, remained calm. Natilya and Hyelisa filled the two empty seats at the conference table after Nova, Tanola, and the Lady Utalya had taken their positions in front. It seemed Natilya, being of House Revan, would be acting as the House's official representative for the proceedings this morning, while Hyelisa served as her adjutant.

Vilam, who was sitting near the other acolytes, seemed baffled when the Lady Utalya first rose with Tanola. When Nova passed to the front, he looked surprised. But almost immediately something inside him clicked. He sat back, smiling to himself, and he appeared to enjoy the bewildered reactions of the people around him.

Mara and the Lady Tsenera couldn't quite suppress their astonishment. But they quickly regained their composure, and Mara's eyes were shining.

Chyardal and Corsen both looked thunderstruck, but obviously for very different reasons. Vechiles only had to glance at his son, whose face immediately became a blank mask. Catyana assumed Corsen now realized how serious his seemingly slight miscalculation twenty years earlier had been. But Chyardal kept his mouth open, even after his father had returned to his seat. Lord Tolares had to elbow his son and gesture for him to regain his composure.

Catyana herself was devastated. She sat there in shock with her eyes wide, as if her heart had actually been pierced by the assassin's searing arrow. Now that she saw her worst fears realized, she no longer had the strength to defy the terrifying dread rising inside her. As it crept through her and laid its icy hand on her heart, she felt herself go numb.

So that was why that black cloud had been hanging over her all this time! She had somehow sensed it would come to this. Nova was the High Priestess, and as one of the highest officials on the planet, it was clear she wouldn't have any time for a simple farm girl such as herself. On the other hand, the High Priestess had to bear immense responsibility toward her people. Catyana could therefore appreciate that she would want someone like Catyana in the Order. She would try to forgive her, although she didn't know if she had the strength. The realization that Nova had never really wanted to be her friend but had only wanted her talents hurt so much, and she felt betrayed.

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With that thought, the dam finally burst, and all the pain, anger, and frustration welled up in her and overflowed. Mara and Vodana did everything in their power to calm her, but it took a while before Catyana was able to compose herself enough to watch the rest of the initial proceedings in distraught silence.

Catyana was astonished that the cold, mechanical part of her mind continued its observations as if nothing had happened. That part of her registered the many outraged people in the hall and those representatives of the western houses who cast dark, menacing glances at the young priestess standing before them.

Nova ignored them as she competently laid out her paperwork. Catyana knew her well enough to realize she was reaching out from inside, feeling the subtle currents of harmony and dissonance and assessing the mood in the large hall. It would have been difficult for Nova to miss the predominantly hostile atmosphere on her right, the side of the assembly room occupied by the western houses.

But Nova seemed sure of herself. She faced the assembly and her voice rang out clear and firm. “Representatives of the Houses, friends and participants; I thank you for taking it upon yourselves to be here today, and I welcome you to this first Selanian Conference of Tolares. I have never been a great friend of formality. I assume we all know why we are here and which issues are at stake. We will therefore promptly commence with the official proceedings.” She took a deep breath. “But first, our laws and traditions compel us to take note of any challenge against the authority of this Council.”

The hall stirred. Many participants seemed to be waiting for exactly this opportunity. Lord Divestelan nodded to one of his deputies, who rose and cleared his throat. “Your Eminence, House Divestelan challenges your authority to preside over this conference.”

“And upon what grounds do you base your challenge?” Nova inquired.

“First and foremost, we have no proof of your identity or your proper claims to the office you profess to hold.”

At this, the Lady Utalya rose from her seat and faced the deputy, her eyes ablaze but her voice firm. “Come, now, Fedesen, enough of this foolish talk. Even if you profess not to know the High Priestess here before you, you do know who I am. And you know beyond a doubt that I would

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never support my protégée if I were not completely assured of her identity, her office, and her competence.” She stared at him a moment longer. Then she gracefully resumed her seat.

The deputy looked down and cleared his throat. “In that case, House Divestelan wishes to challenge the authority of the Advisory Council to appoint the presidency over this conference.”

The hall erupted in astonished cries and gasps. From her parents’ accounts and Nova’s teachings, Catyana was familiar enough with conference proceedings to know such a course was without precedence.

Nova calmly stood her ground. Her authoritative voice quickly silenced the outburst in the hall. “Deputy, you do have the right to challenge the Council’s appointment. But I am equally confident that you are aware of the correct procedure. You must either deliver a formal request to the Council three months prior to the conference, clearly stating your reasons for not wishing the High Priestess to officiate and presenting an adequate alternative, or you must invoke a divine ruling at the conference itself. Since no formal request has been issued, I assume you wish to invoke the ruling.”

“Yes, Your Eminence.”

“Then let your candidate come forward.”

The silence in the hall was charged with anticipation. Nova nodded to the Lady Utalya and Tanola, who quietly left the area and took seats close to Vilam. In the rear of the hall, a giant of a man stood and leisurely removed the tunic and shirt of his western uniform, exposing a massive chest and muscle-packed arms. He strode to the front, his face grim and uncompromising. Nova watched him approach while binding her hair together with a simple barrette. She threw her ponytail over her right shoulder and stuffed it under her sash so it wouldn’t get in her way.

Chyardal was about to jump to his feet, but his father held him back. “Watch, my son, and learn,” the Lord seemed to be whispering.

Catyana had barely been able to hold back her tears from the previous revelation. At this new turn of events, she felt the blood drain from her face and would have slumped to the ground if Mara hadn’t held her. Vilam seemed to be the only one who just leaned back in his chair with a diverted smile on his face, enjoying the show.

The giant waded around the table. He never once hesitated but kept advancing, his body poised like a man plowing through snow. Then, in a surprisingly swift and sleek motion, he jumped forward and reached out with his monstrous hands to pick her up and crush her.

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But there was nothing there for the giant to crush. Everyone in the hall heard a sickening crunch as the outer edge of Nova's foot connected firmly with the side of his knee, which she immediately followed up by smashing her elbow into his kidney. A split second later, there was a dull whump. The man gasped and doubled over, reaching for the area between his legs, where Nova had firmly planted her foot from behind. Now at his side, she grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. A quick blow to his windpipe cut off his air supply. When she released him, he tilted forward, holding his hands over his privates, and tried to look up at her. But he could hardly raise his head and was only capable of emitting guttural gurgles, so Nova sent him into the merciful arms of unconsciousness with a swift kick to his head. The giant flopped to the ground like an oversized sack of potatoes.

Regarding the felled giant with disgust, Lord Divestelan gestured to his deputy and said in a cold voice, "Fedesen, get that sorry excuse for a priestess out of my sight."

The deputy nodded to a couple of western guards, who raced to the front with their swords drawn. Lord Tolares jumped to his feet and pounded the table with his fist. "This is outrageous! The ruling has been decided."

But the guards had already gained the front, where Nova was expecting them. They rushed her, raising their swords to strike, but she somersaulted toward them, staying close to the ground and remaining beneath their weapons while sweeping the guards' feet from under them as she came up at their sides. They toppled to the ground with a magnificent crash.

The first guard cried out when Nova's foot smashed his left hand so he couldn't reach for his weapon. She gave the man's sword a swift punt, grabbed it in mid-air, and effortlessly parried the second guard's overhead slice with a quick thrust to his shoulder, drawing blood. Her sword swung around and whacked him in the head with the flat of the blade, knocking him senseless. She reversed her movement, circling down and sweeping the first guard's feet from under him before he could regain his stance, again with the flat of her blade. Then she struck the fallen guard on the head with the hilt of her sword.

In the meantime, the deputy called six more guards to the front to deal with the annoyingly tenacious priestess. The eastern security guards remained frozen, shocked at the whole development. No one had ever evoked a divine ruling, so they had no course of action to fall back

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on. Despite Lord Tolares's protest, it seemed they weren't sure if this display was still part of the ruling or not.

Vilam took the current act of this performance as his cue and pursued the western guards to the front like a panther stalking its prey. The nearest guard went down when his elbow connected firmly with his head. Contrary to Nova's graceful actions, Vilam's movements were swift but casual, as if he were a well-oiled machine. He hadn't even considered the fallen guard with a single glance while disarming him. With the guard's sword in his hands, he dispatched the three men in front of him using the flat of his blade wherever possible, as he had seen Nova doing.

After Nova dealt with the two remaining guards, the friends met in the center and glanced at each other, then turned, quietly assessing the casualties. When she had assured herself that none of the guards were seriously injured, Nova turned to Vilam and spoke loud enough for everyone in the hall to hear. "Thank you, my friend. It was becoming a bit tiresome."

He gave her a wry grin. "I thought as much. Glad to be of service." He gave the eastern guards in the hall a wink. Finally realizing they should have been protecting the High Priestess, they rushed down to the floor.

Nova glanced at Vilam with a raised eyebrow and he nodded. She signaled Tanola and Natilya, who immediately left their posts and rushed to the other side of the hall with their group of acolytes. Earlier, Catyana had vaguely registered the fact that Tanola and the five acolytes were all wearing swords, but this was the first time she consciously processed it. Nova and Vilam proceeded around the table. Nova stopped beside Lord Divestelan while Vilam stopped beside the Lord's son, their blades hovering menacingly over the two men. Tanola, Natilya, and the four acolytes drew their swords and formed a protective ring around a Lady in the dress of House Divestelan and a young girl of about seven or eight. Catyana could only assume this was the young Lady Gevinesa and her sister Yanita.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lord Divestelan demanded.

"You know as well as I that I could have you detained pending charges of high treason," Nova said. "But I'm willing to defer your arrest and accept your two daughters as security instead." She nodded to Tanola. The Lady Gevinesa and her sister rose, and the group swiftly left the hall, but not before the Lady had awarded Nova a relieved glance. The group was reinforced at the exit by a squad of eastern guards.

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Several western guards situated around the hall seemed inclined to intervene but wouldn't risk anything while their Lord was being threatened. Vilam saw the movement and nodded to his guards, who immediately moved into position and covered any western guards in the building. Vilam's authority seemed undisputed.

Lord Divestelan glared at Nova. "I suppose I have no say in the matter."

"None whatsoever. Although I doubt you would have chosen to be detained."

The Lord's smile was cold. "We both know I wouldn't have. Just as we both know you didn't stage this little incident because you were considering the option. It seems you have won this round, Your Eminence. But rest assured I will not underestimate you again."

The two enemies measured each other silently. Then Nova turned and walked to the front of the hall, dragging Vilam with her. When they reached the High Priestess's table, Vilam motioned for Nova to wait. He stepped to the table and raised his sword to point at the audience.

"You were warned once when the Prophet's Bow sang for you in Nadil. You are being warned a second time now. If you decline to listen, there will be no third warning, only silence and sudden death for those who choose not to believe the truth but have found pleasure in iniquity." He stared at the crowd before him with smoldering eyes, then turned and walked to a seat behind Nova, leaving the participants of the conference sitting in stunned silence or seething anger. Nova eyed him with a curious smile on her lips.

Despite her turmoil, the detached part of Catyana had to marvel at the man. At this moment, there was no trace of the pain, bitterness, and uncertainty that so often surfaced in him. In such situations as now or on that evening in the tavern, he was completely in his element, doing what needed to be done with quiet efficiency and lethal accuracy. She had observed his actions while he dispatched the guards and felt his technique was superior to Nova's. Although she was swift and graceful, her movements were but the result of intense training. His seemed to have been honed through years of experience in the field. Where had this man gained such deadly skills?

Nova gestured to the security guards and pointed at the giant who had challenged her. There was a compassionate look on her face as she regarded him. The guards circled the man, looking down at him with contempt. Was this lifeless heap of flesh the uncompromising warrior who had dared to confront their High Priestess? How had such a slender and seemingly delicate creature managed to overwhelm this huge, muscle-packed fighting machine? It took four men to lift the

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unconscious hulk and drag him from the hall, but Nova received more than one appreciative glance as they carried him off.

Nova addressed the audience while the western guards around her gathered themselves up. She lifted her voice so she could be heard clearly in the farthest reaches of the hall. “In view of the momentary disorder, I propose a recess. We will resume the conference at precisely *nolavelates*.”

The perplexed silence lifted, and people sifted out of the hall or stood together in small groups, conversing quietly while guards of the western houses came to the assistance of their wounded comrades, surrounded edgily by eastern security.

Now that the excitement was over and order had been restored, Vodana and Mara were free to tend to Catyana. Vodana squatted down in front of her with her hand on Catyana’s knee, and Venora took her chair so she could support the girl.

Vodana caressed Catyana’s cheek. “Dearest, whatever is the matter with you?”

“Oh, Vodana, I’m so sorry to be blubbering like a child. It’s just—I had hoped all this time that Nova and I would stay together. She’s like a big sister to me, and I love her so much. But now—she’s the High Priestess. How wonderful for her.” She could hardly suppress her bitterness and shook her head. “What use could the High Priestess have for an inexperienced farm girl like me?”

Vodana gaped at her. Then she took her wet face in both her hands. “Why, you sweet, wonderful, innocent, golden-haired child!” She kissed her on the forehead, then pulled her from her seat and dragged her down to her sister, leaving Venora and Mara staring after them with a concerned gaze. Nova was conversing with the adjutant of one of the eastern houses, but Vodana grabbed her sister’s arm and wrenched her around to face them, her eyes ablaze. The adjutant discreetly bowed himself away. “Well, dearest Nova, I think you have some explaining to do.” She stalked off, her retreating figure all the more imposing for the fuming wrath apparent in her gait.

Nova stared after her in surprise, but when she turned back to Catyana, her eyes opened wide in shock. “Oh, no, dearest, what’s the matter?”

Catyana bowed her head. “Oh, Nova—I mean, Your Eminence—I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

Nova grabbed her hands. “Catyana, please don’t ever say ‘Your Eminence’ to me again. But I sense your poor heart is broken. Please, dearest, tell me what’s wrong.”

Nova’s compassion came as a surprise and started the flow of tears anew. Catyana tried to wipe them away with a handkerchief that was already soaked. Her friend’s unexpected affection

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confused her since she was certain Nova would push her away, and her confusion in turn made her angry. What was she supposed to think? Why was everything always so different from what she thought it would be?

“Oh, Nova, I can hardly believe it. You’re the High Priestess. I never imagined. I should have realized what you were trying to tell me these past few days, when you warned me not to set my heart so fixedly upon any one thing. I’m trying to be strong, really, I am, but it hurts so much. You knew all I ever wanted was to join the Order and stay with you, but you only wanted me for my abilities.” The ache in her heart overwhelmed her, and Catyana clenched her fists to the sides of her head in helpless grief and frustration as she attempted to regain at least a semblance of composure. She shook her head, hardly capable of speaking. “How could I have been so naïve? How could I have ever dared to believe my heart’s desire was coming true?”

Nova listened to her friend, an expression of growing dismay on her face. “Oh, Catyana, I’m so sorry. I thought it would all be clear to you now.”

“Oh, yes, dearest Nova, you’ve made it quite clear. But have no fear, I won’t weigh you down. I’ll depart as soon as you give me leave.”

She tried to turn away, but Nova held her. “Catyana, no.” She shook her head. “I don’t believe I’ve ever been quite so speechless. Catyana, listen to me.” She regarded her friend with an intent gaze. “Yes, it’s true, I am the High Priestess.”

Catyana turned her face away.

Nova tightened her grip on her friend’s wrist and pulled her back toward her. “As such I am entitled, no, even obligated, to seek someone whom I must train as my successor. I’m grateful, because I found that person several years ago, and she has been my dearest and most trusting friend ever since. Do you understand now?”

Catyana stared at Nova, stricken to the heart by the horrific confession her supposed friend had just made. She wondered which of her assistants Nova had chosen as her protégée. Probably Tanola. But at least Catyana finally knew where she stood with her. She had only been an object of casual interest to the High Priestess all along. “Yes, Nova, I understand,” she whispered, hardly capable of breathing.

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“No, Catyana, you don’t.” Nova’s expression was one of flustered exasperation and she shook her head. “I just don’t understand. You’re never this slow. What will it take to get what I’m saying into that thick skull of yours?”

At the unexpected rebuke, Catyana looked her friend in the eye. Like the rising sun’s first glimmer on the horizon, a possibility dawned on her that she had never even dreamed of considering. Her lips parted in awe. “No.”

“Yes,” said Nova, sighing in relief. “Oh, dearest, it’s always been you. How could you have ever thought otherwise?”

Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place, not with a little click, but with a resounding boom. Catyana stood there, feeling as if she had been struck by lightning. Why hadn’t she seen it before? And with that revelation, a new wave of emotions washed over her that was nearly as overpowering as the ones before.

Nova took her in her arms and held her, giving her time to digest this new and overwhelming piece of information and allowing her to cry on her shoulder. After a while, Catyana grew calmer. She reached out, almost timidly, and touched Nova’s cheek. “You’re not sending me away.”

“No, you silly goose, of course not.”

Catyana covered her eyes with her hand. She must have been white as a sheet and clutched at Nova’s shoulder with her free hand to keep from stumbling.

Nova put her arm around her. “Come, dearest, let’s sit down for a moment.” Firmly supporting her friend, she led her to a group of chairs, keeping her arm around her and holding her hand.

When they were seated, Catyana took a deep breath. “Oh, Nova, I feel like such an idiot.”

“No, now that I think about it, my words could well have misled you. I should have been more careful, especially since you’re so vulnerable right now with all the *venora* in your bloodstream. I’m so sorry, Catyana. I should have realized what was going on in that precious heart of yours.”

Catyana saw Vodana talking casually with their friends on the far side of the hall. When she saw how things had turned out, she smiled and waved at them. Nova waved back. Catyana shot her a sidelong glance and Nova laughed. “Oh, I know my sister can be feisty. But she did the right thing by bringing you down here.” She put her hand on Catyana’s arm. “No, really, Catyana. You’re more important to me than any politicizing, and I’m so glad we were able to clear this up.”

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Catyana attempted a smile and nodded. She noticed that Vilam had been following the incident closely. When he saw her looking at him, he strolled over and addressed Nova. “Your Eminence.”

Nova looked up at him, obviously annoyed at his use of the title. When she saw the mischievous grin on his face, she smiled back. “Your Holiness.”

“May I be of assistance?”

Nova caressed Catyana’s wet cheek with the back of her hand. “She’ll be fine. She just needs a moment to collect herself.”

Catyana looked up and managed a weak smile.

“May I ask what the problem is?” When Nova told him, it produced a faint smile on his lips. “Oops! Slight misunderstanding. What I don’t understand, though, is how you could make such a mistake, Catyana. You’re Percepto Girl, remember?”

Catyana looked up at him with a pained smile but had to wipe away a few tears. “I’m beginning to regret I ever said that. You’re never going to drop this, are you?”

“Not a chance,” he said with a grin. “But you really are phenomenally gifted when it comes to perception.”

“Everyone keeps telling me that. But I suppose it doesn’t work too well if you insist on having a certain notion fixed in your head instead of keeping an open mind. And sticking your nose in a batch of wood flowers when you’re sensitive to their effects doesn’t help much, either.”

“Well, maybe wood flowers are your Kryptonite.”

“My what?”

“Oh, um...now, how do I explain that?” Vilam scratched his head. “I guess you could say wood flowers are what make you weak.”

“I...don’t think that’s how wood flowers work, Vilam.” She looked over at Venora, who was talking with Vodana, Mara, and the Lady Tsenera at the far side of the hall. Despite the distance, Venora returned her glance. Catyana was astonished that her friend’s expression was one of concern, and her eyes seemed to be saying, *I’m so sorry*. Wasn’t Venora happy for her?

Taking a deep, quavering breath, she continued, “Anyway, Nova has been trying to explain the situation to me for the past few days, but it didn’t quite register in the way she had hoped. I suppose I completely underestimated how much...how much I mean to her.” Another tear rolled down her cheek.

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Nova squeezed her hand. “Well, dearest, I’m glad you were at least able to take that away from this experience. But the next thing we’ll need to work on is your self-esteem.”

As Nova continued the conversation with Vilam, Catyana gave her an uncertain glance. Working on her self-esteem probably was a good idea. But what she was really looking forward to was the simple pleasure of finally being able to do something—anything at all—without that constant feeling of dread hanging over her. Now that the fear of Nova abandoning her was gone, Catyana was just waiting for that terrible weight to finally lift from her shoulders, and she was certain the ensuing relief would be setting in soon. Any time now. Please?

But when she listened inside herself, she mainly just felt drained. And somewhere further down, she also sensed a hushed kind of tension, like the silence before a storm. Suppressing the darkness had become so routine she didn’t even realize she was still doing it. She needed to relax, so she closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing the way Nova had taught her, deliberately letting all the tension go. First her head, neck, and shoulders, then her arms and legs, hands and feet, all the way down to her fingers and toes.

Nova must have sensed what she was doing and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Encouraged by her friend’s simple gesture, Catyana opened herself up; her mind, her heart, her will, and reached deep down into her soul, where she would finally—”

A wave of such black horror erupted from her subconscious that it would have thrown her to the floor if she hadn’t strained her muscles until her whole body hurt, freezing her in place on the chair. She stifled a scream by slamming her fists into her mouth, and only a high-pitched squeak escaped.

“*Tevas’an*, Catyana! What’s wrong?” Nova grasped her shoulders and her eyes were wide.

Catyana’s breath was coming in short gasps, and she fought with all her strength to force the darkness back down. During the battle, she was hardly aware of her surroundings or the passing of time. How long had she been at it? An hour maybe? Or even two? But when she was finally able to breathe again, she realized it had only been one or two minutes. Her muscles gradually relaxed, and she no longer felt as if she were drowning in some nightmarish flood.

“Oh, honey, what happened?” said Nova.

Catyana shrugged. She lowered her hands and ran her tongue over her teeth. She could still taste the blood on them. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” What could she have told her that

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Nova didn't already know? And what could Nova say or do that would help Catyana in any way? The whole situation seemed hopeless, and she felt so tired of it all. Was there no escape from the constant fear and misery?

Nova leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "I understand. But if you do want to talk, I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

Catyana nodded.

Chyardal must have been waiting in the background and watching for a chance to approach. When Nova leaned back in her chair, he came forward, and Nova smiled up at him.

But her smile melted away when he bowed respectfully. "Your Eminence, I don't wish to intrude, but—"

"You see what happens when you're suddenly tossed into the limelight?" Nova said, cutting off the young Lord's words and looking up at Vilam with a sour expression. "You're no longer 'Nova,' or 'my friend,' but become an isolated figure, set out on display and addressed with pompous titles to keep you at a distance."

Chyardal looked from one to the other. "I'm sorry, Your—" He paused, turning red.

Nova finally glanced up at him, but Catyana felt she looked hurt. "Really, Chyardal?" She shook her head. "I just don't understand. What's so different about me? Please tell me, because I really don't know." She grabbed her hair and looked at it. "Still the same color." Then she put her hands on her face and felt around. "Eyes, nose, mouth, ears, yes, all still there." She took a deep breath and was able to continue a bit calmer. "Do you really find me so changed that we can no longer be on the same terms as before?"

Chyardal looked at her with his lips pressed together. He seemed embarrassed and a bit flustered. "I'm sorry, Nova." He paused. "I think you've made your point."

She gaped at him. "I've made my point?"

"Well, what do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. But I certainly wasn't expecting that." She sighed. "What did you want to speak to me about?"

"I...don't remember."

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“Oh. I’m sorry I made you lose your train of thought.” She took a deep breath and studied his face, but she looked sad. “Maybe I was deluding myself, Chyardal, but I somehow got it into my head that you valued my friendship.”

His eyebrows drew together. “But I do.”

“Alright, if that’s true, would you do me a favor?”

“If I can, sure.”

“Would you please not throw any more formal titles or addresses at me? They just wear me out. Unless, of course, you want to make fun of me, like our friend here.” She smiled at Vilam. “You seem to be the only one who wasn’t taken by surprise.”

“Oh, you definitely managed your surprise, if that’s what you were after,” Vilam said. “But I should have had the foresight to see through your little charade. I’m not saying it wasn’t necessary. I understand why it had to be done, especially if we take into account the events of the past hour. But thinking back, there were too many little things that didn’t quite conform to your role as acolyte, although you did cover up quite well.”

“Thank you, my friend. I’ll gladly take that into consideration for the next time. But you become more and more mysterious. How could you discern the intricate differences that distinguish the various offices of the Order?”

“I’ve been around. How do you feel, now that the game is up?”

She gazed at him, measuring him quietly before answering. “I actually feel quite relieved. I didn’t enjoy having to deceive everyone, although, like you said, it was necessary. On the other hand, it will be almost impossible to take pleasure in something as simple as a stroll through town, now that everyone knows who I am. And I’ll always have to have my personal escort with me.”

“How did you manage it, though? Everyone must have known you were the protégée of a former High Priestess. Weren’t you therefore a prime candidate for the office? How were you able to keep this a secret for five years?”

“I admit, it wasn’t easy. But the Lady Utalya was wise enough not to publicly announce that I was her protégée. We also suppressed certain details regarding my performance as chief of security during the conference in Divestelan and spread rumors that were so embarrassing as to completely discredit me.”

“Was that when you supposedly lost your commission?”

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“Yes. Everyone had to believe I would never even be considered as a candidate for the office. We didn’t make my degradation public, but the information was available if anyone wanted it. It’s an interesting fact, but if you conceal something in the right way, more people will take notice than if you had placed it out there for all to see. I almost couldn’t believe how quickly the news of my humiliation spread.”

“That seems to be a prime characteristic of human nature,” Vilam replied bitterly.

“Anyway,” Nova continued, “we had to restrict admittance to the meetings of the Advisory Council. Usually, anyone is allowed to attend. But after the assassination of the late High Priestess, we allowed only the twelve elders, the High Priestess, the High Priest, and the seventy official members of the Council and their adjutants. Even so, we didn’t think it would work since there were far too many people involved. But the information didn’t leak. I suppose we hit Lord Divestelan’s intelligence network harder than we believed, and it seems I grossly underestimated the fierce loyalty of our Council members.”

Catyana gave her a sullen glance. “That doesn’t quite agree with the story you dished up yesterday.”

“Well, dearest, if you think about it, you have to admit I didn’t tell you any lies.” She sighed. “I’m afraid I’m getting much too proficient at disorientation tactics.”

Catyana squeezed her hand. “Nova, I’m exhausted. Would you mind if I returned to the residence?”

“Of course not, dearest. I still have a lot to do, so I’ll come with you. Chyardal, if you would please excuse us.” She said it politely, but with a deliberate glance in his direction. “Vilam, knowing you, I’m sure you’ve organized a security detail.”

“Of course.” He winked to a squad of guards who had been standing at attention. They immediately surrounded the High Priestess and her protégée.

Nova rose and supported Catyana out of the conference hall. Vilam followed behind, probing the environment with expert scrutiny, leaving Chyardal to stare after them with a rueful and conflicted look in his eyes.

Catyana let herself be dragged along, but she couldn’t understand what had happened. Why was the darkness still there, hanging over her like a suffocating cloud of doom? After the revelations of the past hour, she should have felt relieved. But as Nova helped her through the hallway and to

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their carriage, she felt more miserable and hopeless than she ever had before, and the only thing she longed for was a way to finally escape the dreaded shadows closing in on her from all sides.

34. Stasis

Vordalin enjoyed the warm rays of the morning sun on his face. He and Ilanya were riding east toward Elinas and had passed the southern tip of Lake Divestelan some time ago. He wanted to stay away from the road in case they needed to reach cover quickly, so they were riding close to the trees that lined the forest on their left. It was a marvelously clear day, and the only drawback was being so close to the beautiful woman beside him, who had been his first love and fiancée many years ago, and the conflicting emotions now battling inside of him.

Although Ilanya was an excellent rider, it had been long since she had been on a journey of any length. After the long trek down to Catanin, they had decided to give Ilanya a full day to recover, so they had spent the last two nights at good friends of his. They had started again very early this morning, and Vordalin could tell she was tired. Even so, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Wonderful! I feel so light and free, as if an immense weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I can’t remember the last time I was out riding like this. All I’ve seen in the past years was the Etenolyas Valley, and every now and then the residence in Divestelan, when there was some official event at which my presence was required.”

“Vechiles took you to Divestelan?”

“Yes. Sometimes it was unavoidable if he wanted to maintain his little charade. But I was heavily guarded during those times, and it was almost a relief when I was allowed to return to my valley.” She closed her eyes and let the fresh breeze fill her lungs. “I think I can smell the lake from here. And the fragrance of the conifers around us makes me feel almost euphoric.” She opened her eyes. “It was very kind of your friends to lend us these chyevi.”

“They’re probably not as noble as the ones you’re accustomed to, but they’re stout and reliable animals and worth every *tseval*.” Vordalin patted his steed with a few firm slaps. The animal threw its head up and proclaimed its delight at the attention with a joyful bawl.

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Ilanya stroked her mare's neck. "She's gentle, and even if she doesn't have an untainted lineage, she has a noble spirit. I'd rather have her than a pureblood with a nasty character. Believe me, a chyeves like this could save your life."

Vordalin grinned when the mare twitched her floppy ears and looked back, as if the animal could understand Ilanya's words. Then again, maybe she could.

Ilanya must have noticed his gaze. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just that I'd forgotten how perceptive you are when it comes to animals."

His words produced a pained smile on her lips. "At least that's one thing they couldn't take from me. Sometimes, I felt so useless, as if I was nothing but a figurine locked away in a display case that Vechiles could take out and show around whenever he pleased." She glanced at him. "What do you think he'll do next?"

Vordalin pursed his lips. "We know the army went north and is holing up in the forests east of Divestelan, which is why we're taking the southern route. Since it's impossible to hide such a vast number of troops for an extended period of time, I assume he intends to deploy them soon, probably when that farce of a conference in Tolares is over."

"Farce?"

"I doubt the representatives of the western provinces are aiming for constructive attendance. They're only looking for excuses to justify their actual intent."

"Which is?"

"A full-scale war aimed at crushing the eastern provinces so they can implement their ideology. They'll overrun the east like a swarm of locusts, and at present, there's nothing we can do to stop them."

"Oh, Goddess, help us!"

"I'm sure He will. As a matter of fact, I'm hoping the Emissary arrives soon."

"I thought there was always hope." He didn't miss the sarcasm and bitterness in her voice.

"There is, Ilanya."

"How can you be so sure?"

"That's the essence of faith; confidence in what we hope for, conviction of that which we don't yet see. Anae promised His intervention, and when He speaks, we can trust that He will watch over His word."

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“A lot of good that did me in the past. Where was Her intervention when I needed it?”

Vordalin regarded her with a troubled glance. “Well, I’ve ensured that the Resistance in Divestelan has been notified regarding your husband’s army, and they will in turn inform Her Eminence in Tolares in case we’re detained. She must receive this information as quickly as possible.”

She fixed her eyes expectantly on his face. “You seem to put a lot of faith in your sister.” He thought he detected a scheming undertone in her voice.

“I trust her implicitly.”

Ilanya looked straight ahead with an amused smile on her lips. “I knew it was her.”

Vordalin looked at her in mock surprise. “Ah, so you wanted to catch me off guard?”

“Of course! Didn’t I?”

“If that’s what you wish to believe.”

“Come, now, Vordalin, I trapped you fair and square. There’s no use closing the barn door after the chyeves is out.”

He smiled. “What did you think of the stories regarding the Nightwraith?”

She awarded him a playful grin. “Still can’t admit defeat, can you?” Her smile faded and her brows crunched together. “To be honest, it feels good hearing there’s something out there our enemies might be afraid of. I’ve heard whisperings around camp for the past couple of weeks. Not much, just rumors and anxious glances whenever the subject was brought up. I wasn’t sure what to think, so I’m glad your friends verified the stories.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘verified,’ although they did put a lot of faith in them. It seems the leader of the Resistance in Divestelan is quite certain the reports are true.”

“So there really might be some mysterious apparition out there, killing off members of the Black Guard?”

“Perhaps,” said Vordalin. “The timing seems right. If we truly are nearing the end of the Millennial Peace, and recent events seem to make that obvious, then many relevant prophecies will be fulfilled, and those regarding the Nightwraith are among them.”

“What exactly do the Scriptures say about the Nightwraith?”

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“They say the apparition will be a harbinger and later a companion of *Tevasala se Nemata*, the Goddess of Death, and together they will wreak havoc among the forces of darkness and those who have committed atrocities in the eyes of the One.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Ilanya, although he thought he saw her shudder.

They rode on for a moment in silence, but a corner of his mouth twitched upward, and he looked over at her. “Alright, it’s Novantina Satural.”

“What?”

“The High Priestess.”

Ilanya stared at him. “No!”

“Yes.”

“Really? You’re not just pulling my leg?”

“I would swear on our daughter’s life, if that’s what it takes.”

“Alright, alright, I believe you.” She shook her head. “Novantina Satural. I never would have guessed. But why are you telling me now? You could have just told me yesterday, or when I asked you about it two days ago.”

“Today is the first day of the conference. If everything went according to plan, she’s already made her debut, so there’s no longer any reason to keep it a secret.”

“Oh, you...” She reached over and boxed him in the shoulder. “Always so proper about everything. You need to loosen up once in a while; have some fun.”

“I can have fun.”

“Now that I’d like to see. Give me just one—”

Vordalin suddenly reined his mount and closed his eyes, his senses quivering. He let them reach out around him, perceiving every detail of his environment.

“What is it?” Ilanya sounded frightened.

“Black Guard,” he hissed. “Come quickly. And stay ahead of me.”

He prodded his steed with his heels and galloped off, grabbing Ilanya’s reins to ensure she stayed ahead of him so he could keep an eye on her. On their right, four black riders emerged from under the trees, already in pursuit. He urged his chyeves on and realized Ilanya’s mount truly was superior to his. He could hardly keep up with her. When he looked back, he saw that the Black

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Guards were gaining on them. In this case, it seemed pureblood breeding really was an advantage. The Black Guards' mounts were excellent.

Ilanya was already several armlengths ahead of him. His steed faltered and he shifted his weight so the animal could restore its balance, but that put his companion even more in the lead. On his right, the Black Guard was swarming out. Behind him, he could see even more of them taking up the chase.

All there was now was the wind whistling in his ears, the pounding of hooves, the sun in his eyes, and the grass flashing by underneath as they flew forward. He gave himself over to the sensation of speed, but he knew their flight was a lost cause. The Black Guard would overtake them soon.

He sensed movement on his right. One of the guards drew past him, was abreast of Ilanya, and pulled ahead of her. Vordalin's eyes grew wide when the guard looked back and aimed a blowpipe at her. He hardly had time to think of the deadly and almost instantly acting poison the Black Guard employed when Ilanya stiffened, a dart planted in her neck. She slumped over.

"No-o-o-o-o!" Fear and rage welled up inside of him. In one vast surge of inductive power, his instincts reached out to envelope her in a blinding flash of brilliant white light. At his side and behind him, men cried out as their chyevi staggered and fell to the ground, stumbling over one another.

Ilanya's mare, truly an exceptional animal, stopped Ilanya's plunge when she collapsed and, to keep the Lady from falling, fell back and came abreast of Vordalin's steed so Vordalin could seize her. Despite the mare's own fear, her concern for her rider must have been greater, and although she slowed, she never once faltered.

Vordalin grabbed the mare's reins and heaved Ilanya onto his steed, laying her across his saddle. He pulled the dart from her neck and threw it to the ground as they galloped into the cover of the trees while he kept them both surrounded by an intense white glow.

Vordalin never stopped. His steed pounded the forest floor with Ilanya's mare in tow until they were deep in the woods. With his powers more heightened than ever before, he could sense the Black Guard's terror. They had no concept of what he had done, had interrupted their pursuit in panic, and now remained far behind. But still he continued. He had never been aware of such abilities, but his fear for Ilanya must have tapped into something that had been buried deep inside

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of him. As they rode on, he extended his influence and wiped out any traces by restoring the original ethereal pattern of the virgin forest behind them.

It must have been at least two hours past mid-morning when he finally reined his steed. Utterly exhausted by the continual use of Induction, he eased Ilanya to the ground, where she sank into the pine needles and soft moss covering the forest floor in all directions. He kneeled beside her and reached out to her spirit. She was still there, but oh so faint, and he finally realized what had happened. In his inner turmoil, he had placed the fragile shell of her body in stasis so the poison wouldn't spread. "Oh, Lord! What have I done?" he said.

He was so tired he could hardly think, but he had to finish the job, or she would die. He reached out again, found all the poison in her body, and neutralized it, while attempting to reverse any damage it might have inflicted. The process took long since healing wasn't his specialty, but when he was finished, he was certain she would live. At least her body would. But what was a body without a living soul? Would her spirit return, or would the delicate link be severed completely?

There was only one thing he could do now, and that was to hope. He would have to get her to Tolares as quickly as possible and trust that someone with more expertise could do something for her. But he would have to be careful, and that would slow his journey. He estimated it would take him at least three, maybe even four days to get there.

With such anxious thoughts on his sluggish mind, he stretched out on the ground beside her and fell into the dark sleep of exhaustion, while his ex-fiancée, former mistress, and mother of his daughter Natilya lay unmoving at his side, frozen in a state in which not even the most profound earthly visions could ever reach her.

35. The Audience

During the ride back to the Tolares residence, Nova kept glancing at Catyana. Compared to the turbulent events of the conference, the ride itself was short and peaceful. But Catyana seemed much too quiet, and Nova was worried about her. When they stopped in front of the building, Lord Tolares was waiting on the doorstep to receive them, and Nova saw Venora busy in the background, directing some of the servants.

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The Lord helped Nova and Catyana out of the carriage and nodded to Vilam before turning to Nova. “Your Eminence, I’m sorry to bother you, but there are several people here who request an audience, and I’m certain more will arrive soon. I felt it might be to your advantage if a standardized procedure was implemented to sort through the applicants.”

Nova looked at Catyana with what she hoped was an expressive glance. During the ride back, she tried to prepare her protégée for what they might expect upon their return, and things were turning out just as she had predicted. Not that Catyana seemed capable of processing much of it.

Nova gazed at Catyana again with concern before turning to the Lord with a smile. “Thank you, Your Excellency, for your thoughtfulness. Please have an adjutant compile a list of the applicants, which I will review as soon as possible. I will hold audience from now until *velates*. We will then seek a convenient time for audiences on each of the following days. The persons I wish to see first are the Lady Divestelan and her sister. After that, I must debrief Bejad Tsimerel and interrogate the man we apprehended yesterday. Could you please arrange for a suitable chamber?”

“Yes, Your Eminence, a parlor has already been prepared. But I’m afraid we must also discuss the matter of your accommodations.”

Nova could hardly suppress her amusement. “Your Excellency’s hospitality has been irreproachable, but I sympathize with your appeal. I must request, though, that my protégée also be put up in my new quarters.”

Catyana, who was standing right behind her friend’s left shoulder, gave Nova a weak smile and squeezed her hand in gratitude.

“Of course, Your Eminence,” the Lord answered.

“Have the necessary security measures been implemented?”

“My niece, Tanola, and your chief of security, Sister Revan, have already ordered the security, and we were able to oblige them.” He nodded to Tanola, who was standing unobtrusively at the side. “I hope our arrangements meet with your approval.”

“I’m confident everything has been seen to with the utmost detail. Thank you, Your Excellency, for meeting us personally.”

Lord Tolares bowed deeply at the waist. “It is an honor. One of our senior housekeepers, Cortina, will show you to the parlor, and later to your new accommodations.” He bowed once more to Vilam and Catyana before turning away.

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A very pretty maid of approximately Nova's height stepped forward. She had on the same black skirt and white blouse and apron as the other female domestic servants, but her shoulder panel had five stripes, signifying she was a senior housekeeper in charge of one or more floors. She had a fair complexion, and her figure and bearing could be considered graceful and athletic. Her wavy black hair was pinned up in a massive bun and held together by a simple wooden hair pin. She bowed. "Your Eminence, my name is Cortina, and it is a true honor to be allowed to serve you. I'm so sorry I wasn't able to be here for you these past two days. I...had a family emergency."

"Yes, Savinya informed us. I hope everything is alright?"

"Yes, it, um...turned out to be less urgent than we originally feared. But thank you for your concern. Now, unless there's anything else, I'll show you to the parlor." She let her gaze wander over the group, but she hesitated when her glance fell on Catyana. At first, it seemed she was going to say something, but she turned instead and beckoned for them to follow.

Tanola, who could hardly contain her excitement, moved forward, awarded Vilam a perky smile, and linked with Nova's free arm, dragging her into the entrance hall. "Oh, Nova, I'm so glad you've come," she whispered. "You wouldn't believe the people who are waiting for you."

"Oh, yes, I would," Nova responded with a tired smile.

Tanola looked at Catyana. "You're not doing very well, are you?"

Catyana shrugged.

"I'm sorry we've been so distant with you all this time. But you must realize how difficult the situation was for us. On the one hand, you were the High Priestess's protégée. On the other hand, we weren't allowed to let on about any of this. I really hope we can be friends now."

"I'd like that very much," Catyana answered.

Cortina came to a stop and turned to them. "Your Eminence, we've prepared the southwest parlor. The chamber here next to it is directly connected, so you may use it as a waiting room. You needn't worry. It's large enough to comfortably accommodate at least fifty people."

Nova eyed the guards standing at attention in the hall. "The situation here seems to be taken care of. I assume you have guards posted on the grounds outside and in the waiting room?"

"Of course. And your entourage will be with you in the audience chamber."

"Why were you so amused by Lord Tolares's request regarding our quarters?" Catyana asked Nova. "And why do we have to move? I like the room we're in."

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Nova smiled at her. “I assume he wants to transfer us to the Royal Suite.” She looked at Cortina, raising an eyebrow, and Cortina nodded.

“Is that really necessary?”

“Oh, yes, Catyana,” said Nova with a dash of mockery in her voice, “absolutely necessary! What would people say if they discovered the High Priestess had been put up in one of the regular chambers? It’s unthinkable! Lord Tolares would never hear the end of it.”

Nova saw Cortina restrain a smile and couldn’t quite help grinning herself.

“Nova, I don’t mean to interrupt,” Vilam said from behind, “but do you still require my services?”

“*Oh, ena votalaran*, I’m so sorry, Vilam. I sometimes get so caught up in things I forget what’s going on around me. *Desar lanevares?* Would it be alright if you stayed? I think the first two audiences might be of interest to you.”

“*Ti, desar.*”

“I’d like to go upstairs,” Catyana said. “I’m very tired.”

“I know, dearest. But I’d really like you to meet the Lady Gevinesa and her sister. After that, you’re free to go.”

Catyana nodded wearily.

Cortina showed them to the entrance of the parlor, which was right next to the elevator. She was about to leave when her glance fell on Catyana again. “I’m so sorry, I don’t mean to presume, but am I correct in assuming your name is Catyana Faeren?”

Catyana nodded. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem as such, but I fear there has been some uncertainty regarding your title, and I apologize most profoundly if any of our personnel seemed to be taking liberties. I assure you they meant no disrespect. But to avoid any further confusion, would you be so kind and inform us how we may address you?”

“Address me? I’m not sure I understand. I don’t require any formal address, if that’s what you mean. As a matter of fact, I’d feel most comfortable if you’d just call me Catyana.”

Cortina shot her a puzzled glance and looked at Nova, who nodded. With a smile, she said, “Alright, Catyana it is.” She narrowed her eyebrows. “Excuse me, but I believe a fiber from your cloak is caught in your hair. May I?”

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Catyana nodded, and Cortina carefully reached into her hair, but as she withdrew, her fingers brushed Catyana's cheek. Catyana gasped and clutched Cortina's hand, and they seemed to freeze for a moment, staring at each other. Nova thought Catyana suddenly looked very pale.

"Are you alright, Catyana?" said Nova.

Catyana took a deep breath. She lowered Cortina's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze before releasing it. Rewarding the maid with a weak smile, she turned to Nova. "Yes, everything's fine."

Nova shot them a curious glance, and she saw Venora regarding them with a worried gaze from afar and shaking her head. Did Venora know something she didn't?

Cortina seemed a bit flustered and swallowed a few times, but she turned to Nova and said, "I'm always at your service, Your Eminence, so please don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything. I'll be waiting for you after the audience to escort you and Catyana to your accommodations." The maid bowed and stepped back, but not before she and Catyana had traded what Nova could only interpret as a longing glance.

But Nova didn't have time to wonder at the odd exchange. She had the audience to worry about and took a deep breath before advancing into the parlor. "*Vela'mada*, girls," she said to her entourage as she entered. "It's good to see you. And you all deserve praise for your excellent performance this morning." The acolytes, who had been waiting for her, beamed. Nova greeted each of them with a warm hug. Then she took Catyana and dropped into the chair they had set up for her, with Catyana on her left. She nodded to Vilam to take a chair on her right. "Alright, girls, before we begin with the audience, I need a few words with you."

The five acolytes and Tanola, the only one of the group who held the office of priestess, gathered around in a semicircle.

"Now that the time of our concealment is over, we'll have to adjust our daily routine accordingly. The coming days, weeks, and months will be difficult. Although we anticipated the outcome of this morning's conference session, it's also an indication of the problems we'll be facing. From now on, we'll be wearing arms at all times, even here in the residence, and you'll have to remain alert. Vilam, I'd like to ask if you would be prepared to take over our training in swordsmanship."

"I would be honored."

"Thank you. Could you begin as early as tomorrow?"

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Vilam nodded.

“Natilya, would you please ensure that security is tightened at the conference this afternoon? After this morning’s events, no weapons of any kind will be allowed on the premises of the conference building, except of course for us and cleared security personnel. I want everyone to be searched meticulously before being admitted. Please return here as soon as you’ve arranged for the new measures to be implemented.”

Natilya nodded but leaned down close to Nova. “I’m sorry, but could I have a word with you after the audience?”

“Yes, of course.” As Natilya left the room, Nova turned to the others. “Alright, girls, take your positions. Tanola, would you please show the young Lady Gevinesa and her sister in?”

When Gevinesa entered, she looked about the room to get her bearings, but when she saw Nova, she rushed forward. “I can’t begin to tell you how relieved and grateful I am.” She fell into Nova’s arms and they embraced like old friends.

“I did what was in my power, Vinesa. You know I did it gladly.”

“Yes, I do. You know my sister, Yanita, don’t you?”

Yanita came up behind Gevinesa and bowed. “Good day, Your Eminence.” She looked up at Gevinesa to see if she had pronounced the address correctly.

Nova stooped down and gave the girl a hug. “Hello Yanita. My, you’ve grown. But just call me Nova, alright?” But the girl was staring at something behind Nova, and Nova turned to follow her glance. She saw Catyana, who was staring back at the girl with her lips parted in surprise. Nova stepped aside, and Catyana walked over to the girl, stooping so their eyes were on the same level.

Yanita reached for Catyana’s golden hair but flinched back. “You’re pretty,” she whispered. “Are you an angel?”

Catyana’s face glowed. “No, I’m just Catyana. And you know what?” she whispered in the girl’s ear. “I think you’re pretty too.”

Yanita’s lips curled up in a shy smile. When Catyana stood, Yanita’s hand wound up in hers. Yanita moved closer to Catyana and looked up at her sister for approval.

“That’s amazing,” Gevinesa said. “She’s never taken to anyone so quickly.” Despite Gevinesa’s eager words, Nova wondered at the worried look in her eyes.

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“Gevinesa, I’d like to introduce you to my protégée, Catyana Faeren. Catyana, this is the young Lady Gevinesa Divestelan and her sister Yanita.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, My Lady,” said Catyana, bowing with her left hand on her heart.

Gevinesa stepped up to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “And I’m very pleased to meet you, Catyana. But please, just call me Vinesa.”

“Gladly,” said Catyana.

Gevinesa stepped back and attempted a smile, but Nova again saw concern in her eyes.

“Vinesa, is something wrong?” said Nova.

Gevinesa cast another worried look at Catyana before turning to Nova. “I eavesdropped on one of my father’s conversations last night.” Her glance drifted back to Catyana and she bit her lip.

Nova raised her chin. “Ah. Did he mention someone had...put out a contract on Catyana, by any chance?” She shot a quick glance in Yanita’s direction.

Gevinesa stared at her. “You already know?”

“The black arrow kind of gave it away,” said Catyana.

Yanita was looking from the one to the other with a confused expression on her face.

Gevinesa took a deep breath. “Then there’s already been a proclamation of intent.”

“Yes,” said Nova, “but before we sit and talk about this, I’d like you to meet a good friend of ours, Vilam.”

Vilam came forward and kissed Gevinesa’s hand. “My Lady, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“And you, kind...sir?” She regarded Nova with a questioning gaze.

“I’m not sure if you’ve heard,” said Nova, “but Vilam is the man who used the Prophet’s Bow in Nadil four days ago, and yesterday again here in the Old Town.”

“The Prophet’s Bow?” Gevinesa grinned at Vilam. “How in the world did you manage to pull that one off?” Her smile melted away when she saw the shocked looks with which everyone regarded her. “I see. I...apologize for my lack of sensitivity. But you don’t seem to mind,” she said with a questioning glance at Vilam, who was returning her grin.

“On the contrary,” said Vilam, “I find it very refreshing. Please don’t stop on my account.”

She smiled but resumed a more sober expression as she turned to the others. “I really am very sorry. I meant no disrespect. It’s just that I probably had a very different upbringing from you. It’s

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only been in the past few years that I've begun to study the *Selani s'Ulavan*, and I probably wouldn't have gotten very far without my handmaiden Zetara's help."

She exchanged a sorrowful glance with Yanita, who tugged on her skirt. "May I stay with Catyana while you talk?"

Gevinesa smiled at the pair and brushed a long, dark lock out of Yanita's face. "Of course, sweetie."

"Why don't we all sit?" said Nova.

While everyone was finding their seats, Yanita pushed her chair closer to Catyana's and sat down, holding on to Catyana's robe. She beamed up at her new friend. Catyana smiled back and stroked the girl's hair.

"Do you like archery?" Yanita whispered.

"Archery? Well, a little. Why?"

"Because of your contract. You know, the one for black arrows?"

"Oh. Right." Catyana seemed at a loss for words and shot Nova a helpless glance.

Yanita yawned but covered her mouth.

"Are you tired?" said Catyana.

Yanita nodded. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"I'm sorry to hear that." She put her arm around the girl, who leaned her head against Catyana.

"There is one thing we haven't been able to confirm," said Nova, "and that is the person who issued the contract."

"Do you have any suspicions?" said Gevinesa.

"Yes, we feel there's a high probability the contract was issued by Lusina Marusen."

Gevinesa nodded. "That is the name my father mentioned."

Nova took a deep breath and exchanged a glance with Catyana. "Well, I'm glad we were able to verify that point. How much do you know about the Order of the Novantan?"

"I've had dealings with them off and on over the years. But the Crimson Brigade usually took care of such matters themselves."

"I understand. Is there anything else you could tell us that might be of help?"

Gevinesa shook her head. "I'm truly sorry, Nova. The only thing I can say is find and remove the assassin from the equation as quickly as possible. I'm afraid there's no other way."

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“That’s what we believe, too. But thank you, Vinesa.”

“But, Nova, I overheard quite a bit more to the conversation, and most of it seems to be relevant to your situation.”

“Alright, please proceed.”

“The meeting last night was between my father, Talenon Novesta, and a third man named Eratis Rotasen, who is Lord Tolares’s steward and my handmaiden Zetara’s brother. I know I should have informed you of our suspicions regarding Eratis, but we weren’t sure how far his involvement actually went, and Zetara and I were always hoping... Anyway, I believe Lord Tolares has a serious problem.”

“Why don’t you fill me in on the details?” After Gevinesa had given her an account of the conversation, Nova said, “That does sound mysterious. Tanola, would you please see if your uncle is available, and if so, ask him to bring his steward, Eratis Rotasen.”

Tanola nodded and quietly left the room.

“Are you sure that’s wise, Nova?” Gevinesa asked.

“Confronting the man with the facts might introduce an element of surprise and give us an advantage. In the meantime, what news is there of the situation in Divestelan?”

Gevinesa informed her of the attack on the Resistance while Nova listened in grim silence.

“That really is very distressing. And I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am about Zetara. I know how much she meant to you. I remember her from the conference in Divestelan, and from when I visited you half a year after that. She always made such a good impression on me, and I sensed such a kind and gentle spirit in her. But I’m afraid we can’t undo such horrible deeds. We can only ensure that her sacrifice, and the sacrifice of the other members of the Resistance, wasn’t in vain.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Nova. But isn’t there anything we can do about the situation in Divestelan?”

“I’m so sorry, I wish there was, but I’m afraid we don’t have the resources. And we desperately need more information. But I’m certain Sheletas and my liaison officer in Divestelan will report to me as soon as possible.”

“Your liaison officer? But...that would be Bejad, right?”

The High Priestess

A corner of Nova's mouth twitched in amusement. "Gevinesa, you should know me better. When I discovered how unreliable Bejad was, I immediately phased him out of all active operations. For the past four and a half years, I've been using him as a decoy."

A sharp intake of breath made the two women glance over to a corner of the room.

"I'm sorry, Hyelisa," Nova said, "but we have to face the facts."

The acolyte was pale, but she nodded. "I know. As a matter of fact, I've always known. But it still hurts to hear it."

"Hyelisa, come here, please." When the acolyte approached her, Nova stood and gave her a hug. "You're a brave girl, and I've only recruited the best into personal guard. Don't ever forget that." She squeezed Hyelisa's hand.

"Thank you."

Nova released Hyelisa's hand. "Gevinesa, this is Bejad's sister, Hyelisa Tsimerel. She's one of my most trusted assistants. Hyelisa, this is the young Lady Gevinesa Divestelan. You can thank her for getting your brother back."

Gevinesa nodded to the acolyte while Hyelisa bowed, after which the acolyte returned to her corner. She took a deep breath and stood at attention.

Nova took her seat, and Gevinesa awarded her an appreciative look. "Any more of that and I'm joining your guard."

"That would never do, Vinesa. With your training, you're way out of their league."

Gevinesa grimaced. "I'd gladly exchange all my training for an unblemished childhood."

Nova leaned forward and took her hand. "I know."

Gevinesa smiled at her friend and then gestured to Yanita. "At least we'll be giving my sister a chance to grow up in a sheltered environment. That's all I ask."

Yanita had climbed into Catyana's lap and was sound asleep. The events of the past days had probably drained the girl. Catyana had her arms around her and was resting her cheek against the girl's head. She caressed Yanita's hair and looked at the two women, her eyes wide at what she was hearing. "I hardly dare to think of what you've been through, Vinesa."

Gevinesa just had time to shoot her a faint smile when the door to the corridor opened and Tanola returned with Lord Tolares. Natilya entered directly behind them. The two women returned

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to their posts near the High Priestess. Nova gazed at Natilya, saddened at the thought that she couldn't tell Gevinesa and Yanita she was their sister.

Lord Tolares bowed. "Your Eminence, how may I be of service?"

"Your Excellency, we wish to speak with your steward, Eratis Rotasen," Nova said.

"I'm very sorry, Your Eminence, but Eratis departed quite suddenly after the conference this morning. No one knows where he is."

Nova and Gevinesa exchanged glances. To the Lord, Nova said, "I fear I must inform you that you may have a western covert operative on your staff."

"Eratis?"

"Yes."

"How can you be so certain? Eratis is a good man."

At Nova's behest, Gevinesa told Lord Tolares what she knew.

"That is very incriminating intelligence," the Lord said.

"This information must not leave this room," Nova said. "Your Excellency, I have a strong feeling you won't be seeing your steward again. However, if he does return, I entreat you to take him into custody so we may question him."

"I will do what I can, Your Eminence." He bowed, but as he was leaving, Nova saw him and Natilya exchange a glance. The Lord's expression conveyed more than just a passing interest, but knowing him, she trusted his intentions would be honorable. But Natilya's expression was difficult to interpret. She seemed so serious and somehow so lost. But was there fear or devotion in her eyes? Or even both? The situation seemed to be more complicated than Nova had originally believed. She bit her lip and hoped Vordalin would return soon.

"Nova, how could Eratis have known?" Gevinesa asked.

"There could be any number of factors involved," Nova replied. "Your father is no fool. He recognized at the conference that I had planned your extraction. It's possible they searched your room afterward and found the spyhole, then pulled Eratis out as a precaution."

"That is possible. But Nova, you have to explain what you said about Bejad."

"What would you like to know?"

"You've been using him as a decoy?"

"Yes."

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“And?”

Nova took a deep breath. “All I can tell you is that there must be a leak somewhere inside the Resistance, and it’s not Bejad.”

“But Bejad was a problem?”

“Yes, I’m afraid he was a grave problem. Many good people were lost before we discovered Bejad wasn’t someone we could depend on.” Nova looked at Hyelisa, who was pale but returned her glance evenly.

“If he’s so unreliable,” Gevinesa said, “why did you let him bring my request for extraction to Tolares? You can’t believe the anguish I’ve endured because of it.”

“All I needed to know was that Bejad was on his way,” Nova said. “Even if he hadn’t made it to Tolares, the way stations had to verify his transit by regular post to my liaison officer here in the city, a safeguard you were kind enough to implement at my request. At the worst, I would have found a way to contact you when you arrived to see if you needed anything. There was never any danger of you and Yanita not being extracted this morning.”

“Oh, Nova, please forgive me. I should have trusted you more.”

Nova turned her head at the sound of a chuckle. “What is it, Vilam?”

“It’s intriguing to hear about your work, Nova. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

“Thank you for the compliment. I would, of course, be grateful for any contribution you could make.”

“If I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Vinesa, if it’s alright with you, I think we need to continue with the audience. Natilya, would you please show Bejad in?”

When Bejad entered, Nova nodded to Hyelisa, who immediately ran up and threw her arms around him. “Bejad!”

“Hyelisa! *Tezatal*, little sister.”

“Bejad, why don’t you come over here and have a seat?” Nova said in a casual tone.

Gevinesa moved over and Tanola brought another chair. Bejad came forward, holding his sister’s hand, and bowed to Nova and Vilam. “Your Eminence, Your Holiness.” Then he bowed to Gevinesa. “Vinesa, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Gevinesa grinned. “Yes, and I’m especially glad I don’t have to slit your throat.”

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Bejad returned the grin.

Nova targeted her with a quizzical glance. "I didn't realize you'd become so desperate."

Gevinesa chuckled. "Oh, no, sorry. It's just a private joke."

"I'm relieved to hear it." Nova motioned toward the chair and Bejad sat down, while Hyelisa remained standing at his side. "I heard you brought a young woman with you to Tolares," she said to Bejad, coming directly to the point.

"Yes, Your Eminence. Her name is Netira Cilenas."

"I've had the pleasure of meeting her. Bejad, did you ever consider the possibility that the way station where you picked her up might have been compromised?"

Bejad paled. "Well, I, um...No."

Nova sighed. "Is it true that you told Netira you were my liaison officer and that you were doing intelligence work for me in Divestelan?"

"Yes," he answered with a weak voice.

"What exactly were you thinking, Bejad?"

He tried to keep his gaze steady but failed miserably. "She...she seemed harmless enough."

Nova regarded him evenly. "Appearances can be deceiving."

Catyana gasped. "Nova, what are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. It's a question of principle."

"Is that why you asked Netira all those questions yesterday?" said Catyana.

Nova smiled. "You see, my darling, how quick you are if you set your mind to it?"

Catyana returned the smile from behind Yanita's shock of black hair. She still looked tired but didn't seem inclined to leave just yet. And there was a refreshing air of anticipation around her. Nova was glad her friend had recovered from her episode in the conference hall. But she didn't have time to wonder about it and turned her attention to the man before her.

"I'm sorry, Your Eminence, and I know you're right," said Bejad. "But I'm afraid introspection has never been one of my strong points. To be honest, even Netira rebuked me for being so outspoken regarding my duties."

"Really? That's a pleasant surprise and foretells good things of the initiate. But I'm sorry, Bejad, I don't see any possibility of assigning you to another field operation."

"Because of one mistake?" Bejad exclaimed.

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“One mistake, Bejad?”

He let his head droop. Hyelisa put her hand on his shoulder.

“You have a kind heart,” Nova continued, “and your decision to become a deacon was obviously a good one. If you’re willing, there is much work to be done in Travis.”

Bejad raised his head and sighed. Then he nodded.

“Good. You will return to Travis with the Lady Gevinesa and her sister as soon as we can arrange it. And you will not talk to anyone about this until you reach your destination. Bejad, I do mean anyone. You’re dismissed.”

Hyelisa took him to the door, where she gave him a light peck on the cheek before allowing him to leave. When she returned to her station, she gave Nova a grateful glance. Nova smiled in return.

Gevinesa eyed Nova skeptically. “You let him off easy.”

“What would you have me do? It wouldn’t have changed his nature if I had been harsh with him. As a matter of fact, I’m quite certain he would never recover if I told him he was responsible for so many losses.”

“In the Crimson Brigade, we would have made quick work of such a man.”

“Aren’t you grateful, then, that this isn’t the Crimson Brigade?”

Gevinesa sighed and nodded.

“Tanola, dearest, have you received the list of applicants yet?” Nova scanned the paper Tanola handed her. “The Lords Marusen and Cemasena wish an audience, but we don’t have much time left.”

“I doubt they’ve just come to pay their respects,” Tanola said.

“What do you think they want?” Catyana asked.

“Lord Marusen’s presence is a mystery to me, unless it has to do with Soshia’s death,” Nova replied. “But I know what Lord Cemasena wants. He’s afraid the outcome of this morning’s session will affect our technology agreement, and he wants to make sure we’ll uphold our end of the bargain.” She shot Vilam and Catyana an anxious glance.

“Nova!” Catyana exclaimed in dismay.

“I’m really sorry you had to find out like this, dearest. I promise we’ll talk about it later.”

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Vilam raised an eyebrow. “Technology agreement? So, what was all that you said the other day about wanting to make your technology available everywhere?”

“We do, but there are a few conditions attached. I’m sorry to disillusion you.”

Vilam grinned. “I’m not that naïve, Nova. Bargaining chips, eh?”

Nova sighed. “Natilya, please bring in the prisoner, then ask the two Lords if they would be willing to see me together.” When Natilya had left, she asked Gevinesa, “Were you informed about the events in the city yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Gevinesa. “The Lady Venora took some time earlier to see to our needs, and when I asked her if she knew anything about Bejad, she told me what happened.”

Nova sighed and nodded just as the prisoner was brought in by two guards and placed in the chair Bejad had occupied a few minutes ago. Although his hands and feet were tied securely, the guards remained at his side.

Natilya came back into the room and nodded, acknowledging that the Lords had agreed to see her together.

Nova turned to the prisoner. “What is your name?”

“I have nothing to say to you,” the man replied.

Nova studied him. “Very well. In that case you will be transported to Travis, where you will be tried for attempted murder and treason.”

“I demand to be tried here in Tolares.”

“You should have thought of that before you assaulted a liaison officer of the High Priestess. But your crime clearly falls in the Selanian Order’s jurisdiction. If you change your mind and allow us to question you, please notify your guards.”

As she regarded the man, an image filled her mind. She closed her eyes and it drifted toward her, just the way it had after the mental attack in Tolares yesterday. *Water and Fire, Earth and Spirit*. “Water,” she whispered. “Why are you underwater?”

She saw him stiffen and his eyes grew wide.

“Ah, because they’re calling you,” Nova said, her voice almost inaudible.

“How...how do you know about my dream?” The man’s voice quivered.

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A smile ghosted her lips. "I see you already have an appointment with destiny." She motioned to the guards. "Take him away and arrange for his departure. I want him under way within the hour."

The prisoner stared at her as the guards lifted him from the chair.

"What was that all about?" Gevinesa asked, following the guards with her eyes as they removed the man from the room.

"I'm not sure, but I believe we'll find out eventually." Nova looked at Catyana.

Catyana nodded. "I sensed it too."

Gevinesa eyed them curiously, but her expression became serious. "I think it might be best if I leave now."

"I won't force you to stay," said Nova, "but I really wish you would. I believe this encounter may be important."

Gevinesa gazed at her for a moment, deep in thought. But then she took a deep breath. "Alright, Nova. I trust you."

Nova signaled for Natilya to show the two Lords in. Then she motioned for Tanola to place another chair at the Lords' disposal.

But the first person to enter the room wasn't a Lord, it was a Lady. Lord Marusen, being a gentleman, allowed Mara to proceed him. As Tanola brought another chair, Mara rushed forward and embraced Nova. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to greet you earlier. I wanted so much to tell you how delighted I am that you're the High Priestess. It's so much more than I ever could have hoped for. But you seemed to be a bit busy after the morning session." She gave Catyana a sympathetic smile, who smiled back.

"No worries," said Nova in a whisper. "But I hoped you would join Lord Marusen for the audience."

"Why is that?" said Mara in an equally low voice.

"I don't know him that well, and I have no idea why he wants to see me."

"Don't worry, Nova. I trust Amendel with my life. He means no harm." She emphasized her last words and gazed at her with an intense expression on her face.

Nova raised her head just a fingerbreadth. "Alright, thank you."

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Mara nodded and went over to Catyana and kissed her on the cheek. She also caressed Yanita's hair before turning back. Gevinesa stood when Mara approached her, but she seemed surprised at Mara's warm greeting when the latter embraced her. "Gevinesa, it's so good to see you."

"Thank you, Maralena. It's been ages, but it's good to see another familiar face."

"You two know each other?" said Nova.

"Yes," said Maralena, "we saw each other off and on before Soshia and I left for the eastern provinces. Gevinesa was still quite young then, and I was designated as her companion for a while to help introduce her into society." To Gevinesa, she said, "Nova's sister Vodana and the young Lady Venora Tolares informed me of your circumstances. I'm glad you and your sister are now safe with us."

"Thank you for your thoughtful words, Maralena, although I don't know if I deserve such kindness."

"I agree," said Lord Marusen, who had stopped beside Mara with his friend, Lord Cemasena. Both Lords bowed respectfully to Nova, Catyana, and Vilam, but cast dark glances at Gevinesa.

"Mara, Your Excellencies, please be seated," Nova said, acknowledging their greeting with a nod.

The two Lords didn't budge. "Is the Lady's presence necessary?" Lord Marusen asked, nodding in Gevinesa's direction. Mara, who had taken the Lord's arm, also remained standing to show her support, but she dropped her gaze.

Nova couldn't help wondering what they had planned and said, "The Lady Gevinesa is a friend and has rendered invaluable services in the past five years."

"Does Your Eminence realize who this woman is?"

"I assume Your Lordship is referring to her former affiliation with the Crimson Brigade. The Lady Gevinesa and her sister have officially filed for asylum and have been placed under my personal protection. Won't you please be seated?"

They all took their seats but remained wary.

"What can I do for you?" Nova asked.

"Your Eminence," Lord Cemasena said, "first and foremost, we wish to distance ourselves from the behavior of our, um...associates this morning. We want you to know that we completely support the Advisory Council's choice in regard to the office of High Priestess."

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“I assume you speak for the both of you?” she asked, glancing at Lord Marusen.

Lord Marusen nodded.

“Then I thank you, Your Excellencies. I am relieved to hear it.”

“I also wish to express my pleasure at the way relations between House Cemasena and the Selanian Order have flourished in the past,” Lord Cemasena said, but it seemed he was choosing his words carefully. “I hope we may continue to be of service to Your Eminence in the future.”

Nova gave Vilam a significant glance, who grinned back at her. “You may remain assured of my gratitude,” she said to the Lord.

Lord Cemasena sighed in relief. “My good friend, Lord Amendel Marusen, also expressed a wish to become better acquainted with Your Eminence. Do you believe you might be able to accommodate him?”

“I’m certain we will find time for a more in-depth exchange during your sojourn here in Tolares,” Nova said with a nod in Lord Marusen’s direction, “especially since his companion, the young Lady Maralena Novesta, is a close friend of ours. Please advise your adjutant to contact my chief of staff, Her Grace Tanola Penates, for an appointment. Is there anything else I can do for you in the meantime?”

“Yes,” Lord Marusen said. “I would like to express my concern regarding my daughters, Cetila and Tavita. They have both disappeared.” His glance in Gevinesa’s direction was unmistakable.

“Nova, may I speak?” Gevinesa asked.

When Nova acknowledged her with a nod, Gevinesa turned to Lord Marusen. “My Lord, I know I can never atone for the horrible things I have done, and I can’t even begin to express how sorry I am for bringing your daughters into the Crimson Brigade. I beg of you, is there any way you could find it in your heart to forgive me?”

“It’s easy for you to speak, Gevinesa,” said Lord Marusen, “sitting there comfortably and under the protection of the High Priestess, while my family has been torn apart by events you helped instigate.”

Gevinesa seemed to be looking through the Lord, not at him. Then she fell to one knee before him, her head bowed. “Lord Marusen, I revoke my application for asylum with the High Priestess before all these witnesses and place my life in your hands. Do with me as you see fit. All I ask is that you care for my sister Yanita and personally guarantee her safety.”

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The Lord gazed at Gevinesa, studying her for a moment. Then he stood and turned to Nova, his face set in grim determination. “Your Eminence, would you allow me to use one of your swords?”

Nova fixed Mara with a questioning gaze. Mara seemed tense but responded with a nod. Nova nodded to Tanola, who unsheathed her sword and handed it to the Lord, offering him the hilt.

Lord Marusen took the weapon. “How serious are you in this, My Lady?”

Gevinesa looked up at him. Her jaw tightened and she got down on both knees. Her voice was hoarse as she said, “I deserve any punishment you deem adequate.” She squeezed her eyes shut and bowed her head in the manner of a condemned woman waiting for her executioner to strike.

Nova watched in silence, her hands clutching the armrests of her chair. The Lord stood at a slight angle to Gevinesa with the weapon pointing away from them, regarding her as if taking aim. There were several gasps when he suddenly swung the weapon in a half-circle and let it whoosh down on her. But the blade missed Gevinesa by a fingerbreadth, striking the floor with a metallic clang instead. Gevinesa flinched at the sound, but otherwise never budged. Nova realized the Lord had used the flat of the blade and not the edge. Even if his aim had gone astray, the worst that would have happened was for Gevinesa to wake up with a good-sized bump on her head.

Lord Marusen raised the sword and touched Gevinesa’s shoulder with the blade. “My Lady, I can be neither your judge nor your executioner. But you have proven to me this day that your remorse is sincere. Please rise, for you need kneel only before the One to whom we must all one day answer for our deeds.”

Gevinesa looked up at him, tears in her eyes. The Lord helped her to her feet and showed her to her chair. She seemed shaken but resumed her seat with as much dignity as she could muster.

Nova let her breath escape in a rush. Mara’s eyes were glistening, but she rewarded Nova with a weak smile and mouthed, “Thank you.” Nova nodded. Mara pulled her chair over to Gevinesa and put her arm around her, whispering comforting words. Nova smiled at the sight. She didn’t expect anything less of Mara.

But it was high time to see how the others were faring, and she looked around to gauge their emotional state. All the acolytes’ faces were ashen, and Hyelisa still had her hand over her mouth. Nova felt a faint smile on her lips when she saw that Vilam was unperturbed, and his expression was an excellent depiction of cold analysis. Catyana was pale and stared wide-eyed with her hand

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held over the sleeping Yanita's eyes. She swallowed and nodded that she was alright. Tanola stared at the sword when the Lord returned it to her but managed to restore it to its sheath.

As the Lord took his seat, Nova said, "Your Excellency, I have not been deceived regarding the integrity of your character. I bow to your wisdom."

"Your Eminence, you see before you a man who has been broken by the betrayal of a once beloved wife, the alienation of two beloved daughters, and the loss of a beloved son and daughter. If I had not had Mara's support, and the support of my friend here beside me and his family, I do not know if I would be here today. What you mistake for wisdom is perhaps only one disillusioned man's submission to his fate."

"What else is wisdom?" Nova said, her voice soft. "'For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.' You have not allowed your experience to embitter you, My Lord. For that I cannot but respect you."

The Lord studied her. "Under normal circumstances, I would never allow anyone to cite scripture at me. But I see the Council has chosen well. You speak only of what you have suffered yourself."

They measured each other silently.

"How may I be of assistance, My Lord?" Nova finally asked.

"I would be grateful for any intelligence you could give me regarding my daughters."

"Nova, may I?" Gevinesa asked.

Nova nodded.

"My Lord, I believe Cetila is on an assignment with the Crimson Brigade somewhere in the Northern Forests, but she should be arriving in Tolares by the end of the week. And I have heard Tavita is already here in the city."

"What is the source of your information?" he asked.

"I...eavesdropped on my father and my brother."

"Is there anything more you can tell me?"

"No. I'm afraid my father has not trusted me in years and has cut me off from his operations."

"Still, you knew Tavita quite well. Do you have any suspicions?"

"She always wanted to be part of a covert operation to infiltrate the Council in Travis. I assume that is still her goal."

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The Lord glanced at Nova. “Would Your Eminence be so kind as to inform me if you should acquire any new intelligence?”

“Of course.”

“You are most kind.”

Nova looked at Lord Cemasena. “May I inquire as to your father’s well-being?”

“Thank you for your concern, Your Eminence,” the Lord replied. “The last I heard, he was doing well and is very happy with his position as mayor of Elinas.”

“And what of your wife and your children, the young Lady Denadya and the young Lord Tuval?”

“My wife is well, and I believe Dena and Tuval are both in good health. But I assume you are referring to...” He raised an eyebrow.

“You may speak freely in this room, Your Excellency,” Nova said.

“You are referring to their work for the Resistance in Divestelan.”

“Yes. I haven’t seen them since we visited you in Cemasena four years ago. You were undoubtedly informed that we took the southern route before returning to Nadil?”

“My father informed me of your visit. He felt honored by the confidence you placed in him.”

“And my trust in him has not been misplaced.” Nova looked at both men. “My Lords, these are dark times, and I fear they will become more dismal before things get better. I trust I may count on your unwavering support?”

The men nodded, but their faces were grim.

“Then I hope we meet again soon and in good health. I wish you a good day.”

The Lords rose from their seats and bowed to Nova and her entourage. Nova stepped forward and gave Mara a hug.

When they had left, Nova took Gevinesa’s hand and helped her out of her chair. “What would you like to do, Vinesa? Would you rather stay here and travel with us when we return to Travis, or would you rather leave for Travis as soon as we can arrange it?”

“Thank you, Nova. I would love nothing more than to stay here for a while. But I have a bad feeling about my father’s plans, so for Yanita’s sake, I think it’s best we get as far from the western provinces as possible.” She cast a glance at the sleeping Yanita. “The poor girl has been

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traumatized enough these past days, and I think some distance to the events might hasten her recovery. Besides, the Tyenar Mountains are beautiful this time of year, and she's never seen them."

Nova gazed at her and nodded. "You're right. I hate to see you go, but it might be for the best." Turning to her chief of staff, she said, "Tanola, would you please arrange transport for them? If possible, I'd like Gevinesa, Yanita, and Bejad to leave within the hour. And please assign a threefold escort. The prisoner is to be transported by the southern route through Suvilta, but I want Gevinesa to be sent by the direct route via Nadil and Vetena. But first, please dispatch couriers to all our district headquarters between here and Travis and inform them of the princess's arrival. Let the superintendent of each office know I hold every one of them directly responsible for the princess's safe passage until she and her sister arrive in Travis. They are to ensure the princess's safety by any means necessary. How quickly do you think you can arrange that?"

Tanola nodded. "I'll make sure the couriers are dispatched immediately, and I should be able to have the princess and her companions underway within the hour."

"Thank you." She squeezed the priestess's arm with a smile and clutched Gevinesa in a warm embrace. "I hope I see you again soon, Vinesa. Thank you for everything."

"I'm in your debt, Nova," said Gevinesa. "I'm certain you saved our lives."

They embraced again, and Gevinesa took the sleeping Yanita from Catyana and left the room with Tanola.

"I suppose that went well enough," said Nova, looking around. "Natilya, you wanted to speak with me?"

Natilya nodded and took the chair Mara had just occupied.

Nova turned to Catyana. "I'm sorry, dearest, but I believe this is private. Why don't you go up to our new suite? Cortina should be waiting outside and will show you the way." Catyana favored her with a vague smile but didn't really seem to be looking at her. She was about to turn away, but Nova put her hand on her arm. "Catyana, what's wrong? You've been so quiet."

Catyana took a deep breath and smiled at her, but Nova couldn't quite interpret her expression. "I'm just tired. I'll rest for a while."

Catyana again tried to turn away, but Nova didn't release her hold, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion. "Are you...expecting someone?"

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That got Catyana's attention and she looked straight at her friend, her eyes narrowed. "Nova, privacy?"

Nova gasped. "Oh, no, Catyana, I would never read your mind! Please, don't ever think that. It's just...you have expectation screaming out of you, so it's either *something*, or *someone*. Feels more like...*someone*."

Catyana took her hands. "Nova, please, let me keep this to myself, just for a while."

Nova probed her face but nodded. "Alright, if it's something that makes you happy."

"I don't know yet. But it might be."

Nova gave her a hug. "Will you try to sleep?"

"Maybe for a while. I really am very tired, and you did say the afternoon session might be difficult."

"It would be a miracle if it wasn't. I'll be up in just a while, alright?" She squeezed Catyana's hand and let her go. As Catyana turned away, Nova couldn't quite help feeling apprehensive.

She turned to Vilam. "I'm sorry, my friend, but I must ask you to leave."

Vilam returned her glance with a peculiar little smile. "I understand. Thank you for allowing me to stay during the audience. I must say, it was most enlightening." He bowed to her and exited the room.

Nova was left alone with Natilya and the other acolytes, who remained at attention at their posts. She pulled her chair closer to Natilya's and kept her voice low. "Alright, dearest, what did you wish to speak to me about?"

"I know this is bad timing, but how terrible would it be if I resigned from the Order?"

Nova had been afraid of this. "Why do you ask?" She tried to appear calm.

Natilya took a deep breath. "I believe Lord Tolares's proposal of marriage is imminent, and I feel inclined to accept."

Nova looked into Natilya's eyes. Natilya was very pretty and usually a cheerful person, although Nova sensed she often used this mask of joviality to cover up the conflicts she carried out beneath the surface. Nova had only seen Ilanya Divestelan once, at the conference five years ago. The similarity between the two women was immediately apparent to anyone who knew what to look for. She even saw the resemblance in Gevinesa and Yanita. But it wasn't her place to tell Natilya who her parents were. "Natilya, dearest, are you sure this is what you want?"

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Natilya looked her in the eye. “I know it’s difficult to understand, but I’m certain I’d make him happy.” It was impossible to overlook the tears glistening in her eyes.

“I don’t believe his happiness is at stake here.”

“Don’t you believe I would make him a good wife?”

“On the contrary, with your training and experience, you would make an excellent consort for any Lord. Only a fool would pass up such a chance if he could get you.”

Natilya smiled at her and brushed away a tear. “Thank you, Nova. You’re so kind.”

“No, just honest. Really, Tilya, I believe you would make an outstanding Lady Tolares.”

Natilya stared at her, surprised. “I...don’t know what to say.”

Nova gazed into her eyes. When she spoke again, her voice was soft. “I’m very sorry if I didn’t tell you enough how much I cherish you. It’s my fault if you’ve come to believe it would take the title of a Lady to measure your worth.”

Natilya’s mouth fell open. “No, that’s not...I mean ...” She sighed. “Nova, I was never able to thank you for talking to Auntie Utalya.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

There was a faint smile on Natilya’s lips. “That’s just like you, never taking credit. But you can’t twist your way out of this one. Auntie told me everything. She was quite shocked. Thank you for sticking up for me. Auntie apologized for being so overprotective. She even said I’m all grown up now, and she’ll back any decision I make, even...even if I were to marry Lord Tolares.”

“I don’t need to take the credit for that, Tilya. Give *her* the credit. That must have been quite a step for her.” They smiled at each other, but Nova felt more sorrow than joy. She took Natilya’s hands. “Dearest, wouldn’t you rather think about it some more? You’re such a gifted student. We need you in the Order.”

Natilya’s expression was serious as she regarded Nova. “I’m sorry it’s been so difficult for me to express my thoughts and feelings. But please believe me, this is what I long for, with spirit, soul, and body.”

“Alright, then, I allow you to resign if that is what you truly wish. But please remember, there will always be a place for you here if you ever wish to return. When will be your last day?”

“I’ll perform my duties until I’m officially engaged. Longer, if you need me to.”

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“No, that’s fine, although I appreciate the offer. But when Lord Tolares asks you to become his wife, I guarantee you’ll have more than enough on your own plate.” Nova stood and pulled Natilya up with her. She gave her a warm hug and kissed her on the cheek. Natilya smiled and left the room without another word. Nova watched her go, not quite sure what to think. She signaled the remaining acolytes to follow her out of the room.

36. An Insightful Question

Nemara took another quick glance around to ensure no one had followed her before disappearing into the woods behind the training hall. Her heart was all aflutter, but not because of the man she was going to meet, although he probably would have thought so. When she had resumed her normal duties that morning, she would never have believed the completion of her life’s work might be in reach by noon.

The morning had brought several surprises, although that had been expected since it was the first day of the conference, and everyone was tense because of the imminent debut of the High Priestess. Nemara had favored several candidates, not because they were particularly sympathetic, but because she gave them greater chances of having been elected. If she was honest, the young Lady Satural had not been very high on her list, despite the fact that she was the Lady Utalya’s protégée. Nemara had been pleasantly surprised when she heard the accounts of how well the young Lady had handled herself during the morning session, and Nova had risen even more in her esteem.

There was a less pleasant surprise when Eratis informed her that his cover might have been blown. He relayed his apprehension that the young Lady Gevinesa may have spied on them during his meeting with Lord Divestelan and the young Lord Novesta last night, and asked her to meet him in the woods behind the training hall after the audience to inform him of the verdict. If his suspicion proved to be unfounded, he would return to work with apologies for his brief absence. If, on the other hand, they came looking for him after the Lady Gevinesa had been debriefed, he would be forced to leave immediately and would never be able to return. The thought saddened her, since she had come to respect Eratis as a competent and honorable man in the ten years they had worked together.

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But her greatest surprise had come when she had taken the High Priestess's entourage to the parlor where Her Eminence would hold the audience. This was the first time Nemara had been so close to her target, and her heart had been racing. But then her fingers had brushed Catyana's cheek, and Catyana had clutched her hand. It felt as if someone had poured glowing coals into her heart. A thrill went down her spine, and she felt goose bumps rising on her skin. In all of her admittedly very long life, no target had ever done that to her.

Then, after the audience, she had shown Catyana to the Royal Suite on the fifth floor. The whole way up, Nemara's heart had been pounding. The suite itself contained the most luxurious set of chambers in the residence and, because of its size, Nemara was able to prolong their time together. The main entrance opened into an extensive living area with a magnificent window front and balcony facing the gardens, several groups of seating arrangements, an assortment of tables, bookcases, and a small office space with two desks. The bedroom was even larger and contained two generously proportioned canopy beds with sapphire blue drapery; a dressing area consisting of several full-sized floor mirrors, three vanities, a few dressers and commodes, and a substantial walk-in closet; and a comfortable reading area with coffee tables, armchairs, and sofas. The bathroom with the sunken whirlpool tub and toilet facilities was just as lavish and adjoined the bedroom.

Catyana had shown a mild interest in her new accommodations, but her eyes had mostly remained on Nemara, almost making her blush. After Nemara had explained the suite's basic amenities, they had stood by the main entrance just looking at each other, and Nemara couldn't bring herself to leave. The situation might have become awkward, but Catyana finally took her hands, and the longing in her eyes had been unmistakable. She then gave Nemara a kiss on the cheek, nudged her into the hallway, and slowly closed the door, never taking her eyes off her until the lock had clicked into place, separating them for the time being.

The silent invitation in Catyana's eyes had changed everything for Nemara. She had originally wanted to draw the contract out a little longer. She usually enjoyed taking the time to get to know her targets since she would be spending eternity with them, and Catyana was special. But if Catyana was expecting her, then Nemara certainly didn't want to disappoint the girl. She didn't know if Catyana had somehow realized who she was, but just the possibility that her target might

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wish for her soul to be released into the shadows sent a shiver down her back. If Catyana truly was the one, then Nemara, too, would soon find the peace she so longed for.

But this was no time for pleasant thoughts. She had work to do, so she took a deep breath to regain her focus. Her pace was quick, and she soon reached the place where she had arranged to meet Eratis. It was a lovely spot near a stream and not too far from the residence, which was why they had often used it in the past when they needed to discuss business that was too sensitive to be debated in the residence. Eratis was sitting on a rock waiting for her and stood when she approached. When she was close enough, he said, “Cortina, what news?”

She had already decided to remain in character, at least to begin with, so she made sure her eyes were glistening as she shook her head. “I’m so sorry, but it’s as you feared. Almost immediately after the Lady Gevinesa entered the High Priestess’s audience chamber, they came looking for you.”

Eratis nodded. “The High Priestess had the Lady’s extraction planned well beforehand, and it’s almost certain the Lady made use of the spyhole they discovered in her room this morning. She’s well trained and no fool. I can only bow before such a worthy adversary.”

“But she’s cost you your position as steward!”

“As I said, Gevinesa is a worthy opponent. It’s no disgrace to lose a battle of wits to her. What I can’t understand is why she changed sides. I can’t believe she no longer supports her father’s convictions. We all yearn for a free world, filled with the enlightened wisdom of true holiness. That’s an ideal I’m prepared to give my life for.” He turned back to her. “Did you have someone in place to watch where they took Martan?”

Nemara nodded. “He was being held in the servant’s annex. They took him to the south end of the estate soon after the audience was over. The coach has a defense of six: four guards and two coachmen. We had them followed. They’re taking the southern route via Suvilta.”

“Good. I’ve already organized a small posse of four Black Guards to follow them. If we’re quick, we should overtake them before they reach Suvilta. But it’ll be a taxing ride, since they already have at least an hour’s head start on us.”

“Why would you do that? Corsen doesn’t believe Martan to be worth the trouble.”

“Corsen is a fool. He doesn’t know a good man when he sees one. Martan’s performance as a special courier has been exemplary. I’m sure Vechiles would agree he’s worth rescuing.”

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Nemara had to drop her gaze to suppress a smile. After being confronted with Corsen's incompetence herself yesterday, she agreed wholeheartedly with Eratis's description of the young Lord. Continuing her act, she finally said, "When will I see you again?"

Eratis studied her, and she made sure he saw the supposed pain in her eyes before she dropped her gaze again. "I don't know," he said. "Please don't be sad. We will see each other again, if not here, then in a better world than this."

"Is there then no hope for us?"

"I'm truly sorry, Cortina. I would never wish to hurt you, but I feel there's still something important I need to do in this life. My heart must remain free."

Seeing the look on his face, Nemara sighed, rubbed her eyes to get rid of the crocodile tears, and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I can't do this to you." Thinking of Catyana, she smiled and put her hand on his shoulder. "I hope you're not too shocked, but I had to keep up this performance as part of my cover. And I really am very grateful. It was a good exercise, having you to practice on these past ten years."

"What are you talking about?"

"I made you believe I fell for you." With a smirk, she added, "You're sometimes a bit of a dumbass, you know? Like many good people, you can be much too gullible, and it was almost too easy, making you think I was in love with you. But I have enjoyed working with you, and I've truly come to respect you, Eratis. I didn't want you to leave thinking you'd left a broken heart behind. I know you well enough to realize that would have weighed heavily on your conscience."

"You've been playing me for a fool this whole time?"

He expression became somber. "Is that what you think?"

"Well, what am I supposed to think?"

"That I was doing my job, as were you."

"It was your job to make me think you were in love with me?"

She gazed up at him, scrutinizing his features. "You're an honest man, so please be honest now. How often in the past ten years have you had romantic thoughts or feelings toward me?"

He tried to keep his eyes on hers, but she could see the color rising to his face and he dropped his gaze.

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“Exactly.” She put her hand on his arm. “Eratis, it’s not a crime to feel attracted to someone. And a bit of romance and sexual tension never hurt anyone. The question is, what do you do with it? You’re an honorable man, and I never felt you overstepped your bounds. In our case, our superiors felt we would profit from a relationship in which we were more than just colleagues focused on their assignments, especially since our mission was long-term. Personally, I think our relationship benefited greatly from a bit of romantic banter. Don’t you agree?”

Eratis nodded. “I admit, that is true. But it was also dangerous. What if our relationship had blossomed into a full-fledged affair? That could easily have complicated matters.”

“Now you’re not giving me enough credit. I’m a highly trained expert with more years of experience than you could even imagine, and I take pride in my work. Believe me, there was never any danger of our relationship getting out of hand.”

“Are you saying you never had any feelings for me?”

“I’m not saying that at all. But I’ve been doing this for a very long time. I know how to do my job. But these past months, I’ve sensed a change. My supposed affection for you has been making you uncomfortable, hasn’t it?”

“Yes. I can’t tell you why, but it has. I felt as if our relationship were pinning me down, and I needed to remain free.”

“You did mention that earlier.”

Eratis dropped his gaze and his brow creased into folds. “I wonder why that name keeps spinning around in my head,” he muttered under his breath. “Enavilara, huh.”

Nemara’s mouth fell open. She grabbed his arm and looked him in the eye. “Did you just say ‘*Enavilara*’?”

He scratched his head. “You caught that, did you?”

She shot him a sidelong glance. “Do you even know what that means?”

“Uh...no. I have no idea.”

“Is that what’s been drawing you, making you feel you needed to remain free?”

He gaped at her. “How did you know?”

“Because you can’t really have the one without the other.” She smiled. “To be honest, I envy you. I wish I had been called. But since I’m a woman, I’m afraid that’s physically impossible. And

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Enavilara!” She looked him over and shook her head. “There must be more to you than meets the eye.”

“Cortina, what in Anae’s name are you talking about?”

Nemara took his hands and gave them a quick squeeze. “I’m happy for you, truly I am. But this is something you’ll have to experience for yourself. Besides, I’m sure Enavilara would kill me if I told you more than I already have.”

“So, you know what’s been making me so restless?”

“I’m fairly certain, yes.”

“And you’re not going to tell me?”

“Not on your life!” she said with a grin.

Eratis sighed. “Alright, have it your way. But I’m assuming my restlessness could have interfered with your little game, right? So, if circumstances were different and I didn’t have to leave, what would you have done about it?”

“Well, one strategy that often provides excellent results in such cases is the rival method.” At his questioning glance, she added, “Meaning I would have pretended to gradually fall in love with someone else. That would have given you some space, if that’s what you needed. Or the rivalry might have drawn you back into our relationship. Either outcome would have worked, and neither would have had to remain permanent, which is always an advantage.”

Eratis raised his eyebrows. “You really do know what you’re talking about, don’t you?”

“That’s what they pay me for. So, do you forgive me?”

He finally smiled. “There doesn’t seem to be anything to forgive, since you were only doing your job.”

She returned his smile. “I’m glad you can see it that way.”

“And thank you for not sending me on my way believing I had broken your heart. I really appreciate that.”

“My pleasure. You’re a good man, and that was the least I could do.” She awarded him a playful smile. “But you should have seen the look on your face when I dropped my act. I wouldn’t have missed that for the world!”

He grinned at her. “I suppose I did look quite confused. But if what I’ve seen of you these past ten years was just an act, who are you really, Cortina?”

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“Most of it wasn’t an act. But you always did have a knack for asking insightful questions,” she said with a chuckle, “and this one is certainly not without merit.”

He raised his chin just a fraction. “So, you’re not going to tell me.”

“Sorry, I know you’re a man of integrity, but my current assignment seems to be at a critical stage, and I can’t risk blowing my cover so close to a possible conclusion. Cortina will have to do for now.”

“Your current assignment? You mean, administering the potions to the young Lord and Lady?”

She scoffed. “Administering the potions? You can’t be serious. Oh, don’t worry, they’ll continue to receive a dose whenever we attempt another trial run, and I’ll ensure we proceed with the Lady Venora’s conditioning, for all the good it’s done us. We’ve been at this for months and we’ve hardly made a dent. All she does is stare down at her brother for a few minutes and then wander aimlessly around the residence. I doubt another couple of weeks will change that.”

“I agree, it does seem a bit futile.” He took a deep breath. “Well, alright then, I suppose this is good-bye.” He stretched out his hand.

“Oh, come now. After everything we’ve been through together? We can do better than that.” She gave him a hug, then she put her hands on his shoulders, reached up, and planted a kiss on his cheek. “I really do wish you well, Eratis. Although, given the circumstance, I doubt that will be a problem. Enavilara,” she chuckled, shaking her head. “Unbelievable! But you need to leave. I’ll do my best to deflect their attention away from you. And please give Enavilara my love when you see her.”

“Does she know you by the name ‘Cortina’?”

“Oh, right.” She studied him for a moment. If everything went as she hoped with Catyana, then it was very possible Nemara wouldn’t be around much longer, so his knowing her name wouldn’t hurt. And if Enavilara had truly chosen him, his life as he knew it was about to come to an end anyway. She nodded. “Alright, tell her Nemara is looking forward to seeing her again, be it in this life or the next.”

“Nemara.” He looked into her eyes. “That’s a beautiful name. But who are you, Nemara?”

“I’m with the Order of the Novantan.”

He sucked in his breath. “You’re the assassin Vechiles mentioned?”

She fixed him with a penetrating glance. “Vechiles mentioned me?”

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“No, he mentioned that Lusina Marusen had put out a contract. But I can still put one and one together. Are you really going to kill Her Grace Faeren?”

“Of course,” she said with a smile, thinking of Catyana’s golden hair.

He shook his head. “Despite your protestations to the contrary, I’m not sure I really know you. How can you be so cold about it?”

Nemara’s mouth popped open. “Cold?” Her eyes narrowed just a fraction. “Don’t talk about things you don’t understand, Eratis. And I think it’s time you left.” This time, her voice really was cold, and she already knew she would regret it.

He nodded and gave her another probing glance before turning away. She watched the retreat of his gallant figure until he disappeared between the trees. Then she turned and headed back toward the residence. The stream she followed led past a thicket, and onward to a trail that would lead her to the training hall.

She shook her head. Why did they always have to think an assassin was cold? And why did it always have to affect her so? She really hadn’t wanted those to be their last words together. But it was too late now, and she couldn’t change it, so she pushed it out of her mind.

Instead, her hand went to her chest and her fingers tightened around her blouse. She could feel her heart racing again, and she smiled. Who could blame her for thinking of Catyana? She would have to keep her eyes and ears open, but if Catyana was working toward the same goal, she was sure they would soon find an opportunity to be alone together. The thought sent another delicious chill down her back.

She got a startled look from an elderly gardener when she burst out of the woods and hurried down the walkway to the young Lord’s workshop. But she just waved at him and smiled as she passed, trying her best to walk at a more moderate pace, and he grinned and waved back, shaking his head.

37. The Vote

Nova arrived at the conference building in her heavily guarded carriage with Catyana, Vilam, Tanola, and Natilya half an hour before the afternoon session was to begin. They stopped as close to the dome as possible, which was difficult because of the large throng that had assembled to

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gawk at the High Priestess, her golden-haired protégée, and the man whom everyone assumed was the Emissary. Nova sighed, but she could understand the people's curiosity.

The rest of her personal guard had gone ahead and immediately surrounded them when they descended the vehicle. As added protection, every one of them, including Nova and Catyana, now carried a sword strapped around their waist. Besides the sword Catyana had made for him yesterday morning, Vilam naturally wouldn't go anywhere without his bow case, which he kept slung over his shoulder.

As the High Priestess's party approached the conference building, Nova saw a group of guards dressed in the attire of the Western Alliance on one side of the crowd lining the path to the building. Tanola and Natilya gripped the hilts of their swords and kept their eyes on the group.

Just as they drew abreast, a corporal tore himself away from his comrades, stepped out of the crowd, and dropped to his knee before them. Nova's guard immediately whipped out their swords and surrounded her. One of the corporal's comrades cursed loudly.

"Your Eminence, please, have mercy," the guard cried in his rumbling bass voice.

Nova studied the man kneeling before them. She exchanged a glance with Catyana and Vilam. Yes, they had recognized him too. She nodded to Tanola and stepped forward as her guard retreated to both sides, keeping the crowd at bay. "You're the corporal we apprehended beating the chyeves in Nadil."

"Yes, Your Eminence."

"And you were the one responsible for the brawl in Folan's tavern afterward."

"Yes." He hung his head.

"Corporal, you almost killed Folan."

He looked up at her. "Please, have mercy."

"What is your request?"

"Your Eminence, I am a simple man. I know I'm coarse and vulgar, and I don't speak in the High Tongue as you do."

"Go on."

"I...I never met anyone before who was so kind to me. I saw what they did to you this morning, Your Eminence, and I wanted you to know that I had nothing to do with it, nor did I condone it."

"What is your name, Corporal?"

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“Uraten Catanin.”

Nova regarded the man, measuring him with cautious scrutiny. “Uraten, do you remember what you asked me in the tavern after I tended your wound?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And do you remember my answer?”

“I’ll never forget it for as long as I live.”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes, ma’am. Please, all I want is a chance to make amends.”

“Uraten, this is important. Are you asking the High Priestess for asylum?”

“Oh, yes, ma’am, please. I no longer wish to be a servant of those people.” He bowed his head.

Nova glanced at Catyana. Her friend nodded. They both sensed Uraten’s sincerity. And unless they were wholly mistaken, she would rather not think of the fate that awaited him if she compelled him to return to his comrades. “Roll up your left sleeve, Uraten. Remove the bandage from your wound and raise your arm as far as you can above your head.”

The guard looked puzzled, but he obeyed.

When he was ready, Nova glanced around. Many more had joined the crowd, wanting to catch a glimpse of the new High Priestess, and curious to learn what the commotion was all about. Nova took a deep breath and raised her chin. “Let everyone present hear my voice,” she called, “the voice of your High Priestess.”

A hush fell upon the crowd.

“Behold the man kneeling before me, and behold the wound in his left arm. Let it be known to all; when the Covatal launched his arrow from the Prophet’s Bow in Nadil, it penetrated this man’s arm and pinned him to a wooden post. It was through this man’s injury that the Divine Emissary was revealed to us. Let us honor him for this service.”

A surprised murmur went through the crowd at this revelation. Uraten stared at her in stunned silence.

“Let it also be known that this man is now under my protection. Any who would attempt to harm him in any way shall feel my wrath. So be it.” Nova looked down at the corporal. “Alright, Uraten, I’ve done my part. Now it’s up to you to prove it was worth the trouble. And I warn you, I don’t enjoy being made a fool of.” She took his hand and helped him up.

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“Your Eminence, I assure you, you’ll never regret what you’ve done for me today.”

“I hope not.” She turned to Vilam. “I’m leaving him in your custody.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Vilam growled in a low voice.

“Every now and then. Why, what’s the problem?”

“Why did you say those things about me? You might as well have stood up during the conference and declared I was the Emissary.”

“I’m sorry, Vilam, but I think you did a pretty good job of declaring yourself after our little skirmish with the guards this morning. Besides, it’s just something you’ll have to get used to.”

“Well, I don’t enjoy being put in the limelight like that.”

“Welcome to the society of reluctant prominence, my friend.” Nova offered him a playful smile and strode forward.

They reached the conference hall with no further interruptions. At the gate, she saw that the young lieutenant was on duty who had stopped Catyana and her yesterday morning. She flashed him a teasing smile as she passed. He lowered his head and cleared his throat in embarrassment.

She was soon seated at her table. The Lady Utalya had resumed her position at the main conference table with Natilya at her side, so Catyana, being the High Priestess’s protégée, was now officially her deputy and had taken the seat on her left. Tanola, as Nova’s chief of staff, remained on her right as the High Priestess’s adjutant, as she had done during the morning session.

Nova looked back and saw Mara and her mother sitting in the first row of the seating area behind her. She had arranged it for them yesterday because she was quite certain she knew what would be happening in just a few minutes, and she could use their help, if they were willing. When they saw her looking, they smiled and waved. Nova got up and walked over to speak with them, all the while attempting to steady the sword at her right, so it didn’t bang against her thigh. Carrying a weapon of this size was proving to be quite a challenge. But maybe Vilam or Vordalin could give them a few hints.

When she was close enough, Tsenera reached out and stroked Nova’s black, ceremonial sash. “It really becomes you.” She looked her in the eye. “I am so proud of you, Nova.”

Nova leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. “You deserve much of the credit. I probably wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t helped me all those years ago.”

“I only did what any other caring mother would do. You know I did it gladly.”

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“I do. And how is...?”

“Cora is doing just fine. Of course, we don’t see her very often. Her duties as Council courier take her away for much of the year. But she writes regularly and lets us know where she is and what she’s up to.”

“Is she still calling herself that?”

Tsenera shrugged. “I would prefer Sarena, too. But you know how she is.”

“All too well. But thank you. I’m glad she’s doing alright.”

Mara’s eyes had been wandering back and forth between Nova and her mother. “How long have you two known each other?”

Nova and Tsenera exchanged a glance. “What would you say?” said Tsenera. “About twenty years?”

“That sounds about right.”

Mara just stared at them. “You’ve known each other for twenty years?”

“More or less,” said Nova. “I’m sorry I never told you, but until a few days ago, our combined circumstances wouldn’t allow it. And now that the situation has changed, I wanted to speak with your mother first since it’s her secret, too. We haven’t really had the chance to talk, but it seems she doesn’t mind.” Nova gave Tsenera an inquiring look.

The Lady nodded. “It’s high time you knew,” she said to Mara.

“How did you get to know each other?” Mara said.

“Well,” said Nova, “it’s actually quite an amusing story, because I was running away from home, and your mother found me in one of your gardeners’ sheds. I didn’t even realize I had stumbled onto the Novesta family estate.”

“You ran away from home?” said Mara, her mouth agape.

“Yes, I was going through a difficult phase with Utalya, and I needed some space. But let’s leave that for another time.”

“Alright. But, Mom, you never told me why Corasarena became a ward of House Novesta. Soshia and I were already gone by then, so I didn’t get to know her very well. She’s a relative, right?”

“I...think she’s something like your first cousin once removed,” said Tsenera, “and we don’t leave relatives who are in trouble to fend for themselves, especially when they’re just infants.”

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“Where are her parents?”

“Her father just up and disappeared,” said Nova, “and her mother wasn’t in any condition to care for her, so your mother and I both felt it would be best if she was raised by, uh...relatives.”

“How do you know her?” said Mara to Nova.

“I was actually the one who arranged for her to stay with your family,” said Nova. “I’ve been keeping tabs on her ever since.”

“So, you knew her mother?”

“Yes, the poor girl was in a pitiful state at that time and was only too glad to give up her daughter, especially since she knew she would be well cared for.”

“So, Pira was kind of like her big sister, right Mom?”

“She was, yes, along with Cetila and Dena. But then, you know Tavita wasn’t the only charge of the Nursemaids.” Tsenera looked at Mara with a knowing smile.

Mara grinned. “Maybe, but Tavita was definitely their main charge. Everywhere they went, Tavita was sure to go. But the Nursemaids rotated between their Houses, and Corasarena was only part of the group when they were in Novesta, right?”

“That’s right. I wanted her and Davina home with me. Just because my sister doesn’t care for her charges doesn’t mean I don’t.” Tsenera directed a meaningful glance at Mara.

Mara turned her head away for a moment. There were tears in her eyes when she looked back at her mother. “I’m so sorry for the way I misjudged you, Mom.”

Tsenera sighed. “I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve been trying to put myself in your and Soshia’s shoes, on the run for all those years. Of course, you had to become suspicious of everyone and everything just to survive. A simple slipup could have been lethal, and in the end, it was.” Mara bit her lip. Tsenera saw it and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I should have been more assertive and found a way to let you know you could always come to me, despite Lusina’s tyranny.”

“Oh, Mom, please don’t blame yourself. You know it wasn’t that simple.”

Mara had been playing with the chain of her pendant, and Nova nodded at the gemstone she kept tucked away in her bodice. “Have you told your mother yet?”

Mara dropped her gaze. “I haven’t quite found the courage to show her.”

“Show me what?” said Tsenera.

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Mara took a deep breath, then she pulled the ruby out and placed it carefully over her heart. The dark red glimmering jewel set in the gold pendant made quite an impression against the backdrop of Mara's black velvet bodice.

Tsenera sucked in her breath and stared in awe. "Mara!" She gaped at her daughter, and from the flailing of her hands it seemed she wasn't quite sure whether to grab her daughter by the shoulders or hug her. She finally decided on the latter and clutched her daughter to herself in a tight embrace.

Mara shot Nova a glance over her mother's shoulder, and her smile seemed at the same time happy and helpless.

Tsenera finally pulled back, holding Mara's hand, but there were wet streaks on her face. She dabbed them off with a handkerchief. "Oh, Mara, you can't believe how proud I am of you. I always hoped you might have the aptitude. How did you find out?"

Mara's smile was filled with sorrow. "It was Soshia. She kept urging me on. Did you know she had an amethyst ascendant that rivaled Lusina's?"

"Oh, honey." Tsenera took a deep breath. "There is so much I've missed out on. I should have been more steadfast, but you know how difficult it is to stand up to your Aunt Lusina. I was always afraid if I openly acknowledged Soshia and you, she might come after you just to spite me."

Mara put her hand on her mother's arm. "I know. It was the same reason I was never able to tell Amendel the truth, although I so bitterly wanted to."

"I'm afraid I have to return to my seat," said Nova. "I need to begin this afternoon's session in just a minute. But I wanted to ask you both if you would stand with me."

"Oh, Nova, you have no idea what this means to me," said Tsenera, nodding at her daughter's ruby. "Of course I'll stand with you. What do you need me to do?"

"Mara?"

"Do you even need to ask?" said Mara.

"When I begin the session," said Nova, "I'm almost certain there'll be an intervention from the western houses. If you would come forward when you feel it's appropriate, I'd be in your debt."

"Of course, but what can we do?" said Mara.

"You'll see," said Nova with a smile. She leaned forward and gave both Mara and Tsenera a kiss on the cheek. "And thank you."

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When she returned to her seat, she nudged Catyana. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m alright,” Catyana whispered.

“Are you sure? You seem a bit...distracted.”

“No, I’m fine, really.” Catyana managed a smile to show her she meant it.

Nova nodded, but the time had gotten away from her. The clock showed exactly *nolavelates*, so she took a deep breath and stood. The participants in the hall fell silent. “Friends and representatives, I welcome you to the second session of this conference. After the questions raised by this morning’s events, it is important we proceed as quickly as possible. But before we commence, are there any urgent items that take precedence?”

One of the Lords of the western houses stood and cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Your Eminence.”

Nova recognized the prominent crimson birthmark on the Lord’s right cheek. It was Tsenera’s husband. Nova had, of course, been expecting this, and wondered in what way they would attack her. “Yes, Lord Novesta?”

“We seem to have a problem.”

“Please proceed.”

“May I ask your age, Your Eminence?”

Nova stared at him. So that was what they were up to! “Of what relevance is that to our business here, Your Excellency?”

“Please bear with me for a moment, Your Eminence.”

“Alright. I am forty-three.”

“Did you say forty-three, Your, uh, Eminence?”

“You heard me correctly, Lord Novesta.”

“Well, then, if I am not mistaken, your name is Novantina. I’m sure such a young person as yourself wouldn’t mind if I called her Nova, would you?”

Several chuckles followed this remark.

“You have made it sufficiently clear that you are aware of the correct form of address, Lord Novesta. If you would please continue?”

“Yes, of course, Your, uh, Eminence. Would you be so kind as to inform the assembly what the minimum age for the office of High Priestess is?”

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“It is forty-four.”

“And why is the minimum age set at forty-four?”

For a moment, Nova even considered defending her position, but she knew it would only pointlessly prolong this humiliating interrogation. Better to get it over with quickly. “The age *recommendation* is set eleven years after a candidate has achieved the rank of priestess, so she has enough time to gain the necessary experience.”

“And the minimum age at which an acolyte is awarded a commission as priestess coincides with her Age of Maturity, does it not?” Lord Novesta had dropped any pretense of using the address. The interrogation had turned into an inquisition, and Nova no longer seemed to have any right to formality.

“Yes, it does,” she replied.

“Would you please inform us how old you were when you received your commission as priestess?”

“I was twenty-nine.”

“Oh, so young? You hadn’t even come of age. And when were you elected High Priestess?”

“Five years ago.”

“So, you were how—?”

Nova held her breath. Despite his sudden pause, she thought the Lord might continue his rant. But she sighed in relief when his jaw dropped and he just stared, because it wasn’t the High Priestess he was staring at.

“Father, what in Anae’s name do you think you’re doing?”

Nova looked down so her smile wouldn’t seem too overbearing. Mara had, of course, come up from behind and was standing beside her on her right, glaring at Lord Novesta. Tanola had been informed of the plan and moved over to make room for her. Mara had left her ruby pendant out, so it was in plain sight for all to see. Nova heard gasps coming from various places in the hall. These were probably people who knew what the ruby signified. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Nova whispered, nodding at the pendant.

“I won’t hide any longer,” Mara said in an equally low voice. “Just go with it.”

Nova nodded and remained silent.

Lord Novesta stared at his daughter. “Maralena! What...what are you doing here?”

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“I believe I just asked you the same question. But if you must know, I’m here to support my close friend, the young Lady Novantina Satural, whom you will henceforth please address as Her Eminence.”

“Your...friend.” Lord Novesta took a step back, stumbled against his chair, and plopped down in his seat.

At this moment, Tsenera came forward and stood beside her daughter, taking her hand, and said to her husband, “I must admit, Merelan, I am a bit shocked. Since when do we address Her Eminence in such a rude and informal manner?”

Nova observed several elegant Ladies in the hall. who had similar pendants as Tsenera’s, staring at her as she stood beside the young woman with the dark red ruby. Some of them had smiles on their faces, others were confused or relieved, and then there were a few who didn’t look particularly happy.

Lord Novesta had, in the meantime, regained his feet, and his gaze wandered between Mara and his wife. Finally, he sighed and turned to Lord Divestelan. “I’m sorry, Vechiles, but family comes first.” To the audience, he said, “House Novesta has no further objections.” He sat down with as much dignity as he could muster.

Lord Divestelan’s expression had darkened during this exchange. He rose to his feet. “But House Divestelan objects,” he said. “How dare the Council present us with this...this mockery of leadership?”

Nova smiled when Tsenera looked him up and down. “Really, Vechiles. Her Eminence was kind enough not to file any charges against you, despite your outrageous behavior this morning. Is this how House Divestelan behaves toward its benefactors? Or do I need to file a complaint regarding your activities in a certain valley up in the mountains?”

Lord Divestelan narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips as he studied her. “Mark my words, Tsenera,” he said in a husky voice, “you will come to regret this.” He sat down.

Nova leaned toward her. “I didn’t realize you had pertinent information regarding the Etenolyas Valley.”

“I don’t,” she whispered back. “But he doesn’t know that.”

Nova suppressed a smile.

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A man at a table of one of the minor western houses stood and cleared his throat. “Your Eminence, if I may?” The man had sharp features, resembling a gedashol, and the darker complexion of the Northern Covasinians. His words sounded thick and sweet, like honey, but oozed of false pretense.

Tsenera looked at Nova, her mouth tightened into a thin line.

Nova sighed and nodded. The man was Lusina’s “adoptive” father, and she knew no good would come of this. “Thank you,” she whispered to Mara and Tsenera, “but you might as well return to your seats.”

“Nova, are you sure?” said Tsenera.

“Yes, let’s just get this over with.” As the two women nodded and turned away, Nova said with little conviction, “The High Priestess recognizes His Excellency, Lord Jerad Rotasen.”

Lord Rotasen bowed to Nova. “Thank you, Your Eminence.” He stared around at the assemblage, his head held high and his expression marked by feigned indignation. “Although Houses Divestelan and Novesta have withdrawn their objections, I do believe Lord Novesta and Lord Divestelan made a valid point and, to be honest, I am outraged. In the past thirty years, the Advisory Council has consistently neglected the needs of the western provinces. They have employed delaying tactics in their endeavor to withhold their much-needed aid and have repeatedly deferred their efforts to impart their advanced knowledge of technology, despite the relief their expertise might have brought to some of our more impoverished regions. And now they insult us by snubbing centuries of honored traditions and disregarding their own recommendations.

“Your Grace,” said the Lord, emphasizing the address as he turned back to Nova with a slight bow of his head, “through your foresight and actions here today, you have more than earned our regard, and you have proven beyond a doubt that you are indeed an authority to be reckoned with. Under different circumstances, I truly believe you would someday make an outstanding High Priestess. But given the current state of affairs, I am left with no choice but to move for a vote of no confidence in your presidency.”

Lord Rotasen straightened his shoulders, turned his back on the High Priestess, and thrust his right fist against his chest in the symbolic gesture of stabbing himself in the heart rather than suffering such humiliation. Then he strode out of the hall.

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Lord Novesta followed suit by rising from his seat, but his movements were hesitant, as if he were giving in with great reluctance. Before he turned his back on Nova, he gazed at his wife and his daughter, but he seemed more confused than anything else. Then he imitated Lord Rotasen's gesture with a dull thump to his chest and left the floor.

One by one, the Lords of the western houses stood proudly, with their backs to Nova, and pounded their right fists against their chests, then turned and followed Lord Novesta. One of the last to rise was Lord Divestelan. He stood triumphantly and, with a wicked grin at Nova, turned his back on her and placed his right fist over his heart. Then he walked across the floor and up the stairs with his shoulders straight and his head held high.

The adjutants of the Lords remained, gathering the paperwork, but soon followed their masters. Before long, the side of the floor allotted to the western houses was practically empty. Only Lord Marusen and Lord Cemasena remained seated on their side of the main table.

Nova stood in silence, watching them leave. When the shock lifted, the hall stirred, and the audience dispersed. Here and there, she heard whispered conversations, but the absence of the noise and vibrancy one would normally expect when so many people were gathered made an eerie impression on her.

Catyana leaned closer and looked up at her. "I don't understand," she whispered. "What just happened?"

"The conference is over," Nova said in a toneless voice.

38. Elinas

The town of Elinas was situated on the scenic northern shore of the lake of the same name. The inhabitants were proud of their heritage, which was evident in the way the buildings in the town were constructed, reflecting the Elinian style of architecture still apparent in the ruins of the once-powerful Malentisa. As Dena and her brother rode into town with the afternoon sun at their backs, she marveled at the elegant, towering structures around them.

Tuval shook his head. "It's hard to believe. My astonishment is renewed every time I see them."

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Dena didn't answer but stared up at the buildings. Although they had visited the town often in the past, she had to agree with her brother. Nothing on Piral could compare to these gracefully curved edifices that adorned the park-like community on all sides.

She was grateful they had made such excellent time. The road along the Suvilta was dry, and their chyevi had been energetic, relishing in frequent bursts of trot and gallop. They had originally planned to continue directly to Tolares, but now they might allow themselves a short rest and even visit with their grandfather if he wasn't attending the conference.

She was torn from her reverie when Tuval grabbed her arm. "Black Guard!" he hissed. "What are they doing here, and in broad daylight, too, as if it was the most natural thing in the world?"

Only then did she realize how uncommonly quiet everything was. A few wagons and carriages were on the road, probably taking the southern route from Catanin, Gisatena, Suvilta, or Revan to Tolares. The residents themselves were nowhere to be seen. Members of the Black Guard casually patrolled the streets or inspected the vehicles going north. The scene seemed deceitfully serene. "It looks as if an entire company has been stationed here," she whispered. "I don't believe they've seen us. Let's find Grandpa and see if he knows what's going on."

Tuval nodded, and they turned into a side street. To their relief, the Black Guard didn't follow. The street rose gradually as it wound up a hill overlooking the lake. Dena smiled to herself as they approached the residence, which evoked pleasant memories of the times they had spent with their grandfather.

The retired Lord Cemasena was wealthy enough to afford a generous home in one of the most attractive and affluent areas of the town. He had always loved Elinas and had moved here when he was satisfied his oldest son, Dena's father, had acquired the necessary experience to handle the affairs of state in Cemasena. With his singular vision and vivacity, Dena's grandfather soon became a popular figure in Elinas. It had been a wise decision for Lord Tolares to appoint the aging Lord as mayor and allow him to represent the Tolares interests in the town when the previous mayor passed away. Dena's grandfather relied upon the inhabitants' pride of being the only town besides Travis that the Elinar had frequented during the height of their power. It had been the hometown of the Prophet Cades, who somehow found access to the Elinar's hearts and brought some of their wisdom to the Suviltan Plateau in the form of these remarkable architectural structures.

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Lord Cemasena gradually turned the town into a distinctive tourist attraction and added to its charm and affluence without losing its peaceful and refreshing ambience, for which the population loved him. Many of the buildings were well over a thousand years old and had been completely and carefully renovated. Any new structures had to follow a precise code so the buildings could be smoothly integrated into the existing environment. The young Lord Tolares had even spent several years in Elinas and assisted with some of the renovations to learn more about Elinian architecture. The result of his studies was the new conference building in Tolares.

Dena and Tuval dismounted in front of their grandfather's house. The equerry immediately ran up and took their chyevi. He didn't say a word but aimed a fearful glance at them and led the animals to the stable. The siblings looked at each other with raised eyebrows and cautiously walked up to the entrance. When they rang the bell, Rovanes, a servant who had been in their grandfather's service for many years, opened the door. He seemed shocked when he saw them. "My Lady, My Lord, you have come."

"Good day, Rovanes," Tuval said. "Is something wrong?"

"I...think it is best if you talk to your grandfather about that," Rovanes said with a quick glance behind him.

"Is he here?"

"I believe so."

"Desar."

They stared at each other.

"Uh, Rovanes?" Tuval said.

"Yes, My Lord?"

"Is there any chance you could, perhaps, show us in?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I'm sorry." Rovanes reluctantly opened the door wide and gestured for them to enter.

What's going on? Dena mouthed as they followed the servant into the house.

Tuval shrugged. He motioned to his sword. Dena nodded and they cautiously loosened their weapons in their sheaths.

Rovanes led them up the stairs, his steps slow and his glance darting back and forth. Except for their footsteps, the house was silent. There was no indication of the bustle with which their

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grandfather usually surrounded himself. Rovanes showed them into their grandfather's study, which was a spacious room with a magnificent view of the lake.

Their grandfather was sitting behind his desk, facing them. He made the sign for danger used in the Resistance just as the door slammed closed at their backs. "Take them!" a cold voice behind them shouted.

Dena saw her grandfather lunge to the side as she whipped out her sword and turned to face the enemy. Four Black Guards emerged from behind the curtains and attacked. The one who had shot a dart at her grandfather from a blowpipe didn't get a chance to discharge a second projectile, since Tuval finished him with a slash across the neck.

Her grandfather, sword in hand, flew to Dena's side and vigorously joined the assault. But the Black Guards were deadly adversaries. It took all their skill and concentration just to hold their ground. Dena finally managed to slash into her opponent's foot, causing him to stumble, which she followed with a quick but lethal thrust to the abdomen. She immediately turned on her grandfather's opponent. With surprise on her side, she and her grandfather swiftly dispatched the foe. Together, they merged on the last guard standing, who was just moving in on Tuval for the kill. The guard didn't last long.

Tuval fell into a chair, cradling his arm. Dena wiped her sword on the guard's uniform and sheathed it, then rushed to her brother. "Are you alright?"

"I'm not sure. I'm afraid you were always a better student of the arms than I was." He managed a weak smile.

"Brother, this is no time for jesting," she said, inspecting the wound.

Her grandfather locked the door, then squatted beside his grandson, tearing strips from Tuval's cloak. "Children, I'm so grateful you're alive," he said, handing a strip of cloth to Dena, who bound it around the wound in Tuval's arm.

"Grandpa," Dena cried, "I'm so glad to see you. But I don't understand how you—"

"Hush, child. We have no time for that now." He handed her another strip of cloth, which she used to bind a wound in Tuval's leg. "A squad of ten guards has been assigned to this house, and the remainder of them will be here any second."

"I need a longer strip for this wound in Tuval's side."

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The Lord tore off a long, thick strip of Tuval's cloak and handed it to her. Someone pounded on the door. Dena shot her grandfather an anxious glance.

"The door is solid," her grandfather said. "It will take them a moment to break in."

"There, I'm done for now," said Dena. "But we'll have to look at those wounds again soon."

The pounding at the door became rhythmical.

"Tuval, can you fight?" his grandfather asked.

Tuval shook his head, his face pale.

"Grandpa, you're wounded too," Dena exclaimed, staring at a bloody slash in her grandfather's tunic.

"It's just a scratch." Her grandfather picked up a fallen guard's blowpipe and a satchel with darts and handed them to Tuval. "Take this. But be careful with those darts. They're tipped with an extremely lethal and quick-acting poison."

Tuval accepted the weapon and nodded. He loaded the pipe, being careful not to touch the tip of the dart, and aimed for a book on the shelf near the door. He missed by several fingerbreadths and tried again with a second dart. Satisfied with the result, he rose from the chair.

The door splintered. Dena and her grandfather positioned themselves near the window with the sun at their backs to give them an advantage and more space to maneuver. Tuval took up a position behind the desk. Their expressions grim, they nodded to one another.

With one final, splintering crash, the door burst open and two Black Guards charged through, with four more right behind them. Tuval's aim was good and he quickly felled three of the guards while Dena and her grandfather engaged two others.

Dena shrieked when the sixth guard rushed Tuval while he was reloading, but she had to keep from getting killed herself. She watched helplessly as the fiend raised his sword to slash into her brother. But the guard suddenly lunged forward and fell to the ground, an axe buried in his back.

Rovanes dashed through the doorway behind the equerry. Both men stormed forward with swords in their hands and engaged the two remaining guards, who were quickly dealt with.

As they all stood, surveying the carnage of the ten guards in stunned silence, Dena's grandfather turned his attention to the two men who had joined them. "Thank you, my friends. Your intervention saved our lives."

"Glad to be of service, My Lord," Rovanes answered, wiping the sweat from his brow.

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Tuval rose and joined Dena and his grandfather. The Lord locked them in a warm embrace. “Finally, I can greet you as I wished.”

“Grandpa,” Dena said, “what’s going on? How did you know the signal for danger we use in the Resistance?”

Her grandfather winked at her. “Who do you think sponsored your training with Vordalin and Renestal? But we must hurry. I’ll explain in more detail later.” He turned to Rovanes. “My friend, assemble the rest of the staff and flee. I don’t care where you go, but south or east will probably be best. After what’s happened here, the Black Guard’s revenge will be terrible indeed. Anae willing, we’ll meet again in Revan or Travis.”

The two servants bowed and left the room.

He turned to his grandchildren. “Come, children, we must leave immediately.”

“Where are we going?” Dena asked in surprise.

“Why, to Tolares, of course. It’s imperative we see the High Priestess.” He dragged them outside to the stables, where they quickly saddled their chyevi and rode off, escaping the town by little used back roads.

39. Memories of Darkness

Vilam needed some fresh air to absorb the events of the conference and was roaming the gardens behind the Lord’s residence. The late-afternoon sun warmed his face, and the peaceful atmosphere helped him to analyze the questions coursing through his mind. If only he didn’t have that irritating sensation at the back of his head; the feeling he always got when someone was watching him. “Alright, Uraten, come on out.”

He heard a deep, booming voice. “Yes, Your Hallowedness.” The guard stepped out from behind one of the shrubs lining the alcove, his head hanging in embarrassment. Not that the shrub had hidden him very well. The guard was almost comparable in size to the hulk who had challenged Nova that morning. He had cast off his western uniform and wore the dark forest green of the eastern provinces. No clothes fitting his stature could be found, so they had taken a uniform that originally belonged to a large but stout captain. The garments looked as if someone had washed him too hot and hung him out to dry. Vilam had to suppress a smile whenever he saw him. In the

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green outfit, the guard reminded him of a comic book figure he had once admired. Better not go down that road.

“Listen, Uraten, I admire your vigilance, but you’re in my custody, not the other way around.”

“Yes, Your Beholiedness. I just thought you could...maybe use an escort.”

“That’s a kind thought, but I think I can take care of myself. Why don’t you go find some nice tanks to play with?”

“Your Confoundedness?”

“Oh, never mind. Corporal, I want you to look for the High Priestess’s chief of staff and have her assign you to mess duty, or whatever else she can devise.” Under his breath he muttered, “Just keep out of my way.”

“Yes, Your Beheadedness.” Uraten smashed his immense fist to his breast and bowed, then turned smartly and marched off.

Vilam grinned and shook his head. Ever since Nova had granted Uraten asylum and placed him under Vilam’s supervision, the corporal had been following him around like a *carulen* trailing its master. All that lacked was for Uraten to come purring up to him. He was glad to be rid of him.

He resumed his tour of the gardens, but before long, he happened upon the elder Lord Tolares and Natilya. They were standing close together in a secluded alcove surrounded by tall shrubs, holding hands and talking earnestly. When Natilya saw him, she blushed and let go of the Lord’s hands. Lord Tolares turned toward him, and Vilam could tell from the Lord’s radiant face that he must be a happy man indeed.

“Ah, Vilam, my friend. How interesting that you should chance upon us at just this moment. What could be more appropriate than having the Emissary himself be the first to hear the news? Natilya has just agreed to become my wife.”

Vilam stared at the couple in astonishment. “Well, I suppose congratulations are in order.” He stretched out his hand, which the Lord enclosed in a firm grip. Then he turned to Natilya. It was the first time he had taken the chance to look at her more closely. She really was beautiful with her eyes cast down but her face glowing with excitement. She wasn’t quite as tall as he was, and therefore quite a bit shorter than the Lord. Her thick, black hair shone in the sunlight. It was freshly brushed and hung down lower than her waist. Her face was oval and delicate, but her lips were full

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and her figure elegant. He understood how Lord Tolares could have fallen in love with her, although the age difference between them must have been substantial. Did she really love him?

“Natilya,” Vilam said, “I wish you all the happiness in the world. I imagine your time with the High Priestess has been an excellent opportunity to prepare you for the responsibilities that await you as the future Lady Tolares.”

Natilya took his hand and glanced up at him. Her smile was barely visible, and her expression was difficult to interpret. She seemed relieved and at the same time confused. But the devotion in her eyes when she glanced at the Lord was unmistakable.

“I’m sorry if I appear amazed,” Vilam admitted. “Please forgive me for being so candid, but this is all very sudden, and it seems to me as if you don’t know each other very well.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Lord Tolares answered cheerfully, apparently too exultant to be irritated by Vilam’s presumptuous remark. “Natilya and I met four years ago, when the Lady Utalya’s party—or should I say, the High Priestess’s party—stayed here for several weeks before leaving for the western provinces. Natilya made quite an impression on me at the time, and I have been following her career with great interest from afar ever since. I believe I have come to know her very well in the past four years, and it seems she has also been keeping tabs on me from a distance.”

They joined hands and smiled at each other.

Vilam didn’t know what to say. He had been absorbing all the little things happening around him, and he was aware of Nova and the Lady Utalya’s anxiety for Natilya. There had to be more going on here than he could tell, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it, nor was it any of his business. “Well, then, let me express my best wishes to you again.”

“Thank you, Vilam. We very much appreciate it,” the Lord replied.

“The two of you probably have much to discuss, so I’ll leave you alone.”

“That’s very kind of you. I hope we will see you later this evening.”

Vilam took his leave and continued his stroll through the garden. It didn’t take long before he was again preoccupied with his own musings. Not only was he now caught up in central events that would have a profound impact on the future of this planet, but in some respects, he even seemed to be a catalyst for what was happening. How had he gotten into this? What was it all

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leading to? And after everything that had happened in the past few days, he might as well throw the Temporal Displacement Directive out the window.

He was so lost in thought he didn't notice Nova sitting by herself on a bench, staring at the ground. She didn't look up until he almost stumbled over her. "Oh, Vilam, it's you."

"Nova! I'm sorry. Did I startle you?"

"A little."

"Where's Catyana?"

"She asked to remain in our suite. She has a lot to think about. I was actually quite glad to have a moment to myself."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll leave you alone."

"No, Vilam, that's not what I was trying to say. Please stay."

He sat down beside her, staying on her left so her sword wouldn't get in the way. It seemed she wasn't used to wearing a weapon. Contrary to his, which was lying by his side, her cross-guard was digging into her thigh and the hilt was pressing against her chest and belly. He again caught her trying to shift the weapon to a more comfortable position.

"Alright, get up," he said, rising from his seat.

Her brow furrowed. "Excuse me?"

He nodded at her sword. "Let me help you."

"Oh! Yes, of course." She got up, facing him. "I was actually hoping you would know what to do. This thing is really starting to annoy me."

He had noticed earlier this afternoon that she was wearing the belt around her waist. Her sword was dangling so the hilt fell across her chest and belly and the scabbard fell across the front of her right thigh. "Haven't you ever worn a sword belt before?"

"No, we never needed them. We only ever used swords for practice, nothing more. And I don't think I've ever held a sword with a scabbard, either. Can you tell me what I'm doing wrong?"

"Yes, it's mainly two things. First of all, your sword should be at your side. You need to turn your belt so the buckle is facing forward. And keep your sword more vertical, with maybe a slight tilt forward, but not too much."

She grabbed the belt and twisted it on her waist until the sword was at her side. "There. Now, what else?"

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“Well, the problem with these two-handers is that the blades are quite long, so you’ll need more than your full arm’s length to unsheathe your weapon. That’s why your belt needs to be lower, at your hip, not around your waist. See how I have mine? This broad pad here on the left keeps the belt firmly on my hip, and I have the belt lowered on my right, so it creates a slight diagonal across this area.” He tugged at his belt, which was taught across his pelvic region. “You know, like the way gunslingers are depicted wearing their holsters in one of those Westerns.”

Nova’s brow creased into folds and she shook her head. “Like the way who is depicted wearing what in where?”

“Oh, um, sorry.”

“Vilam, the strange things you say are usually quite amusing, but I’ve had a bad day, and I’m sorry, but I’m just not in the mood.” She loosened her belt buckle and dropped the belt to her hip, keeping it a bit lower on her right. “Is this what you meant?”

“Yes, that’s great.”

She tightened the belt again. “Anything else?”

“See this strap in the back that runs diagonally down from your belt to the scabbard? If it stays taught, your weapon remains more or less vertical, and the strap keeps the hilt from tilting back. Since your weapon is now low enough, you can stabilize it while you’re walking or running by keeping your hand on the hilt or the cross-guard. Or, if you don’t have your hand free, you can use your elbow. With a bit of practice, your weapon shouldn’t swing and bump you anymore.”

“Well, that’s a relief. But could you also please show me the correct way to draw it?”

“Of course. You know that strap that keeps the sword from tilting back? Well, it will allow you to tilt it to the front. So, grab the scabbard with your right, tilt it forward, and draw the weapon with your left. There you go. Perfect!”

“Thank you, Vilam,” she said, sheathing her weapon. “This really is much more comfortable.” She tried to sit on the bench again but must have realized the scabbard would get in the way. She looked at him, puzzled.

“That’s something you’ll need to get used to,” he said. “When you sit, tilt your sword so the hilt points forward, the way you would when you draw it. Watch me.” He demonstrated by sitting, and she sat down beside him, emulating his actions. “That’s it. And since you now have the weapon positioned low enough on your right hip, it’s lying beside you on the bench. See?”

The High Priestess

“That certainly makes things easier but could be a problem for anyone walking behind me.”

“True, but in times and places where carrying a sword becomes necessary, that will be the least of your worries. Worst case, you can always unstrap the weapon and place it under the bench or beside your chair.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just carry our swords on our backs?”

“Right, well, if all you want to do is carry it, you can. But what if you get into a situation where you need to draw it quickly?”

“Why should that be a problem?”

Vilam took a deep breath and stood, unbuckling his own sword. “Let’s try it. You’ll need to get up again.” She did, and Vilam got behind her, holding his sword and scabbard diagonally across her back so the hilt was in reach over her shoulder. “Now, reach back and draw it out.”

When she tried, she only got the blade as far out of the scabbard as her arm was long. “Oh, right. I didn’t think about that.”

“See, if you carry your sword lower on your back, you won’t be able to reach the hilt to draw it. If you can reach the hilt, the blade of a two-hander this size will still be longer than your arm, so you’ll never be able to get your weapon out of the scabbard, not to mention getting it back in again if you actually could get it out.”

She sat down, but this time she remembered and tilted her sword hilt forward. “I understand.”

“Yeah, I wish the filmmakers would, too,” he mumbled, strapping his sword back on. “Pisses me off every time I have to watch one of those ridiculous movies where the hero runs around with his sword on his back. As if Conan would really do that.”

“Ridiculous what?”

“Never mind.”

“Really, Vilam?” She shook her head. “Anyway, I’d rather not ask where you learned all this, but I truly appreciate your help. I mean it,” she said when she saw his uncertain gaze. “As a matter of fact, I’m so grateful, I’ll even put up with those quirky phrases of yours.” Her mouth stretched in an attempt to smile. “See? Thank you. Really.”

“*Tezatal*,” he said, sitting down beside her. “But, to change the subject, how do you like your new accommodations?”

She shrugged. “They’re alright.”

The High Priestess

He gave her a puzzled glance. “Not good enough for you?”

Her mouth popped open. “Oh, no, not at all. The suite is magnificent! It’s just...I suppose I’m not used to such opulence. Even the quarters we had on the fourth floor were more than what I’m accustomed to, although they were very nice. And the Royal Suite...well, it’s actually a bit overwhelming.”

He grinned at her. “Would you like to trade?”

She managed a smile and jabbed him with her elbow. “Probably not such a good idea.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, which suite did they put you in when you arrived?”

“Uh, something called the State Suite?”

She chuckled. “Oh, Vilam, you’re hilarious.”

“Why? What did I say this time?”

She awarded him an amused glance. “The State Suite is the male counterpart of the Royal Suite.”

“Really?”

“Really. The only reason the Royal Suite is larger is because, traditionally, people assume women require more time and space to make themselves presentable.”

“Ah, I see. So, no Royal Suite for men. What about couples?”

“Depends on the couple. Some couples don’t share their bedrooms. And if they do, there are alternatives, such as the Harvest Moons Suite, or the Sapphire Suite. Although I have heard of couples who decided to share the State Suite.”

Vilam nodded. “Thanks for the clarification. By the way, I feel you handled the situation at the conference quite well this afternoon.”

Nova smiled bitterly. “What was there to handle? All I had to do was stand there and watch them leave.”

“Nova, that wasn’t your fault.”

She put her hand on his arm. “I know. But thank you for the encouragement.”

Vilam looked around. “Where’s your personal guard? Shouldn’t they be on duty?”

“Hyelisa has ensured that the grounds are sufficiently secured. I felt my escort could use some time off after today’s events.”

The High Priestess

“Hyelisa? Isn’t Natilya your chief of security?”

Nova took a deep breath and sighed. “I’ve reassigned Hyelisa to the position. Natilya has asked to be released from her duties, and this way, she’ll have some time to mentor Hyelisa before she leaves.”

“Well, that was to be expected, now that Natilya is marrying.”

Nova stared at him in surprise. “Were her hopes so transparent?”

“No. I just saw her and Lord Tolares together a short while ago.” He told her of the encounter.

Nova’s face was grim. “At least Lord Tolares’s intentions are honorable, and I respect him highly for that. I’m sure he’s delighted that Natilya has accepted his proposal. I wish her all the happiness in the world.”

“Judging from your expression, you don’t seem to believe your wish will come true.”

She smiled, but her eyes were sad. “I’m sorry, Vilam, but not only is this a personal matter, it’s also quite complicated, even more than I first believed. I hope you understand if I drop the subject.”

“Yes, of course.”

He looked up to see Elder Yonatan strolling toward them.

“Poppa!” Nova jumped up and ran to him, falling into the elderly man’s open-armed embrace.

One of Vilam’s eyebrows shot up. Poppa? How long would this elaborate game of ‘Who’s Who?’ go on? He got up and walked toward them, stopping at a respectful distance.

Elder Yonatan saw him, smiled, and gestured for him to approach while swaying his daughter back and forth. She kept her face partly buried in her father’s robes but shot Vilam an impish grin. “*Votalaran*, Vilam. I hope you don’t mind my cuddling. I don’t get this chance very often.”

“*Tezatal*. It’s refreshing to see that even a High Priestess has some very basic needs. It would be a terrible world if it wasn’t so.”

The elder chuckled. “How wisely spoken, my friend.” He offered Vilam his hand while keeping his other arm around his daughter. They shook heartily. “So, I finally get to meet the renowned Covatal.” Vilam was about to contradict, but the elder waved it aside. “No, my friend, let it happen. No matter how little you may believe it yourself, there is nothing you can do to stop an avalanche once it has been set in motion. You must learn to come to terms with the situation. But it is very encouraging to perceive your candid humility.”

Vilam took an immediate liking to the elderly man. “Thank you, Your Beatitude.”

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“Oh-ho! So you wish me to address you as ‘Your Holiness’?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Um, no, that’s not really what I had in mind.”

“Well then, I think a simple ‘Yonatan’ should suffice, don’t you?”

“Well, I—”

“May I call you Vilam?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’m grateful to see you have chosen to don the attire of the Selanian Order, Vilam. It makes it so much easier for me to present you with this token of your office.” Elder Yonatan handed him a platinum brooch shaped exactly like the one pinned to his own breast, but with the distinct difference that the lowest tier was crafted from a sapphire gem.

Vilam stared at it in amazement. “This is beautiful. What is it?”

“It’s Nevacad’s brooch!” Nova exclaimed. “Poppa, wherever did you get it?”

Vilam skeptically eyed the ornament, turning it back and forth in his hands.

“I’m sorry, Tinasa,” Elder Yonatan replied. “I should have told you when you were elected High Priestess, but it slipped my mind at the time, and you were quite busy afterward. It came into my possession together with the bow, but the bearers were sworn to secrecy.” Turning to Vilam, he continued. “You see, the Prophet Nevacad created this brooch and passed it on with the instruction that it was meant for the Emissary. It is a symbol of his affiliation with the Three Races. I’m afraid we have no notion what that might imply.”

The Three Races! Vilam could hardly contain his amusement. Nova had already confirmed it was a constructed theological term, so it was doubtful the Prophet Nevacad had used it. The phrase must have originated from a false interpretation of the *Selani s’Ulavan*. Whatever the reason, these people were in for a big surprise. “I can’t accept this,” Vilam said.

“Why?” said the elder. “Because it would be an admission of your status?” Elder Yonatan winked at him. “Keep it for now, my friend. We can always decide what to do with it later.” He turned back to his daughter, giving Vilam an unobserved moment to let the brooch disappear into one of his pockets. “Now, Tinasa, what’s on your mind?”

She turned her eyes up to his. “It’s so frustrating. Although I know intellectually why the conference turned out the way it did, I’m having difficulties coping with it emotionally.”

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“Meaning?”

“Well, the conference was my responsibility, and it has turned out a complete disaster.”

“Yes, the conference was your responsibility. And yes, it has turned out a complete disaster, as expected. I’m very proud my daughter handled it so magnificently. For instance, this morning, you snatched two daughters away from the most powerful man in the western provinces, while he had to look on without being able to lift so much as a finger to do anything about it. And I could hardly keep from laughing aloud when the young Lady Maralena Novesta, who has been missing for years, suddenly turns up at your side this afternoon to rebuke her own father while he was trying to discredit you. Many of the participants were asking themselves how you were able to contrive such brilliant counterstrategies. And I don’t know many priestesses who could handle the humiliation of having half of the Great Houses walk out on her.”

“Oh, Poppa, you’re so sweet. But I still feel like a complete failure.”

He looked into her eyes. “Do you really believe anyone could have done anything to avert what happened?”

“I doubt it,” said Vilam, cutting in. “It was apparent that they came with only one purpose in mind: to sabotage the conference. They never intended to stay.”

“Very perceptive, my friend. Yes, it was exactly as we feared in the Council. There is more to this situation than meets the eye. I hope Vordalin returns soon. He may bring more information.”

Nova looked up at her father, her gaze solemn. “Why didn’t you tell me the young Lord Chyardal was your protégé?”

“He is remarkable, isn’t he?” the elder teased, his eyes glowing playfully. “I never felt there was a need to rush things. Knowing my daughter, I was confident she would find out for herself sooner or later. Oh, but what is this?” he said in mock surprise. “Could it be that the High Priestess has fallen in love?”

Nova blushed, then turned to Vilam with a faint smile on her lips. “I’m sorry, Vilam, but there are some private matters I wish to discuss with my father. Would you please excuse us?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll see you later, then.”

“Oh, and please don’t forget about our meeting at *ulavelanetas*. There’s much we need to discuss.”

“I’ll be there. Will Mara be joining us?”

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“Yes, as will her mother and Lord Marusen. Mara and the Lord have accepted Lord Tolares’s invitation to stay at the residence, so it will be a good opportunity to mediate relations between the two Houses. Oh, and in case you were wondering, they’re staying in the Harvest Moons Suite,” she said with a playful smile.

Vilam nodded, grinning in return.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Vilam,” Elder Yonatan said as he offered him his hand. Vilam took it and they squeezed firmly.

Vilam continued his promenade through the garden. He wasn’t surprised when he encountered the Lady Utalya in a quiet alcove a few minutes later. Maybe it was just the fair weather, but he assumed if he kept looking, he would probably stumble across everyone he knew sooner or later. The Lady was reading a book and obviously enjoying the afternoon sun. “My Lady.”

She looked up. “Vilam! What a pleasant surprise. Would you care to join me?” She put the book away and patted the empty space next to her on the stone bench.

“I would, thank you.”

He sat down, and she looked at him expectantly. “Well, my friend, what’s on your mind?”

“You must be very proud of Nova.”

“Oh, yes. No one could have wished for a more attentive and amiable student. She has done very well for herself.”

“I’ll say! But how does one go about training a future High Priestess?”

“Believe me, my friend, most of the work is done on your knees, praying for wisdom and guidance. Although it does come in handy having been High Priestess yourself. But I’m afraid any training you might provide is almost always inadequate. Every High Priestess is confronted with an entirely unique situation and must learn to rise to the occasion. Just look at the way this conference turned out. Who could have trained her for such an event? And yet, she handled it brilliantly. The best training there is consists of the life experiences Anae deigns to bestow upon each of us. And believe me, she’s had more than her fair share of those. That’s how we usually choose our protégées: when we sense Anae Herself has been preparing their hearts.”

“There have been several allusions to a deep pain in her life. Her sister mentioned to me once that there were originally six sisters. Does that have anything to do with it?”

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The Lady probed him for a moment, pain in her eyes. “Vilam, if you hadn’t become such a close friend in these past few days and received such a heavy burden to carry, I would never evoke such unspeakable memories of darkness. But in the position you’ve been placed, I feel it’s only right for you to know. Maybe the tale of the grief she’s endured will help dispel some of the pain we sense hidden away so deeply inside of you.” She sighed. “I assume I may count on your complete discretion in this matter?”

“Yes, of course, My Lady.”

She studied the ground to collect her thoughts before turning back to Vilam. “Do you remember what I told you in Nadil about a shadow emerging in the west, and the terror then spilling over into the eastern provinces? Well, it happened a little more than twenty years ago. We heard rumors of terrible occurrences in the west, events so monstrous no one was willing to believe them. If only we had listened. But I’m afraid we were in shock and denial at the time. Be that as it may, what followed was as unexpected as it was horrific.

“Yonatan was away on business for the Council with Vodana, who had already made quite a name for herself by that time. House Satural has its properties northwest of here, right by the lake of the same name and close to the western border. It’s quite a secluded area, but back then, no one thought anything of it. That has, of course, changed in the meantime, with fear spreading as it has.

“They struck sometime in the early evening of a pleasant day in late summer. Elana and her five daughters were enjoying some fresh air on the veranda, when at least twenty masked men dressed in black cloaks and uniforms charged down the road toward the residence on their chyevi. The first thing they did was incapacitate Elana by threatening her daughters and then tying her up. I don’t know why they targeted her first. But after they had secured her, they proceeded to kill all the servants on the estate. The poor girls were terrified, but it was nothing compared to what awaited them.

“The men drove them into a parlor of the residence and commenced their hideous sport. They started with the mother, forcing her daughters to watch every last minute. Elana was a stunning beauty, but had the kindest heart you could imagine, and was a loving wife and mother. It’s not clear how many times they violated her. They took their time, beating her so viciously between rapes that the poor, ravished soul must have been near death by the time they were finished with

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her. In the end, they slit her throat and tossed her bleeding and wasted body on the floor as if she were some butchered animal.

“They did the same with every one of her daughters, saving the youngest for last. Nova doesn’t remember how many times they forced themselves on her, but it wasn’t until the early hours of the morning that they finally left off, having beaten her to within a finger’s breadth of her life. She never understood why they didn’t slit her throat, as with her mother and her sisters. Maybe they were too drunk, or too tired, or felt she was already dead and not worth the effort.

“Early the next morning, a friend stopped by for a visit. She ran off screaming to the closest neighbor when she saw the bodies of the slain servants. That most likely saved Nova’s life, because she wouldn’t have lasted much longer without medical attention.”

Vilam stared at the Lady. “*Tev’anan*, Utalya!”

The Lady’s face was pale, but she remained calm.

“What happened then?” After the preliminary shock, he now felt anger rising in him.

“The Council was informed immediately. Of course, Yonatan and Vodana were devastated. I’m grateful they had many dear and wise friends who helped them through that difficult period of their lives. I was High Priestess at the time and immediately canceled all my appointments and rode out to their estate. I only intended to stay for a few weeks, but when I saw how desperately Nova needed me, I prolonged my sojourn for several months. I’ve never regretted my decision, because it soon became clear to me what our Goddess had planned for her.”

“You believe Anae wanted this to happen?”

“Of course not! How could the creator of love and everything holy be the origin of evil? But I do believe Anae allows us freedom of choice, even if we choose evil and darkness. And I’ve experienced that any evil anyone commits will work together for the good of those who love Anae and choose to turn to Her in their need.”

Vilam glowered. “Yeah, right.”

The Lady Utalya shook her head and sighed. “I still feel I was to blame. I should have listened to the rumors and done something about them. If I had, maybe none of this would have happened. I suppose that was the reason I finally let Emiles Revan persuade me to marry him and resigned my commission as High Priestess.”

“That’s quite a burden to be carrying around with you like that.”

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“Whatever do you mean?”

“Weren’t there elders at that time? And what about the High Priest? Where was he? Are you sure you want to carry the blame all by yourself? Besides, in the end, it was the choice of those...those *atezati* who did those terrible things. Don’t blame yourself; blame them!” Vilam felt helpless rage coursing through him. Why did Anae allow such dreadful things to happen?

“It’s not quite as simple as that.”

“Well then, why don’t you explain it to me?”

She regarded him evenly. “Even if we know intellectually that we aren’t at fault, or if we’ve sought and found forgiveness, there’s still much emotional residue that must be dealt with. It can take many years, sometimes decades, before we come to terms with it. Our conscience will force us to take a good look at ourselves and to consider our actions, or to assume responsibility for our inaction. The sooner we’re prepared to face our inner demons, the quicker our healing will be. For some people, the pain of confronting the past is too intense, and they decide to drown their grief in spirits or to run away from it.”

Vilam knew all too well what she was talking about. “And what did you do?”

“I decided to confront it, but piece by little piece, which took some time. I was afraid it would overwhelm me otherwise. As a matter of fact, there are still things that rise up every now and then that I must deal with. For instance, I should have been more adamant toward my colleague, the High Priest presiding at that time, or the elders of the Council. But I let myself be persuaded and remained silent. There is much I have to answer for.”

Vilam took a deep breath and let the air rush out of his mouth.

Utalya smiled at him. “It seems each of us has a burden to carry.”

“So it seems. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“That was the idea.” She looked him in the eye. “Come, I’m getting hungry. I’m certain dinner will be ready soon.”

He gave her a weak smile. Then he took the arm she offered, and they ambled back to the residence together.

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40. Enavilara

Eratis threw another rock into the clear blue water of the lake and looked over at the man he had rescued, attempting to assess whether he had recovered enough to continue their journey. Martan must have misinterpreted his glance and said, “Thank you again, my friend. That’s quite a service you’ve rendered me.”

“I was glad to do it,” Eratis replied. “You’re a valuable man, and it would have been a shame to lose you. But we need to keep moving. You can rest for another few minutes, but then we’ll head south and west. We should try to reach the southern shore before it gets too dark.”

Martan nodded and skipped a stone across the water with his good arm.

They were resting on a large rock in a secluded bay on the eastern shore of Lake Suvilta. The sun would set in a while and bathed the scene in golden light, its luminous path mirrored on the water’s surface. Eratis picked up a trowel and a bundle of tissues and headed into the woods.

His thoughts returned to the mission they had completed that afternoon. After a hard, eight-hour ride, they had caught up with the coach two hours ago, just short of the lake. He regretted not being able to stop the Black Guard from killing the two coachmen and the four eastern guards accompanying the transport. After congratulating the men on a successfully performed operation and releasing them from their duty, he tended to Martan’s wounds. The guards who had been transporting Martan had been rough with him, and to make matters worse, he had been injured during the attack on the coach when one of the wheels broke off. Eratis had patched up the man’s arm as best he could. Then they had circumvented the town of Suvilta and headed east to confuse anyone who might want to track them. After about an hour, Martan had become so pale that Eratis knew he needed a break. They had stopped in this secluded bay for a short rest and—

Eratis was torn from his musing by the sound of a woman humming near the shore. Her voice captivated him in a strangely familiar way. Even after the song stopped, the enchanting melody continued to echo in his mind.

He shook his head to clear his senses. Had he just imagined it? Everything appeared quiet enough. But it seemed as if the light had changed. How much time had gone by? Could he have been away for a quarter of an hour? He finished his business and crept cautiously back to the bay.

When he cleared the shrubs, he stopped and stared. Martan was lying on the shore with his head toward the lake, not moving or breathing, his eyes staring into space. Blood trickled from a corner

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of the man's partly opened lips. A stunningly beautiful woman hovered waist deep in the water and was trying to drag the body in. As far as Eratis could see, she didn't have any clothes on, but her thick, long, auburn hair concealed the relevant parts of her anatomy well enough not to seem indecent.

Something must have notified her of his presence, and she looked up, her eyes locking onto his. Her glance drew him forward. He felt faint, and his heart pounded in his chest.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "Your arrival is most opportune. Would you please be so kind and help me get your friend into the water? He's quite heavy, and I must get him under, or he'll die." Her voice was pleasant, even alluring, and her words gentle and matter-of-fact.

Eratis shook his head to clear his mind. "It seems to me you've already done a good job of killing him."

The woman's eyes opened wide and she gaped at him. "What? No, you don't understand. It's not like that at all."

"Oh, I think I understand well enough." Eratis unsheathed his sword. "Get away from him."

"No, please, don't do this," the woman begged.

Eratis stepped forward and half-heartedly swept his sword at the woman's head, missing her by more than a handbreadth. She cried out and flung herself backward into the lake, disappearing below the surface.

Eratis just stood there, his mouth agape, and blinked. What he had just seen was impossible, and his mind almost refused to register it. When the woman had thrust herself away from him, he had expected to see her legs as she dove into the water. Instead, he saw an elegant, forest green fin framed by flowing crests that flared bright orange in the evening light.

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. When he looked again, the water was calm, but Martan was still lying at the water's edge, as silent and unmoving as before. Was he really dead? Had the woman spoken the truth?

"Yes, my sister was telling the truth," a soft voice behind him said, "even if she is too inexperienced to persuade you."

He spun around. Before him stood a woman who was even more stunning than the first. She wore a long, green gown that seemed to flow around her and set off her gorgeous auburn hair. A

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second gown, similar to hers, lay in the grass nearby. When he stared at her, his head started swimming. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Who are you?”

“You know who I am. I’m sorry Eratis, I didn’t realize the spell would overwhelm you so quickly. I was hoping we’d have more time to talk.”

Keeping his eyes closed, he said, “Then why did you enchant me?”

“Enchant you? I would never do such a thing. No, you’re under the spell of the Siren’s Song, as the fishermen call it. It’s the effect our voices have on all the male Selani.” She took a deep breath. “Oh, Eratis, you can’t imagine how I’ve longed to speak with you, and I wish we could talk without the spell interfering. But I’m afraid that’s not yet possible. We’ll just have to do our best.”

“How...how do you know my name?”

“Oh, my love, I’ve always known you, just as you’ve always known me.” She hesitated. “I’m so sorry about your sister.”

His eyes popped open. “My sister?” But the sight of the beautiful woman before him made his legs turn to rubber. He closed his eyes again.

“Yes, your sister, Zetara. She was such a kind and gentle soul. I’m sure we would have been great friends.” He heard the soft sound of her footsteps in the grass as she drew near. “Open your eyes.”

He obeyed. The woman stood only two steps away from him. Her large eyes were deep green, and he could feel himself being drawn into them.

“Let go of your sword. You won’t need it.”

His weapon dropped into the grass with a dull thud. “You’re Ventaren,” he said with waning strength.

“Yes, that’s your name for us, although we call ourselves *Osatal*, Women of the Water.” She moved even closer and shut her eyes as she placed her hands on his heart. It seemed as if she were listening into his soul. When she opened her eyes again, there was sadness in them. “I suspected as much. Please believe me, I never wanted this to happen.”

He only managed to get one word out. “What...?”

“You couldn’t hear me because the bond between you and your sister was so strong it drowned out my voice. It seems so tragic that she had to go before you could hear my call. But please believe

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me, even if I had known for certain she was the reason you couldn't hear me, I would never have done anything to harm her, despite my deep longing to be with you." She gazed up at him, her eyes filled with sorrow. "Oh, my love, what have you done to yourself?" She shook her head and leaned her forehead against his breast. "You've been beguiled by the forces of darkness, and you allowed it because you couldn't understand the yearning of your own heart. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but the men in whom you put your trust are the ones who are responsible for your sister's death."

His eyes opened wide and he stared at her in horror. "Vechiles?"

She sighed. "Yes. If only you could have heard my voice sooner, we might have been able to prevent all this." She looked at him with a sad smile on her lips. "But I know you. In your heart, you're still an honest man, and because of that, I can cleanse you of this evil." She put her hand on his heart. "I'm sure you sense what that entails. You'll have to surrender yourself to me completely. Do you trust me?"

Eratis nodded. He felt as if his heart was pounding in his throat. He wanted so much to be with this woman, more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, because she was... "Enavilara?"

"Yes, my love?"

"That's your name."

She chuckled. "Of course it is. But you've always known that."

It was true, he had known, somehow. And he knew now what he had been searching for all his life, what had prompted his restless longing. This woman was the fulfillment of all his dreams and desires; she was his heart and his soul. Entranced, he took her into his arms, drawing her close.

Enavilara resisted. "Eratis, are you sure? There's no going back if we do this." She looked into his eyes, searching. But she must have seen his answer there, because she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, her breath like a whisper of sweet water lilies on the wind.

Without thinking, he surrendered himself to her soft, parted lips and drank her warm breath in huge, yearning gulps. His heart almost burst when she lowered herself into the grass and pulled him down, welcoming him onto herself with a tender yet fervent kiss. As she put her arms around him and drew him into her embrace, the sheer magnitude of her longing overwhelmed him, filling him with such ecstatic delight he could hardly contain it without going mad.

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A split second later, the whole dream shattered when her tongue slipped down his throat, descending farther and farther until he could no longer breathe. His lungs craved air and he convulsed, but she wrapped her legs around him and clutched him to herself as he struggled, tightening her hold and making it impossible for him to break free. He felt her tongue moving somewhere inside his chest, and then, ever so tenderly, she pulled it back, scratching him near his heart.

Exhilarating warmth spread outward from the wound and through his body, enclosing him in a soft blanket of elation. As if in a dream, he felt the Siren draw him to the water's edge. The last thing he saw before his consciousness fled was the breathtaking sight of the setting sun's flaming rays shining through the water's surface above him as he drifted to the bottom of the lake.

41. Into the Shadows

Nemara's eyes widened and her heart started pounding. The signal light for the Royal Suite had just gone on. She realized her fingers had tightened around her skirt, so she deliberately relaxed her muscles. The Reckoning had hit her harder than usual yesterday, and she felt she wasn't quite herself yet. But maybe she wouldn't need to be.

Savinya regarded her with a questioning glance. "Would you like me to go?"

Nemara took a deep breath. "No, I'll do it. But thank you, Savinya." She gave her an appreciative smile.

Savinya returned the smile and took another sip of her *deventas*. They were taking a short break in the servants' kitchenette on the fifth floor, which was mainly used to prepare smaller items that didn't need to be ordered from the main kitchen. But Nemara had asked for permission to add a couple of tables for *deventas* and meal breaks. The room faced north and had a marvelous view of the city, which was aglow in Velana's late-afternoon light.

Nemara stood and squeezed Savinya's shoulder as she passed. She had always liked her. The maid was a competent yet pleasant girl and easy to get along with. As she stepped into the hallway and walked in the direction of the Royal Suite, she grimaced at how she had used the girl and, not for the first time, regretted that she had to terminate her sister Maridya's employers the other day. But the contract on Catyana hadn't given her enough time to make other arrangements, so Nemara

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had used an existing connection from her cover job to gain access to appropriate lodgings for her stakeout. Under normal circumstances, Nemara would never have done something so reckless, and she had hoped the connection would remain hidden. But somehow, Elana's daughter had discovered that the two maids were sisters and asked the Lady Venora to give Savinya the evening off so she could be there for Maridya. The Lady Venora had explained the circumstances of Savinya's leave when Nemara had returned to work this morning, giving Nemara pause. It might become a problem, but only if she couldn't complete the contract soon, and she had high hopes she would.

When she arrived at the Royal Suite, she knocked on the door. Catyana opened almost immediately and smiled when she saw her, making Nemara's heart jump. "*Ulavela'mada*, Cortina. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"The past days have been trying, and I feel exhausted. But for some reason, my thoughts just keep spinning and won't let me rest."

"I'm very sorry you're finding it so difficult to unwind. If you wish, I could bring you an herbal tea with soothing properties to help you relax."

"That would be very kind."

"Glad to be of service. But may I remind you of the meeting Her Eminence has scheduled at *ulavelanetas*? If you take a sedative now, you probably won't be in any condition to attend."

"That's fine. I really am very tired and would rather rest. Besides, I wouldn't mind having the suite all to myself this evening." She kept her eyes on Nemara as she emphasized her last words.

"Oh." Nemara's heart skipped a beat and then started racing at double-time. She took a deep breath. "In that case, I'll be back shortly with your tea."

"*Votalaran*."

"*Tezatal*. You know I do it gladly."

"I know," said Catyana with a smile, closing the door before Nemara had a chance to bow.

Nemara released her breath and stood there for a moment, staring at the door. Catyana wanted to be alone in her suite this evening, and she had made it very clear she wanted Nemara to know about it. Or was it just wishful thinking? Had she interpreted the look in Catyana's eyes correctly? She shook her head as she walked down the hallway and returned to the kitchenette.

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Savinya had returned to her duties so the room was empty. But Nemara would have prepared the tea herself anyway. It was important to get the dosage just right to ensure Catyana would be able to rest for a while, but not too long. Ten minutes later, she pushed the serving cart down the hallway and knocked on Catyana's door. The girl opened almost immediately again, as if she had been waiting for her right by the door.

"Here you go," said Nemara, pushing the cart into the suite. "Would you like it at your desk?"

"Could you put it on the table by the sofa?" said Catyana.

"Of course." Nemara placed the pot, the tea ball holder, and the cup with the tea ball on the indicated table and poured a serving of steaming water into the cup. Pointing to the tea ball holder, she said, "Let the tea sit for two minutes before taking the tea ball out."

Catyana nodded. She had remained close to her—almost too close—so Nemara took Catyana's hands. "I'll come back later to check in on you after Her Eminence has gone to her meeting, alright?"

"I would like that very much," said Catyana, squeezing Nemara's hands.

Nemara's heart almost stopped, and a thrill went through her. This time, the silent invitation in Catyana's eyes was unmistakable. Nemara nodded and pushed the serving cart back out into the hall. At the door, she turned and said, "I hope you can get some rest now."

Catyana just smiled in response, so Nemara shut the door and returned the cart to the storage closet in the kitchenette. Then she stood at the window for a moment, looking out at the city. She couldn't see the setting sun from here—you had to be on the south side for that—but she could see the sun's orange glow reflected in countless windows. It was a beautiful sight, but if everything went as she hoped, it would be the last time she would ever see it.

When the time neared to escort Her Eminence to her meeting, she went in search of Savinya. The maid was exactly where the duty roster said she would be. She had directed some of the other participants of the meeting to the parlor and was now preparing one of the suites on the fourth floor. Nemara was relieved to see the girl was as reliable as ever. She touched her arm to get her attention. "Savinya, I have something urgent I need to take care of. I'll collect Her Eminence in her suite, but could you please meet us at the staircase and take her the rest of the way?"

"Yes, Cortina, of course. Is everything alright?"

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She understood the girl's concern. Nemara's request was highly irregular and would probably raise a few more eyebrows before she was done. But she had to keep away from the parlor where the participants were gathering, or her longtime friend, the Lady Tsenera Novesta, would undoubtedly recognize her and could unintentionally blow her cover. "It's nothing to worry about, but it is a time-sensitive matter that needs to be dealt with promptly."

"I understand."

"Were you able to show Lady Novesta and her daughter to the parlor?"

"Yes, it was a delight to serve them. They were both so friendly."

"I would expect nothing less," said Nemara with a smile. She gestured for Savinya to join her and they mounted the staircase together. When they reached the top floor, Nemara touched Savinya's arm. "Just wait here. I'll bring Her Eminence to you."

Savinya nodded.

Nemara looked at her for a moment, and then spontaneously hugged her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you, Savinya, for being so reliable. It's always been a pleasure to work with you."

When Nemara stepped back, Savinya looked at her with concern and put her hand on Nemara's arm. "Cortina, are you alright?"

"Yes, but I don't think I tell you often enough how much you're appreciated."

Savinya beamed at her. "Yes, you do, all the time. But I never get tired of hearing it."

Nemara smiled and gave her another kiss on the cheek before turning away. She quickly reached the Royal Suite and straightened her apron and skirt before knocking. The young Lady Satural opened after a moment. "*Ulavelan mada*, Your Eminence." She cast a glance into the suite. The double-winged doors to the bedroom were both open, and she saw Catyana lying fully clothed on one of the beds. "I'm very sorry. Am I too early?"

"No, Cortina, you're right on time."

Lowering her voice, Nemara said, "I did bring Her Grace Catyana a mild sedative earlier. I hope that wasn't contrary to your wishes."

"No, not at all. I want Catyana to make as many independent decisions as possible. If she's decided to stay in our suite this evening and rest, that's perfectly fine."

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It seemed Catyana wasn't quite asleep yet and had seen her. She raised her hand in greeting and smiled at her. Nemara smiled and waved back, but when she saw the young Lady's probing glances wandering between her and Catyana, she immediately put on a more sober expression. "Please forgive me if I've overstepped my bounds and displayed too much familiarity with Her Grace Catyana."

"I appreciate that," said Nova. "But I'd like to request that you don't use her formal address with her, at least for the moment. Catyana is still in shock regarding her new status, and it might confuse her even more."

"I understand. She did ask me to call her Catyana this morning, so I'll continue doing that. But the familiarity of using her first name sometimes makes it difficult to keep the required interrelational distance."

The High Priestess nodded, and her gaze became less scrutinizing. Nemara hoped she had been able to deflect any suspicions. She gestured into the hall. "May I show you the way?"

Nova looked back at Catyana. "Good-bye for now, dearest, and sleep well. I'll try not to get back too late."

Catyana nodded and smiled, but she seemed to be having difficulties keeping her eyes open. Nova passed through and Nemara shut the door for her before leading her to the staircase, where Savinya was waiting for them. Turning to Nova, she said, "I'm very sorry, Your Eminence, but there's an urgent matter I need to attend to. Savinya is here to lead you the rest of the way."

"Good evening, Your Eminence," said Savinya. "If you would please step this way, I'll show you to the parlor."

Nova targeted Nemara with another probing glance, but Nemara had expected that. When Nova saw Savinya's unaffected smile, she nodded and gestured for Savinya to proceed. Nemara watched the young Lady follow the maid down the hallway of the adjacent wing before sighing in relief and descending the staircase.

It didn't take her long to reach the servant's quarters in the western annex. Although Nemara had lodgings nearby in town, every servant had at least a small space they could call their own, in case they wanted to take a short nap during a break, or if things got too late for them to return home at night. As senior housekeeper, Nemara had her own room. It wasn't large, since she didn't

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want to take space away from servants who lived on the estate full-time, but she was glad for the privacy. In her line of work, it could sometimes come in handy.

Nemara always kept her door locked, so after she had opened it and turned on the light, she shut the door behind her and locked it again from the inside. Then she made sure the curtains were drawn so nobody could see into her room from outside. She kept a robe of office on a hanger behind a hidden panel in the closet and took it out to make sure it was presentable. It was, since she always kept her robes clean and pressed. The robe was similar in appearance to the robes of the Selanian Order, but it was completely black and had more folds below the waist. The symbol of her Order—a stylized black novantan blossom—was stitched into the bust near the heart.

Nemara carefully folded the robe and put it in her bag with a few other personal effects she would need. It wasn't always possible to wear an official robe during a kill, especially when she was undercover, but she tried to. And if Catyana turned out to be the one and this Nemara's final contract, she wanted to be wearing it, no matter the cost.

Of course, a termination wasn't possible without the proper tools, and she opened a storage space hidden beneath a floorboard. Among other things, the space contained several of her favorite type of close-range weapon, the long, black stiletto. One of them was the dagger she had finished for Catyana. She forged all her weapons herself, but she only engraved the symbol of her Order together with her target's name on very specific items, such as her black arrow or this dagger. She took Catyana's stiletto and one for herself from the space and closed it back up. Both weapons were already oiled and wrapped in thick cloth and fit perfectly into a pocket of her apron. The last thing she did was to place a letter with instructions on her desk. She wanted everything ordered before she stepped through the veil. After a quick glance around, she locked everything up and left.

Before she entered the residence, she took a long last look up at the building. It was difficult to imagine that it had been her home away from home for ten years now. But at her age, time seemed to fly by so quickly anyway, so she needn't have been surprised.

When she arrived at the Royal Suite, she took a quick look around to ensure she was alone in the corridor before entering. The lights in the suite were still on. The first thing she did was check on Catyana in the bedroom. She smiled when she stood beside her bed. The girl looked so peaceful and beautiful lying there like that, even if she had only flopped herself down fully clothed. She

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was sound asleep. Nemara turned the lights in the bedroom down a bit and used the dressing area to change and freshen up. For this final act, she let her hair down and brushed through it a few times so it shone. The stilettos disappeared in special sheathes at the back of her belt, hiding the weapons in the folds of her robe.

When Nemara felt she was ready, she put her housekeeper uniform and bag on the coffee table of the reading area. She hoped she wouldn't need them anymore. Then she sat down on the bed beside the girl and looked down at her. Was Catyana the one? She hoped with all her heart that she was. Nemara had no idea what would happen when she woke the girl up, but she felt so tired, and she didn't know if she would be able to go on if Catyana turned out to be another false hope. She longed for the solace of the shadows, wanted the stillness of the night to engulf her soul so she could finally rest.

Taking a deep breath, Nemara reached out and caressed Catyana's hair and cheek.

Catyana sighed and rubbed her eyes with her thumb and finger. When her eyes fluttered open, she looked at Nemara and smiled. "There you are."

"So, you're not surprised to see me?"

Catyana turned onto her side to face her and supported herself with one elbow as she reached over to play with a lock of Nemara's long hair. "No, I was hoping you'd come." Looking into Nemara's eyes, she must have seen her question there, and she added, "Please, believe me, Cortina. I really am glad you're here, more than you could know." She let her fingers glide over the emblem near Nemara's heart. "That's lovely. May I ask what it is?"

"It's the symbol of my Order, the Order of the Novantan."

"What does it mean?"

"Here, look." The blossom had five petals, and Nemara put her finger on the top one. "This petal represents our Lord, who watches over all. The two petals directly below it represent air and fire, the symbols for masculinity. And the last two petals on the bottom represent earth and water, the symbols for femininity."

"So, the symbols for femininity form the basis of your Order, upon which everything else rests."

Nemara opened her mouth in surprise. "Very astute, Catyana. I'm surprised. Most members of our Order never even realize that."

Catyana touched it again. "That's the same symbol you put on my arrow, isn't it?"

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Nemara drew in her breath and covered Catyana's hand with her own, pressing it against her heart. She just looked at her for a moment. "So, you know who I am?"

Catyana nodded. "I knew the instant you touched me when we came back from the conference this morning." Catyana slipped her hand out from beneath Nemara's and caressed her cheek, emulating what Nemara had done earlier that day.

"How?"

"I held your arrow after you sent it to me. You put so much of your heart and soul into it that I could almost picture you. And when you touched me today, I just knew it was you." She let her fingers glide through another lock of Nemara's hair.

"And you're not afraid of me?"

"Should I be?"

"Catyana, I'm here to kill you."

"Huh."

Nemara caught her breath at the girl's response, and her heart skipped a beat, but she shook her head. "I can't understand you. Anyone else would be running away, screaming bloody murder."

"I'm not anyone else. But you don't know that, and that's not fair to you. You've already shown me so much of yourself, and I'd really like to do the same for you, if you'll let me."

"I would like that, very much even. But how would we do that?"

"This is something my sisters and I do a lot back home." She moved over to make room for Nemara and sat up on her knees. "Just face me."

Nemara got on the bed and sat opposite Catyana. "Alright, now what?"

Catyana moved a little closer so their knees were almost touching. "Put out your hands with your palms facing me, like this." Catyana showed her what she meant.

Nemara could feel her brow crease as she lifted her hands so her palms touched Catyana's. "Aren't we a little old for pat-a-cake?"

Catyana smiled as she intertwined her fingers with Nemara's. "See? No pat-a-cake. But it's easier if we're touching. Now, just close your eyes."

Nemara did as she was told and sensed a warm tingling in her fingers. It spread into her hands and up her arms until it reached her heart. It was as if a golden glow had engulfed her, followed by a multitude of impressions. But they were much different from her own; days filled with golden

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sunshine, blue skies, and fluffy white clouds; meadows with bright, colorful flowers and clear, bubbling streams. Family picnics, pillow fights, and studying; but also bickering sisters, a quarreling brother, and shouting parents. It was all beautiful in its own way, but so different from her own experiences that it almost overwhelmed her.

“Catyana, it’s too much. I don’t know if I can...” Her words trailed into silence when she caught a glimpse of something else. There, down in the depths, were impressions similar to her own, but Catyana almost immediately cut them off.

Their eyes popped open at the same time. Catyana was breathing heavily and her expression seemed shocked. She would have tumbled over, but Nemara caught her and eased her down. Catyana curled up with her head in Nemara’s lap, and Nemara stroked her hair. “Oh, Catyana, you’re shaking like a leaf. What happened?”

“I didn’t mean to go down that deep,” she said with a quivering voice. “But it was so beautiful in there with you that I lost track of where I was and almost let it out again.”

Nemara sighed. She caressed Catyana’s cheek and brushed back a golden lock that had fallen into Catyana’s face. Then she put her hand over Catyana’s, and they played with each other’s fingers. “Can you tell me what was so bad about it?”

“I don’t know. It keeps rising up, and then I have to push it down again. But it’s wearing me out, and one day soon it’s going to swallow me whole. I thought it was because I was afraid of losing Nova. But after the conference this morning I had another horrible episode, so I know that’s not the cause.”

“What I saw didn’t seem so bad to me, although I did feel how devastated you were.” Nemara sniffed. “You’re afraid of a stroll in the moonlight, but you’re not afraid of the assassin who was contracted to kill you. You really are a very strange girl.”

Catyana turned onto her back and gaped at her. “You think I’m strange?”

Nemara smiled and stroked her cheek. “No, not really. There are much stranger people in this world, believe me.”

“I do believe you.” Catyana cuddled up closer to her. She took Nemara’s hand, kissed it, and clutched it to her heart. “I saw all the people you killed, Nemara. You were never malicious, and you never deliberately tried to cause them pain. Your kills were always as swift and as merciful as you could make them.”

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“Nemara? How do you know my name? I don’t think I ever told you.”

“We just joined. What did you think was going to happen?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. I’ve never allowed anyone to join with me before.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No. You’re very dear to me, Catyana.”

“Even now that you’ve seen inside me?”

“Now even more.”

“I’m glad.”

Nemara leaned down and gave Catyana a kiss on the cheek, then she scooted lower so she could lie down beside her and put her arm around Catyana’s waist. They just rested like that for a few minutes. She must have drifted off because her eyes fluttered open when Catyana squeezed her arm.

“Did you fall asleep?” said Catyana.

“Oh, no.” Nemara groaned, rolled onto her back, and put her hand on her forehead. “I must have.”

“I know how tired you are. But why do you want to die?”

“You saw that?”

Catyana nodded.

Nemara reached over and brushed another lock out of Catyana’s face. “It’s so peaceful there, on the other side. And that’s really all I want, peace and quiet, without this constant weight on my shoulders.” Catyana took a shuddering breath and Nemara drew her closer. “What is it, honey?”

“I feel the same way. I’m so tired of this cloud hanging over me and the pain in my heart. Sometimes, I just want it all to end.” She looked into Nemara’s eyes. “How...how do you know it’s really so peaceful on the other side?”

“Our Lord sometimes grants us visions. Well, they’re more like impressions, but my mind always translates them into a walk in the moonlight. You know, with all the different flowers glowing around you, and everything so still and peaceful.”

Catyana shuddered. “When I think of flowers glowing in the moonlight, especially wood flowers, all I feel is dread.”

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“I sensed a bit of that when we joined. But you suppressed it again almost immediately. How could something so beautiful trigger such horrible emotions?”

Catyana shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Nemara stroked her cheek. “Now you’re being dishonest with yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

Nemara put her hand on Catyana’s heart and applied gentle pressure. “Whatever is down there is so horrible that you don’t *want* to know what it is.”

Catyana abruptly sat up with her back to Nemara, pulled her knees up against her chest, and wrapped her arms around them.

Nemara sighed. She moved closer, put her arms around Catyana, and laid her head on her back, rocking her back and forth. “Hey, are you alright?”

“I will be. I just need a moment.”

Nemara waited a while, then pulled Catyana’s hair back a little and kissed her on the neck.

“I know you’re right,” said Catyana, turning her head toward her just a little, “but I’m so afraid.”

“It’s alright,” whispered Nemara, “I’m here.” She kissed her on the cheek.

Catyana leaned into her and reached back to stroke Nemara’s hair. “You won’t leave me, will you?”

“Never.” She reached around Catyana’s waist and put her arms just under Catyana’s breasts, hugging her tight.

Catyana sighed and put her arms over Nemara’s, lifting them just a bit and pressing them up against herself. Nemara kissed her on the neck. When she felt Catyana’s breath coming faster, she eased her down and onto her back. Catyana looked up at her, her eyes pleading. Nemara leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Catyana closed her eyes and Nemara kissed those, then wandered down until she was hovering over Catyana’s lips. When she sensed Catyana part them, she kissed her, first slowly, then more passionately.

When they took a moment to catch their breath, Nemara whispered, “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Catyana nodded and drew her back down.

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Later, when Catyana was sleeping, Nemara got out of bed, slipped her robe back on, and tied her hair together with a simple clasp. She sat down beside her love, pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, and tucked her in. Then she just watched her for a while.

When did it happen? Was it when they had joined? Or perhaps when she was holding the girl as she was shaking? Nemara wasn't sure, and it didn't really matter, but she did know with absolute certainty that Catyana was the one. Every fiber of her being told her that. She reached down and caressed her cheek.

Catyana sighed and opened her eyes. When she saw Nemara, she took a deep breath, "It's time, isn't it?"

Nemara nodded.

"What do I need to do?"

"Just close your eyes, my darling."

Catyana obeyed, and Nemara pulled up her skirt just enough so she could slide on top of the girl, straddling her. She realized what an intense impression the contrast of her pitch-black dress against the pure white fabric of Catyana's blanket made. It seemed almost metaphorical. When she felt the soft pressure of Catyana's hands on her waist, she closed her eyes and sighed. She bent down and kissed her one last time while cupping the lower portion of the girl's left breast with her right hand. She massaged her, she was so wonderfully soft and warm there, but what she was really doing was feeling for the space between Catyana's ribs just below her breast. She leaned down and whispered, "Keep your eyes closed, my darling. It'll be quick, and I'll follow right behind."

Catyana nodded, and Nemara took out Catyana's black stiletto, which she had hidden in the back of her robe. Raising her eyes to the heavens, she whispered, "Take this soul, My Lord, and carry it into the shadows on your gentle wings." She took a deep breath, then exhaled as she thrust down. The dagger's blade penetrated the blanket's fabric and slid into Catyana's heart. Catyana gasped and her eyes popped open.

Nemara already had her hand on the hilt of the second dagger behind her back, but she froze in shock when a light spread out from Catyana and engulfed them. With horror, she realized the stiletto in Catyana's chest was gone. "Catyana, no! What are you doing?"

Catyana rose from the pillow and hugged her tightly to herself. "It's alright, Nemara," she whispered in her ear. "Just let go. It won't harm you."

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Nemara felt Catyana's soft lips on her cheek, then everything around her faded into a warm, golden light.

42. Sunset

Gevinesa stroked Yanita's hair as she watched the sun setting behind the forests to the west, lighting the countryside in an orange glow. Her sister had fallen asleep moments after the carriage had started moving. Gevinesa was happy for her. After Nova had extracted them from their guard at the conference this morning, she had sensed her sister's relief, and Yanita had almost become her old self again. Of course, it would take time for her to get over the shock of seeing the Black Guard at their residence, and she was obviously exhausted from the trauma of their captivity during the past few days. But exhaustion was easily remedied by exactly what her sister was doing now, which was sleeping soundly with her head in Gevinesa's lap. Tending to her sister's shock would be more difficult, and Gevinesa hoped the girl hadn't been scarred for life.

Bejad smiled over at them. Gevinesa returned a weak one of her own, but she couldn't help wondering at the man. How could Nova have ever made him her liaison officer? And in Divestelan, to boot. Although the High Priestess had soon discovered her mistake, it must have cost the Resistance dearly. All of Gevinesa's training and experience made her want to grab her sword and run him through for what he had done to them. On the other hand, her heart had softened in the past seven years, and that was mostly Yanita and Zetara's doing.

Gevinesa had made Zetara her personal handmaiden nine years ago after Zetara's predecessor had been killed during one of the Crimson Brigade's more difficult operations. Gevinesa had sworn to herself not to use anymore of the girls from the Brigade for that position. Her brigadiers had the annoying tendency to either get themselves killed or to get married and resign, and she had always hated having to get used to a new servant's quirks. Gevinesa had already known Zetara as a reliable and quiet chambermaid assigned to tend to Gevinesa's lodgings and possessions, and she proved to be just as capable as her handmaiden. It wasn't until two years later that she discovered Zetara's true worth.

Gevinesa hadn't seen her mother very often since her father had confined her to the summer residence in the Etenolyas Valley. She was therefore surprised when her father brought Gevinesa

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a small, squirming bundle one day and asked her to please take care of her new baby sister. Annoyed, Gevinesa had asked him why her and not a nursemaid, to which her father had responded that Gevinesa could care for the infant in any way she saw fit, but that Yanita would remain her responsibility for the time being. Zetara had been delighted and helped Gevinesa take care of all the baby's needs. Gevinesa had been impressed by the way Zetara handled the situation. For instance, Gevinesa had been raised with iron discipline and would have used similar methods on Yanita, but Zetara showed her that a baby also needed love and encouragement. Zetara's devotion to both Gevinesa and the child had touched her and gradually softened her heart.

At the next opportunity, Gevinesa had visited her mother and confronted her, but her heart had already been softened enough to realize her mother was in pain herself, and that Yanita had probably not been the result of a consensual act. Gevinesa surprised herself at how distressed she was by her mother's plight, and she launched herself into the job of raising her sister with new vigor.

During the Conference of Divestelan, Gevinesa needed to make special arrangements for herself and her little sister and had been directed to the designated chief of security for the conference, Her Grace, Novantina Satural. Nova wasn't at all what she had expected. Although she was extremely proficient and competent, she also never missed an opportunity to expose both her own heart and Gevinesa's. Seeing right through Gevinesa's predicament, she opened herself up to Gevinesa and told her about her own experiences. By the time the conference ended in the tumultuous event of the High Priestess's murder, Nova and Gevinesa had become good friends.

Gevinesa sighed. Nova was right, of course. If she wanted to follow her heart, she had to stop thinking of people in terms of the iron justice she had been accustomed to dispensing. Every person was different, and what amounted to righteous punishment in her eyes could be a walk in the park for one or pure torture for another. She needed to consider every situation on its own terms and every person in light of their true motives.

She sniffed. If only it were that simple. Discovering a person's true motives could be like losing yourself in a labyrinth where the paths kept changing. People didn't want their true motives being exposed and often did everything in their power to ensure they weren't.

Gevinesa stroked Yanita's hair. A child was simple, and she hoped her sister would be able to remain as innocent as she was for a very long time. Now that they were free of their father and

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brother, she had high hopes that Yanita could have a safe and unblemished childhood. Seen from that perspective, people like Bejad, with their simple and unpretentious nature, might even be a good influence on her.

In the meantime, Velana's last reddish glow was dissipating in the clouds. And just as the sun had set and would rise again in the morning, she hoped they had put their old life of darkness, fear, and violence behind them and could begin a new life filled with light, hope, and joy.

43. Her Final Mark

Mara couldn't understand the flutter in the pit of her stomach that had been with her all evening, as if some dark cloud were hanging over her, and she had a hard time concentrating on the meeting. The sudden knock on the door startled her, and her heart seemed to stop for an instant. "I'll see who it is." When she opened, Savinya was standing before her. Mara only managed a weak smile. "Hello, Savinya. What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, My Lady, but Her Grace Catyana has asked for Her Eminence. She says it's urgent."

Mara felt something in her chest tighten and she sucked in a quavering breath. "Alright." She turned. "Nova, Savinya is here. She says Catyana has something urgent."

Nova immediately rose and joined Mara at the door, but she got just a bit too close and her sword bumped Mara's thigh. Nova gave her an apologetic look. Mara wondered if she would ever get used to the sight of her friends wearing swords.

Savinya bowed. "Your Eminence."

"Hello Savinya. Do you know what Catyana wants?"

"Yes, she's in the bedroom of your suite and said to tell you she has information regarding...a black arrow? She said you would know what that means."

Mara and Nova exchanged a startled glance. "Was Catyana alright when you saw her?" said Nova.

"She seemed a bit confused, but otherwise she seemed fine."

Nova sighed with relief. "Alright, thank you, Savinya. I'll be with her in a moment."

Savinya bowed and left.

The High Priestess

Mara touched Nova's arm. "May I come with you?"

"Of course." Nova excused herself from the group at the table and stepped into the hall with Mara right behind her.

Mara had the feeling something was very wrong, and she couldn't help pulling ahead. The Royal Suite was in the other wing but on the same floor, and it didn't take them long to get there. But by the time they arrived, Mara was running. The door to the suite was ajar and she burst inside. But when she got to the bedroom, she stopped and stared, not quite sure how to interpret what she was seeing. Catyana was sitting on her bed in her robes, and she looked shocked when she saw her. "Mara! I...wasn't expecting you."

"We were just down the hall, and I was so afraid something had happened to you, so I asked Nova if I could join her. What's going on? Why is Cortina on your bed?"

Nova had paused to shut the door to the suite and now stopped beside her. "Catyana! Are you alright?" She seemed slightly out of breath but shot a confused glance at the senior housekeeper in the strange, black robe.

"Yes...um, thank you, Nova, I'm fine. But her name isn't Cortina, it's Nemara. She's..." Catyana took a deep breath "She's the assassin who was contracted to kill me."

Mara gaped at her. "Nemara?" She cast another glance at the woman on the bed, scrutinizing her face. Why hadn't she seen it before?

"How do you know she's the assassin?" said Nova.

"I...think it was the knife in my heart that gave it away." She picked up the blanket beside her. There was a hole in the fabric with a rather large blood stain around it. The crimson red seemed like a glaring violation against the sterile white of the fabric.

Nova rushed forward and hugged her. "*Texas'an*, Catyana! How are you still alive?" She stepped back and stared at her with her eyes opened wide.

"I'm not quite sure. I think it was an automatic response. As soon as I sensed what was happening, my body just kind of...took over and healed itself."

Mara had a dull feeling in her stomach. Catyana had been so shocked when she had seen her, and she seemed embarrassed at Mara's presence. "There's no blood on your robe," she said, staring at Catyana's breast. "I don't see a hole, either."

The High Priestess

Catyana must have seen the pained look in Mara's eyes and dropped her gaze. "I...um, I was already undressed for bed."

Mara's jaw dropped. Catyana had never lied to her before. She realized Nova was staring at Catyana too. Mara felt as if someone were tugging at her heart, trying to yank it out. What she suspected just couldn't be true.

Nova shot a quick glance at Mara. "That's not important right now. Catyana, what happened to Cortina...I mean, Nemara? Did you do something to her? Is she hurt?"

"No, she's fine, but I think I made her sleep."

"She's not hurt?" said Mara.

Catyana shook her head.

"That's easily fixed." Mara jammed her lips together in determination as she marched over, grabbed Nemara by the hair, and yanked her off the bed. There was a dull smack as Nemara's head connected with the floor.

"No!" Catyana's hand shot up to her mouth and she rushed over, dropping to her knees and stroking Nemara's hair out of her face to ensure she was alright.

The intensity of Catyana's cry, her closeness to the woman, and the familiarity of her touch told Mara everything she needed to know. She gave Catyana a quick glance but couldn't quite conceal how hurt she felt. She marched over to the window and ripped off the cord from one of the curtains, using it to tie Nemara's hands behind her back and ensuring they were so tight they bit into her flesh. She did the same with her feet. Catyana remained beside Mara, and it seemed she was hesitating to put her arm on Mara to console her, but she flinched back at the look on Mara's face.

"You might want to go a little easier on her," said Nova, gesturing at Nemara's hands.

"No, I don't think so," said Mara, still busy checking the cords. She glared up at Nova with her mouth jammed into a thin line and gave the cords around Nemara's wrists one last tug. Satisfied, she dragged Nemara away from Catyana and positioned her so she was sitting with her back against the wall.

"What exactly happened?" Nova said to Catyana.

"Well, I was sleeping, but I woke up when I felt someone stroking my hair. Nemara was sitting on the bed beside me, watching me."

"She didn't try to kill you?"

The High Priestess

“No, we just...talked.”

“Oh, is that what they’re calling it these days?” said Mara.

Nova shot her a warning glance. “What did you talk about?”

Catyana dropped her gaze. “Just...stuff.”

Nova walked over to her and took her hands. “Catyana, what’s going on?”

Catyana regarded her with a helpless look and brushed away a tear. “I don’t know. I’m so confused. I don’t really know what happened.”

“What’s so confusing about it?” said Mara. “I think it’s quite clear what happened.”

Catyana could hardly raise her eyes to look at her. “I’m so sorry, Mara,” she whispered. “I never meant to hurt you.” Another tear slipped down her cheek and she wiped it off.

Mara dropped her gaze. She didn’t get angry very often, and when she did, it was usually to mask her pain. At Catyana’s heartfelt words, she felt the anger seep out of her, and she had to swallow to keep her own tears at bay.

Nova’s glance was wandering between her and Catyana. “I’d give you two some privacy to sort this out, but I’m afraid the situation won’t allow it. Besides, I think Nemara is waking up.”

Mara looked over at the assassin. Her eyes were indeed fluttering open, so she stepped closer. When she spoke, there was no longer any anger in her voice, just sadness. “Nemara.”

Nemara blinked and tried to focus. “Maralena! It...is good to see you, although I’m not quite sure why you’re here.” She cast a puzzled glance at Catyana, but then she grimaced. “How did I get such a bump on my head?”

Mara couldn’t quite help the humorless smile that commandeered her lips. “I actually didn’t recognize you until Catyana told us your name.”

“She did? Oh.” Mara winced at the hurt look on Nemara’s face. “Well, you weren’t supposed to see me, let alone recognize me, which is why I did my best to avoid you and Tsenera. Of course, had the circumstances been different, I would have gladly sought you out. I’ve missed you, Maralena, and your mother.”

“You two know each other?” Catyana said in astonishment.

Mara nodded. “Nemara was my nursemaid when I was little. But it was so long ago, I didn’t remember until now.”

Nova stared at Nemara. “May I ask how old you are?”

The High Priestess

“I’ll never tell,” said Nemara, “but probably several times older than all your ages put together.”

Catyana kneeled beside Nemara and checked the bump on her head. She put her hand over the spot and let it glimmer for a moment. When she was done, she stroked Nemara’s hair. A sigh escaped her.

“Thank you.” Nemara gave her a pained look. “But why did you tie me up?”

Catyana regarded her with a shocked gaze. “Oh, Nemara, how could you think that? I would never do that to you. It was Mara.”

“Alright, then why did you bring Maralena and Novantina here?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I did, but I only sent for Nova. I was at a loss, Nemara. I didn’t know what to do, and I was sure Nova would help. I...wasn’t expecting Mara,” she said with a quick glance in Mara’s direction.

Mara saw the looks that passed between Nemara and Catyana, and it wrenched at her heart. “What did you do to Catyana?” she asked Nemara, but she couldn’t quite suppress the bitterness in her voice.

The assassin gave her a startled glance at her tone, but something seemed to click, and she raised her chin just a fraction. “That’s between Catyana and me. But now I understand the bump on my head. I’m so sorry, Maralena. I didn’t realize how you felt about her.”

“Would it have changed anything?”

“I don’t know, and it’s a bit academic at this point. But believe me, I would never deliberately hurt you like that, ever.”

Mara sniffed. “Right, unless someone put out a contract on me.”

Nemara shook her head. “I would never accept a contract put out on you, or on Novantina, for that matter. On the contrary, it would be one of the few reasons why I would ever turn against my Order.”

Mara could feel her brow crease. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I would always protect you, even against my sister assassins. But to answer your next question, no, I did not enchant or seduce Catyana. That’s your domain.” She turned back to Catyana and lowered her voice. “What happened, my darling? I was hoping to be with you in the shadows by now.”

The High Priestess

Catyana shook her head. “I’m not sure. When you slipped the knife in, something inside of me just took over. I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Nemara gazed into her eyes. “Do you know how truly remarkable you are? I felt the blade penetrate your heart, Catyana. How is it possible you’re still alive?”

Catyana shrugged.

Nova was staring at them, an expression of dismay on her face. “Catyana, dearest, may I speak with you for a moment?”

Catyana looked over at her and nodded. She leaned forward and kissed Nemara on the cheek before rising.

Nova took her friend’s hands. “Catyana, I don’t understand. You wanted to die?”

“I’m sorry, Nova. But I really am confused.”

“I know the past few days have been eventful, but what could have disheartened you to the extent that you would take your own life?”

Catyana stared at her, aghast. “I would never take my own life.”

She nodded toward Nemara. “There’s no difference between taking your own life or letting her do it for you. What happened, Catyana? I thought things would be better for you, now that you know we won’t be separated.”

“I thought so too. But don’t you remember what happened after the conference session this morning? The darkness is still there, Nova, just waiting. And at any moment, it’ll pounce out and swallow me whole. I’m so tired of hurting and being scared, and I just...I just want it all to be over.”

Nova took her into her arms. “Oh, Catyana, please don’t hurt yourself. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She released her and took her hands, gazing into her eyes.

As the two friends stood there talking, Mara looked back at the assassin. Nemara was gazing at the floor and seemed calm enough. But something about her words earlier seemed out of place. Mara was missing something, but she didn’t know what. She rebuked herself for feeling too hurt to pay attention. What had Catyana and Nemara been talking about?

It was difficult for her to even think about it, but Catyana had wanted her soul to be released into the shadows, as the assassins’ faith described it. What exactly had Nemara said? She was hoping to be with her in the shadows by now?

The High Priestess

Mara drew in her breath. So Catyana was Nemara's chosen one, her final mark. That meant she would have taken her own life as soon as she had terminated her target. The thought made her shudder. But it was strange. An assassin always left the instrument of death in the body as proof they had completed the contract. If Nemara had used her dagger on Catyana and left the instrument with her victim, wouldn't she need a second dagger to...?

Mara finally realized her mistake, and she sensed Nemara's intent before she saw it. "Nova, look out!"

But it was too late. Nemara freed her hands with her second dagger, slashed through the cords tying her feet as she summersaulted forward, and body-checked Nova as she came up, sending Nova flying backward into the wall. But Nova's sword remained in Nemara's hands. Spinning around, Nemara thrust the sword through Catyana's abdomen, aiming for her side, where Mara suspected she wouldn't cause damage to any major organs.

"No!" cried Nova in horror as she tried to get up.

"I'm sorry, my darling," Nemara said, using the sword like a lever to pivot herself and Catyana away while using the ensuing momentum to pull the sword out, "but I don't want you disappearing my weapon again." Nemara situated herself so a sofa was at her back while using Catyana as a shield between her and the others. "Don't even think about it, Maralena!" said Nemara, with a quick glance to the side. "I can cut through her faster than your sphere would ever reach me." She had one arm around Catyana's waist, keeping pressure on Catyana's wound while holding her upright, and had the sword's blade at Catyana's throat.

Catyana was glowing, but she was weak with shock, so Nemara lowered the sword and eased her down onto her knees, all the while ensuring Catyana stayed between her and the two women. Supporting Catyana so she wouldn't tumble over, Nemara prompted her down and forward into a prayer position with a gentle nudge. With one knee on the floor for stabilization, she held the sword away from them like an executioner so she could swing it up and over in a half-circle to build up the necessary momentum. "I'm so sorry I wounded you, my darling. And now I have to stop you from healing yourself again, but I promise it will be quick. You won't feel a thing."

"No, please don't," Catyana wailed, raising her head a bit.

Nemara's shoulders sagged and she lowered the sword. "Oh, Catyana. Begging for your life? After everything we've been through tonight?"

The High Priestess

“Not you,” whispered Catyana, “her.” She had a pained, helpless look in her eyes, and her gaze wandered from Nemara back to the other two women.

Nemara’s eyes opened wide and her head whipped around.

Mara had taken her pendant out of her bodice and was clutching it, trying to concentrate and thinking what to do without endangering Catyana. Nova stayed behind her, probably realizing what she was up to and giving her room to work. But when Nemara looked at her, Mara let go of the pendant and opened her hand, which had a glowing, dark red sphere in it.

“A ruby,” Nemara whispered, staring at Mara’s pendant in amazement. “Oh, Maralena.” She rose to her feet, gaping at Mara. “The only other enchantress I’ve ever known who could focus her powers with a ruby was your great-grandmother. I’m so glad to see her gift was passed on to someone worthy of it.”

Now it was Mara’s turn to be amazed. “You knew my great-grandmother?”

“I did. She had your serene type of beauty, and your heart. I would say she was more like your mother and her younger sister in that regard, and certainly nothing like the way your Aunt Lusina turned out. It was an honor being her companion, at least for the brief time allotted us. She perished at the Battle of Malentisa. But I’m sure if she could be here with us today, she would be so proud of you.”

“The Battle of Malentisa? But that was...”

Nemara drew her eyebrows together. “By my calculation, a bit more than five hundred years ago.” She glanced back at Mara. “Your mother and her sisters also lost their mother—your grandmother—in the battle, and I tried my best to console the poor girls, but I was too devastated myself to do a very good job of it.”

Mara suddenly realized what Nemara had been saying and shot her a puzzled glance. “Wait, what? My mother and her sisters? But my mother only has one sister: Lusina.”

“No, I was their nursemaid, and I helped all three of them through their trials, so I think I would know. There were three sisters: Lusina, Tsenera, and Elana.”

Nova rushed forward with wide eyes. “No, that’s impossible! Elana is my mother’s name.”

Nemara regarded her with a weak smile. “You really do have your mother’s aptitude. There are other women named Elana, but you sense something, don’t you?”

Nova just gaped at her with her hand on her heart.

The High Priestess

Nemara nodded from Nova to Mara. “Novantina, meet your cousin, Maralena.”

Mara and Nova stared at each other. Nova said, “How is that possible? Gelanes Cemasena is my uncle, my mother’s brother.”

“Now you disappoint me,” said Nemara. “I know it’s a bit of a shock, but you have your mother’s instincts, Nova. Listen to your heart. What is it telling you?”

Nova stared back at Mara, who flinched when Nova took her hand and closed her eyes. A moment later she opened them again. “It’s true. I don’t know how, but it is.”

Nemara’s shoulders sagged a bit, and she let out a deep sigh. “I’m glad you two found each other.” She put her hand on Catyana’s head and looked down at her for a moment before looking back at Mara. “You’re not going to let me take her with me, are you?”

Mara gasped and the red glow immediately appeared in her palm again. “I just lost my daughter. I’m not going to lose Catyana, too.”

Nemara nodded. “I understand, and I’m truly sorry about Soshia. But I’m so tired, Maralena.” She took another glance at the dark red gem lying against Mara’s heart and then looked her straight in the eye. “Would you do me the honor?”

“No, Mara, please, please don’t!” Catyana was still too weak to stand, but she was sobbing and slung her arms around Nemara, pressing her ear against Nemara’s belly.

Nemara put her arms around her and stroked her golden hair. She looked at Mara and nodded.

Mara felt her own tears pressing against the ducts in her eyes. “I don’t know if I can do this, Nemara.”

“You can’t have it both ways. Please, grant me this mercy. I’m tired of this life, and having my soul released by the Supreme Enchantress is an honorable death.”

“No, please,” said Catyana, but it wasn’t much more than a whimper.

“I’m not the Supreme Enchantress,” said Mara. “My Aunt Lusina is.”

“No, Maralena, you are. You just don’t know it yet.” Nemara sighed. “Alright, I’ll make this easy for you.” She stooped down and kissed Catyana on the forehead. “I’m so sorry I have to do this to you again, but if I don’t, you’ll just try to save me. Good-bye, my darling. I’ll be waiting for you on the other side.” With one swift motion, she positioned herself so her own front was fully exposed, grabbed Catyana’s shoulder, and drove the sword through her, severing her spine.

The High Priestess

“No!” Mara reacted without thinking. A dark red spear-like shaft impaled Nemara and flung her across the room, pinning her against the far wall. She hung there for a moment like a lifeless puppet. Then Mara released her, and she crumpled to the ground.

Catyana had collapsed to the floor, enveloped in golden light, but Nova was already at her side, holding on to her. The girl was still glowing as she healed, but she was struggling against Nova’s grasp, trying to drag herself over to Nemara, each sob of her broken heart tugging at Mara as if turning her inside out. Mara somehow found the strength to haul herself over to them.

“Please, please, let me go,” Catyana sobbed. “I can save her.”

Mara lowered herself to the floor and stroked the girl’s hair. “Please don’t, Catyana. Let Nemara go.” She felt tears sliding down her face and wiped them away.

“No, I can save her!”

“Oh, Catyana, please stop,” said Nova. “Mara’s right. You have to let her go.”

“No!” But the girl finally stopped struggling and clung to Nova, burying her face in Nova’s lap, her shoulders trembling. The glow surrounding her was slowly dissipating.

Nova continued to stroke Catyana’s hair but turned to Mara. “Thank you. You did the right thing.”

Mara shrugged.

Nova put her hand on Mara’s arm. “Please, don’t punish yourself like this. What you did was necessary.”

“Was it? Catyana wanted to go.”

“Our primary duty is to save lives, Mara, not take them or allow them to be destroyed. Catyana is young and confused. There may come a time when she makes such a choice on her own, and that would be her right. But as her guardians, we have an obligation to ensure no harm comes to her, even if it’s from herself.”

Catyana raised her head. “I understand that, Nova. But why wouldn’t you let me save her? Or at least try?”

“She never would have stopped, dearest. Her own faith dictates it. If we had spared her life, she would have found a way to end yours, somehow. And if I’m forced to choose between you and someone else, I will always choose you.”

Catyana fell into Nova’s arms with a sob. “I love her, Nova.”

The High Priestess

“I know, honey.” Nova rubbed her back with firm but gentle strokes. She gave her a few more minutes, then she said, “Do you think you’re well enough to stand?”

Catyana sat up and nodded. “I think so.” Nova stood, and she and Mara helped Catyana up. They were going to assist her to the door, but Catyana held on to Nova’s arm and shook her head. “I’m not leaving her. I’ll stay here until someone comes to take her away. And I’m also going to help prepare her, like we did for Soshia.” She looked at Mara, who dropped her gaze but nodded.

Nova regarded her for a moment, searching her eyes. “Alright, dearest. But we need to inform the household. Will you be alright by yourself for a while?” When Catyana nodded, Nova squeezed her hand and said, “I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Nova took Mara’s arm and pulled her to the door, but Mara cast a last pained glance at Nemara’s lifeless form before turning away.

44. Eyes of the Heart

Dena tightened the gauze over her brother’s ribs and gave the bandage a gentle pat. “There, that’s better.” She had been checking his bandages every hour but didn’t want to show him how worried she was. If only they had access to a Selanian priest or priestess out here.

“Thank you, Dena. You’re a wonderful nurse,” Tuval said, grinning up at her.

She looked into his pale face. “How are you holding up?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll live.”

She clenched her teeth and nodded. Then she turned back to the first-aid kit her grandfather had given her and cleaned up, recycling the events of the past hours in her mind.

After their escape from Elinas that afternoon, they had traveled north through the forest, keeping abreast of the main road. Her grandfather wanted to get as much distance between themselves and the Black Guard as possible, and they urged their chyevi on for several hours. But around sunset they realized Tuval could go no further. They moved deeper into the virgin forest until they found a secluded clearing near a small stream, where they decided to camp until the following morning. The aging Lord gathered wood and boiled water while Dena cleaned and dressed Tuval’s wounds as well as she was able. Her grandfather had procrastinated and seemed reluctant to let her examine his wound, and she had let it slide for the past hour or so. But enough was enough.

The High Priestess

Her grandfather returned from scouting the area, carrying another armload of firewood. There had been no rain for over a week, so it wasn't difficult to find dry twigs and branches, even by moonlight. She glanced at him as he dropped the wood on the existing pile, gauging his mood.

"That should do until morning," he said as he straightened and gazed at his grandchildren.

"Alright, Grandpa, now it's your turn, and I won't take any more of your excuses," Dena said, glaring at him.

Lord Cemasena shrugged but obediently walked over to where Tuval was already propped up against a tree trunk. He sat next to his grandson so Dena could inspect the wound in his right arm in the light of the campfire. When he opened his tunic and exposed the ugly gash, Dena gasped. "A'mada, Grandpa!"

"What's wrong?"

"You call this a scratch?"

"I've had worse."

She shot him a reproachful glance, then set to work, cleaning out the wound with boiled water and sprinkling generous portions of disinfecting powder over it. Her grandfather never once winced, but she could see his jaw was set. She had to admire him, since she knew from personal experience that the powder burned as if someone were pouring glowing coals into the wound.

After she had dressed the wound and put away the material and utensils, she tended the fire and sat in front of the two men, who were both sipping a regenerating broth brewed from herbs.

Tuval grimaced. "This stuff tastes awful."

"Yes, but it'll accelerate the healing process and aid against infection," Dena said. "Drink up, brother, and think of this broth the next time you decide to duel the Black Guard. It might be incentive enough to do a better job of dodging your enemy's blade."

They smiled at each other and Tuval took another sip

Their grandfather chuckled. "It would be too easy if we could defeat those demons with such simple tricks."

Dena's mood became somber. "Grandpa, what happened in Elinas? Why was the Black Guard there?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you a direct answer to that question, although there must be more going on here than we know."

The High Priestess

“It seemed as if they knew we were coming,” Tuval said.

“That they did.”

“But, how could they?” Dena asked.

“I’m afraid you might have a traitor in the Resistance. A courier arrived yesterday afternoon with the news that you would be coming.”

Dena and Tuval exchanged an apprehensive glance. “Did the Black Guard invade Elinas because of us?” she asked.

“No. They marched into Elinas the night before last, under cover of darkness. At first, they kept very quiet and only secured my residence and the surrounding area, so most of the population didn’t realize what was happening. I had arranged to leave for Tolares early yesterday morning, but they knew of my plans and came in the night before, so nobody missed me when I didn’t make an appearance. They seem to be very well informed, which worries me. Then the courier arrived, and they blocked all possible routes in and out of town. They saw you coming this afternoon but didn’t accost you because they hoped you would walk into the trap they had set for you.”

Tuval sniffed. “I thought it seemed too easy. But why do you believe they were in Elinas?”

“If I were to speculate,” Lord Cemasena replied, “I’d say they’re getting their advance strike forces in position as preparation to a full-scale war.”

Dena stared at him, her eyes wide. She glanced at her brother, who didn’t seem to be taking this information much better than she was. “But Grandpa, how can that be? And why?” she asked.

The Lord gazed solemnly at his two grandchildren. “It worries me to see you’ve both neglected your instruction in spiritual matters. It’s not enough to understand the affairs of the physical world, even if the work you’ve both been doing has been virtuous and gallant. If you wish to grasp the global context of what’s happening here, the eyes of your hearts must be enlightened.”

Dena shook her head in confusion. “What does the study of the *Selani s’Ulavan* have to do with what’s going on here?”

“Dear child,” her grandfather said, “it has everything to do with it. The fact that you don’t know that gives me great cause for anxiety.”

Tuval awarded him a grim smile. “I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, would someone please explain it to me?” Dena exclaimed.

The High Priestess

“It has to do with the prophecies regarding the end of the Millennial Peace, doesn’t it?” Tuval said.

“Yes, grandson, you’re on the right track.”

“You mean you actually believe in that stuff?” Dena cried, hardly capable of concealing the resentment in her voice.

Her grandfather looked her in the eye. “Yes, Dena, I actually believe in that stuff. The subtle signs that have accompanied the gradual rise of darkness have been evident for almost a century, for those who had eyes to see. Only very few wise men on the Council had that foresight, such as Elder Yonatan and Elder Livanes, which is probably why we’ve remained such good friends all these years. Our joint campaign against the impending disintegration of our culture has held us together. Your parents are also part of our little conspiracy and have provided accordingly.”

“Mother and Father are part of this?” Dena shook her head. “What do antiquated texts and the traditions of an outdated religion have to do with our struggle against Lord Divestelan’s Black Guard?”

Her grandfather studied her for a moment. “I’m very sorry I wasn’t there for you after your fiancé was killed. Varan Marusen was a valiant man, and his death a grave tragedy. But I’m even more sorry that you’ve allowed this sinister deed to harden you against Anae’s love.”

Dena swallowed. She felt as if her heart were being squeezed together by an immense fist. “What are you talking about?”

“Why did you accompany your brother on this mission? One person would have been enough to inform the High Priestess regarding the current situation in the Resistance.”

“I was planning to continue on to Travis to search for Tavita Marusen,” she said with her head held high, attempting to sound matter of fact. “We’ve intercepted reliable intelligence that she’s on a covert operation to infiltrate the Advisory Council.”

“But why you? There are enough agents in the Resistance who know Tavita and could identify her. Tavita used to be a good friend of yours. Why is it you now wish to hunt her down?”

Dena was breathing heavily, and she felt tears stinging in her eyes. She tried to choke them back, as she usually did, but she could no longer contain the dull, aching throb of her heart. “Oh, Grandpa!” she finally blurted out as a flood of tears misted her sight and streamed down her face.

The High Priestess

She immediately felt her grandfather's strong, tender arms around her. He held her tightly for a while, but when her sobs diminished, he took her shoulders and regarded her at arm's length, his gaze solemn. "Dena, I love you, and I can only imagine how much you've suffered these past two years. But I beg you not to continue this crusade of retribution."

She looked up at him with her lips compressed in agony. "Please, don't try to sway me," she pleaded. Her voice sounded hoarse in her own ears.

Her grandfather squeezed her shoulders and released his hold. "You always were stubborn once you set your mind to something. But how can you expect to comprehend and resist the dark forces surrounding us if you close your heart to love and allow your thoughts to be consumed by your lust for vengeance? I'm very afraid for you, Dena."

She rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I'm trying, Grandpa. I really am. But it just hurts so much. You weren't there, sitting in his blood, holding his trembling, mangled body as the seizures hit him again and again. He couldn't even tell me he loved me because that witch cut out his tongue. All he could do was look up into my eyes until every last spark of life was drained out of him. If there's really an almighty Goddess, how could She allow such horrible things to happen?"

"Because we're not puppets, Dena. There's no freedom of choice if we're not allowed to choose evil. I'm so sorry I can't offer more counsel than that, which is why I suggest you speak with the High Priestess. The poor girl has experienced more grief than either of us put together and can understand your pain better than I ever will."

Dena stared at him. "You know the High Priestess?"

Her grandfather smiled. "She visited me four years ago with the Lady Utya and revealed her identity while asking for my assistance. I was glad to oblige her. Since today is the first day of the conference, she's already made her debut, so I can tell you she's the young Lady Novantina Satural."

"Novantina Satural!" said Dena. "No, Grandpa, that's not possible."

"Really? And why is that?"

"Because she's the one who got Halita Penates killed! We heard she didn't implement the elders' mandated security measures, and the Council stripped her of her commission for negligence. I think they let her off easy."

The High Priestess

“You really must learn to reserve judgment until you have all the facts, Dena. Things aren’t always as they seem. It’s true she didn’t implement the elders’ security measures, for the very reason that she was suspecting such an attempt on the High Priestess’s life and therefore implemented a much stricter protocol of her own accord. But even she couldn’t provide for every eventuality and the attempt succeeded, which isn’t surprising considering the enemy had the home advantage. Nova tried to dissuade the elders from holding the conference in Divestelan, but to no avail. No one believed the situation was so grave. Her wise foresight was probably what persuaded the Council to choose her as the new High Priestess, despite her young age.”

“That’s actually been bothering me for a long time,” Tuval said. “Why didn’t they choose Halita’s protégée as the High Priestess? I believe that was Halita’s younger sister, Tanola, right? She would have been the most likely candidate.”

“Oh, so that’s been bothering you for a long time, has it?” his grandfather said with a raised eyebrow and a subtle smile. “How could you have known Tanola wasn’t chosen?”

Tuval’s cheeks became flushed. “I, uh...I try to stay informed. It...seemed like the most logical conclusion, given the facts.”

“Tuval, just because I’m advanced in years doesn’t mean I’m senile. If there are things you need to keep to yourself, for whatever reason, that’s fine. But don’t ever try to play me for a fool.”

“Sorry, Grandpa. It...won’t happen again.”

Dena stared at her brother. “Tuval, what’s going on? What aren’t you telling us?”

Tuval’s face seemed to be set in stone. Dena knew from her brother’s expression that she wouldn’t get any further information from him, at least not now.

Her grandfather nodded, a content smile on his face. He certainly seemed to know more than he was telling. “To answer your question, Tanola was so traumatized by her sister’s death she almost resigned from the Order. You mustn’t forget, she was sitting in the carriage right next to her sister when the High Priestess was murdered, and Tanola was wounded during the incident. Although Nova was able to persuade her to retain her commission as priestess, she didn’t make herself available for the election and withdrew to a quiet life, teaching school down south in Gisatena.

“But it seems a year of seclusion was more than enough for a lively girl like Tanola, and she wrote to Nova, who delivered her from her unfortunate predicament after visiting me. I believe

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Nova made her chief of staff. A wise decision, if you ask me, since Tanola acquired much experience in the former High Priestess's entourage."

Tuval gave his grandfather a teasing look. "You're even better informed than I am, Grandpa. I think I'm beginning to piece it together. You told us in Elinas that you sponsored our training with the High Priest Vordalin and his mentor, Elder Renestal. Was it you who financed the Resistance and allowed them to commence their opposition against the Black Guard twenty years ago?"

Lord Cemasena returned the grin. "Yes, that was me, although I made it clear to Sheletas at the time that he would have to find ways to supplement the funding. It would be dangerous if their finances depended upon a single source, especially since it had become clear by then that the Black Guard was being controlled by someone behind the scenes. I must admit, Sheletas is an excellent leader and has done very well."

"Is that why you knew the signal for danger when we were attacked in your study?" Dena asked.

"Yes, I was more than just an active supporter of the Resistance. There isn't much of your training I haven't completed myself. You see, I, together with many other adherents, took the prophecies of the *s'Ulavan* very seriously. We firmly believed the Millennial Peace was coming to an end, and we prepared accordingly. As events have demonstrated, our fears were only too well founded."

"So, do you think Vordalin will be able to help us?" Tuval asked. "As High Priest, such matters fall in his jurisdiction."

"No, I respect Vordalin highly, but he's a man of action. We believe the Emissary's arrival is imminent, and it's been prophesied that he's the one who will prepare our people for conflict in this time of turmoil. Knowing Vordalin as I do, I suspect he'll remain at the Covatal's side when that time comes. Personally, I believe the High Priestess is our greatest hope. She has an excellent mind and has learned to keep a clear head in difficult situations. That's one of the reasons why I'm escorting you to Tolares."

Dena and Tuval remained silent as they digested this information.

Their grandfather regarded them with a significant gaze as he continued in a soft voice. "Children, you may have been too far away to have heard the news, but four days ago, the Prophet's Bow was used for the first time in five hundred years."

They stared at him, incapable of speech.

The High Priestess

“The Emissary has arrived?” Tuval finally gasped.

“It would seem so.” Despite his seemingly calm demeanor, it was clear their grandfather was excited. “I was attempting to keep abreast of the situation when the Black Guard marched on Elinas. Since then, I haven’t received any further intelligence. That’s the main reason I wish to get to Tolares as quickly as possible. Nova was in Nadil at the time, and I’m sure she can fill us in. I don’t know of anyone more versed in the subject of the Covatal than she.”

“The Emissary has arrived,” Tuval whispered. “It’s the dawn of a new era. All the prophecies will be fulfilled. The Elinar, the Demantar, and the Sword of Selanae will be restored to us.”

Their grandfather smiled at Tuval’s enthusiasm. “Why don’t we take this one step at a time? If there’s one thing I’ve learned in all these years, it’s that Anae’s wheels grind slowly. As a matter of fact, they usually grind much too slow for our comfort. It could take years before the prophecies are fulfilled, decades even.”

“Do you really think so?” Dena asked.

“Who knows? But I can tell you what I’d do in the meantime.”

“And what would that be?”

“Eat. Tuval, you need to get your strength back, and a meal should help you get your head out of the clouds and your feet back on the ground.”

Dena and Tuval grinned, and Lord Cemasena rose to raid his saddlebags.

45. Cousins

Nova had her arm around Catyana, who was resting her head on Nova’s shoulder. Nova would have enjoyed this quiet time with her friend more if Catyana hadn’t been so distressed, or if the lovely carvings in Catyana’s wooden headboard weren’t digging into her back. She thought about shifting to a more comfortable position, but Catyana seemed so peaceful, and Nova didn’t want to ruin the moment. If Catyana hadn’t sniffed back a few tears every now and then, Nova might have believed she had fallen asleep.

Catyana had helped Nova, Venora, and Savinya prepare Nemara, and had cleaned her clothes and healed her wounds by Induction. Contrary to the gaping hole in the stable boy’s chest in Nadil, Nemara’s wound had been almost surgical in precision. If the circumstances hadn’t been so sad,

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Nova might even have been impressed at the progress Mara had made in the use of her powers. Afterward, Nemara had been laid out in the chapel, and Catyana had sat with her for an hour or so but finally decided to go back to their newly assigned accommodations to wash up and change.

Nova looked around the room and sighed. Venora had put them up in their previous room on the fourth floor for the night. The young Lady felt it would be better for Catyana to be in familiar surroundings. She was probably right. But the thought of Venora made Nova realize she still had work to do.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

Catyana nodded, and as Nova scooted to the edge of the bed and swung her legs over, Catyana grabbed a pillow and curled up around it.

Nova pressed the signal button near the door. Almost immediately there was a knock. Surprised, she opened the door. “Savinya! How did you get here so quickly?”

“I never left,” said Savinya. Her eyes were red and there were wet streaks on her face, but she swallowed and bravely kept her head up. “How may I be of service, Your Eminence?”

“I think, given the circumstances, it’s time we dispensed with the formalities. Please call me Nova.”

Savinya sucked in her breath. “I don’t know if Lord Tolares would allow that.”

“And what would the Lord say if you declined a prominent guest’s request?”

“Oh, he would be furious!”

“Good, then I request that you to call me Nova.”

Despite the tears in her eyes, Savinya smiled. “I’d be glad to. Now, how I may be of service?”

“Would you be so kind and fetch the Lady Venora for us? I need to talk to her.”

“Gladly. I’ll be right back.”

Nova shut the door and sat back down on the edge of the bed, stroking Catyana’s hair. “How are you feeling, dearest?”

“Please stop asking me that.” A tear dripped off her cheek and onto her pillow. Catyana sniffed and wiped the wet streak on her face away.

Nova sighed. “I’ll try.”

The High Priestess

She continued stroking Catyana's hair until there was a knock at the door. Nova leaned down and kissed Catyana's cheek before getting up. When she opened the door, Savinya was in the corridor with Venora.

"Thank you for coming," Nova said to Venora.

"Of course," said Venora as she stepped inside. "Savinya said you wanted to talk to me?"

"I do." To Savinya, Nova said, "Would you please come inside?"

Savinya shot a glance at Venora, who nodded.

When she was in the room, Nova shut the door and took the maid's hands. "Savinya, you need to grieve, too. It's not good if you keep it all bottled up."

A few tears slid down Savinya's face and she wiped them away. "I won't, I promise. But I can grieve when I'm at home or in the chapel. If everyone were to neglect their duties when they feel bad, who would look after the bereaved?"

Nova nodded. "I commend your sense of duty. But if that's how you feel, would you allow me to ask you a few questions about Cortina?"

Savinya nodded, and Nova led her to a small sofa group, gesturing for Venora to join them. Nova sat the maid down on the sofa and Venora took the seat on Savinya's left so the maid was between them.

"I'm trying to understand who Cortina was, and it seems you knew her quite well," said Nova.

"After hearing the account of what happened in your suite this evening, I'm not sure I did know her," said Savinya.

Nova pondered the girl's statement for a moment. "Savinya, people often have secrets in their lives, but those secrets don't necessarily define who they are. What's important is the impression Cortina made on you during the four years you were working together."

"That's just it," said Savinya. "I've had several positions as a maidservant before taking the position here in the residence, but none of my former superiors can compare to Cortina. She's just wonderful. I can't understand it. How could she be a cold-blooded assassin?" More tears slipped down her face. Venora passed her a handkerchief, which Savinya took with a grateful glance in the Lady's direction.

"I'm beginning to believe our notion of what an assassin is or isn't might be quite wrong, at least in this case. Does anything Cortina ever did strike you as strange or out of the ordinary?"

The High Priestess

“Just the fact that she was so patient and kind to everyone always struck me as strange. I don’t know many people who can do that.”

“Did you ever see her get upset or angry?”

“Well, yes, certainly. But those instances were few and far between, and always with good reason.”

“Can you give us an example?”

Savinya thought about it for a moment. “I think a good example would be the caretaker apprentice we had two years ago. He reveled in playing nasty pranks on others, including animals. But these weren’t just harmless tomfoolery, mind you. They could range from just plain annoying to humiliating or even dangerous. We didn’t know who was playing the pranks, and for a while, everyone feared what would happen next. But Cortina found out who the culprit was and laid a trap. When she caught him...well, it was almost frightening.”

“Why, what did she do?”

“She sent him packing.”

“That...doesn’t seem so bad.”

“No, she really sent him packing. For a whole week, he had to pack up and dispose of anything and everything that needed packing up, and Cortina made sure that was mainly refuse and excrement.”

“Oh!”

And a week later, she sent him packing again, only this time completely shaved and naked. When Cortina forced him to leave, anyone who worked at or for the residence lined the road and watched his walk of shame.”

“Oh, really! Who shaved him?”

“Several guards helped restrain him, but Cortina was the one who shaved him, which was perhaps the most humiliating part for the boy. No one ever saw him again after that.”

“That is a bit frightening.”

“I can tell you who Nemara was,” Catyana said. No one had realized she had gotten out of bed and was standing there, watching them. They all looked up at her in surprise. Tears were running down her face, but she continued, “Nemara was one of the kindest and most deeply caring people

The High Priestess

I have ever known. What she did to that boy, she did to warn off others who might have wanted to follow his example, and to protect those who might have become his victims.”

“Why do you believe that, dearest?” said Nova.

Catyana shook her head. “Belief has nothing to do with it. It’s pure fact. She staked him out in her free time and investigated him thoroughly. What she found was horrible. The position here at the residence was only one of many, and he always moved on whenever he felt someone was getting too close. The pranks he pulled here hardly scratched the surface, but it would have gotten much worse if no one had stopped him. At most positions, he didn’t leave until several people had gone missing. Believe me, he got off easy.”

“Catyana, how do you know all this?” said Nova.

“I joined with her.”

Nova had to make a conscious effort to close her mouth, but Venora and Savinya just stared. Savinya finally walked over and took Catyana’s hands. “Thank you for restoring my faith in her.”

Catyana nodded but started sobbing again. This triggered Savinya’s own tears, which started streaming down her face. When Catyana teetered, Savinya put her arms around her. It seemed she was accustomed to carrying heavy items because Catyana was taller than she was, but hugging Catyana steadied them both.

Nova went over and said to the maid, “Would you please help Catyana back to her bed? I think she’d be more comfortable there. And if it’s not too much trouble, please stay with her for a while. I need to speak with Venora.”

Savinya nodded and supported Catyana as they moved toward the bed.

When Nova returned to the sofa, she said to Venora, “You’ve been very quiet.”

“I was listening.”

“Do you remember the incident Savinya mentioned?”

“Of course,” said Venora. “It was quite a tense time for everyone here, and we were all very relieved when Cortina...um, Nemara, finally caught him. My father gave her free reign to punish him in any form she saw fit. He was even the first in line to watch the boy’s walk of shame.”

“Interesting. But wouldn’t it have been better to turn the boy over to the constabulary?”

“Well, aside from the fact that they’re not equipped to handle such complex cases, that’s not really how it works. But I’m surprised. You should know that, Nova.”

The High Priestess

“You’re right. Anything that happens on a Lord or Lady’s property is in the estate’s jurisdiction. Unless, of course, a person comes to harm, in which case it falls in our jurisdiction. Only damages in the city proper are handled by the constabulary.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No. Well, maybe in part. I’m still trying to sort through everything that’s happened in the past few days, and I was hoping you could help me.”

“Of course. Whatever you need, Nova.”

“Thank you.”

Venora studied her for a moment. “Do you agree with what Catyana said? About how she sees Nemara?”

“I don’t think I can give you a simple answer to that question. In broad terms, yes, I do agree with her. But I could never condone taking a life because someone wants someone else dead. I wonder how the Order of the Novantan justifies something like that. But what I wonder even more is how Nemara was able to deal with it. She didn’t seem like the kind of person who would just murder someone in cold blood.” Nova turned to Venora and took her hand. “Please be honest with me. Didn’t you ever sense anything about Nemara, or Cortina, as she was called here? She was with you for ten years.”

“I’m sorry, Nova, but my gift of Sensation just isn’t as well-developed as yours. As a matter of fact, I think it’s probably quite mediocre. It seems I only excel under very specific circumstances. And even then, I’m sure someone with Nemara’s training would have been able to shield herself from me.”

“You’re right. Not even I could sense anything, although I did try to scrutinize her when she became too familiar with Catyana for my taste. But I did want to ask you about that, if I may. In which specific situations do you excel?”

“It’s mainly with people to whom I have a special connection. My father or my brother, for instance. And then there’s Catyana and Vilam. In regard to Catyana, I know exactly why I can sense her so well. With Vilam, I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Nova patted Venora’s arm with a smile. “I’ll let you have Vilam. He’s not the person I’m worried about right now. But why Catyana? What’s so special about her?”

The High Priestess

Venora took a deep breath. “I promise, I will tell you. And not just because you’re the High Priestess. You’re my friend, Nova, and I’d like to believe you’re discrete enough for me to share such things with you. But in this case, I’m afraid I cannot. There are others involved, and it would be a betrayal of their confidence if I told you.”

“Alright, I understand only too well. As long as Catyana isn’t in any danger, you may keep your secrets.”

“She would only be in danger if someone interferes, like Chyardal did when he—” Venora caught her breath. “Oh, I’m...sorry. It seems I trust you far too much, Nova, or that wouldn’t have slipped out.”

Nova raised her chin in a subtle nod. “Well, I’m glad to know I have your trust.”

“You do, always. You’ve proven to me on countless occasions that I can rely on you. But this goes far beyond friendship or trust.”

“Alright, but you do understand that you’ve made me curious, and that’s always dangerous.”

They grinned at each other, but their smiles were tinged with sadness. “I know,” said Venora. “I’m the same way. If I hear of a puzzle or mystery, it just won’t let me go until I’ve solved it. But I’ve also learned to be patient because I know my interference could have some horrible consequences if I’m not careful. I therefore beg of you, Nova, to please let it go for now.”

“I will. I promise.” Nova hesitated, but she couldn’t resist. “So, Chyardal, huh?”

“Nova!” Venora jabbed her with her elbow and they both chuckled. “Vodana warned me about you.”

“Well, then, let me warn you about Vodana.”

“No need. We’ve been friends for years, remember?”

“Ah, right. But, just in case, would you like to know where she’s the most ticklish?”

Venora dropped her gaze and said with a restrained smile. “Her feet.”

Nova gaped at her. “You two have had sleepovers!”

“And it was such fun! You wouldn’t believe how quickly we turned into a pair of giggling hens.”

“I would, and I’m jealous.”

“Please, don’t be. Vodana was just trying to help. You know, after Mom...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Of course.”

The High Priestess

“It really was very therapeutic, being able to laugh again. If Vodana hadn’t been there for me after Mom passed away, I would never have been able to help Chyardal out of his depression. But you know what? Why don’t we have a sleepover, just the three of us?”

Nova took a glance over at the bed. Catyana was still sobbing. It seemed Savinya preferred to suffer in relative silence, but she couldn’t hide the telltale streaks under her eyes. “Could we make it four? Or even five?”

Venora followed her gaze. “Oh, you’re right. I shouldn’t be so selfish.”

Nova took a deep breath. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll find some time one evening this week. But I still need to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course. What would you like to know?”

“Well, I saw you and Catyana exchanging glances over the past few days, and I saw how you reacted when Nemara and Catyana touched this morning just before the audience. Can you tell me anything about that? Anything at all?”

“Yes, that is something I can share with you. This morning, when Catyana touched Nemara, I realized Catyana was again setting all her hopes on one person, like someone clinging to a life-preserver. She did it with you, she did it with Chyardal, and now she did it again with Nemara.”

“Venora, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m sorry, maybe I should have. But I didn’t see the need at the time. If I had known who Cortina really was, I might have reacted differently. But I knew the worst that could happen to Catyana was for her to get her heart broken yet again, and that’s pretty much how it played out in the end. I would have talked to her, but I knew she wouldn’t listen. Her stubbornness can sometimes be very frustrating.”

“It certainly can,” said Nova with a smile. She looked over at the bed, where Savinya and Catyana were consoling each other. “That’s a sight for sore eyes. I’m so glad they can share their grief with each other.”

“So am I. I’d like to give Savinya a few days off, if she wants. The girl has been a real blessing, and she and Nemara worked so well together. I’m thinking of promoting her soon. But Savinya and Nemara had a deep connection, and I know Savinya will miss her dearly. It might take her a while to get over the loss.”

The High Priestess

“That’s very possible. On the other hand, if you employee her sister, that may be just the incentive Savinya needs.”

“I thought of that, and you’re probably right. Like I said, I’ll see what I can do. But I’m afraid I can’t do anything unless they approach me of their own accord.”

“I understand. But back to Catyana. How could you know nothing would happen to her?”

Venora eyed her with a reproachful look. “That’s not what I said, Nova. Do you call getting your heart broken nothing?”

“Uh, well, I...” She sighed. “No, sorry, of course not. But in my experience, a broken heart will heal, but a dagger in the heart doesn’t. Well, unless, of course, your name is Catyana.”

“I know what you mean, but I’m afraid that’s not always true. A broken heart can be just as deadly and is usually much more painful.”

Nova shook her head. “I really have no idea what I’m talking about, do I?”

Venora put her hand on her arm. “Oh, Nova, that’s not true. On the other hand, you do have a valid impediment, which makes such things more difficult for you. Even so, your insights are often very valuable.”

“Thank you, that’s kind of you to say. But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Yes, of course. I may be the only one to sense this because of the special connection we share, but Catyana seems to have life screaming out of her. There’s just so much of it there, it never even occurred to me that anything could happen to her. I’m not surprised Nemara wasn’t able to kill her. And don’t her sisters call her *Tevasala se Nimata*?”

“Yes, although I always thought that was more of a family joke. On the other hand, I just found out a few days ago that the four Faeren sisters have been joining for years. Since that is the case, they probably know more than we do.”

Venora stared at her. “They’ve been joining? For years?”

Nova’s head bobbed up and down. “I was just as surprised as you are now.”

“That explains a lot,” said Venora. “I was wondering how Catyana was able to say, ‘she joined with Nemara’ as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Probably because, to her, it was. But it’s also cause for concern.”

The High Priestess

“It is. But all we can do for the moment is observe and see if there are any further consequences. I still have a few questions for you, though. What happened at the conference this morning? I saw you and her sharing a few looks after her meltdown.”

“Which meltdown? The first or the second one?”

Nova pressed her lips together. “That might almost be funny if it wasn’t so frightening. I do understand what caused her first meltdown during and right after the session. But I can’t understand how the second one came about.”

“I can tell you that. I’m afraid Catyana miscalculated. She thought, since you wouldn’t abandon her, all the darkness in and around her would disappear and she would feel the weight lift from her shoulders.”

“But that’s a reasonable assumption. It’s what I thought would happen, too.”

“Yes, I saw you encourage her when she tried to meditate. But the thing with Catyana is she’s not being honest with herself, and that’s why she can’t get at the root of the problem. She’s very afraid of something, so afraid, for that matter, that she would rather suppress than face it. Instead, she hopes someone will come along who will displace the darkness in her heart. That’s why she clung to Chyardal at first, and then to Nemara. Her episode after the conference session this morning must have tipped her over the edge, and she wanted to end it all rather than live with such a continual nightmare. When she realized who Cortina really was, she thought she had found a solution.”

Nova took a shuddering breath. “Oh, Venora, it breaks my heart to hear that.”

Venora took Nova’s hands, and Nova saw the pain in her eyes. “Yes, mine too.”

“But I should have seen it coming.”

“Every person has their limits, Nova, even you. The past five years have been an immense strain, and with everything that’s been going on lately, I’m surprised you’ve held up as well as you have. Besides, I don’t think Catyana wanted to admit to herself that she couldn’t go on like that anymore. It would have been difficult for you to sense such emotions if she was suppressing the thought.”

Nova shook her head. “I couldn’t live with myself if I let anything happen to her. What am I going to do?”

The High Priestess

“Well, now that you no longer have to conceal yourself, you really need to start delegating more. There are many people here who love Catyana and who will gladly share the burden with you.”

“That’s true, but Mara will be leaving soon. She wants to return to Nadil for the time being.”

“Yes, Mara certainly loves Catyana with all her heart. But I wasn’t talking about her. Catyana is like a little sister to me, and I know I will always have a special connection to her. Then there’s Tanola and Hyelisa and the other acolytes. They already love her. How much better will their relationship become now that they can be honest with her? Please, Nova, let us help you.”

Nova couldn’t help smiling. “Gladly. I’m beginning to realize I can use all the help I can get.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. But there’s something else we need to discuss. What will happen with Nemara? I’m more than glad to have her laid out in the chapel for now, but we can’t keep her there forever.”

“Tsenera will probably know what happens with assassins who have passed. Maybe their Order wishes to observe certain funeral rites. But have you checked her room and her lodgings yet? She seemed to be very organized, and it’s possible she left instructions somewhere, or at least clues.”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of that. On the other hand, as Cortina, Nemara was very well liked here in the residence. Even if many people turn their backs on her when they discover who she was, I think there are just as many who would like to say good-bye, or maybe even visit her grave from time to time. If nothing else turns up, I’m sure we can find a place for her here in our cemetery.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Don’t mention it. But if that’s all, I have a few things I need to take care of. Would you excuse me?”

“Of course. Thank you for being so honest with me.”

Venora squeezed Nova’s hand, and went over to Catyana, who was still on her bed, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll bring you something later to help you sleep, alright?” Catyana nodded, and Venora stroked her hair. Then she went to the door and opened. But instead of leaving, she just stood there with her mouth open. “Goodness, Mara! Why didn’t you knock?”

“I wasn’t sure I was welcome.”

“Oh, Mara.” Venora took her hand and dragged her over to Nova. “Look what I found outside.”

The High Priestess

Nova smiled and patted the empty spot on her right. Mara hesitated for a moment but finally sat down. Venora squeezed Mara's shoulder as encouragement and left.

"Mara, dear, why in the world would you think you're not welcome?"

"No, I do know *you* would welcome me." Mara cast a despondent glance over at Catyana.

Catyana had, in the meantime, become very quiet. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and gave Savinya a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

Savinya nodded as she stood.

Catyana walked over to them. Mara seemed just as surprised as Nova when Catyana sat down at Mara's right and took her hand. "You will always be welcome here, Mara. Please don't ever think otherwise."

A tear slid down Mara's cheek. "Thank you," she whispered as she brushed it away. "You don't know what that means to me."

"I'm beginning to, just a little."

Savinya came forward. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I wanted to thank you for letting me stay."

"Of course," said Nova. "You're always welcome, Savinya."

"That's very kind of you, Nova. But I think I should return to my duties now."

"No, you've already stayed much, much longer than the end of your shift, and I'm sure the Lady Venora would rather you went home and took the next few days off."

Savinya nodded. "Alright, maybe this once. But I'm not really the kind of person who can sit around doing nothing. I might feel more comfortable coming back to work tomorrow."

"If you feel up to it, you're welcome to come back. But don't feel obliged to return out of a false sense of duty."

"Thank you. I wish you all a pleasant—" She drew in her breath. "I'm sorry, that was inappropriate. We all know there won't be anything pleasant about it. But I do wish you all well and hope to see you again soon." She bowed and left the suite.

"I really like her," said Catyana.

"Yes, she seems very nice," said Mara.

Catyana was still holding her hand. "I think we need to talk about what happened tonight. I mean, what happened between you and me."

Mara probed Catyana's face, a bit fearfully, it seemed. "Alright."

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“Would you like me to give you some privacy?” said Nova.

“That’s kind of you,” said Catyana, “but the three of us were in the Royal Suite this evening, so it seems fitting that we all stay.”

“If that’s what you want, dearest. Of course.” Nova was actually impressed. A few days ago, Catyana would never have been able to react in such a mature fashion. What had happened between her and Nemara during their joining?

“This may get a bit personal, Nova, but you’re my best friend, and I don’t think we should have any more secrets between us.”

“I’d...like that, too.”

Catyana gazed at her, studying her eyes. “I understand. I know it’s too much information, so you can’t tell me everything at once, but will you promise not to deliberately keep anything from me anymore?”

Nova returned her gaze. “I promise.”

“Good, thank you. But I also want you to stay because I wouldn’t want to split up two cousins who just found each other,” she said with a weak smile.

Mara and Nova looked at each other. “We really do need to talk about that,” said Nova.

“Yes, you do,” said Catyana. “But what I have to say can’t wait.” She squeezed Mara’s hand. “I always felt there was something between us, Mara, but I never fully grasped what it was. Not until...not until Nemara.”

Mara looked at the floor and swallowed.

“Please believe me, I never imagined things like this could be possible, so I also never imagined you might feel wounded or betrayed. All I can say is that I’m very, very sorry for the way I hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Oh, Catyana, you don’t ever need to ask me that. Of course I forgive you, with all my heart. But if we’re being honest, do you think this could ever be anything?” She intertwined her fingers with Catyana’s and raised their hands a couple of fingerbreadths.

Catyana took a deep breath. “I don’t know. My heart still aches too much for me to be able to feel anything through the pain. And I’m still very confused about everything. I’ll need time to heal and sort things out, and I’m afraid this isn’t the kind of wound that just disappears through Induction.”

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“I know.”

Catyana put her free hand over their intertwined fingers and let her head droop onto Mara’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I know you’re hurting too.”

Mara brushed a tear away and laughed. “I guess we’re all hurting.” She looked at Nova.

“In one way or another,” said Nova with a nod.

“What about Lord Marusen?” said Catyana. “Wouldn’t you be hurting him if we were together?”

Mara sighed. “I have talked to him, and he knows how I feel about you. But he’s already lost so much, and now he’s afraid of losing me.”

“Could you really do that to him?”

“No, of course not. He’s the father of my children, even if we only have Cetila left now. I’ll always love him.”

Catyana let her fingers glide over the top of Mara’s hand. “And I’ll always love you, Mara. I just don’t know exactly what that means yet.”

“That’s still so much more than I had this morning. I’m so relieved that we can talk about it now. And Catyana, I’m very sorry too. I was so hurt, and I said and did a few very mean things. I wish I could take them all back. I don’t think Nemara deserved the things I did to her.”

“On the other hand, if you hadn’t reacted the way you did, I would still be ignorant, and we wouldn’t be sitting here like this. So I’m actually glad it happened. But, Mara, please believe me, you don’t need to worry about how Nemara feels. I can’t even describe how much she’s always cared for both Elana and Tsenera. And because of how she felt about both of your mothers, she always did everything in her power to protect you, just as she would have always forgiven you. Remember earlier, when she said she would never do anything to deliberately hurt you? She really meant that. Besides, Nemara is a lot tougher than you give her credit for. She’s had much worse than a bump on the head and a few cords that cut into her wrists and ankles.”

Mara looked at her. “Do you love her?”

“Of course I do. How could I not? I know she was an assassin. I heard what you said earlier, Nova, when you were talking to Venora, and I don’t know if I could condone taking a life like that, either. But what she thought and felt was very complex, and she was so beautiful, I mean, on the inside, not just the outside. She didn’t justify the things she did, she suffered for them.” A tear spilt

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down and she wiped it off. “It would take much too long to explain her beliefs, and I’m doing a very bad job of it anyway. But I want you both to know that she would have been worthy of your friendship.”

“I believe you,” said Mara.

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.” She leaned forward. “Nova, I heard what Venora said about me, too.”

“When you said you had heard what we were saying about Nemara, I almost thought as much,” said Nova. “Are you angry with us?”

“No, of course not. You weren’t wrong. As a matter of fact, Nemara told me the exact same thing Venora said. Mara, would you mind if we switch places?”

They looked at each other before untwining their fingers. When Mara got up, Catyana slid closer to Nova, and Mara took Catyana’s previous spot so Catyana was between them.

Catyana took Mara’s left hand and intertwined their fingers again. Mara smiled.

“You were saying that Nemara had told you the same thing as Venora,” said Nova.

“Yes, she told me point blank that I wasn’t being honest with myself. Of course, stubborn old me,” she gave Nova a cheeky smile, “I didn’t want to hear it and turned my back on her.”

“Yes, that sounds just like my Catyana,” said Nova. “So, you heard what we said about your being stubborn, too, did you?”

“I did. But I want to learn, Nova. I know I can be stubborn and judgmental. Again, neither of you were wrong.”

“Do you know what you’re so afraid of?”

Catyana shook her head. “It’s buried so far down I really don’t know. And to be honest, I’m not sure I want to right now. But I think being able to acknowledge it is a step in the right direction.”

“Alright. What happened after you turned your back on Nemara?”

“That’s...personal, and I’d rather not talk about it.”

Mara’s chin went up just a tad and she took a deep breath. When Catyana shot her a fearful glance, Mara said with a weak smile, “Enchantresses call it ‘conciliative impassionment.’ I think the colloquial term is ‘make-up sex.’”

“Oh.” Catyana looked at her for a moment. “Is...that a thing?”

“It happens.”

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“You and Amendel?”

“Sometimes.”

Catyana’s eyebrows drew together and she shook her head. “I think I know what you mean, but...that’s not what it felt like at all.” She looked at Mara. “It was the first time for me, so I don’t have anything to compare it to, but I’ve never experienced anything like that.”

“Experienced good, or experienced bad?”

Catyana dropped her gaze, and her voice was soft. “It was wonderful.”

Mara nodded. “I’m glad it was like that for you. I’m afraid my first time was very different, but we can talk about that some other time.”

Nova realized she had to stop staring and closed her mouth. She tried to suppress the sound as she cleared her throat and swallowed, but she wasn’t very successful.

“Sorry, Nova,” said Catyana.

“I wish I could get used to that,” said Nova, “but it shocks me every time.”

Mara reached across Catyana, caressed Nova’s cheek, and gently brushed her hair behind her ear. “I’m so sorry, Nova. Mom and I had a long talk earlier before she left. She told me what happened, and how you two met.”

“Oh. Did she tell you...everything?”

Mara nodded. “Don’t worry, you know you can trust me.”

“I know.” Nova looked at Catyana.

Catyana returned her gaze. “Will you tell me...everything?”

“I want to, I do. But, please, dearest, this is very difficult for me. Just give me a little more time, alright?”

Catyana nodded. “Of course.”

Nova turned back to Mara. “What else did your mother say?”

“Well, she mainly told me about Elana.”

Nova could feel her eyes widen. “Oh, please, Mara. You have to tell me.”

Mara and Nova both slid forward so they were sitting at an angle to Catyana and could see each other better. Catyana leaned into the back pillow to make it easier on everyone, but she didn’t let go of Mara’s hand.

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Mara smiled at her before saying to Nova, “Do you remember what year your parents were married?”

“Of course. It was in the late spring of 1455. Vodana was born two years later. Is that important?”

“No, not really. I was just wondering how long Elana had been free of the coven before she was ready for that kind of relationship. It seems it took her about fifty years. I’ve only been away for twenty.”

“But...you do have a relationship.”

“Yes, I was very fortunate. I don’t know what would have happened to me if Lusina hadn’t driven me into Amendel’s arms. Anyway, it seems your mother, my Aunt Elana, was born in 1002 and was therefore only seven when the Battle of Malentisa was fought. My mother was four years older, and Lusina was born three years before that. After the battle, the three orphaned sisters became wards of the coven and were trained meticulously. But Elana never seemed to fit in. Mom said she was highly gifted, but she never cared about developing her powers and remained mediocre, probably because she hated everything to do with the coven. I can empathize.

“By the mid-1300s, she had had enough and began forging connections to the outside to prepare her escape. She was very careful and very thorough, so it wasn’t until 1400 that she disappeared. Lusina was already Supreme Enchantress back then and never forgave her sister for leaving. It was strictly forbidden to even mention her name. My mom was the only one who knew where she was, but she never told anyone and never spoke about it, not even to me. She was too afraid Lusina would find out. But enchantresses are nothing if not patient. It took Lusina a full century, but she found out where your mother was. You know the rest.”

Nova felt tears in her eyes and had to swallow.

Catyana didn’t let go of Mara’s hand, but she pulled Nova closer and hugged her. “Oh, Nova, it’s so horrible. I’m so sorry.”

Nova brushed a tear away. “Thank you, Catyana.”

“But...” Catyana let go of Nova and dropped her gaze.

“Yes?”

Catyana looked at both Nova and Mara. “Tsenera wasn’t the only one who knew where Elana was.”

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They stared at her. “What do you mean?” said Nova.

Cat yana took a deep breath. “Nemara also knew. It seems she and Elana remained very good friends, even after Elana had grown up. But she never told anyone,” Cat yana said quickly when Nova opened her mouth.

“Are you sure?”

Cat yana nodded. “I told you, Nemara would have been worthy of your friendship. She never would have betrayed Elana’s confidence. Or Tsenera’s, for that matter,” she said, looking at Mara. “As a matter of fact, she never forgave Lusina for what she did to Elana, and she almost didn’t accept my contract because of it. I’m so glad she did, though, or I never would have gotten to know her the way I have. By the way, Nemara was very proud of you, Nova. She regretted not being able to know you and your sisters better, but she was afraid of what Lusina might do if she found out Nemara was getting too close to any of you, even after Elana was gone.”

Nova took a deep breath and nodded. “Thank you, dearest, for telling us that. But now I finally understand why there were no further attacks in the east. The assault on our House was never political. It was the result of a personal vendetta.”

Mara reached over and took Nova’s hand. “I’ve already lost two of my children to that witch, but your loss was even greater.”

“Maybe, but now I feel as if I never even knew Momma.”

Cat yana squeezed her arm. “Do you remember what you told Savinya earlier? Are you going to let your mother’s secret define who she was?”

Nova pulled the air in through her mouth. “It seems I was asking more of Savinya than I was prepared to do myself. I’m such a hypocrite.”

“Oh, Nova, please don’t say that.”

“Well, what are the alternatives?” said Mara. “Either your mother really was the loving and caring woman you knew her as, or she was just putting on an act and was in reality an evil enchantress like me, set on destroying you and your sisters.”

Cat yana nudged her. “An evil enchantress like you, huh? What would you have done? Nuzzled them to death? But to be honest,” she said to Nova, “I don’t know anyone who could put up such a convincing performance for thirty-two hours a day, seven days a week, for twenty years. The

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only reason Nemara was able to be the person everyone knew as Cortina was because she didn't have to act. Um...well, at least for most of it."

"That does kind of put things in perspective. Thank you, both of you."

"Well, that about summarizes what Mom told me," said Mara, "more or less. But if there's anything else you'd like to know, then I'll try to answer if I can."

"No, thank you, Mara. There will certainly be many more questions, but I think I need some time to digest all this first."

"Alright." Looking back and forth between Nova and Catyana, Mara said, "I never heard the full story of how you two met. Would you be willing to tell me?"

"Oh, that's no secret," said Catyana. "To be honest, I don't think I'll ever forget it. It was a cold but bright winter afternoon about four and a half years ago. I was playing outside with my sisters when Nova came riding in from the west on a beautiful chyeves, frozen to the marrow. Of course, Mother immediately invited her in for a hot cup of *deventas* so she could warm up. We were surprised that an acolyte should be riding all alone and on such a valuable animal, and she told us...Oh! Ha, ha, very funny, Nova."

Mara looked at them with a puzzled glance. "Why, what did she say?"

"I told them I was on an urgent assignment for the High Priestess," said Nova with a smile.

Mara raised her chin just a fraction. "Ah."

"Well, you must admit, I wasn't lying," said Nova.

"Nova, can you tell us what you were doing then?" said Catyana.

"Yes, of course. I trust both of you with my life. When I arrived at the Faeren farm that day, I was returning from Divestelan, where I had visited the Lady Gevinesa. I had to travel alone because of the delicate nature of my business. No one could know the Lady had connections to the Selanian Order, let alone to the High Priestess. At the same time, I had to take care of the increasing difficulties we were having because of Hyelisa's brother, Bejad. Sheletas Catanin, the leader of the Resistance, finally agreed to take over Bejad's function until I was able to find a suitable replacement later that year. But my journey had another advantageous side effect, one that turned out to be even more significant."

"What was that?" said Catyana.

"I met you."

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“Oh.”

“Nova, you moved to Nadil and started training her very soon after that,” said Mara. “May I ask how quickly you knew Catyana would be your protégée?”

“Very quickly.”

“How did that come about?”

“Well, when I arrived at their farm that day we first met, Matila must have seen how exhausted I was and invited me to stay for a couple of days to recover my strength. I can usually size up people very quickly, and in this case, I had two whole days in which to observe them in their accustomed environment. Mara, you know for yourself what a remarkable family they are, but you, Catyana, were the crown jewel. When I returned to Travis, I only took enough time to register Catyana as my protégée and order my affairs before moving back to Nadil half a year later.”

“Nova, why didn’t you tell me you were training me as your protégée?”

“I assume it’s for the same reason enchantresses don’t tell their apprentices that they’re training them,” said Mara. “The initial training phase is much more efficient if the trainee doesn’t know what’s going on.”

“That’s true.” said Nova. “But in your case, Catyana, the secrecy was also for your safety, as much as my own. You saw what happened at the conference today. I’m certain if it had been possible, they would have tried to assassinate me before this. That there were no attempts on my life until today proves our feeble efforts at concealment were more successful than we believed. But if we hadn’t succeeded, dearest, your life and even the lives of your family might have been in danger.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Catyana. “You tried to warn me about that during our journey here.” She took a deep breath and turned to Mara. “I’m so sorry. I wish I could keep you here and we could just continue talking. But I’d really like to get back down to Nemara, and you probably need to return to your Lord.”

Mara nodded. “Amendel knows what happened, and he understands. But it has gotten very late.”

Catyana rose, pulling Mara up with her. She put her arms around her and drew her into a tight hug, then she gave her a kiss on the cheek. “We’ll see each other tomorrow, I promise.”

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Mara nodded, and they showed her to the door. After she left, Catyana brushed her hair since she hadn't had a chance after washing it, and Nova watched her for a while. "Would you like some company in the chapel?"

"No, that's alright. I know you're exhausted. I am too, but I do want to see her one more time before going to bed. I won't stay with her for too long, though. Maybe another hour or so."

"You know, you really do seem different. But I was very proud of the way you handled yourself tonight, despite what you experienced earlier."

"I've noticed it too. I think it was the joining with Nemara. She seems to be a part of me now, and seeing things from her perspective, a person who is so different from me, well, I think it would change anyone."

Nova studied her for a moment longer before changing into her nightgown. Yes, Catyana did seem different, but whether it would be for better or for worse remained to be seen.

46. Rejection

Cetila marched past the guards, who pretended not to see her, and approached the crate in which they had imprisoned the Tinavar. That was one of the advantages of being first lieutenant and commander of the Brigade, and in this case, she had no scruples whatsoever about exploiting her rank. Her sisters in arms would never dare to question her actions, and after her supposed accomplishment three days ago, they were in too much awe of her to want to.

When she unbolted the gate, a penetrating stench wafted against her, taking her breath away. The only way to overcome the smell was to saturate her senses, so she took several deep breaths but had to struggle to fill her lungs with air. The odor reminded her of putrid flesh, chyeves dung, and cetesa urine, amplified by several orders of magnitude.

As she stepped inside, the Unicorn whinnied softly. She took out the phosphorescent orb she carried with her and shook it. When the soft light filled the narrow space before her, she gasped and had to clench her teeth as tears filled her eyes. "*Teva'lin*, what have they done to you?"

The beast's condition was piteous. Its silvery coat was lacerated with hideous streaks that shimmered with the dark blue flow of its noble blood. Its hooves and legs were caked with mud and its thick mane and long tail were clotted with dark crusts of blood and dirt. But it stood upright,

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its translucent horn glowing dully, and held its head high, demonstrating that its spirit had not been broken.

She held out her hand. The Tinavar sniffed it and allowed her to approach. She let her hand glide along its silky coat, avoiding its many wounds. Then she put her arms around its neck and let her tears wet the animal's fur. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

The Unicorn nudged her and watched her through its intelligent, dark eyes.

She remembered how excited she had been when they discovered the tracks in the forest. It was exhilarating to pursue the beasts, sensing the closeness of their magical presence, and it took her breath away when she set eyes upon this steed for the first time. But oh, how soon had her delight turned to anguish! All she had experienced in the past three days was the turmoil of an angst-ridden mind. Why had Cetila's mother ordered Pira to inflict such pain upon this magnificent animal?

Cetila couldn't bring herself to witness the maltreatment the Unicorn was exposed to every day. She visited it on that first evening after its gruesome abuse, wanting to comfort it if she could. Its narrow prison was still clean then, and she reveled in the Tinavar's scent: the fragrance of dark earth, moss, pine needles, and wood flowers, with that delicate whiff of a fresh breeze on its coat.

That was three days ago, and the animal had not been allowed out of its crate except for its "treatment." She hadn't found the courage to look in on the Unicorn since then, and the change with which she was now confronted was heartbreaking. The proud beast stood in its own waste with hardly enough space to move, so it had no way of tending to its coat, mane, and tail. And the heat of the sun glaring down on the crate had done its share. What would the animal's condition be when they finally arrived in Tolares?

As Cetila caressed a silky shock of mane between its ears, her hand brushed the Tinavar's horn. She caught her breath. The sensation aroused her in an unexpected way. She hesitated, but the urge was too strong. Her fingers glided once more over the horn's smooth, intertwined surface. She stroked it timidly at first, sending a shiver down her spine. Her movements became bolder. She wrapped her fingers around the horn, sensing its power, and she believed her heart would burst.

Her breath was coming quickly now, and she had to close her eyes when she got dizzy and almost swooned. Without thinking, she grasped the Tinavar's horn and aligned herself so the lethal tip was pointing directly at her heart, breaching the cloth of her uniform and piercing her skin. A flicker of bright light penetrated her eyelids.

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The Tinavar pulled back and eased its horn out of her grasp.

Her eyes fluttered open. She jammed her lips together, her eyes ablaze. “Why won’t you take me?” She reached out, but the animal turned its head and shook its mane, snorting softly. “Isn’t my heart’s blood good enough? Why won’t you save yourself?”

The Unicorn glanced at her, a soft glow in its dark eyes. Then it moved forward and nudged her but kept its horn out of her reach.

With a pounding heart, she threw her arms around its neck and pressed herself against its soft, warm coat. “I love you. I’ll always love you.”

The animal waited patiently until she had spent her tears. After she had quieted, it gently pushed her away.

“Alright. I don’t understand, but alright. Farewell, my love.” She gazed at it one last time. Then she returned her orb to her pocket and let herself out into the warm summer night.

When she turned away from the crate, she almost collided with Davina. Her emotions were in such an uproar she didn’t stop to consider what the lieutenant was doing there, or why Davina’s surprised expression became a subtle smile when she stepped aside to let her pass. She didn’t perceive the peaceful sounds and delicate scents of the forest or the inquisitive glances of the guards as she rushed by, her eyes burning, her vision swimming, and her heart throbbing with a dull, yearning ache.

47. The Brooch

As on the previous evening, Vilam stood in the garden behind the residence. Light flowed out across the lawn from the curtained windows of Chyardal’s workshop, but this time, Vilam didn’t hesitate out of indecisiveness. It was true the nights here were longer than what he was accustomed to, but he had never required much sleep anyway. There was still a fluttery sensation in his belly, and the events of the day had been disturbing enough to keep his thoughts engaged and his senses alert. But none of these things were the reason he paused when he reached this spot.

He had hardly been there a minute when the door opened just enough for Chyardal’s head to pop out. When he saw Vilam, he grinned. “Alright, come on in. I doubt you were thinking of spending the night out there.”

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Vilam returned Chyardal's grin as he climbed the steps. Before he entered, he turned and stared into the darkness of the gardens. "Uraten, why don't you go back to your quarters and get some rest?"

"Yes, Your Beholyfulness," replied a sonorous bass from the shadows. Vilam heard a dull thud, like a gourd being smashed on the pavement, and he could almost feel the corporal bending his immense torso in a reverent bow.

Chyardal held the door open, ushering him in. "The western corporal seems very, uh...dedicated."

"I wish he was dedicated to something else," Vilam muttered.

The workshop was empty except for Venora, who looked at him as he entered, measuring him quietly, but she didn't approach.

"I wonder how she does it," Chyardal whispered. "It's amazing. I've never seen anything like it."

Vilam shrugged. "Does she do it often?"

Chyardal grinned. "No. Yesterday evening was the first time."

Vilam's heart fluttered, and he was hardly capable of holding back his own grin.

"Oh, and Vilam." Chyardal's features suddenly became grim.

"Yes?"

"If you break her heart, I'll kill you, even if you are the Emissary."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Chyardal could no longer suppress his amusement, and he chuckled while shaking his head.

Venora called, "Brother, could you please give me a hand over here?"

Chyardal sauntered over to her, steering clear of the many cluttered workbenches that filled the wing. "Why don't you get things set up," he said over his shoulder. "We're almost done, so I'll be right with you."

Vilam set the bow case on the bench he had used yesterday and stood the bow press beside it. He couldn't understand Venora. Sometimes, she would allow him to draw near, the way she had yesterday evening. Just thinking about it made his heart flutter, and he felt she also enjoyed his presence. But she usually held her distance, pulled away from him. Was it shyness? He didn't think

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so. And why was she sometimes so sad? Was there any way he could get closer to her without seeming brash?

At least he had found out what he wanted to know. She could sense his presence—and only his—and it seemed she cared enough to let him into the workshop.

He cast an inquisitive glance at the sitanem still resting innocently on its pedestal. At any rate, he knew now where the weapon he had used so often in the past originally came from. Besides being a pretty decent guy, Chyardal was also quite brilliant. It was a shame Vilam had never been very interested in history. He might have been able to capitalize on such knowledge in his present situation. On the other hand, that was why the Temporal Displacement Directive and its various amendments had been implemented. He shook his head. The thought was strange, intriguing even. How long would he be here? Would he be able to repair his ship?

He opened his case and took out the Prophet's Bow, which he carefully set down beside the bow press. In the meantime, Venora and Chyardal had cleaned up and joined him. Venora was holding a bouquet of wood flowers, and her eyes avoided Vilam as she approached.

When Vilam saw the flowers, he had an idea. He didn't know if the timing was right, but from his perspective, this was as good an opportunity as any. He set his jaw and took a deep breath. "Those blossoms really accentuate your fair complexion, Venora."

She gazed at him, measuring him uncertainly, but otherwise didn't budge.

Chyardal's eyes wandered from one to the other. "Alright, you two lovebirds, why don't you stop this nonsense and act your age?"

"Chyardal!"

"Tit for tat, sister," he replied with a grin. "Remember how you teased me about Lord Vetena's daughter?"

Venora studied the floor, trying to restrain a smile. But she must have come to a decision because she looked up, directly into Vilam's eyes. "Thank you. That was a sweet compliment."

"I meant it. You have wonderfully fair features."

"Appearances can be deceiving." Her voice was hushed, and he saw pain in her eyes. "Things aren't always as they seem."

"As demonstrated at the conference today. Venora, I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. That wasn't my intent."

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“That’s very kind of you, Vilam, and I believe you. I sometimes wish I were as easygoing as Vodana. She never seems to be at a loss. But I’m afraid I don’t have her talent, or her bearing, so please forgive me if I’m not always as forthcoming.”

“I like you just the way you are.”

She gave him a skeptical look.

He moved a bit closer and lowered his voice so only she could hear. “Listen, while we’re talking of wood flowers, I was never able to apologize to you for what I said the other evening when we were in your alcove near the statue of the Elinian Queen. I didn’t mean to pressure you into revealing something in front of everyone that you didn’t want to, and I’m very sorry.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. But it was strange. How do you know about these things?”

“Where I come from, we don’t keep such information a secret.”

“It’s very different here. There are forces at work that are trying to destroy everything, and my friends are in danger. I’ll gladly talk to you about it somewhere more private, but please not here, or anywhere where others might be able to overhear our conversation, especially Chyardal.”

“I understand. But can you tell me just one thing? Are you a Tinasal?”

She studied him for a moment. “I am, yes.”

Vilam nodded. “Thank you for confirming that for me. I’m relieved to see I’m not completely bonkers.”

She smiled but threw him a puzzled glance. “Bonkers?”

“Hey, Vilam, what’s this?” Chyardal asked. He was inspecting the compartment Vilam had discovered in Nadil on the underside of the bow press.

“I have no idea,” Vilam replied. “At first, I thought it was for some kind of power source, but the projection works fine when the compartment is empty.”

“It looks like a semblance of the Selanian brooch of office.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but—oh, hold on.” He reached into his pocket, from which he extracted the sapphire and platinum brooch. He had completely forgotten about it.

When he held it up, Venora caught her breath. “Nevacad’s brooch! Wherever did you get it?”

“Elder Yonatan gave it to me after the conference this afternoon.” The brooch glittered dark blue and silver in the bright light of the workshop.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

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“Yes, it is. But the entire lower tier is made from a gem,” he replied thoughtfully. He looked at Chyardal, who was staring at the brooch in fascination. “What do you think?”

“A gem,” Chyardal mused. “Optics.”

They looked at each other and grinned.

“Nevacad must have been a genius,” Chyardal said.

Vilam was already busy laying the bow press on the table and placed the brooch in the compartment. It was a perfect fit, and the metal clasp clicked smoothly into place. He replaced the metallic lid and set the press upright on the table. Then he mounted the bow into the press, as he had done several times before. When he tapped the base of the press, the holographic relief appeared above them. “Chyardal, would you please dim the lights?”

“Of course.” Chyardal pushed a slider on the bench, and the intensity of the lights in the workshop diminished to a faint glow.

“There doesn’t seem to be any difference,” Vilam said. He felt disappointed.

Venora tapped one of the smaller crystals on the riser. The map immediately zoomed in on the area around Tolares, which was near the bottom of the image, and a shiny trail appeared, glowing light blue and leading south, which was upward.

Vilam stared at Venora in surprise. “How did you know to do that?”

“What did I tell you last night?”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “This is never going to work if you’re not prepared to listen to me.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m more of a visual person.” *Especially when it means looking at you*, he added in his mind.

There was a faint smile on her lips. Speaking softly so only he could hear, she said, “I don’t mind if you look at me, Vilam.”

His jaw dropped.

“I’ll give you another chance. And if it’s your eyes you need to use, then watch.” She reached up to his chest. He thought she was going to remove another fiber from his cloak, as she had done yesterday, but this time, she placed her hand on his heart, leaving it there for a moment. He felt her warm touch on his breast and thought his heart would burst. “Listen to what your heart is trying to tell you.”

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Vilam nodded. He didn't think he would ever be able to forget her words after such a demonstration.

She smiled and gestured to the bow. "Your turn."

Venora had tapped the bottom crystal. Vilam tapped the next one. The image moved and the trail continued to lead upward. As he touched each of the smaller crystals in succession, the images outlined a passage into the desert. It ended short of Malentisa.

"Interesting. Six crystals, a six-stage journey into the desert."

"Vilam!" Venora fixed him with a strict gaze "What did I tell you?"

Chyardal sniffed and shook his head, grinning.

But Vilam was getting the picture. He tapped the large crystal in the middle. "Seven."

Venora smiled, and her eyes glowed.

The image zoomed in on Malentisa and outlined the location in a bright, pulsating blue. A new icon appeared near the symbol that represented the Fountains of Malentisa. The icon glowed in a dark sapphire blue. "Do you know what that is?" he asked Venora.

"Yes, it's the Elinian symbol for transformation and new life."

Vilam tapped one of the crystals that zoomed in on the desert. "What's that symbol in the middle and at the end of each stage?"

"Water."

Vilam and Chyardal exchanged a glance.

"Interesting, water in the desert," Vilam said.

"What do you think it means?" Venora asked.

"I'm not sure. Chyardal, would you please hit the lights again?"

The room brightened.

Venora sighed. "I need to leave. I'm very tired." To Vilam she said, "There was something I wanted to ask you."

"Yes?"

"About the western corporal you sent away before. Uraten."

"Alright."

"I feel you shouldn't brush him off like that."

"Oh?"

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“Beneath his harsh exterior, I sense a kind and gentle heart. I feel he’s sincere, even if he isn’t telling us everything. And please remember that, to him, you’re a myth come real. He’s in awe of you. Show him just a wisp of kindness, and his gratitude will be yours forever.”

Vilam sighed. “I’ll try to remember that.”

She picked up the flowers and planted a kiss on Chyardal’s cheek. “*Nevela ’mada*, brother dear.”

“Good night, sister.”

“*Nevela ’mada*, Vilam”

“Good night, Venora. By the way, what are the flowers for?”

“Not what, who. They’re for Catyana. She’s been through so much in the past few days, the poor girl, and after what happened tonight...well, I’ll just steal into her suite later and put them on her nightstand. I think they might have a...stimulating effect on her.”

“I thought she was allergic to them,” said Vilam.

“No, not allergic, sensitive.”

“Didn’t she get an overdose just the other day?”

“She did, yes.”

“Then why expose her to more of them?”

“Well, several reasons, actually,” said Venora. “On the one hand, there’s the controlled homeopathic effect, which counters the rampant substance in her bloodstream. Then there’s the need to acclimate her system to the flower’s potency. If she doesn’t expose herself to controlled doses regularly, she’ll remain much too sensitive, which could someday lead to a fatal accident. I could never forgive myself if anything like that happened to her. These flowers here have a specifically controlled strength and dosage that is far less than what Catyana was exposed to the other day.”

“Ah, I see. Interesting. How is she, by the way?”

“She’s actually doing better than I thought she would,” said Venora. “But Cortina’s death really shook her up. Catyana loved her, and it will probably take her a while to get over the loss.”

“Loved her?” said Chyardal. “The assassin who tried to kill her?”

Venora shook her head. “Brother, you can sometimes be so exasperating. We can’t always control the direction our hearts lead us. And it seems you’re trying to define Cortina by a single term. Would you want me to do that to you?”

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Chyardal gazed at her. “Your uncanny wisdom sometime scares me, sister.”

“That’s the idea,” she said with a smile. Venora hesitated for a moment, then she stepped up to Vilam and kissed him on the cheek. “Good night,” she whispered.

“Good night,” said Vilam, touching his cheek as she disappeared out the door.

Chyardal gaped at him. “You have no idea how lucky you are, Vilam. My sister has never done that to any of her suiters.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Chyardal took a deep breath. “Listen, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

“Yes?”

“I heard you used to be married.”

Vilam gazed at him. “It’s not really a topic I care to discuss.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...” Chyardal hesitated.

“Yes?”

“I thought you might be able to give me some advice.”

“What about?”

“About Nova.”

“Nova?” Vilam took a relieved breath. “Well, I can try. What’s on your mind?”

“I think I messed things up this morning after the conference, you know, by addressing her as ‘Your Eminence.’”

“That you did, my friend.”

“She seemed so annoyed...and hurt. Do you think she’ll ever forgive me?”

“Oh, yes, definitely. I don’t know her that well, but I believe she has a kind heart. And she doesn’t seem like the resentful type. But she may want to punish you for a while longer,” he added with a grin.

Chyardal stared at him. “Why do you say that?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the way she looks at you.”

“No.”

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you break out the cider, and I’ll explain a few things?” said Vilam, still grinning.

The High Priestess

“That sounds like a good idea,” Chyardal replied, returning the grin as he went to fetch the cider and two mugs.

48. Ignorance Revealed

Tavita was sitting on the edge of the fountain but hardly perceived its gentle splashing as she sketched little figures on the water’s surface. The luminous brilliance of the star-filled sky cast its sparkling reflection on the waves she created, but the glowing spectacle would no longer console her as it had yesterday. Still, the rippling shapes that resulted when she drew her finger through the water somehow soothed the strange sadness that had invaded her heart since she arrived in Tolares.

Her mind was whirling with dark thoughts, and a bitter smile played on her lips. So, Nova was the High Priestess, and Catyana her protégée. There was no comfort in the thought, no pleasure, no anticipation. She would never be able to enjoy their friendship. All there was for her was ruthless exploitation of such a seemingly interesting development. Would her parents never be satisfied? Allow her to enjoy some of the fruits of the relationships she had formed?

She didn’t react when a shadow appeared beside her and tugged at her sleeve. “Come on, let’s go somewhere more private,” Corsen whispered in her ear.

Tavita didn’t budge but continued the monotonous, circling movements of her hand.

“Come on, we don’t have all night,” Corsen hissed.

Her jaw muscles tightened, and she splashed the water with her open hand, disturbing the numerous expanding rings she had produced. Only then did she turn to the man beside her. “I’m sorry, but I don’t feel like it tonight.” She hadn’t meant for the words to come out so coldly, but she didn’t regret it, either.

Corsen took a step back and stared at her. “What’s with you? You’ve been behaving pretty strangely these past few days.”

She returned his stare. “So, have I?”

“It seems that way.”

“And how would you like me to behave?”

“Well, you know...” he replied, dropping his gaze and scratching the back of his head.

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She rose and moved toward him with the noble yet alluring quality she had been taught as a princess of the House of Marusen. When she was a handbreadth away from him, she stopped and looked up into his eyes. “Here I am. What are you waiting for?” she whispered.

He took another step back. “Tavita, what’s going on?”

“Isn’t this what you came for?” she replied, her voice frosty. “Take me and get it over with.”

Corsen shook his head. “Not like this.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Do you need it served on a silver platter?”

“Hey, there’s no need to turn on me like that.”

“What’s wrong? Have you lost your flair? Or can’t the great Corsen Divestelan perform under less than optimal conditions?”

“Will you stop it?”

“Ah, I understand. You poor dear. I suppose you are very disappointed. Your eldest sister has gone and taken Yanita away, and now you and your father won’t be able to ruin her life like you did with Gevinesa.”

“Why are you—?”

“Why?” The word exploded from Tavita like a crazed screech, making Corsen cringe. “You dare even ask? Isn’t it clear to you why Gevinesa went to such pains to remove herself and Yanita from your presence?”

He stared at her. “Why now, Tavita? Those things never bothered you before.”

“How would you know? You never cared about what bothered me. All you ever cared about was yourself and your insatiable craving for slaughter and perversity.”

Corsen’s breathing came heavily as he glared at her.

“Tell me, Corsen, when was the last time you were able to boast of an actual conquest? Oh yes, I’m well aware of the lewd talk you and your ‘friends’ indulge in when you’re among yourselves.”

Corsen’s eyes seemed to be aflame with wild savagery.

“Why do you think none of the other girls in the Brigade wanted anything to do with you unless you took them by force? It takes a real man to satisfy a woman’s needs, and let’s face it, Corsen, you’re anything but a man. Even my sister knows you’re nothing but a spoiled brat who uses others to accomplish your vain notions.”

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Corsen made a noise like a wounded animal as his hand lashed out. But Tavita was ready and countered his attack with a vicious blow to a point on his upper arm, followed by a lightning-swift kick to the area that would most injure his overblown ego. He doubled over.

“Don’t you dare touch me,” Tavita hissed, emphasizing each word.

“You bitch!” Corsen gasped, clutching his arm and attempting to straighten up.

“That’s all I ever was to you, wasn’t I? Your little whore, that you could take out and play with anytime you felt like it.”

“Damn you,” Corsen wheezed, struggling for breath. “I never forced you to do anything. If you didn’t want to be with me anymore, you could have just told me. There are enough other girls out there. I’ll survive without you.”

“Maybe, if you happen upon some poor, deranged soul desperate enough to put up with you.”

“I swear,” said Corsen, “I’m going to make you regret this.”

Tavita’s smile was cold. How had her mentor always responded in such situations? “My, now wouldn’t that be interesting?”

“I’m warning you, Tavita, I will finish you,” he said, gasping with pain, “and you’ll never see me coming.”

“If only that were true. It would be a refreshing change to your usual blatant incompetency.”

Corsen laughed spitefully. “I’ve already outwitted you. You never realized it, but in the past two years I’ve studied you and know you better than you know yourself. I’ll use your weaknesses against you and crush you like the treacherous snake that you are.”

“You think you know me?” She shook her head. “You have absolutely no concept of what you’re dealing with. But maybe it’s time you found out.” She lowered her head and put her hands over her eyes while focusing her energy, creating an aura of blue luminescence around herself while she restored the natural appearance of her eyes. When she raised her head and gazed back at Corsen, he recoiled, sucking in his breath. She didn’t give him a chance to recover. Her hand whipped forward, releasing a deep blue pulse of energy that hit him squarely in the chest and knocked him off his feet.

“*Tev’andar*,” Corsen whispered, staring at her from the ground. “Who... What are you?”

“It is quite staggering when your own ignorance is revealed, isn’t it? And I suppose you’re wondering what you’ve been sleeping with all this time.”

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Corsen wasn't capable of speaking. Tavita saw pure terror on his face as he tried to scramble away from her.

"Get out of my sight, Corsen," she said, her voice as cold as ice. "And if you ever dare show your face again, injured pride will be the least of your worries."

Corsen finally managed to get to his feet and bolted, running as quickly as the pain in his groin would allow.

Tavita was surprised when her eyes suddenly brimmed over. She attempted to brush the tears away, but all the bottled-up pain and sorrow of the past years welled up inside her, demanding to be released. No matter how she tried, she couldn't keep the flood at bay, and it spilled over, running down her face and dripping onto her hands as she sought to dry her cheeks with the edge of her cloak.

Her legs felt weak, and she stumbled back to the fountain, letting herself plop down on its edge. "Oh, no," she gasped and clutched at her heart. She tried again to suppress the emotions pouring to the surface, but that just made everything worse, and she broke into uncontrollable sobs. "No," she whispered. "Please, stop. It hurts so much." After a few minutes, her ribs felt sore from crying, and she sucked in a deep, quavering breath. "Oh, Soshia, Cetila, where are you?" she whispered. "I'm so sorry. Please, help me."

A couple passing by on the promenade paused and regarded her with concern. "Sister, are you alright?" said the young woman.

Tavita hid her eyes, changing them back to their usual dark brown. She looked away and shook her head.

"Is there anything we can do for you?"

Tavita stood and finally looked at them but had to shudder as she drew in a breath. "That's very kind of you, but I don't think there's a remedy for what I have." Wrapping her black cloak tightly around herself, she fled into the night, leaving the bewildered couple to stare after her.

49. Wood Flower Visions

Catjana tossed and turned as a kaleidoscope of images filled her mind. The scent of wood flowers was thick in the air as she walked in the luminous silence beneath the trees. Translucent

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horns beckoned to her from the shadows and her heart yearned, she knew not for what. She stepped into a clearing, engulfed in light, and was startled by the glow of dark blue droplets falling at her feet. From above, the precious fluid trickled down from a wounded heart, and a voice droned in her head, crying out in agony.

“Oh, Itinales, what are they doing to you? No, Itinales, no!” She shrieked and jolted upright in bed.

“Catyana, what’s wrong?”

She saw Nova’s form outlined in the bright moonlight pouring in through the open window. A gentle breeze moved the curtains.

She let the air escape from her lungs. “I’m sorry, Nova. It must have been a bad dream.”

Nova switched on the light on her nightstand and glanced at the clock. “There are only a few more hours until sunrise.” She stared at her friend. “Oh, Catyana, you look terrible. And you should probably change. Your nightgown is soaked.”

Catyana started drawing back the covers but hesitated and sniffed the air. “What is that?”

Nova inhaled carefully and looked over at Catyana’s bed. “Who put those there?”

Catyana finally saw the vase of wood flowers on her nightstand. “Oh, I’m sure it was Venora. She said she would bring me something that might help. But why did she bring wood flowers after the way I’ve been reacting to them?”

Nova took the vase and set it out on the balcony. In the meantime, Catyana sponged herself down before slipping into a fresh nightgown. But her heart was too heavy, and she didn’t feel like getting back into her bed, so she just sat down on the edge.

“Well, have a good night, dearest, at least what’s left of it,” Nova said as she crawled back under the covers.

Catyana got up and walked over to Nova’s bed. She dropped her gaze as her fingers stroked the mattress. “Nova, would you...would you mind? I’d rather not sleep alone.”

Nova’s eyes lit up. “Oh, honey, of course.” She threw back the covers and patted the spot beside her. “Come on. It’ll be just like in Nadil when we had a sleepover.” Catyana managed a weak smile and climbed in, and Nova pulled the covers over them both before switching off the light. Catyana cuddled closer to her friend’s warmth, and Nova kissed her on the head. “Good night, dearest.”

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“Good night.” Catyana tried to relax and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness settling in around her. She was exhausted but was afraid of closing her eyes and straying into another nightmare, so she watched as the night wind stirred the curtains and created shifting patterns on the floor and walls.

Nova’s soft breathing soon informed her that her friend had fallen asleep. The sound seemed to have a calming effect on her so she listened for a while, hoping it would help her to drift off. At least she no longer had to worry about Nova abandoning her. But it also didn’t surprise her that the thought wasn’t as comforting as she might have hoped.

She turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling. So much had happened in the past few days, and her mind was filled with more images and impressions than she knew how to process, most of them not even her own. But maybe if she concentrated on the things she had experienced herself, it would help her stay grounded until Nemara’s memories settled in.

One pleasant event, for instance, had been accompanying Netira back to her lodgings. Of course, the memory of how they had met wasn’t pleasant at all. She certainly didn’t enjoy seeing Bejad lying in the street, gasping like a fish out of water, or Netira staring down at him with that somber expression on her face. But she couldn’t really blame the princess for getting attached to her target, either. Such things tended to happen much too quickly, had even happened to Nemara a few times. And then, after Catyana had healed Bejad, Nova asked Tavita if she knew the man. Tavita replied that she did, and that he had brought her there from Pitaren so she could—

Catyana’s eyes opened wide and she sat up with a gasp. “Oh, no!”

“Honey, what’s wrong?” mumbled Nova, stretching out her hand and rubbing Catyana’s back. “Did you have another nightmare?”

Catyana looked at her friend, who was still half asleep. “Oh, yes, you could definitely say that. What a nightmare!”

“Why? What did you dream?”

“I, um, it...was about Bejad.”

Nova propped herself up on her elbows. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I should have known that would come back to haunt us. You’ve seen far too many horrible sights these last few days. That has to be traumatic.”

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“No, don’t worry. I’m alright.” Catyana’s lips turned up in a sardonic smile. She had every single one of Nemara’s kills stamped into her mind as picture perfect images. No, the little incident with Bejad really wasn’t going to be an issue.

“Are you sure?”

Catyana turned to her friend and stroked her hair. “Yes, I’m sure. Try to get some rest. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, alright.” Nova let herself sink into her pillow and mumbled, “Good night, honey.”

“Good night.” Catyana lowered herself back down into bed and turned so she could look at Nova. Her friend had already fallen asleep again and seemed so peaceful.

And Catyana had just lied to her.

Fortunately, Nova had been half asleep and hadn’t noticed, or Catyana would have had some explaining to do. In this case, she was grateful she didn’t have to, even though she was certain Nova would understand. But she needed time to sort all this out.

Catyana still felt the shock of the realization that Netira was Tavita, and the flood of Nemara’s memories and emotions that had followed upon the revelation had been overwhelming. No wonder it had been impossible for her to tell Nova the truth, especially since she now felt so protective of the princess.

Catyana reached out and stroked Nova’s hair. One thing she was certain of was that her friend would never deliberately betray anyone’s confidence. But Catyana now had more secrets than she ever could have wanted. How could she betray all these people’s confidence? And how could she ever betray Tavita?

The answer was simple: she couldn’t.

Catyana was starting to feel drowsy, so she cuddled up closer to Nova, who sighed in her sleep and put her arm over her. Catyana would have smiled at her friend’s gesture, but she was too worried. A part of her hoped her concern for Tavita wouldn’t compel her do something reckless. But she also knew she would do almost anything to help the poor girl, and as she drifted off, she mumbled, “Oh, Tavita, what have you gotten us into?”

END OF THE HIGH PRIESTESS

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Note: The plot of *The High Priestess* will be continued in the next volume of the Selandian Chronicles, *The Goddess of Death*.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank everyone involved in the conception and realization of this monumental project. It would have been impossible without your help. In particular, I'd like to acknowledge the following:

Thanks to Rita. You're still the greatest friend and most patient advisor anyone could wish for.

Thanks to Sina. Not all angels have wings.

Thanks to Rodd Umlauf, for your beautiful mermaid paintings and the resulting inspiration (www.UmlaufStudio.com/the-lake-superior-project).

Thanks to Jim Milestone, Superintendent of the Whiskeytown National Recreation Area in California, for your in-depth information in regard to inholdings.

Thanks to Beth Blue and Julianne Long, for your always appreciated comments and suggestions.

Thanks to Balti, for your scanning services.

Thanks to John Clements, director of the Association for Renaissance Martial Arts (www.TheARMA.org) for again putting at my disposal your profound knowledge in regard to swords and swordsmanship.

Thanks to all the members of the Critters Online Writer's Workshop (www.Critters.org) who helped critique the initial version of *The High Priestess*.

Atilen al Anae tyenara

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Author's Notes

A Note on Structure

The main problem with a series like this is that it's an ongoing tale. The two stories in this volume are continuations from the previous volume, and each will be continued in the next volume. But if you're entering the world of the *Selanian Chronicles* at this stage, I want you to feel as comfortable as possible in your new surroundings, so I've extended the appendices so you won't lose your way. I hope you'll find them helpful.

If you were able to get a copy of the first book, *The Emissary*, you might remember I mentioned in the author's note that each volume of the series contains two stories. The first story in each volume is set in our time in the state of Oregon—well, usually. In this volume, the story is called *The Alley*. The second story in each volume of the series is set 4,500 years in the past on the planet Piral. In this volume, the story is called *The High Priestess*.

The two storylines—past and present—are directly related and, as promised, the connection will be revealed and the two storylines brought together in the seventh and final installment of the series. In the meantime, I wish you much pleasure as you immerse in the world of the *Selanian Chronicles*. I hope this part of the saga will be even more enjoyable than the last.

A Note on the South Bronx

In 1977, President Carter walked down Charlotte Street, which is south of Crotona Park in the Morrisania neighborhood and proclaimed the South Bronx of New York City the worst slum in America. Ronald Reagan visited the same area during his 1980 presidential campaign and compared it to burned-out London in World War II, citing it as a prime example of urban decay. On December 10, 1997, after President Clinton toured the same community, now renamed Charlotte Gardens, he said, “Look at where the Bronx was when President Carter came here in despair. Look at where the Bronx was when President Reagan came here and compared it to London in the Blitz. And look at the Bronx today. ... If I could have any wish ... I would just like one thing: I would like for every single American to see before and after. And they would know.”¹

¹ Clinton, William J. “President's Speech to the People of the Bronx.” December 10, 1997. Clinton

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The first story in this book, titled *The Alley*, is partly set in the South Bronx. I apologize to any residents of the Bronx who are offended by my portrayal of their borough, but I needed a setting whose name alone would conjure up images of gloom and create an atmosphere of depression. I'm afraid the South Bronx does have a notorious reputation. To be fair, I'll also admit it no longer lives up to its reputation, as President Clinton pointed out.

But the poverty and neglect of the past is still visible. Mute remnants of the 1960s and '70s recall ugly terms such as "organized crime" and "drug trafficking." In those times, many landlords in the South Bronx set their buildings on fire, hoping to collect the insurance money, either out of despair because their addicted tenants no longer paid rent, or out of pure greed. And sometimes the buildings were burned down by the tenants themselves, who hoped for public housing and money for new furnishings, which the city's policy promised tenants of burnt-out buildings.

The rampant arson didn't end until the city's tenant policy changed, and insurance payments related to fire damage were limited. Since the mid-1980s, the Bronx has recovered significantly. In corroboration with the NYPD, the communities have initiated and realized many redevelopment projects to promote the borough's gentrification and economy.

I believe the NYPD's vital role in transforming the South Bronx can't be cited enough. New York's Finest risk their lives 24/7 to increase the safety of the borough, and too many have made the ultimate sacrifice. The Bronx neighborhood I chose for my story is called Highbridge. It's in the South Bronx Community District 4, which includes Yankee Stadium and coincides with the 44th Police Precinct. I'm afraid Highbridge did have a high violent crime rate at the time *The Alley* is set. Although the violent crime rate of the Bronx is still the highest of the NYC boroughs, it has dropped significantly in the past twenty years. Today, New York City is considered one of the safest large cities in the United States. Let's give honor where honor is due.

A Note on Translation

Many of the events described in the Selanian Chronicles take place on another world and in a language and culture different from our own. Anyone who has ever attempted to learn a second

Foundation. Cited December 22, 2005. Available from: <http://www.ClintonFoundation.org/legacy/121097-speech-by-president-to-people-of-the-bronx.htm>

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language, let alone attempted a translation from one language to another, will know how difficult such a task is.

A language is always embedded in a certain culture, and therefore in a certain mindset or way of thinking. Any attempt to translate a text from this language into another must be regarded as an interpretation; the translator attempts to reconstruct what the person responsible for the text was thinking, feeling, and trying to express. At the same time, the translator is confronted with the formidable task of trying to convey the meaning of the text as accurately as possible in the language of the audience for which the translation is intended. Is it therefore surprising that there are so many different Bible translations?

It wasn't always easy for me to find the right interpretation of the original Selanian, and I'm grateful for all the support I had in this complex endeavor. On the other hand, it was just as difficult for me to foresee in which way my readers would want me to present the results. Some readers even mentioned they would have preferred a more Shakespearian style of language to portray Nova, Catyana, and Vilam's conversations in order to emphasize the "otherworldliness" of the whole situation.

I think this is a common problem. For instance, many of us have been exposed to the King James translation of the Bible since our childhood, so we sometimes believe biblical characters actually spoke in thees and thous. But they didn't. They were normal people like you and me who used common speech to express their meaning. The Greek New Testament text is one of the simpler ancient Greek texts available to us today. If a pastor who took courses in NT Greek during seminary were to attempt the translation of actual Greek literature, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, they would probably find it a hard nut to crack. This is more proof of the fact that the authors of the NT texts were trying to convey their message as simply as possible.

In my translation attempt, I've tried to convey not only the meaning but also the mode in which the individuals interacted with one another. Of course, it's possible that I didn't always succeed in the way I had hoped. One of the difficulties of translating Selanian is the fact that there exists a "high" form of the language, which is used when formality is required, and a "common" form, which we would equate to common speech. In some Yazorian—excuse me, Earth languages—formality can be expressed simply by changing the person, as the Romanic languages do, by switching from second person singular to second person plural (e.g., French: *tu es*; *vous êtes*).

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This is not quite so simple in Selanian. When expressing formality through the use of the high form, the speaker must adhere to a strict set of structural rules. When using the common form, the rules change. It would be simple if we could just learn these rules and then translate accordingly. But people being people, whether they live on Piral or on Earth, nobody ever sticks to an exact, mechanical representation of something, especially in regard to language. So during a conversation, the speaker will mix elements of both the high and the common forms, depending on situation, emphasis, and their relationship to the person they're talking to. It's also common for a conversation to begin formally, but as the speakers feel more comfortable with each other, they may switch to a more informal style of speech.

I've attempted to convey this peculiarity of the Selanian language by using a more rigid and perhaps archaic writing style when conveying the high form, and a more common style when conveying elements of the common form. A third form, the low language, is used by people with little or no education, or individuals with corresponding exposure to such people, who don't adhere to any formal code at all.

Let me give you two examples. When Melina first meets Carol in *The Alley*, she asks, "*Camar apara venires lu parena te Selanei?*" If she had known Carol well, she probably would have asked, "*Cita pares lu Selanae?*" But the latter phrase might be misunderstood if someone were audacious enough to use it in a different context, perhaps with devastating results.

A more difficult example is the long conversation between Nova, Vodana, and Vilam on their way to the Faeren farm in *The Emissary*. During her animated rebuke of Vilam, Vodana uses a very—might I say “colorful”?—mixture of elements of both the high and common language forms. But in the end, her fire seems to have gone out, and she returns to a simple common phrase: "*Vil'anan; nimat'esar tanasira se lutan dinevelis.*" A possible translation could be “My friend, your life must have been of the most wicked [or diabolical] confusion.” I took the liberty of translating “one hell of a mess,” and hope nobody was offended. “Of the most wicked confusion” would have sounded quite formal and even awkward to our ears, which is definitely not the kind of language Vodana was using at that point. “One hell of a mess” also comes closer to the sometimes diabolical sense of wickedness expressed with *dinevel* and coincides with the word's close relationship to *sinae te nevilas*, which translates as “place of darkness” or “hell” and is often contracted to *si'nevilas* or *ti'nevilas*.

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A Note on Language Conventions

Because of the cultural complexity and somewhat fantastical nature of this tale, I've allowed myself a few liberties with the English language. To guard against any misunderstanding, I'd like to take a moment to clarify these concepts.

Some readers may have been dismayed by the extensive use of *alright*—as opposed to the stylistically correct *all right*—in the first book of the series, *The Emissary*. As mentioned in the introduction to the appendices of *The Emissary*, I'm aware this practice may constitute a challenge for some readers. To those who were troubled by the matter, I express my most profound regrets, for I must disappoint you again. This oddity will not only be continued in the current volume, *The High Priestess*, but throughout the entire Selanian Chronicles.

I decided to use *alright* to denote the difference between our use of *all right*, *okay*, or *fine* in the English language, and the use of *tezatal* or *desar* in the Selanian tongue. If Jonathan, Philip, or Carol uses the word, they say *okay* or *all right*. But Nova and Catyana would say *alright*.

High Priestess and *High Priest* are always capitalized, because each title denotes a specific person with a very specific function and authority. At the time this story takes place, there is always only one High Priestess and one High Priest.

Sensation and *Induction* are capitalized when they refer to the ethereal arts and sciences of the Selanian Order. Please refer to the corresponding article in the appendices.

In the Selanian culture, *prophet* can be used as a title and is capitalized when it refers to a certain person, such as the Prophet Cades.

On Piral, the lords and ladies of the houses have a status akin to kings and queens on Earth. Even if these terms aren't used to distinguish a certain person, I've decided to capitalize them in all instances to emphasize the power and royalty attributed to the title. The same rule applies to the addresses *Your Excellency*, *My Lord*, and *My Lady*, or *Your Lordship* and *Your Ladyship*. To remain consistent, *house* is capitalized whenever it refers to a specific house as a political entity. See the article on the Great Houses in the appendices for more information.

The Advisory Council on Piral, and later on Chyoradan, is the primary legislative assembly, comparable to the U.S. Congress. If the word *council* refers to the Advisory Council, it is therefore capitalized.

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In the Selanian Chronicles, the terms Elinar, Demantar, Tinavar, and Ventaren all refer to intelligent races indigenous to Piral. Just as we would capitalize American, Canadian, or European, I capitalize the English translations of these terms whenever they refer to such beings:

Elinar: Angel/Fairy

Demantar: Dragon

Tinavar: Unicorn

Ventaren: Mermaid

A Note on Pronunciation

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the heroine asks, "What's in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet;"² To which Lucy Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables thoughtfully replies, "I read in a book once that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but I've never been able to believe it. I don't believe a rose *would* be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage."³

Anne's musing undoubtedly has more to do with aesthetics than semantics. And since the Selani are so intent on beauty and harmony, their language reflects this emphasis. I'm sure many Selanian scholars would be horrified by our feeble attempts at pronouncing their names or using their language. I'd therefore like to make a brief attempt at explaining the pronunciation of the one or other name used in the Selanian Chronicles. For more information, please consult the introduction to the Selanian language in the appendices.

The most important aspect of the Selanian language is that all vowels are pronounced in the European form, as in *do*, *re*, *mi*, *fa*, and *u* as is in *luna*. Thus, Silana should be pronounced See-lah'-nah, and Melina should be pronounced Meh-lee'-nah. In keeping with this concept, Vilam is

² Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene II). Massachusetts Institute of Technology's online edition of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. Accessed December 22, 2005. Available from: http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/romeo_juliet/full.html

³ Montgomery, L. M. *Anne of Green Gables*. New York: Bantam, 1987. p 38 (of 309 p.). ISBN 0-553-21313-X

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not pronounced like the English word *villain*, but as Vee-lahm'. (In these examples, I've used a single quote (') to denote a stressed syllable.)

There are three consonants that might prove difficult for readers accustomed only to the English language. They are *r*, *j*, and *ch*.

R is pronounced by rolling the tip of the tongue, or by trying to imitate the ringing of a telephone, as in *brrr*. Remember, the Selanian tongue is always soft, so roll it like the soft purring of a cat.

J is pronounced softly, like the *-ge* in *garage*, or the *s* in *vision*.

Ch will be the most difficult because there's nothing comparable in the English language. It's a soft, unvoiced, vibrant sound, like the *ch* in the German word *Licht*. You produce it by trying to pronounce a *k*, but don't quite let your tongue make contact with the back of the roof of your mouth. Just let the air pass through. If you do it correctly, it'll sound like the hissing of a cat.

Here are a few names and phrases and how to pronounce them:

Anae	Ah-nay'
Bejad	Beh-jahd'
Chyardal	Chyahr-dahl'
Chyoradan	Chyoh-rah-dahn'
Hyelisa	Hyeh-lee'-sah
Ilanya	Ee-lah'-nee-yah
Melina	Meh-lee'-nah
Mivelin	Mee-veh-leen'
Natilya	Nah-teel'-yah
Silana	See-lah'-nah
Talas	Tah'-lahs
Tamenisa	Tah-meh-nee'-sah
Tolares	Toh-lah'-rehs
Tuval	Too-vahl'

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Utalya	Oo-tahl'-yah	
Venora	Veh-noh'-rah	
Vilam	Vee-lahm'	
Halena Yazoral	Hah'-leh-nah Yah-zoh-rahl'	(Forbidden Planet, Earth)
Novantan	Noh-vahn-tahn'	(rose-like flower)
Piral	Pee-rahl'	(Earth)
Selanae	Seh-lah-nay'	(the wind, the spirit)
Setavelan mada	seh'-tah-veh-lahn' mah-dah'	(Good morning)
Tezatal	Teh-zah-tahl'	(You're welcome; it's okay)
Votalaran	Voh-tah-lah-rahn'	(I'm sorry)

Disclaimer

Beginning with this installment, some readers may note a peculiarity that will become more evident as the series progresses. The Selanian Order's cosmological model of the universe is geocentric. (Please refer to Professor Heyanis Movaran's excellent synopsis on Sensation and Induction in the appendices for more information.) Although I've integrated the model into this tale in the way I came across it, I would like to assert that I am familiar with the various cosmological models, including the physical model currently accepted by the majority of the scientific community. I don't wish to claim the Selanian Order's view of the universe to be the most accurate or reliable. However, I do agree with certain literary scholars that the potential for symbolic and allegorical exploitation of geocentricism is enthralling.

Peter Krausche

August 2017

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Author's Note on the Appendices

The following articles were originally written by experts in the various disciplines. Because of the extent and complexity of these articles, I have taken the liberty to shorten and abridge them into appendices to give readers a better overview of the history and culture of the Selani and therefore a better understanding of the events portrayed in the Selanian Chronicles.

I would like to thank the scholars of the Selanian Order on Chyoradan, and especially Philip Brannon of Bend, Oregon, for their assistance, insights and valuable contributions during the compilation of these appendices.

A peculiarity of the text of *The Selanian Chronicles* may be the extensive usage of “alright.” I’m aware this may constitute a challenge for some readers. I have decided to use “alright” to denote the difference between our use of “all right,” “okay,” or “fine” in the English language, and the use of “tezatal” or “desar” in the Selanian tongue. So if Philip uses the word, he might say “okay,” or “all right.” But Nova or Catyana would say “alright”. I hope this note will help to clarify any misunderstandings regarding this concept.

For more information on the Selani and the Selanian culture, including examples of the Selanian script and full color maps of Piral, please see the author’s website:

www.PeterKrausche.com

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Appendix A: The Covatal's Excerpts on History

Introduction

Because of the Covatal's unique insights into the history and culture of the various ethnic groups indigenous to Piral, and later of the seceded factions that were scattered across the galaxy after the Galactic Diaspora, his *Excerpts on History* have become the basis for any historic research attempted by the Selanian Order. It is rumored that, with a little incentive from the High Priestess presiding at that time, he began to compile his knowledge and experiences into this academic epic soon after his arrival on Piral.

What sometimes makes scientific examinations tedious when employing the *Excerpts* as a source for academic research is the Covatal's reluctance to admit his own connection to any of the occurrences described in his work. Many scholars have attributed the Covatal's unwillingness to focus on his personal involvement in central historic events to his unusually demure nature, although wicked tongues have been known to accuse him of deliberate chicanery. Because of such obstacles, the *Excerpts* have been meticulously cross-referenced with the records of the Covatal's contemporaries, beginning with the memoirs of the renowned Lady Novantina Tolares and ending with the Covasatal's *Reflections of the Soul*. A study group is currently attempting to cross-reference the *Excerpts* with the *Selani s'Ulavan*.

Despite the various difficulties involved in studying the *Excerpts*, they remain the most prominent source of information in regard to Selanian history. Acquiring a general working knowledge of the composition's structure is therefore mandatory to any students of the historical sciences.

Although most computer systems today are distributed with a complete copy of this classic opus, it is always prudent to verify on occasion that a particular system retains the latest update. The Covatal's *Excerpts* can be accessed or downloaded in their entirety at any time and from any terminal with a trans-dimensional field link to the scholastic library's computer of the Selanian Order on Chyoradan.

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Overview

This section is devoted to imparting an outline of the Covatal's *Excerpts* to students not yet accustomed to the composition's intricate structure. The proposed framework is this author's personal attempt to interpret the anatomy of the *Excerpts* and does not necessarily coincide with the Covatal's actual intent. It is this author's desire that the overview will aid students of the historical sciences in their endeavor to become acquainted with a most extraordinary document, so prospective graduates and scholars may come to appreciate the value of the Covatal's contribution to the academic community.

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
PARADISE	1 TC	450 TC
Rise of the various cultures on Piral. Emergence of the first townships and cities. The Covatal especially directs our attention to the relationships between the various races, which in many cases were not discovered until after the Millennial Peace. Since the Covatal did not experience the events of the eras termed "Paradise," "The Cataclysm," and "The Millennial Peace," it is assumed that he collected his data from scholars of the various races, while also leaning heavily on the <i>Selanis'Ulavan</i> .		
Lord Pival Tolares establishes the City of Tolares.	289 TC	
Cades, a simple quarryman, is called to be a prophet of Anae.	314 TC	
The Prophet Cades establishes Travis, the City of Light, at the site of his first encounter with Anae.	376 TC	
THE CATACLYSM	450 TC	550 TC
This section examines the conditions that led to the rise and fall of the High Elinian Scholar Vilasan, thereafter known as Nevilan. The Covatal also scrutinizes the consequences that these devastating events have upon subsequent eras.		
Nevilan commits genocide on his own people, the Elinar, simultaneously slaughtering the Demantar that coexist with them.	496 TC	
A large asteroid crashes in the Plains of Tesalin.	521 TC	
The Sword of Selanae and the Admonition are constructed from the metal of the asteroid. The work is supervised by the Prophet Cades.	524 TC	526 TC
The Admonition is lost on the western slopes of the Covasin Massif while being transported to Travis.	527 TC	
Last battle against Nevilan on the eastern slopes of the Covasin Massif. Death of Lord Pival Tolares. Loss of the Sword of Selanae. Nevilan disappears.	534 TC	
THE MILLENNIAL PEACE	550 TC	1550 TC

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
In this time of peace and affluence, the Great Houses are first recognized and begin to strengthen their influence. Although most historians terminate the Era of the Millennial Peace with the Conference of Tolares in 1524 TC and the beginning of the Selanian Civil War, this author believes that a more global view of the subject must be taken.		
Establishment of the Selanian Order and the Advisory Council during the first Synod of Travis.	572 TC	
Death of the Prophet Cades.	737 TC	
Various Holy Scriptures are collected and appraised by the Advisory Council and formed into the <i>Selani s'Ulavan</i> during the third Synod of Travis.	816 TC	
First Conference of Travis.	861 TC	
The Prophet Nevacad constructs the Prophet's Bow.	1009 TC	
Conference of Divestelan and assassination of the High Priestess Halita Penates.	1519 TC	
Conference of Tolares.	1524 TC	
Selianian Civil War. Reemergence of the Demantar and the Elinar. The Sword of Selanae is retrieved.	1524 TC	1525 TC
Quadrilateral Concord.	1533 TC	
The High Priestess Catyana Faeren initiates the Vetenian Non-Violence Act, prohibiting the use of technology in any form to aid in the design of weapons.	1545 TC	
THE SWORDMASTERS	1550 TC	2250 TC
After the events of the Selanian Civil War, the Great Houses begin to assemble armed forces strong enough to protect the population and enforce the laws of the provinces. Swordmasters are usually hired to supervise these functions. The swordmasters are almost always priests of the Selanian Order. Their status becomes nearly as important as that of the lords to whom they have sworn their allegiance.		
Because of the widespread fear of the use of technology to advance weaponry (e.g., the <i>sitanem</i> developed by Lord Chyardal Tolares), the main responsibility of the swordmasters		

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
is to suppress such attempts in compliance with the Vetenian Nonviolence Act. One of the chief characteristics of this era is the almost nonexistent advance of technology. A beneficial side effect of this form of government is the expansion of the provinces and the urge to control new and unsettled territories. Tighter bonds are formed with the Elinar.		
The High Priestess Lady Yanita Divestelan emulates the initiative of her friend Lady Novantina Tolares and engages the services of the former High Priest Vordalin Penates as official Swordmaster of the House Divestelan. Many of the other Great Houses quickly follow suit.	1581 TC	
The Covasatal discovers the Admonition while en route to Travis with Sevana Faeren.	2096 TC	
Riots in the streets of several major cities. The High Priestess Sevana Faeren annuls the Vetenian Nonviolence Act.	2136 TC	
THE TECHNOCRATS	2250 TC	2850 TC
Despite the annulment of the Vetenian Nonviolence Act, the constant censorship of technological progress by the Great Houses finally leads to incessant civil commotions. Technical experts independent of the houses gain influence. Since the effective operation of the Advisory Council in Travis is based upon the symbiosis between the Selanian Order and the leaders of the Great Houses, the Council's authority declines. The Technocrats develop their own honor codex and a refined form of the <i>sitanem</i> becomes the preferred method of dueling.		
Telates Catanin elected as first Technical Advisor of the City of Divestelan.	2292 TC	
Comprehensive time warp model advanced by Telates Catanin.	2364 TC	
First inductive pulse produced by technical means. The resulting inductive field is termed a telatian field, in honor of Telates Catanin, who anticipated the formation of the field in his time warp model.	2587 TC	
FEDERALISM	2850 TC	3350 TC
The society's need for greater independence yet efficient structure leads to federalism. Church and state are separated. Travis remains the legislative capital of Piral, but is now		

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
governed by the Selanian Assembly, whose members are elected by the populace of the various provinces. The Federal Council is elected by the assembly and the president by the Council. The Technocrats retain judicial sovereignty and form the Federal Congress of Provinces, which appoints the Federal Court.		
Establishment of the Selanian Federal Assembly in Travis.	2932 TC	
Flight of the <i>Mivelin</i> , the first space vessel to employ telatian technology.	3176 TC	
PLURALISM	3350 TC	3850 TC
The provinces become more independent. The Technocrats have long since lost control of the Federal Congress of Provinces, which is also designated by the populace, although actual domination over the corrupt politicians is retained by powerful industrialists. Various forms of religion are now acceptable. The members of the Selanian Order have become a minority. Only a small number of citizens heed the quiet voices that advise caution.		
In order to satisfy the growing energy demands on Piral, construction commences of the first telatian reactor to orbit Velana.	3492 TC	
THE GALACTIC DIASPORA	3850 TC	50 SV
Although the exact reasons for the devastating events leading to the Galactic Diaspora are unknown, many scholars believe that the telatian reactors built in orbit around Velana led to an imbalance in Piral's sun, triggering a supernova of unprecedented proportions.		
Piral's sun, Velana, goes supernova. All life on Piral is annihilated.	3983 TC	
SOLITARY WORLDS	50 SV	650 SV
During the first six centuries following the Galactic Diaspora, most of the newly populated worlds struggle to survive. Because of the confusion of tongues, which must have been the result of some unidentified form of radiation before the supernova, there is little or no communication between the solitary worlds. Only the Advisory Council on Chyoradan is capable of establishing an efficient government.		

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
Development of the Mitelian Decryption Algorithm on Chyoradan, which functions as a universal translation method and facilitates communication with the civilizations of nearby stellar systems.	533 SV	
THE ALLIANCE OF CHYORADAN	650 SV	850 SV
During the six centuries of near isolation, a loose bond is established between Chyoradan and some of the nearby stellar systems. This finally leads to the Alliance of Chyoradan.		
Alliance of Chyoradan.	722 SV	
Temporal Displacement Directive prohibiting any unauthorized computerized temporal synchronization facilities.	834 SV	
THE COLONIAL LORDS	850 SV	1250 SV
<p>Many stellar systems comprehend the advantages of the Alliance. Since the Alliance cannot handle so many new affiliates at once, a peculiar form of colonialism develops. Representatives of the Alliance are stationed on worlds requesting admittance as members. Candidate worlds with an Alliance presence retain a status as a Protectorate of the Alliance.</p> <p>Since the representatives are more or less independent and almost completely responsible for the admission process, they soon receive a significance never intended by the Advisory Council and often rule over the colony worlds as lords while lining their own pockets. For a while, the Alliance almost descends into chaos. This is the time of hot-headed space pilots and gun-slinging tradesmen.</p>		
Horasen Cevanis is dispatched to the Caldarian stellar system, one of the most isolated systems of the galaxy. He is the first representative of the Alliance to supervise an admission process.	871 SV	
After almost three centuries of constant delays and temporizing on the part of Alliance representatives, the Caldarians, who have still not been admitted, break away in disappointment and frustration. They return to their lives of seclusion and religious obscurity.	1143 SV	
ENLIGHTENMENT	1250 SV	1650 SV

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
The immense expansion of the Alliance and the changes to society wrought by the Era of Colonialism have led to a certain measure of insecurity in the population. In their quest for answers, a renewed interest in history awakens in the Selanian Order. A progressive form of Renaissance, termed the Age of Enlightenment, sweeps the worlds of the Alliance, yielding new forms of art, music, and literature.		
The Galactic Intelligence Division (<i>Sevon Costenan Velitra</i> , or SCV), a branch of the Selanian Order that manages the official intelligence network of the Alliance, discovers first traces of a shadowy coalition termed the Order of the Novantan.	1278 SV	
Torvolan Novesta composes the inspired opera <i>The Swordmaster</i> , which recounts the moving love story that unfolded between Sevana Faeren and Perganes Cemasena during the Era of the Swordmasters on Piral.	1323 SV	
The SCV uncovers a conspiracy to gain control of the Advisory Council. The members of the conspiracy, who all commit suicide, are rumored to have belonged to the Order of the Novantan.	1592 SV	
MODERNISM	1650 SV	present
After the turbulent events of the past millennium, the Advisory Council decides it is time for an honest and deep retrospection of its choices and actions. The worlds of the Alliance also acknowledge the need for more stability in their various ideologies. A new form of thought supplants the principles that governed the Age of Enlightenment. This contemporary philosophy attempts a self-conscious break with the past while searching for new forms of expression. Traditional teaching is accommodated to present-day concepts, and the exuberant metaphysical views of the Age of Enlightenment are toned down to a more moderate position. This endeavor to balance various academic disciplines with a call for more tolerance terms itself Modernism.		
Members of the SCV discover remnants of an abandoned military training camp of immense proportions in an isolated and unpopulated stellar system.	1734 SV	

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ERA	From	To
Short Description		
Singular Events	Date	
The Free Trade Association reports an alarming increase in lost transports.	1887 SV	
The Advisory Council counters an Alliance initiative that strives to drastically enhance the size of the military forces.	1934 SV	

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Appendix B: The Selanian Order

The Selanian Order and its primary legislative assembly, the Advisory Council, were established in 572 TC, at the beginning of the era termed the Millennial Peace, and were based in Travis. The houses soon recognized the beneficial aspects of the Council's guidance and bowed to its wise judgment in spiritual matters. The houses were allowed much freedom regarding the government of the provinces.

The Advisory Council consists of twelve Elders, the High Priest, the High Priestess, and seventy priests and priestesses who are chosen specifically for this function. There are forty-two men and forty-two women on the Council, so the male-female component is balanced. The general public is usually encouraged to attend the meetings of the Council, although this privilege was suspended during the five years between the ill-fated Conference of Divestelan and the Conference of Tolares to protect the identity of the new High Priestess.

The following table displays the various offices in the Selanian Order and the correct address of the persons carrying them. It also includes the material of which the brooch is made and designates the office of the bearer. (See the article on the Selanian brooch.) If there are two materials, the second one denotes the border. The last column gives the standard guideline for the minimum age limit at which an office may be commissioned.

Office	Address	Brooch	Minimum Age Guideline
Covatal (Traveler)	Your Holiness	Platinum/Sapphire	n/a
Elder	Your Beatitude	Platinum	111
High Priestess / High Priest	Your Eminence	Platinum/Gold	44 / 55
Priestess / Priest	Your Grace	Gold	33 / 44
Deaconess / Deacon	Your Reverence	Bronze	33 / 44
Female Acolyte / Male Acolyte	Brother	n/a	22

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Appendix C: The Selanian Brooch of Office



The Selanian brooch of office depicts the triphyllon, the three-leafed symbol for eternity (or infinity), superimposed over a circle, which is the Selanian symbol for the Selani people, but also for the spirit. The brooch represents God's dealings with humanity, His loving involvement in our affairs. As an example of its symbolism, the triphyllon could be used to represent the Holy Trinity: three interlocked leaves, separate entities yet forever bound together in a closed loop.

The brooch has three tiers, or layers, reinforcing its trilateral symbolism. The three tiers represent the three basic, eternal, spiritual values: love, hope, and faith. Since love is the greatest of these, it forms the foundation and is therefore embodied by the lowest tier. Here again, we may find a correspondence in the three essential doctrines of Christianity:

- 1) **Love:** Salvation by grace through the sacrifice of Christ
- 2) **Hope:** The resurrection of Christ
- 3) **Faith:** The deity of Christ

The material of which the Selanian brooch is made distinguishes the offices of the Selanian Order. (See article on the Selanian Order.) The material also symbolizes a certain attribute of the office of the bearer. If a brooch is made of two materials, the office is believed to require both attributes. The table below denotes these attributes.

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Material	Office	Attribute
Bronze	Deacon, Deaconess	Compassion
Gold	Priest, Priestess	Holiness
Platinum	Elder	Wisdom
Sapphire	Covatal	Clarity

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Appendix D: Sensation and Induction

Excerpted from: *A Structured Analysis of Piralian History* by Professor Heyanis Movaran, Chair of the Department of History, Galactic Academy of the Sciences, Travista, Chyoradan.

Introduction

This synopsis of the Selanian principles of Sensation and Induction is intended for an audience that is aware of the extent and ramifications of these skills and the interdependencies involved in their manifestation, but would appreciate further insights into their evolution and the underlying concepts governing their application. An essential aspect of the ethereal arts is that they are a logical result of the belief system of the Selanian Order and are therefore a natural expression of Selanian faith. Consequently, any elaboration upon these topics requires not only a comprehensive survey of historical events, but also an accurate appraisal of the cosmological aspects and spiritual principles involved. The author hopes this outline may serve as an itinerary during the prospective student's journey into this fascinating subject.

Please note that this article only deals with the topic as it pertains to Piralian history. For an overview of developments in the ethereal arts following the Galactic Diaspora, please refer to Professor Genar Tirafel's excellent synopsis of the subject.

Note on Selanian Cosmology

A comprehensive understanding of Sensation and Induction is only possible with a working knowledge of Selanian cosmology. At the time of the Selanian Civil War, the Selanian Order believed in an ethereal substrate, which to them constituted the basis for all matter and energy in the universe.

The Selani considered any manifestations with measurable physical properties, such as matter and energy, to be the result of resonance phenomena produced by the ethereal substrate, resulting in distinct patterns of harmony and dissonance unique to each environment, object, or event. With their powers of Sensation they were able to perceive this pattern, and with their powers of Induction they were able to actually affect the pattern. This latter inductive influence, as it was

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called, was limited, since the ethereal substrate had a profound capacity to reassert its former state. The Selani referred to this characteristic as the substrate's inherent resistance.

Another significant aspect of Selanian cosmology is the Selanian Order's creationistic and geocentric perception of the universe. The most extraordinary detail of this model is that Halena Yazoral (the Forbidden Planet, Earth), and not Piral, constitutes the center of the universe. This fact was allegedly revealed to the Selani by their prophets (a fact that can be verified by the *Selani s'Ulavan*), who decreed Halena Yazoral off limits should the Selani ever manage to reach for the stars.

Such a concept has several grave implications. Besides the obvious impact on astronomical disciplines, it abandons the principles of scientific reasoning to theological and philosophical considerations. Scholars of the literary arts, however, feel the possibilities of symbolic and allegorical exploitation are enthralling.

Note on Spiritual Principles

Although the Selanian Order adopted an astonishingly systematic attitude in their analysis of the ethereal substrate and the disciplines that comprised the art of Sensation and Induction, it must be noted that the underlying principles guiding their studies remained profoundly spiritual in nature.

To the Selani, the ethereal substrate represented the gateway between the physical and a postulated spiritual realm. They believed the body of any living entity was a mere physical shell, which housed an immortal spirit. According to their theology, the spirit, and therefore the consciousness of the entity, resided in the spiritual realm. The spirit was bound to its physical abode but also dominated it by means of the ethereal substrate. The ethereal substrate itself, though, was nothing less than the medium by which Anae upheld all physical existence, and the resonance phenomena in the substrate were produced by His words or thoughts.

This spiritual concept of reality was taken directly from the *Selani s'Ulavan*. Several key passages and their various cross-references were exploited to substantiate the concept (e.g. 2 Cades 3:11–12):

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“For by His counsel all things are established, both in the heavens and on earth, the visible and the invisible, and by His thoughts all things exist and are sustained by the power of His Word.”

Historical Overview

The unique powers of the Selani are mentioned in the earliest historical records available from Piral. But it was not until the emergence of the prophets and the subsequent founding of the Advisory Council that these skills matured into a trained discipline, whose application and advancement was monitored carefully by the priests and priestesses of the Selanian Order. The incentive for this development is believed to have stemmed from a disturbance in the ethereal balance of Piral, which the Selanian Prophet Cades and the Elinian Guardian Soraten detected in 392 TC. Interestingly, this event coincides with the establishment of the City of Divestelan, whose foundation was laid at that time using stones from Mount Toradeh.

During the first one and a half millennia of recorded history on Piral, there is no indication the Selani ever pondered the origin of their abilities. Most modern historians attribute this puzzling omission to the fact that their powers were such an intrinsic aspect of their faith and culture. But the events of the Selanian Civil War in 1524 TC forced them to examine the factors upon which Sensation and Induction were based. The ensuing discovery was disturbing. It seemed as if the existence and manifestation of their ethereal skills was subject to complex interdependencies inherent to their world. The Selani realized they would have to rethink their attitude toward the environment in which they lived.

The art of Induction was significantly advanced through the extraordinary abilities of Catyana of the House of Faeren. With the Covatal's aid, the young maiden was able to produce an inductive pulse field with which she eluded the ethereal substrate's capacity to reassert its former state. Although the officials of the Selanian Order were able to reproduce her results, it was apparent her technique could not be duplicated with the same ease. Eventually, the Selanian Order determined that such unusual aptitude was linked to the so-called Golden Gene, which was inherent to the House Faeren and sometimes resulted in golden hair and blue eyes. These characteristics were uncommon, since the Selani usually had black hair and brown eyes. The induction of a pulse field would remain a difficult undertaking reserved for especially gifted students in the advanced levels.

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During the Era of the Technocrats on Piral, the brilliant scientist and Primary Technical Advisor of the City of Divestelan, Telates Catanin, refined the ethereal model, unifying the relativistic and quantum theories in force at that time and gradually replacing them with his telatian time warp model, the bulk of which first became publicly accessible in 2364 TC. His model represented a major shift in scientific thought. Telates proposed that the ethereal substrate in itself was not homogenous, but consisted of sub-quantum elements, which he termed etherons. The ethereal substrate was the result of reaction processes of these elements, and any quantifiable manifestations, such as time, space, energy, and matter, could be compared to resonance phenomena defined by the kinetics of the ensuing ethereal substrate.

Up to that point, time had been considered a linear aspect of space-time geometry by the Advisory Council and was conveyed as such to a large segment of the populace by the scholars of the Selanian Order. Contrary to this traditional view of reality, much evidence in regard to the existence of time dilation effects had been accumulated by the scientific community, which obviously supported the relativistic and quantum theories they had developed. For this reason, Telates emphasized the fact that his model proposed a distortion, or warp, of time, hence the name telatian time warp model. In later eras, the model was simply referred to as the telatian model. But during the Era of the Technocrats, Telates's model caused further dissatisfaction among the population in regard to the views of the Advisory Council, which many historians regard as one of the main factors for the Council's rapid loss of credibility at that time and the subsequent decline of its authority.

It took more than two centuries of further research, but by 2587 TC, technology had advanced to the point where the first inductive field could be produced in a laboratory. The days in which the art of Sensation and Induction was practiced and monitored exclusively by Selanian priests and priestesses had temporarily come to an end.

When interstellar travel became possible during the Federal Era on Piral, and tentative relations to extra-Piralian civilizations were established, the Piralians discovered that their abilities, which seemed so natural to them, often had an adverse effect on their attempts at contact. At best, their powers made a cryptic impression on other societies, but in some instances, they yielded disaster. Such tragic experiences taught the Piralians to be more cautious about disclosing their talents and demonstrated how extraordinary and unique the art of Sensation and Induction was in the galaxy.

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It was not until after the Galactic Diaspora that the Advisory Council again secured exclusive control over the discipline, thereby providing the necessary ethical and spiritual backdrop for its discreet and beneficial application.

Note on Similarities to Yazorian Concepts

On Halena Yazoral (Earth), there have been, and still are, some striking similarities to concepts of Selanian cosmology.

The ethereal substrate of Selanian cosmology is comparable to the postulated **luminiferous aether**, which was a popular hypothesis on Halena Yazoral in the late nineteenth century AD, but lost credibility when the results of the famous Michaelson-Morley experiment were published in 1887 AD. After the Yazorian physicist Albert Einstein advanced his theory of relativity in the early twentieth century, making the existence of an ethereal substrate unnecessary to explain the propagation of light, the aether theory was gradually abandoned.

The telatian model of the Technocratic Era on Piral could be considered an advanced form of process physics, a model of reality currently emerging on Halena Yazoral. When comparing the two models, etherons correspond to virtual elements called geometric bits, or gebits. Gebits constitute space-time or quantum foam, which of course corresponds to the ethereal substrate of the telatian model.

The cosmological model of the Selani is similar to creation science and modern geocentrism on Halena Yazoral, although in the Selanian model, Halena Yazoral (the Forbidden Planet, Earth), and not Piral, represents the center of the universe. This is unusual because most civilizations postulating geocentric models view their own worlds as the focal point of existence.

Even the spiritual concepts of the Selani find a correlation in Yazorian views. For instance, the statements made in the *Selani s'Ulavan* (e.g., 2 Cades 3:11–12) exhibit an amazing congruence to passages in the Yazorian Bible (Isaiah 14:24; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:3).

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Appendix E: The Great Houses

The Great Houses were first recognized during the onset of the era termed the Millennial Peace. These were the houses with the greatest influence, and their votes carried the most weight during Selanian conferences.

The Great Houses displayed many similarities to monarchies when compared to Yazorian forms of government. The first houses to be recognized as Great Houses by the Selanian Conference were Tolares, Vetena, Bevelas, and Revan of the eastern provinces, and Divestelan, Cemasena, Novesta, and Marusen of the west. These remained the oldest and most powerful of the Great Houses until the time of the Technocrats. Houses could only obtain the status of a Great House by recognition in the Selanian Conference and had to be recommended by at least one existing Great House.

The official address of the head of state of a house was “Your Excellency.” The official title of the male head of a house and his sons was “Lord” and the address “My Lord” or “Your Lordship.” For the female heads and their daughters, the title was “Lady” and the official address “My Lady” or “Your Ladyship.” Direct relations of the Lords and Ladies were addressed as “Madam” and “Sir,” although such addresses were often also used by children toward their parents in more formal families. The sons and daughters of a Lord and Lady were referred to as princes and princesses and were addressed as the “young” Lord and the “young” Lady. Grandchildren of ruling Lords and Ladies were addressed as the “younger” Lord and the “younger” Lady.

During the first decades of the Millennial Peace, the Ladies of the Great Houses took particular pride in distinguishing themselves by a variety of hairstyles. These hairstyles soon became official attributes of the females of the Great Houses and have held even into the present stellar age. A Lady’s affiliation to a certain Great House can therefore often be determined by her hairstyle.

House	Hairstyle
Tolares	Royal crown braid with braided side loops. The hairstyle mimics the triphyllon, the Selanian symbol for eternity.

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Marusen	Chignon
Novesta	Tucked braid
Satural	Lace crown braid with waterfall cascade

Every house has its own colors. Before and during the Selanian Civil War, the guards and armies of the eastern and western provinces donned uniforms in the colors of the most powerful Great Houses in order to save costs. The Houses were Tolares in the east (dark forest green, burgundy, and gold) and Divestelan in the west (dark brown, black, and gold).

House	Colors
Tolares	Dark forest green / burgundy / gold
Marusen	Gray / burgundy
Novesta	Dark blue / wine red / gold
Satural	Cream / burgundy / gold

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Appendix F: Inhabitants of Piral

The Selani

The Selani are the inhabitants of Piral most similar to humans. Because of Piral's greater mass, they tend to be slightly smaller than humans. Of the various intelligent life forms indigenous to Piral, the Selani are the race that supposedly populated Piral most extensively. At the time of the Selanian Civil War, the Selani were known to inhabit regions that extended west of the Sea of Ventara and south as far as the Tonisian Plateau and the Sumelan. It was even rumored that some people had attempted to settle in the moor and swamp regions of the Chyenesar east of the Tyenar Mountains. It is not known whether a settlement of the Navaren (Northern Forests) had been attempted at that time.

The approximate lifespan of the Selani was 230 years at the time of the Covatal's arrival on Piral. The age of maturity was set at thirty-three for women and forty-four for men. A comparison to biological Yazorian (Earth) ages can be derived with the following formula:

$$\text{Yazorian Age} = (\text{Selanian Age} - 15) / 3 + 15$$

Novantina Satural, who is forty-three at the commencement of the Selanian Chronicles, would have a biological Earth age of twenty-four, and Catyana Faeren, who is twenty-six, would have a biological Earth age of eighteen.

The Demantar

Before the Cataclysm, the Demantar grazed in the grasslands of the Vortelan surrounding Malentisa, which at that time was still a fertile basin. The Demantar were therefore most likely herbivores. It is apparent that the Demantar were dragons. Contrary to most dragon legends, the Demantar did not have wings, and many scholars believe they were related to the drake or wyrm. On the other hand, the Demantar were not long worms, but sleek and elegant creatures that had certain similarities to marine mammals; for instance, their webbed paws. The greatest resemblance

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of these formidable creatures would be to the biblical Leviathan. The Demantar's skin was smooth, jet black, and shiny. Their heads and bodies were adorned by bright crimson crests similar to fins.

The Elinar

It is difficult to define the Elinar. They have similarities both to fairies and angels. In the Selanian Chronicles, the author chose the term *angels*. This is not quite so astonishing, since angels are often divine heralds. The Elinar are considered by the Tinavar to be the divine Heralds of Wisdom and the Guardians of Passage.

Fairies are usually quite small. The Elinar, on the other hand, are tall, even by human standards. Contrary to biblical angels, the Elinar have wings similar to fairies, although the wings of the Elinar are huge and graceful. It would be difficult to reconcile the daintiness of many fairies depicted in contemporary artwork to the nobility and pride of the Elinar.

It is rumored that the Elinar and the Demantar coexisted in some form of symbiosis. Evidence to this fact is the statue of the queen of the Elinar in the gardens of His Excellency's residence in Tolares. The queen is displayed together with a Demantar.

The Tinavar

At the time of the Covatal's arrival on Piral, only mythical stories, legends, and fairy tales recounted the existence of the Tinavar, or Unicorns. Legends banished these magical creatures to the Navaren (the magnificent Northern Forests, which began north of the town of Navaresa) and even to the icy wastelands of the Far North. It is rumored that a maiden, pure of heart, could tame the wild beasts and allow them to be captured.

The Ventaren

Every child on Piral knew that such things as the Ventaren, or Mermaids, didn't exist. And yet no child on Piral would ever turn down the chance to hear the tales of these wondrous creatures. Fishermen on the Sea of Ventara would sometimes relate (always with an amused wink of an eye) that they had seen the beautiful sea maidens sitting on rocks, combing their hair and luring unsuspecting men to their deaths with their enchanting song.

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Appendix G: The Selanian Calendar

Epochs

The Selani divide the calendar into two main epochs: the time after creation (Tena Corasetal, or TC), which coincides with the approximately four thousand years of history up to and including the annihilation of Piral, and the time after the Galactic Diaspora (Sevaten Velitra, or SV). The new calendar (SV) was introduced because the temporal units needed to be adjusted to the situation on Chyoradan, although several puritan factions (e.g., the Caldarians) insist on the continuous use of the old calendar (TC).

Selianian Epoch	English	From	To
Tena Corasetal	After Creation	3984 BC	2 BC
Sevaten Velitra	Galactic Diaspora	2 BC	Present

It is assumed that the light of Velana, the dwarfed sun now circling the lifeless Piral, takes approximately fifty-six years to reach Halena Yazoral (the Forbidden Planet, Terra, or Earth). Although Velana went supernova some fifty-six years earlier, the light of this devastating galactic phenomenon did not reach Halena Yazoral until August 30 in 2 BC (by Yazorian calculation). The time warp model advanced by the technocrat Telates Catanin—the propagator of the telatian field—in 2364 TC accounts for the contradictory flow of time in different sections of the universe.

Although, when objectively seen, more time passed on Piral during the four thousand years of its history than on Halena Yazoral, the relative and warped structure of the universe allows for an astonishing concurrence of historic dates. Seen from a Yazorian point of view, 1 TC would correspond to 3984 BC, and the year of the destruction of Piral, which is 3983 TC, would correspond to 2 BC in the Yazorian calculation. The new Selanian calendar (SV) corresponds almost seamlessly with the current Yazorian era (*anno domini*, or AD).

A day in the old calendar was divided into thirty-two hours. High noon was therefore at sixteen o'clock, Selanian time. One Selanian hour was slightly shorter than a Yazorian hour, approximately fifty-two minutes. A Selanian year had 480 days and was accordingly about one and a half times longer than a Yazorian year. The four thousand years of Piralian history would have objectively

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taken about six thousand years of Yazorian time, but this is accounted for in the Telatian time warp model.

A day in the new calendar is divided into twenty-four hours, and the hours correspond almost exactly to Yazorian hours. The 360-day year of the new calendar therefore takes about as much time as the Yazorian 365/366 day year.

Days of the Week

A Selanian week corresponds to the seven-day creationistic model described in the *Selani s'Ulavan*. Yazorians reading this article may be uncomfortable with the fact that Sunday corresponds to Velanav, the first day of the week. Such readers are requested to remember that, in the original Yazorian model, Sunday also corresponds to the first day of the week, and that Saturday is actually the Holy Sabbath. Only after Christ's resurrection on the morning of the first day of the week (Sunday) did the custom change, in remembrance of Anae's act of hope for all mankind. The Selani on Chyoradan were not aware of such customs until the Covatal made contact with Philip Brannon and a tentative exchange of information between the two planets commenced.

Selian Name	Yazorian Counterpart	English	Abbreviation
Velanav	Sunday	First Day	Van
Velamayav	Monday	Second Day	Vmy
Velabenav	Tuesday	Third Day	Vbn
Velapilav	Wednesday	Fourth Day	Vpl
Velanetav	Thursday	Fifth Day	Vnt
Velavedav	Friday	Sixth Day	Vvd
Velavides	Saturday	Holy Day	Vds

Months of the Year

In both the old and new calendars, a Selanian year begins at the vernal equinox, which corresponds to the first official day of spring, even on Halena Yazoral. In the old calendar, a month was divided into forty days, which coincided approximately with the cycle of the larger moon,

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Velanevos. Each season therefore consisted of three months. Summer began three months after the vernal equinox, at the summer solstice; fall three months later at the autumnal equinox; winter at the winter solstice. In the new calendar, a month has only thirty days, which corresponds roughly to the cycle of Chyoradan's largest moon.

Season	Selianian Month	English	Abbreviation
Spring			
	Anasetani	Early Spring	Ast
	Setanimata	Spring	Stn
	Ulanaseta	Late Spring	Ust
Summer			
	Anamadani	Early Summer	Amd
	Madanimata	Summer	Mdn
	Ulanamada	Late Summer	Umd
Fall			
	Anatinani	Early Fall	Atn
	Tinanimata	Fall	Tnm
	Ulanatina	Late Fall	Utn
Winter			
	Ananelani	Early Winter	Anl
	Nelanimata	Winter	Nln
	Ulananela	Late Winter	Unl

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Appendix H: Selanian Units of Measure and Currency

Linear Units

During the first decades of the Millennial Peace, the Selanian Order saw the necessity of synchronizing units of measure. Legend has it that the Advisory Council asked the Prophet Cades to find a satisfactory model for a cubit. Cades was inspired to use the forearm of his great-granddaughter Vitela at the time of her Affirmation, which is usually performed at the age of eleven. A cubit is the length of the forearm measured from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger.

Selianian Unit	English	Consists of	US Equivalent	Metric Equivalent
Fires	Thread		0.09 inches	2.3 mm
Runam	Finger	5 Firesi	0.45 inches	1.15 cm
Bemar	Hand	5 Runami	2.24 inches	5.74 cm
Vitel	Cubit	5 Bemari	11.2 inches	28.7 cm
Norven	League	5000 Viteli	0.88 miles	1.435 km

Examples

The distance from Divestelan to Travis is five hundred leagues. (See the chapter “The Contact.” in *The Emissary*) That is 440 miles, or approximately the size of the state of Oregon from east to west.

Mount Vaduras (the highest peak of the Tyenar Mountains) has been measured at 32,175 cubits, which is 30,071 feet (9,238 meters). Mount Toradeh (highest peak of the Covasins) is 44,325 cubits, or 41,425 feet (12,726 meters). In comparison, Mount Everest, the highest peak on Earth, measures approximately 28,760 feet (8,850 meters); Mount McKinley in Alaska measures 20,320 feet (6,242 meters); Mount Hood in Oregon measures 11,239 feet (3,452 meters).

Because Piral and Chyoradan are slightly larger than Earth, and their masses are therefore greater, people from these planets are generally slightly smaller and lighter than people on Earth. As demonstrated in the examples above, mountain ranges on Piral are also usually larger than

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Earth ranges. Since the curvature of Piral is not as pronounced, mountain ranges can be seen from a farther distance than they can on Earth. The Tyenar Range, for example, is visible from Nadil. Both mountain ranges (Covasin and Tyenar) can be seen from the top of a multistory building in Tolares, or from almost anywhere in the Desert of Vortelan.

Currency

Just before and during the time of the Selanian Civil War, which followed the Millennial Peace, the owner of a small farm in the western provinces would often earn an average of two domani a day, which was barely enough to survive. For this reason, Hyumosen told Netira her father would be fortunate to earn thirty-five ayjeni in as many years. (See Chapter “The Market” in *The Emissary*.) If a farmer earns two domani a day, that would make 960 domani a year (one Selanian year has 480 days), or just short of one ayjen.

Selianian Currency	Consists of
Tseval	(approx. 1 cent)
Doman	100 Tsevali
Ayjen	1000 Domani

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Appendix I: Introduction to the Selanian Language

Introduction

Before the Galactic Diaspora, the Selanian language was the only language spoken by the races indigenous to the planet Piral. It is therefore profitable for any students of the chronological sciences to study this language in more detail. What is even more fascinating is that the language endured the Galactic Diaspora, was in use on Chyoradan for many centuries, and has today once again become the language most widely employed to communicate throughout the galaxy. Scholars assume that the language was able to survive because of its significant connection to the spiritual origins of the Selanian Order and its application in the *Selani s'Ulavan*.

A characteristic aspect of the Selanian language is that new words are often formed through association and combination of existing words. Because the Selani are very conscious of the flow of the tongue, the word combinations are often abbreviated to facilitate pronunciation, thereby sacrificing semantics for aesthetics.

Pronunciation

Generally, the Selanian language is a very soft-spoken tongue. Harsh sounds are foreign to it. All consonants that sound harsh or hard in the English language must be toned down. The following examples describe the differences between the English and the Selanian languages.

Vowels

Vowels are all pronounced in the European form, as in *do, re, mi, fa*. The vowel *u* is pronounced as in *Luna*, or like the two o's in *boot*.

Consonants

C is always pronounced as in *cake*, even if it comes before *i* or *e*, but not as harshly as a *k*. It is never pronounced like an *s*, as in the word *celebrate*.

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G is always pronounced as in *garden*, even if it comes before *i* or *e*. It is never pronounced like a *j*, as in the word *germ*.

J is always pronounced softly, as in the French *jardin* or *je*, never as in *judge*. The English language tends to pronounce *j* as *dge*, such as in the word *grudge*. To pronounce the Selanian *j* correctly, just leave out the *d*. Pronounce like the *s* in *vision*.

R is rolled softly on the tip of the tongue. It may be compared to the voiced purring of a cat.

Ch is a soft, vibrant, and unvoiced sound produced by letting air pass between the back of the tongue and the roof of the mouth. It is pronounced softly, as in the German word *Licht*, never harshly as in the German *Bach* or the English *church*.

Alphabet

The following table portrays all twenty-five letters of the Selanian alphabet in their correct order. The name of each letter is given, and a short example of its pronunciation.

Letter	Name	Pronunciation
A	ana	European pronunciation: <i>fa</i> , as in <i>do, re, mi, fa</i> .
M	mayen	M as in <i>mother</i> .
B	benu	B as in <i>bat</i> .
P	pilas	P as in <i>pilot</i> .
E	eti	European pronunciation: <i>re</i> , as in <i>do, re, mi, fa</i> .
V	vedan	V as in <i>value</i> .
F	fola	F as in <i>fast</i> .
I	ino	European pronunciation: <i>mi</i> , as in <i>do, re, mi, fa</i> .
T	tulas	T as in <i>table</i> .
D	domay	D as in <i>dive</i> .
N	navin	N as in <i>nothing</i> .
L	lode	L as in <i>large</i> .

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Letter	Name	Pronunciation
S	sina	S as in <i>Santa</i> .
J	jevis	French pronunciation, as in <i>jardin</i> .
SH	shoval	SH as in <i>shovel</i> .
Z	zedi	Z as in <i>zebra</i> .
TS	tsutal	TS as in <i>whatsup</i> or as the <i>z</i> in the German word <i>zimmer</i> .
R	retu	R is rolled softly on the tip of the tongue.
O	onay	European pronunciation: <i>do</i> , as in <i>do, re, mi, fa</i> .
CH	chyadas	CH is pronounced softly as in the German word <i>Licht</i> .
C	ceta	C as in <i>cake</i> .
G	guvin	G as in <i>garden</i> .
Y	yamel	Y as in <i>yellow</i> .
H	hesot	H as in <i>hurricane</i> .
U	ulan	European pronunciation, as in <i>luna</i> .

Numbers

The letters of the alphabet are generally employed as numbers, although a stylized version of the corresponding letter is used in the written form. Since the Selani use the decimal system, the first nine letters are generally used. The exception is the number zero, for which the Selanian word *nel* is used.

The dashes used in the table below are not written, but are only employed to demonstrate how the number is assembled.

Selanian	English
nel	zero
ana	one
mayen	two
benu	three
pilas	four
eti	five

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Selanian	English
vedan	six
fola	seven
ino	eight
tulas	nine
ana-nel	ten
an-ana	eleven
a-mayen	twelve
a-benu	thirteen
a-pilas	fourteen
an-eti	fifteen
a-vedan	sixteen
a-fofa	seventeen
an-ino	eighteen
a-tulas	nineteen
mayen-nel	twenty
may-ana	twenty-one
ma-mayen	twenty-two
ma-benu	twenty-three
ma-pilas	twenty-four
may-eti	twenty-five
ma-vedan	twenty-six
ma-fofa	twenty-seven
may-ino	twenty-eight
ma-tulas	twenty-nine
benu-nel	thirty
pila-nel	forty
eti-nel	fifty

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Selanian	English
veda-nel	sixty
fola-nel	seventy
ino-nel	eighty
tula-nel	ninety
domay	hundred
a-domay	one hundred
ma-domay	two hundred
be-domay	three hundred
pi-domay	four hundred
e-domay	five hundred
ve-domay	six hundred
fo-domay	seven hundred
i-domay	eight hundred
tu-domay	nine hundred
navin	thousand
a-navin	one thousand
adomay navin	one hundred thousand
adomay mayana	one hundred twenty-one
lode	million
sina	billion
jevis	trillion
ulana	infinity

Cardinality

Cardinality is achieved by placing the suffix *-av* after a number.

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Selanian	English
anav	first, beginning
mayav	second
benav	third
pilav	fourth
etav	fifth
vedav	sixth
folav	seventh
inav	eighth
tulav	ninth
anelav	tenth
ananav	eleventh
amayav	twelfth
abenav	thirteenth
apilav	fourteenth
anetav	fifteenth
manelav	twentieth
benelav	thirtieth
pinelav	fortieth
enelav	fiftieth
venelav	sixtieth
fonelav	seventieth
inelav	eightieth
tunelav	ninetieth
domayav	hundredth
adomayav	one hundredth
anavinav	one thousandth

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Gender and Articles

The Selanian language recognizes two substantive genders: masculine and feminine. If a noun requires a definite or plural article, the article is placed at the end of the word as a suffix. There is no singular indefinite article in the Selanian language. The masculine singular definite article rhymes with the English word *hay*. The plural definite articles are both pronounced exactly the same, as in the English word *eye*.

Gender	Singular Definite	Plural Definite	Plural Indefinite
masculine	-ae	-ei	-i
feminine	-a	-ai	-i

Examples

The formal address of the Selanian godhead is *The One*. *One* in Selanian is *ana*. *The One* is therefore written as *Anae*, since the Selanian language has no gender neutrality.

The word for wind or spirit in the Selanian language is *selan*. The word is masculine, so *the wind* or *the spirit* would be *selanae*. The Sword of Selanae must therefore be translated as *The Sword of the Spirit*.

The word for fire is *pilan* in the Selanian language and is also masculine. *The fire* is translated as *pilanae*. The plural form, *the fires*, would be written as *pilanei*.

In English, one sometimes refers to *Mother Earth*. This metaphor receives its own significance in the Selanian language since *piral*, or *earth*, is feminine. *The Earth* is therefore written as *pirala*.

Water is *osal* in Selanian and is feminine. The Great Waters of Halena Yazoral are referred to by the Selani as *osalai linos*.

Velan is the Selanian term for *sun* and is also feminine. The sun of Piral is therefore referred to as *Velana*.

The concept of gender is used profoundly in the Selanian marriage ritual. The male symbols of fire (light) and wind (spirit) are placed in the left and right hands (respectively) of the groom during the ceremony, and are complemented by the female symbols of water and earth in the left and right

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hands of the bride. As the ritual progresses, fire and earth, spirit and water converge, symbolizing a new form of life.

Personal Pronouns

Subject personal pronouns usually aren't required in combination with verbs. They are only used when denoting emphasis. The Selanian language does not differentiate between subject and object personal pronouns.

Person	Selianian	English
Singular		
	ana	I/me
	esa	you
	adae, ada	he/him, she/her
Plural		
	anu	we/us
	esta	you
	atae, ata	they

Possessive Adjectives

Because possessive pronouns are constructed from possessive adjectives in the Selanian language, the possessive adjectives are shown here first. Possessive adjectives are constructed by adding the suffix *-r* to the personal pronoun.

Person	Selianian	English
Singular		
	anar	my
	esar	your

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Person	Selianian	English
	adaer, adar	his/her
Plural		
	anur	our
	estar	your
	ataer, atar	their

Possessive Pronouns

Possessive pronouns are built from the possessive adjectives by adding the suffix *-ae*.

Person	Selianian	English
Singular		
	anarae, anara	mine
	esarae, esara	yours
	adaerae, adaera / adarae, adara	his/hers
Plural		
	anurae, anura	ours
	estarae, estara	yours
	ataerae, ataera / atarae, atara	theirs

Verbs

Verbs in the Selianian language usually end in *-ar* or *-ir*. Conjugation and tenses are quite simple, since there don't seem to be any exceptions to the rules.

Conjugation

Normally, the Selianian language doesn't use personal pronouns in combination with a verb. The pronoun is implied by conjugation, as in Spanish or Italian. Selianian verbs are conjugated by adding the corresponding suffix to the end of the verb.

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Person	Selianian	English
Singular		
first person	-an	I
second person	-es	you
third person	-ae, -a	he/she
Plural		
first person	-anu	we
second person	-esta	you
third person	-atae, -ata	they
Examples		
	sir	to be
	siran	I am
	sires	you are
	sirae, sira	he is/she is
	siranu	we are
	siresta	you are
	siratae	they are
	votalar	to be sorry
	votalaran	I am sorry
	votalares	you are sorry
	votalarae, votalara	he is sorry/she is sorry
	votalaranu	we are sorry
	votalaresta	you are sorry
	votalaratae	they are sorry

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Voice, mood and tense

Voice, mood, and tense are expressed by prefixes joined to the root of the verb, or, in the case of the future tense, an affix inserted directly into the verb. If mixed forms are used, the correct sequence is voice, mood, and then tense.

Form	Selianian	English
Simple Past Tense	te-	
Present Perfect Tense	ta-	
Past Perfect Tense	to-	
Future Tense	-av-	
Passive Voice	a-	
Subjunctive Mood	la-	
Examples		
Simple Past Tense	tesiranu	we were
	temilantarae	he/she took
	tevaran	I went
Present Perfect Tense	tamilantaran	I have taken
	tasirae	he/she has been
	tacunatiratae	they have acted
Past Perfect Tense	tomilantarae	he/she had taken
	tojevaranu	we had helped
	tocosiresta	you (pl.) had sung
Future Tense	saviran	I will be
	enaviranu	we will return
	milavantarae	he/she will take
Passive Voice	amilantarae	it is taken
	alicosar	to be praised
	atecozatalarae	it was destroyed
Subjunctive Mood	latilares	you would/could tell
	lasiranu	we would be
	lamilantaran	I would take

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Appendix J: Selanian-English Dictionary

The following dictionary is a short excerpt of the official Selanian dictionary stored in the scholastic library of the Selanian Order on Chyoradan. The official dictionary contains more than 600,000 entries. This excerpt should assist any parties interested in studying the accounts portrayed in the work titled *The Emissary* to better understand the culture of Piral during the time before and during the Selanian Civil War. The work was compiled by a good friend of Philip Brannon and has been appraised by linguistic experts of the Selanian Order. The Advisory Council wishes to extend its gratitude to the author for the time, effort, and affinity to detail apparent in his research.

The entries portrayed in this excerpt were placed in the alphabetic order of the English language to facilitate any queries regarding Selanian vocabulary.

Selianian	English	Function
A		
a, al	to	preposition
-a	the	suffix definite article feminine
ada, adae	she/her, he/him	personal pronoun
adanis	heaven	noun; feminine
adar, adaer	her/his	possessive adjective
-ae	the	suffix definite article masculine
alin	again, over, sometime, somewhere	adverb
alin cel alin	here and there	adverbial phrase
alin set'alin	to and fro	adverbial phrase
alin ten'alin	time after time	adverbial phrase
alin vor alin	by and by	adverbial phrase
A'mada	Good Lord! (Anae + mada)	expletive
ambaren	fullness	noun; feminine
ana	1 st letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
ana	one	adjective
ana	I, me	personal pronoun
Anae	The One	noun; masculine
anam	once	adverb

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Selianian	English	Function
anar	my	possessive adjective
anarae	mine	possessive pronoun
anasin	nobody, no one	pronoun; masculine
anavae	the beginning, the first	noun; masculine
anavelan	sunrise (beginning or first sun)	noun; feminine
anemar	ashes	noun; feminine
anu	we, us	personal pronoun
anur	our	possessive adjective
-as	little (as in <i>talas</i> , little man, or <i>porodas</i> , little squirrel)	masculine diminutive suffix
atae	they, them	personal pronoun
ataer	their	possessive adjective
atel	behind, arse	noun; masculine
aten	behind	preposition
atilen	alone, only	adverb
atilenes	only, single	adjective
atezat	anus	noun; masculine
ayjen	Selianian currency	noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
B		
becintas	Large feline predator of the Far North.	noun; masculine
bemar	hand	noun; masculine
bemir	to grasp, to keep	verb
Bemura Pora	Golden Keeper	
benu	3 rd letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter

Selianian	English	Function
C		
cadan	when	adverb
camar	how, as, like	adverb
carulen	Animal with characteristics of both a dog and a cat. Often domesticated as a house pet. Related to the larger	noun; masculine

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Selanian	English	Function
	becintas of the Far North.	
cel	for	preposition
celuvan	forever, always	adverb
cemitar	to kill	verb
cena	who	pronoun
cepesati	literally: all things; also used as the technical term for the universal calibration point.	noun; feminine, plural
cerat	cricket-like insect	noun; masculine
ceta	21 st letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
cetesa	goat-like creature	noun; feminine
chyadas	20 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
chyeves	horse-like creature	noun; masculine
Chyoradan	Heavenly Paradise	noun; feminine
chyoras	paradise	noun; feminine
cita	why	adverb
civar	which	adverb; pronoun
civen	Selanian pause, similar to comma	letter; character
coni	where	adverb
cor	to make, to become, to do	verb
corel	effect, result, consequence	noun; masculine
corel selatanas	literally: gentle breeze effect; often translated as “butterfly effect.”	
coritan	business	noun: masculine
corasetal	creation	noun; feminine
corasetar	to make new, to create	verb
corvosar	to make love	verb
cosir	to sing	verb
costar	to penetrate	verb
costenan	intelligence	noun; masculine
costenal; costenares, costenalen, costenalis	intelligent	adjective
covar	to travel	verb
Covasatal	Traveleress (traveling woman)	noun; feminine
covasin	impassable	adjective
Covatal	Traveler (traveling man)	noun; masculine

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Selianian	English	Function
cozar (arch. cozatar)	to make to nothing, destroy	verb
cozaten	destruction	noun; masculine
culen	what	adverb; pronoun
cunatir	to act	verb

Selianian	English	Function
D		
deventas	a drink brewed from roasted cereals, something like coffee	noun; masculine
dima, dimalen, dimalis	bad, worse, worst	adjective
dineval	evil; wickedness	noun; masculine
dinevel; dineves, dinevelen; dinevelis	evil, wicked, diabolical	adjective
doman	Selianian currency	noun; masculine
domay	10 th letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter

Selianian	English	Function
E		
ela	there	adverb, pronoun
elasin	vocalic symbol	letter; character
eli	here	adverb
ena	so, more	adverbial augmentation
enaves, enavilen, enavilis	coming, future (from <i>enir</i>)	adjective
enimar	to revive	verb
enir	to return	verb
-esa	little (as in <i>teresa</i> , little princess; only used for feminine nouns)	feminine diminutive suffix
esa	you	personal pronoun; singular
esar	your	possessive adjective
esarae	yours	possessive pronoun
esta	you (pl.)	personal pronoun; plural
estar	your (pl.)	possessive adjective; plural
eti	5 th letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter
etino	The difference between life and death. (The Selianian words for life	adverbial phrase; idiom

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Selianian	English	Function
	and death, <i>nimata</i> and <i>nemata</i> , are only distinguished by the first vowel and emphasis on the second or first syllable, respectively.)	

Selianian	English	Function
F		
felen	dirt	noun; masculine
feles, felesen, felenis	dirty	adjective
fetara	dish of something similar to beans	noun; feminine
fires	thread	noun; masculine
fola	7 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selianian	English	Function
G		
gedashol	rat-like rodent	noun; masculine
gugin	22 nd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter

Selianian	English	Function
H		
halen	planet	noun; feminine
hesot	24 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
hitan	condemnation	noun; masculine
hitar	to damn, to condemn	verb
hites, hitalen, hitalis	damned, blasted	adjective
hi'tev	goddamn	adjective, expletive
hyelan	heart	noun; feminine
Hyelisa	True Heart	proper noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
I		
i	and	conjunction
imala	kindness	noun; feminine

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Selianian	English	Function
imalan, imasen, imalis	kind, kinder, kindest	adjective
inar	to write	verb
inaren	script, writing	noun; masculine
ino	8 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
isa	most	adverbial escalation
isan	joy	noun; feminine
isanes, isanelen, isanelis	joyful	adjective

Selianian	English	Function
J		
jevan	help	noun; feminine
jevales, jevasen, jevanis	helpful	adjective
jevar	to help	verb
jevis	14 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
jites	colorful bird native to the Southern Covasins	noun; masculine
jotan	Selianian inquiry, similar to question mark	letter; character

Selianian	English	Function
L		
lar	to reign (as a king or queen)	verb
lara	queen	noun; feminine
laran	king	noun; masculine
ley, les	with	preposition
licosar	to praise	verb
linos, linosen, linois	large, big, important	adjective; adverb
lode	12 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
lomaran	colorful fowl similar to a Yazorian peacock	noun; masculine
lovanir	to obscure	verb
lu	in, through	preposition
lusenir	to breathe	verb
lutan	chaos, confusion	noun; masculine

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Selianian	English	Function
luves, luviren, luvaris	light, easy, simple	adjective

Selianian	English	Function
M		
mada, madalen, madalis	good, better, best	adjective
madan	good, goodness	noun; feminine
madanimata	summer (good life)	noun; masculine
mayen	2 nd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
milantar	to take	verb
milusir	to learn	verb
mir	to celebrate	verb
mitalen	hate, anger	noun; masculine
miter	to hate	verb
mivelin	bird similar to an eagle	noun; masculine

Selianian	English	Function
N		
nar	to walk, to wander	verb
navin	11 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
ne	no (common tongue), not	adverb
nel	none, zero	pronoun; adverb
nelanimata	winter (no life)	noun; masculine
nemar	to die	verb
nemata	death	noun; masculine
nepesan	nothing	pronoun; masculine
netar	to blow	verb
nevar	to stand still, hold one's breath, stay, remain	verb
nevelan	night (no sun)	noun; feminine
nevelates	midnight	noun; feminine
nevilas	darkness (no light)	noun; masculine
neluvilas	shadow (darkness in light)	noun; feminine
niles	Selianian union, similar to apostrophe	letter; character

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Selianian	English	Function
nimar	to live	verb
nimata	life	noun; feminine
nola, nolasen, nolasis	low, lower, lowest	adjective
nolad	servant, priest	noun; masculine
Noladen Tina	High Priest	noun; masculine
Nolasa Tina	High Priestess	noun; feminine
nolasa	priestess	noun; feminine
nolavelan	afternoon (low sun)	noun; feminine
nolavelates	mid-afternoon	noun; feminine
norven	league	noun; masculine
novantan	rose-like flower with white petals on the outside and bright yellow petals on the inside	noun; feminine
Novantina	Blossoming Rose	proper noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
O		
onay	19 th letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter
osal	water	noun; feminine
Osatal	Women of the Water; the name the Ventaren give themselves	noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
P		
panar	to beg	verb
par	to speak	verb
paren	language	noun; feminine
penir	to ask	verb
pesan	thing	noun; masculine
pesat	things	noun; feminine
pesetas	little things	noun; feminine
pesuvan	everything	pronoun
petal	punctuation; Selianian terminator (no, not Arnold Schwarzenegger), similar to a period	letter; character

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Selianian	English	Function
petar	to stop	verb
pilan	fire	noun; masculine
pilar	to make fire, to breathe fire	verb
pilas	4 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
piles, pilasen, pilanis	fiery	adjective
pir	to give	verb
pir cel	to provide	verb
piral	earth	noun; feminine
pirhyelar	to welcome; to be welcome	verb
pora, poralen, poralis	golden	adjective
porodan	golden squirrel	noun; masculine

Selianian	English	Function
R		
reta	that	pronoun; adjective
retu	18 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
runam	finger	noun; masculine

Selianian	English	Function
S		
sanir (arch. sarenir)	to hope	verb
sar	to sail, to glide	verb
saren	hope	noun; feminine
satal	woman	noun; feminine
satulen	emptiness	noun; feminine
se, te	from, of	preposition
selan	wind, spirit, breath	noun; masculine
selatanas	gentle breeze	noun; masculine
seta, setalen, setalis	fresh, new, young	adjective
setanal	child	noun; masculine
setanimata	spring (fresh or new life)	noun; feminine
setavelan	morning (fresh sun)	noun; masculine
setavelates	mid-morning	noun; masculine

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Selianian	English	Function
seten	before	preposition
sevonatar	to scatter	verb
sevaten	scattering, diaspora	noun; feminine
sevon	division	noun; masculine
shoval	15 th letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter
sina	13 th letter of the Selianian alphabet	letter
sina' te nevilas	place of darkness, hell	noun; masculine
sinal	place	noun; masculine
sinaven	swan-like water fowl	noun; feminine
sine, sin	no (High Tongue)	adverb
sir	to be	verb
sirae	he is	verb; third person singular
siran	I am	verb; first person singular
sires	you are	verb; second person singular
sitanem	winged death (weapon developed by Lord Chyardal Tolares)	noun; masculine
sitar	to fly, to take wing	verb
sutan	dove-like bird	noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
T		
tal	man	noun; masculine
talas	little man (diminutive)	noun; masculine
tanas, tanalen, tanalis	small	adjective
tani	this	pronoun; adjective
tavasin	stranger	noun; masculine
te, se	from, of	preposition
te'linos!	Abbreviated form of <i>teval linos</i> . Best translated as "My god!" or "Great god!"	expletive
teman	dust	noun; masculine
tena	after	adverb
Tena Corasetal	After Creation	adverb
tenar	reed	noun; feminine
tenir	to rule (as a lord or lady)	verb

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Selanian	English	Function
teresa	little princess (added diminutive - esa)	noun; feminine
terina	lady	noun; feminine
teris	lord	noun: masculine
terisetan	prince	noun: masculine
terisa	princess	noun; feminine
-tes	mid-	suffix
tesa	between	adverb
tesalen	calmness	noun; feminine
tesan	middle, balance	noun; feminine
tesanes, tesanelen, tesanelis	calm	adjective
tesar	to balance	verb
tev'anar!	Abbreviated form of <i>teval anar</i> . Best translated as "Oh, my god!"	expletive
teva'lin!	Abbreviated form of <i>tevasal linos</i> . Best translated as "My Goddess!" or "Great Goddess!"	expletive
teval	god	noun; masculine
tevas'an!	Abbreviated form of <i>tevasal anar</i> . Best translated as "Oh, my Goddess!"	expletive
tevasal	goddess	noun; feminine
tezatal	no matter, you're welcome (of nothing)	adverb
ti	yes	adverb
tilar	to tell	verb
tina, tinalen, tinalis	high, old, ripe, mature	adjective
tinanimata	fall (old life)	noun; feminine
tinar	to mature, grow up	verb
tinatalir	to be grateful, thankful	verb
tinatar	to thank	verb
tinavelan	noon (high sun; archaic, sometimes poetic form)	noun; feminine
tivanar	to circle	verb
tivanes	circle, year	noun; feminine
tratan	house	noun; masculine
trates	town, city	noun; feminine

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Selianian	English	Function
tsemir	to allow	verb
tseval	Selianian currency	noun; masculine
tsutal	17 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
tulas	9 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
tusat	difference	noun; masculine
Tyenar	glory, majesty	noun; feminine
Tyenaes	majestic, glorious	adjective

Selianian	English	Function
U		
ulan	25 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
ulanav	end, last, goal	noun; masculine
ulanavae	the last, the end	noun; masculine
ulavan	eternity	noun; feminine
ulavar	to cease, stop	verb
ulavelan	evening (last or end sun; sunset)	noun; feminine
ulavelanetas	mid-evening	noun; feminine

Selianian	English	Function
V		
vamir	to know	verb
vanar	to meet	verb
var	to go	verb
vatalas	little wanderer	noun; masculine
vedan	6 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
Velabenav	Third Day; Tuesday	noun; masculine
Velamayav	Second Day; Monday	noun; masculine
velan	sun; f., day	noun; feminine
Velanav	First Day; Sunday	noun; masculine
velanetas	noon	noun; masculine
Velanetav	Fifth Day; Thursday	noun; masculine
velanitras	galaxy	noun; feminine
Velapilav	Fourth Day; Wednesday	noun; masculine

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Selianian	English	Function
Velavedav	Sixth Day; Friday	noun; masculine
Velavides	Holy Day; Saturday	noun; masculine
velitra	galactic	adjective
venadin	danger, threat	noun; masculine
venir	to come, to arrive	verb
venatir	to hunt down	verb
venora	a wood flower similar to a crocus	noun; feminine
vetanar	to swallow, consume	verb
viden	messenger	noun; masculine
vides, videlen, videlis	pure, holy	adjective
Videsa Pora	Golden Messenger (used as a name)	noun; feminine
Videsan Pora	Golden Messenger (used as a title)	noun; feminine
vilanevel, vilanev, vinev	moon (light of night)	noun; masculine
Vilanevos	Luna Major	noun; masculine
vilas	light	noun; masculine
vilasanim	friend (light of life)	noun; masculine
Vilatanas	Luna Minor	noun; masculine
viles, vilesen, vilenis	bright	adjective
vinev	moon, month	noun; masculine
vital	wanderer (walking man)	noun; masculine
vitel	forearm, cubit	noun; feminine
vonal	name	noun; feminine
vonar	to name	verb
vor	by, near	preposition
vosal	love	noun; feminine
vosar	to love	verb
votal	please	adverb
votalar	to be sorry	verb
votar	to excuse	verb

Selianian	English	Function
Y		
yamel	23 rd letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
yazoral	forbidden	adjective

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Selianian	English	Function
Z		
zat	hole	noun; masculine
zatal	nothing	noun; masculine
zatulavan	void (eternal hole)	noun; masculine
zedi	16 th letter of the Selanian alphabet	letter
zicises	bird similar to a raven	noun; masculine

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Appendix K: The Selanian Inaren

The contents of this section will introduce you to the structure of Selanian writing. The Selanian Inaren (*Inaren* comes from the Selanian word *inar*, “to write”) is alphabetic (contrary to the symbolic script of the Elinar) and is written from right to left, like Semitic scripts (e.g., Hebrew or Arabic) on Halena Yazoral (the Forbidden Planet, Earth). This seems reasonable, since the Selani are generally left handed.

The Selanian Inaren was created by simple people who needed a unified script. The discipline wasn't refined until after the Selanian Order was established.

Of the vowels, only *yamel* has its own representation. The other vowels are usually implied by diacritic markings above or below the consonant carrying (preceding) the vowel. In cases where this is not possible (for instance, at the beginning of a word or in a diphthong), the vocalic symbol *elasin* is used.

Another noteworthy attribute of the Selanian script is the use of a prolonged stem to depict a voiced consonant. The stem may point up or down, depending on the position of the character in the consonant group. The Selanian script does not recognize capitalization.

Vodana's song *Alin* was used in the following example of the Selanian Inaren. (See the chapter “An Evening in the Tavern” in *The Emissary*.) The sample was discovered in the estate of the former High Priestess Silana Tolares and may have been copied by the High Priestess herself. The font used is a modern cursive font. The modern cursive script was developed after the Galactic Diaspora to facilitate writing, since the older Selanian brush script was more calligraphic and required much discipline.

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Appendix L: Selanian Funeral Invocation

In the Selanian tradition, priests and priestesses would recite a prayer during a funeral service. This is the prayer Silana invoked in chapter 2 of *The Rose*, when Philip first met her and they buried the squirrel. Here is the invocation and its English translation:

Anae piraē, Anae milantarae. Alicosar vonala s'Anae. Camar tesiranu anam se pirała, enaviranu alin a pirała. Piral a piral, teman a teman, anemar al anemar.

The One gives, the One takes. Praised be the name of the One. As we were once of the earth, so shall we again return to the earth. Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

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Appendix M: Index of Persons (by First Name)

Name	Description
Amendel Marusen	His Excellency Lord Amendel Marusen. Husband of Lady Lusina. Father of Soshia, Varan, Cetila, and Tavita. His companion is the young Lady Maralena Novesta, who is also the birthmother of his first three children.
Anosen	Owner of a tavern on the northwest outskirts of Tolares where Lusina Marusen stays while in the city.
Arena Catanin	Former High Priestess of the Selanian Order and mentor of Silana Tolares.
Artanes Sormay	Constable of the southeast precinct in Tolares. Investigates the deaths of Zirsha and Talonis.
Bejad Tsimerel	Former liaison officer of the High Priestess who was stationed in Divestelan. Brother of Hyelisa. Deacon of the Selanian Order. He escaped from Divestelan during the Black Guard's attack on the Resistance and is bringing vital information to her Eminence, the High Priestess, in Tolares regarding Lady Gevinesa Divestelan's request for extraction. While en route from Divestelan to Tolares, he met Netira Cilenas at one of the waystations near Pitaren and allowed her to accompany him to Tolares.
Bill Marten	Husband of Carol Marten. Friend of Philip Brannon. He and his wife Carol first appear in <i>The Rose</i> .
Carol Marten	Wife of Bill Marten. Friend of Silana Tolares Brannon and Melina Tolares. She and her husband Bill first appear in <i>The Rose</i> .
Caty	see Catyana Faeren
Catya	see Catyana Faeren
Catyana Faeren	Daughter of Lotis and Matila. Sister of Torvos, Vira, Mina, and Sinara. Best friend of Nova (Novantina Satural) and possible love interest of Mara (Maralena Novesta). The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. She is one of the three main characters of the story along with Vilam and Nova. Nova believes Catyana may be the prophesied <i>Golden Messenger</i> .
Cavan Tolares	His Excellency Lord Cavan Tolares. Father of Chyardal and Amarya (deceased), and adoptive father of Venora. Widowed husband of Oventya. Love interest of Natilya Revan.
Cavara Venural	Wife of Constable Pirtas Venural.
Cetila Marusen	Daughter of Lord Amendel Marusen and the young Lady Maralena Novesta. Stepdaughter of Lusina Marusen. Sister of Soshia, Varan, and Tavita. First Lieutenant and commander of the

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	Crimson Brigade. Friend of Captain Pirena Novesta and one of the former Nursemaids.
Chyardal Tolares	Prince of House Tolares. Son of Lord Cavan Tolares and Lady Oventya. Brother of Venora. Love interest of Nova.
Citenes Novesta	Brother of Lord Merelan Novesta. Uncle of Maralena, Talenon, Pirena, and Davina. Captain of the Black Guard.
Cora	See Corasarena
Corasarena	Daughter of unknown parents. Ward of House Novesta. Grew up as “sister” of Davina and Pira Novesta after Maralena had already left home.
Corsen Divestelan	Son of Lord Vechiles Divestelan and Lady Ilanya. Brother of Gevinesa and Yanita. Half-brother of Natilya. Lover of Tavita Marusen. Colonel of the Western Alliance and commander of the Black Guard. He is directly responsible for the attack on members of the Resistance in Divestelan mentioned in <i>The Emissary</i> and for Zetara Rotasen’s death.
Cortina	Senior housekeeper responsible for the fourth and fifth floors of the Tolares residence. Has been employed by the Tolares estate for ten years. Covert operative for western intelligence and possible love interest of Eratis Rotasen.
Covasatal	Selanian: <i>Traveleress</i> . Future wife of the Covatal, the Divine Emissary of the Selani. Some of Venora Tolares’s friends believe she may be the Covastal.
Covatal	Selanian: <i>Traveler</i> . The Divine Emissary of the Selani. Nova believes Vilam is the Covatal.
Culisa Sitenan	Wife of Mayor Menirel of Nadil. Best friend of Semanta Revan. She and Semanta work for Western Alliance intelligence.
Daren	Lad in his mid-twenties who lives on the south side of Tolares. Casual love interest of Nemara.
Davina Novesta	Princess of House Novesta. Daughter of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Younger sister of Mara (Maralena), Pira (Pirena) and Talenon. Niece of Citenes. Second Lieutenant of the Crimson Brigade and commander of the Brigade’s Second Company. Apprentice of the Supreme Enchantress Lusina Marusen.
Decarin	Priest of the Selanian Order. Front office supervisor of the men’s section of Selanian Order Headquarters in Tolares.
Dena	see Denadya Cemasena
Denadya Cemasena	Princess of House Cemasena. Sister of Tuval. Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan and Zetara Rotasen’s contact. One of the former Nursemaids. Usually called Dena. Fiancée of the late Varan Marusen. She has sworn vengeance on Tavita Marusen for killing Varan.

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Don Ferris	Husband of Julie Ferris. Mentioned during Philip and Silana's meeting with Julie and her daughter Theresa. First mentioned in <i>The Rose</i> .
Elana Satural	Late mother of Nova and Vodana. Sister of Gelanes Cemasena.
Eluset	Elder of the Advisory Council. Protégé of the Prophet Nevacad and mentor of Elder Yadez.
Emiles Revan	Second and late husband of Lady Utalya Revan.
Enavilara	Possible love interest of Eratis Rotasen
Eratis Rotasen	Brother of Zetara. Steward of the Tolares estate. Covert operative for western intelligence. Colleague of Cortina.
Fatasa Gisatena	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. Younger sister of Jalisa.
Fedesen	Deputy of Vechiles Divestelan
Folan Revan	Husband of Semanta. Cousin of Lady Utalya Revan. Owner of a first-rate tavern in Nadil.
Fores Baral	Congressman Fores Baral, representative from the Lodanian System. Husband of Tura.
Gelanes Cemasena	Uncle of Nova and Vodana. Brother of Elana Satural. Liason officer of the High Priestess in Tolares.
Gerten Cemasena	Mayor of Elinas. Grandfather of Dena and Tuval.
Gevinesa Divestelan	Princess of House Divestelan. Daughter of Lord Vechiles Divestelan and Lady Ilanya. Sister of Corsen and Yanita. Half-sister of Natilya. Founder of the Crimson Brigade, but turned her back on the movement five years ago. Friends with her handmaiden Zetara Rotasen.
Gregg Bailey	Pastor who married Philip and Silana. Silana had a lengthy discussion with him regarding faith when she and Philip met with him in the pastor's office. First appearance in <i>The Rose</i> .
Halita Penates	Princess of House Penates. Sister of the High Priest Vordalin. Mentor of her sister Tanola. One of the last High Priestesses during the decline of the Millennial Peace. Assassinated during the Conference of Divestelan in 1519 TC.
Hyelisa Tsimerel	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. Sister of Bejad. Gifted botanist.
Hymosen	Friend of Bejad Tsimerel and a chyeves merchant in Tolares. Buys Netira's chyeves in <i>The Emissary</i> .
Ilanya Bevelas Divestelan	Her Excellency Lady Ilanya Divestelan. Wife of Lord Vechiles Divestelan. Mother of Corsen, Gevinesa, and Yanita. Mother of Natilya Revan (by Vordalin) and former fiancée and mistress of the High Priest Vordalin. Sister of Utalya, Renestal, and Tilon Bevelas. The Lady and her husband Vechiles have been estranged for years. Her husband has been keeping her captive in her

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	summer residence in the Etenolyas Valley.
Jalisa Gisatena	Sister of Fatasa. Wife of Tecelas.
Jerad Rotasen	His Excellency, Lord Jerad Rotasen. Adoptive father of Lady Lusina Marusen.
Julie Ferris	Wife of Don Ferris, mother of Theresa Ferris, and friend of Silana Tolares Brannon. Has blonde hair and blue eyes and seems to be connected to Silana somehow.
Livanes Navaresa	Elder of the Selanian Order
Lotis Faeren	Farmer who lives northeast of Nadil. Husband of Matila, father of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes.
Ludanes	Equerry of the chyeves merchant Hymosen in Tolares.
Lusina Covatinalis Marusen	Her Excellency and Supreme Enchantress Lady Lusina Marusen. Wife of Lord Amendel Marusen. Stepmother of Soshia, Varan, Cetila, and Tavita. Sister of Lady Tsenera Novesta. Mentor of her niece Davina Novesta. Adoptive daughter of Lord Jared Rotasen. Mistress of Lord Vechiles Divestelan. She is responsible for the death of her stepson Varan and her stepdaughter Soshia. Has contracted the Order of the Novantan to assassinate Catyana Faeren.
Lutrisya Cemasena	Wife of an important member of the town parliament in Nadil and well-known as a gossip. Likes to look down on domestic servants.
Magarena Isoltas	Priestess of the Selanian Order. Front office supervisor of the women's section of Selanian Order Headquarters in Tolares.
Martan	Courier of Lord Vechiles Divestelan.
Mara	see Maralena Novesta
Maralena Cemasena	Former alias of the young Lady Maralena Novesta
Maralena Novesta	Princess and heir apparent of House Novesta. Daughter of Merelan and Tsenera Novesta. Mother of Soshia, Varan, and Cetila Marusen (by Lord Amendel Marusen). Sister of Pirena (Pira), Talenon, and Davina. Works as a maid in the service of Culisa and Menirel Sitenan under the alias Maralena Cemasena. Possible love interest of Catyana Faeren and friend of Nova. One of only two enchantresses who can focus her powers with a ruby.
Maridya	Maid of Zirsha and Talonis.
Matila Faeren	Wife of Lotis, mother of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes.
Mavena Catanin	Initiate of the Selanian Order and roommate of Netira.
Melina Tolares Penates	Sister of Silana Tolares Brannon. Friend of the High Priestess Tamenisa Larutas. Wife of Vatal "Talas" Penates.

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Menirel Sitenan	Mayor of Nadil and husband of Culisa. He seems to dislike Folan Revan and is working with Talenon Novesta, the head of Western Alliance intelligence.
Merelan Novesta	His Excellency Lord Merelan Novesta. Husband of Tsenera. Father of Mara (Maralena), Talenon, Pira (Pirena), and Davina. Brother of Citenes. Chief of Staff of the Western Alliance and right hand of Vechiles Divestelan. The male members of the Novesta family are characterized by a bright crimson birthmark on their right cheek.
Mina	see Minora Faeren
Minora Faeren	Daughter of Lotis and Matila. Sister of Catyana. Usually called Mina. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. She receives a lesson in swordsmanship from Vilam in the chapter “Awakening” in <i>The Emissary</i> and shows extraordinary skill.
Mirayla	Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan. Love interest of Sheletas Catanin.
Natilya Revan	Niece and chief of security of the Lady Utalya Revan and acolyte in her entourage. Love interest of Lord Cavan Tolares. Illegitimate daughter of Ilanya Divestelan and Vordalin Penates. Half-sister of Corsen, Gevinesa, and Yanita.
Nemara	Assassin of the Order of the Novantan. Currently contracted by Lady Lusina Marusen to kill Catyana Faeren. Killed Zirsha and Talonis to gain access to their lodgings so she could issue Catyana’s proclamation of intent (black arrow) as Catyana’s group was entering Tolares.
Netira Cilenas	Young girl from a farm near Pitaren. Accompanies Bejad Tsimerel to Tolares and becomes an initiate of the Selanian Order.
Nevacad	Prophet of the Selani who constructed the Prophet’s Bow. Mentor of Elder Eluset of the Advisory Council.
Nevilan	Selianian: <i>Dark One</i> . The Dark Lord of the Elinar. Previously called Vilasan.
Nisa	see Tamenisa Larutas
Norila Penates	Her Excellency, Lady Norila Penates. Mother of Vordalin, Halita, and Tanola. Sister of Oventya Navaresa Tolares.
Normas Tunilen	Stable boy and courier who worked in Nadil. He was carrying a letter to Vetena that would have endangered Catayana Faeren. Maralena Novesta attempted to seduce him to give her the letter, but he was killed by Mara after he tried to rape her.
Nova	see Novantina Satural
Novantina Satural	The young Lady Novantina Satural. Sister of Vodana. Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan and Utalya’s chief of staff. Best friend of Catyana Faeren and friend of Maralena

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	Novesta. Usually referred to as Nova. She is one of the three main characters of the story along with Vilam and Catyana.
Nursemaids	A nickname given to the princesses Dena Cemasena, Cetila Marusen, and Pira Novesta, because of their charge, Tavita Marusen
Otisa Deronas	Priestess of the Selanian Order and Chief of Staff of the Advisory Council in Travis. Former High Priestess and mentor of Lady Utalya Revan.
Oventya Tolares	Lady Oventya Navaresa Tolares. Late wife of Lord Cavan Tolares. Mother of Chyardal and Amarya (deceased), and adoptive mother of Venora. Sister of Norila Navaresa Penates.
Pales	Superintendent of Selanian Order Headquarters in Tolares
Paloren Catanin	Elder of the Advisory Council.
Philip Brannon	Husband of Silana Tolares. Friend of Bill and Carol Marten. Founder of the Selanian Society and the Center for Spiritual Studies in Bend, Oregon. Main character and narrator of <i>The Rose</i> .
Picanas Catanin	Brother of Sheletas. Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan.
Pira	see Pirena Novesta
Pirena Novesta	Princess of House Novesta. Daughter of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Sister of Maralena (Mara), Talenon, and Davina. Niece of Citenes. Friend of Cetila Marusen. Captain of the Crimson Brigade. One of the Nursemaids. Usually called Pira.
Pirtas Venural	Constable in Nadil. Liaison between the constabulary and the Selanian Order.
Pival Tolares	Lord and High Priest. Led last attack upon Nevilan's army but perished in combat against the Dark Lord at Malentisa in 534 TC. Mentioned by Vera Faeren in the chapter "The Ballad."
Rayan Hevaros	Colonel of the Western Alliance stationed in the Etenolyas Valley. Responsible for the dismantling of the army's camp.
Redina Navaresa	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya. Younger sister of Sitenayla. She and her sister like to cook.
Renestal Bevelas	Brother of Utalya, Ilanya, and Lord Tilon Bevelas. Elder of the Advisory Council. Teacher and mentor of the High Priest Vordalin Penates. Famous mountaineer and tracker.
Savinya	Mid-level domestic servant in the residence of His Excellency in Tolares. Assigned to Nova and Catyana.
Semanta Vetena Revan	Wife of Folan Revan. Operative for Western Alliance intelligence. Folan is worried about her since she seems to be exhausted all the time.
Sheletas Catanin	Leader of the Resistance in Divestelan. Brother of Picanas. Love interest of Mirayla.

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Silana Tolares Brannon	Late wife of Philip Brannon. Sister of Melina Penates. Former High Priestess of the Selanian Order on Chyoradan. Mentor of the High Priestess Tamenisa Larutas.
Sinara Faeren	Youngest daughter of Lotis and Matila. Sister of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. She is called the <i>Golden Keeper</i> by the Tinavar.
Sitenayla Navaresa	Acolyte in the entourage of the Lady Utalya Revan. Older sister of Redina. She and Redina like to cook.
Soshia Marusen	Princess and heir apparent of House Marusen. Daughter of Lord Amandel Marusen and the young Lady Maralena Novesta. Stepdaughter of Lusina Marusen. Former love interest of Vilam. Worked as a maid in the service of Menirel and Culisa Sitenan under the alias Soshia Rotasen. Killed in Nadil by her stepmother Lusina.
Soshia Rotasen	Alias of the young Lady Soshia Marusen
Sutanay	Selianian: <i>Wandering Dove</i> . Eldest of the Demantar. First appearance in the Prologue of <i>The Emissary</i> .
Tal	see Vatal Penates
Talas	see Vatal Penates
Talenon Novesta	Son of Lord Merelan Novesta and Lady Tsenera. Brother of Maralena, Pirena, and Davina. Priest of the Videsian Order and head of Western Intelligence.
Talonis	Husband of Zirsha. Former employer of Maridya. Murdered by Nemara.
Tamenisa Larutas	High Priestess of the Selanian Order on Chyoradan. Friend and protégée of Silana Tolares Brannon. Friend of Melina and Tura. Usually called Nisa.
Tanola Penates	Sister of the High Priest Vordalin Penates. Protégée and sister of the late High Priestess Halita Penates. Acolyte in the Lady Utalya Revan's entourage and the Lady's deputy chief of staff.
Tavita Marusen	Princess of House Marusen. Daughter of Lord Amendel Marusen and Lady Lusina. Sister of Soshia, Cetila, and Varan. Former captain of the Crimson Brigade. Covert operative for Western Alliance intelligence. Mistress of Corsen Divestelan. Charge of the Nursemaids. It seems Tavita is responsible for the death of her brother Varan, for which Varan's fiancée Dena Cemasena is seeking revenge. Tavita's sister Cetila is also very angry with her for killing their brother.
Tecelas	Husband of Jalisa. Owner of the Old Lantern, a well-known tavern in Tolares known for its southern specialties.
Theresa Ferris	Daughter of Don and Julie Ferris.
Tilantes	Elder of the Advisory Council. Protégé of Elder Yadez and mentor of Elder Yonatan.

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Tilya	see Natilya Revan
Tinasa	Pet name (Tinasa means “little blossom”) of Novantina Satural, often used by members of her family such as her sister Vodana.
Torvos Faeren	Son of Lotis and Matila. Brother of Catyana. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes.
Traveler	Called <i>Covatal</i> in Selanian. The prophesied Divine Emissary of the Selanian Order. Nova believes Vilam is the Covatal.
Tsenera Covatinalis Novesta	Her Excellency Lady Tsenera Novesta. Wife of Merelan. Mother of Mara (Maralena), Talenon, Pira (Pirena), and Davina. Enchantress and sister of the Supreme Enchantress Lusina Marusen. Adoptive daughter of Lord Caldaran.
Tura Baral	Wife of Congressman Fores Baral. Friend of Melina Tolares Penates and Tamenisa Larutas.
Tuval Cemasena	Prince of House Cemasena. Brother of Dena. Operative of the Resistance in Divestelan.
Uraten Catanin	Corporal of the Western Alliance.
Utalya Bevelas Revan	Her Excellency Lady Utalya Revan. Widow of Lord Emiles Revan. Cousin of Folan Revan and aunt of Natilya Revan. Protégée of the former High Priestess Otisa Deronas. One of the last High Priestesses during the decline of the Millennial Peace and mentor of Novantina Satural. Her maiden name was Utalya Bevelas. Sister of Lord Tilon Bevelas, Ilanya, and Renestal.
Varan Marusen	Prince of House Marusen. Brother of Soshia, Cetila, and Tavita. Covert operative of the Resistance in Divestelan. Former fiancé of Dena Cemasena. Killed by his sister, Tavita Marusen, in 1522 TC after his cover was compromised.
Vatal Penates	Adopted son of Regas and Novisya. Also known as Vatalas, Talas, or Tal.
Vechiles Divestelan	His Excellency Lord Vechiles Divestelan. Husband of Ilanya. Father of Corsen, Gevinesa, and Yanita. General and founder of the Western Alliance. Love interest of Lusina Marusen
Venora Tolares	Adopted daughter of Lord Cavan Tolares and Lady Oventya. Sister of Chyardal. Deaconess of the Selanian Order. Friend of Vodana and possible love interest of Vilam.
Vilam Tavasín	Main character of the story, along with Nova and Catyana. Took his name from the Nadil town sign. Nova believes he may be the Covatal.
Vilasan	Selianian: <i>Bright One</i> . High Scholar of the Elinar. Later known as Nevilan.
Vinesa	see Gevinesa Divestelan
Vira	see Zetavira Faeren
Vodana Satural	Her Excellency, Lady Vodana Satural. Sister of Nova and friend

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	of Venora. A renowned musician during her time.
Vordalin Penates	Prince of House Penates. High Priest before and during the Selanian Civil War. Brother of Tanola and the late High Priestess Halita Penates. Former fiancé and love interest of Ilanya Divestelan and father of Natilya (with Ilanya).
Yadez	Elder of the Advisory Council. Protégé of Elder Eluset and mentor of Elder Tilantes.
Yanita Divestelan	Princess of House Divestelan. Youngest daughter of Lord Vechiles Divestelan and Lady Ilanya. Sister of Gevinesa and Corsen. Half-sister of Natilya.
Yonatan	Elder of the Selanian Order. Protégé of Elder Tilantes.
Zanatol Bevelas	Third-degree cousin and first husband of Lady Utalya Bevelas Revan.
Zetara Rotasen	Personal handmaiden of Gevinesa Divestelan. Sister of Eratis. Killed during a retaliatory strike by the Black Guard in the spring of 1524 TC.
Zetavira Faeren	Daughter of Lotis and Matila. Sister of Catyana. Usually called Vira. The family is characterized by golden hair and blue eyes. She is a very talented musician and singer.
Zirsha	Wife of Talonis. Killed by Nemara.

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Appendix N: Index of Persons (by Family Name or House)

This index lists all the names in the previous appendix by last name or House. Other names used for each person are listed in parenthesis. For details on each person please consult the previous appendix.

A

B

Bailey, Gregg

Baral, Fores

Baral, Tura

Bevelas, Renestal

Brannon, Philip

Brannon, Silana (Tolares)

C

Caldaran, Lord

Catanin, Arena

Catanin, Mavena

Catanin, Paloren

Catanin, Picanas

Catanin, Sheletas

Catanin, Uraten

Cemasena, Denadya (Dena)

Cemasena, Gelanes

Cemasena, Gerten

Cemasena, Lutrisya

Cemasena, Maralena (Mara)

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Cemasena, Tuval

Cilenas, Netira

D

Deronas, Otisa

Divestelan, Corsen

Divestelan, Gevinesa (Vinesa)

Divestelan, Ilanya (Bevelas)

Divestelan, Vechiles

Divestelan, Yanita

E

F

Faeren, Catyana (Caty, Catya)

Faeren, Lotis

Faeren, Matila

Faeren, Minora (Mina)

Faeren, Sinara (Sina)

Faeren, Torvos

Faeren, Zetavira (Vira)

G

Gisatena, Fatasa

Gisatena, Jalisa

H

Hevaros, Rayan

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I

Isolatas, Magarena

J

K

L

Larutas, Tamenisa (Nisa)

M

Marten, Bill

Marten, Carol

Marusen, Amendel

Marusen, Cetila

Marusen, Lusina

Marusen, Soshia

Marusen, Tavita

Marusen, Varan

N

Navaresa, Livanes

Navaresa, Redina

Navaresa, Sitenayla

Novesta, Citenes

Novesta, Davina

Novesta, Maralena (Mara)

Novesta, Merelan

Novesta, Pirena (Pira)

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Novesta, Talenon

Novesta, Tsenera

O

P

Penates, Halita

Penates, Melina (Tolares)

Penates, Norila

Penates, Tanola

Penates, Vatal (Tal, Talas)

Penates, Vordalin

Q

R

Revan, Emiles

Revan, Folan

Revan, Natilya (Tilya)

Revan, Semanta (Vetena)

Revan, Utalya (Bevelas)

Rotasen, Eratis

Rotasen, Jerad

Rotasen, Soshia

Rotasen, Zetara

S

Satural, Elana

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Satural, Novantina (Nova)

Satural, Vodana

Sitenan, Culisa

Sitenan, Menirel

Sormay, Artanes

T

Tolares, Cavan

Tolares, Chyardal

Tolares, Melina (Penates)

Tolares, Oventya

Tolares, Pival

Tolares, Silana (Brannon)

Tolares, Venora

Tsimerel, Bejad

Tsimerel, Hyelisa

Tunilen, Normas

U

V

Venural, Cavara

Venural, Pirtas

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Appendix O: Index of Places

Name	Description
Bevelas	Town in the eastern provinces and on the Suviltan Highway. It is the seat of one of the Great Houses.
Caldaran	Town in the Covasin Mountains.
Catanin	Small town on the eastern slopes of the northern Covasin Mountains and seat of one of the minor houses.
Cemasena	Town in the western provinces and on the Suviltan Highway. It is the seat of one of the Great Houses.
Chyenesar	Lake, swamp, and moor region east of the Tyenar Mountains.
Chyoradan	Selanian: Heavenly Paradise. A new world promised to the Selani in case Piral was ever destroyed.
Covasin Mountains	The Covasins (Selanian for “impassable”) are a long and broad range of high mountains and mark the western border of the Suviltan Plateau. The highest peak is Mount Toradeh.
Covatinalis	Small, secluded town and highest inhabited location in the Covasin Mountains. Legend has it that it is the origin of the Enchantresses and the Order of the Novantan.
Divestelan	City at the feet of the Covasin Mountains. Capital of the western Suviltan provinces.
Elinas	Little town situated on the lake of the same name. It is under the political rule of Tolares and is governed by a mayor, who is the direct representative of Lord Tolares. Last major civilized stop before going into the southern wilderness or the Desert of Vortelan.
Faeren	Little town at the feet of the Covasins in the Plains of Tesalin. It is the seat of one of the minor houses.
Gisatena	Little town at the southern edge of the Suviltan Plateau and seat of one of the minor houses. Last settlement before going south into the Desert of Vortelan.
Halena Yazoral	Selanian: The Forbidden Planet. Earth, which constitutes the center of the universe for the Selani, has been placed out of bounds by the prophets.
Malentisa	Former capital of the Elinian provinces before the Cataclysm. Now lies in an outcrop of the Tyenar Mountains in the Desert of Vortelan.
Marusen	Town nestled on the eastern slopes of the Covasin Mountains and seat of one of the Great Houses.
Nadil	Little town between Tolares and Vetena on the Suviltan Highway. It is under the political rule of Tolares and is governed by a

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Name	Description
	mayor, who is the direct representative of Lord Tolares.
Navaren	The Northern Forests, which spread out from north of the Sea of Ventara to north of the Chyenesar. Legend has it that the Navaren is the home of the Tinavar, the Unicorns.
Navaresa	Town on the border of the eastern Suviltan provinces and gateway to the Navaren, the Northern Forests. Seat of a Minor House.
Novesta	Major township of the western Suviltan provinces on the Suviltan Highway. It is the seat of one of the Great Houses.
Peladin	Province west of the Sea of Ventara. Famous for its breeding farms of porodi (golden squirrels).
Penates	Little town in the eastern Suviltan provinces. It is the seat of one of the minor houses.
Pitaren	Little town in the western Suviltan provinces which is controlled by Lord Novesta and therefore has a mayor.
Revan	Town in the eastern provinces and seat of one of the Great Houses.
Rotasen	Small town in the Covasin Mountains. It is under the political rule of Marusen and is governed by a mayor, who is the direct representative of Lord Marusen.
Satural	Little town in the eastern Suviltan provinces on the lake of the same name. It is the seat of one of the minor houses.
Sumelan	Prairie south of the Tonisian Plateau.
Suvilta	City on the Suviltan Plateau between Elinas and Revan.
Suviltan Plateau	Large, fertile plateau ledged between the Covasin Mountains in the west, the Tyenar Mountains in the east, the Navaren (Northern Forests) in the north, and the Desert of Vortelan in the south.
Suviltan River	River that flows out of the Covasin Mountains, into Lake Divestelan, and on to Lake Elinas.
Tesalin, Plains of	Plains west of the Covasin Mountains and south of the Sea of Ventara. Houses the crater of the asteroid that fell during the Cataclysm. Famous for its Tesalian steel and distinct breed of chyevi.
Tolares	Main economic center of Piral. Largest city of the eastern Suviltan provinces. Seat of one of the Great Houses.
Tonisia	City on the Tonisian Plateau.
Tonisian Plateau	Large, fertile plateau (similar to the Suviltan) ledged between the Covasin Mountains in the west, the Tyenar Mountains in the east, the Sumelan (Prairie) in the south, and the Desert of Vortelan in the north.

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Name	Description
Toradeh, Mount	Highest peak of the Covasin Mountains. Measured at 41,425 feet (12,726 meters). Its stones were used to build the City of Divestelan.
Travis	City of Light. Legislative Capital of Piral located at the foot of Mount Vaduras (Tyenar Mountains). Seat of the Advisory Council of the Selanian Order.
Tyenar Mountains	Mountain range that is not quite as high and broad as the Covasins, but has very majestic peaks (Tyenar is Selanian for <i>majestic</i>). The highest peak is Mount Vaduras.
Vaduras, Mount	Highest peak of the Tyenar Mountains. Measured at 30,071 feet (9,238 meters).
Ventara, Sea of	Largest body of water on the planet Piral. Legend has it that it is the home of the Ventaren, the Mermaids.
Vetena	Town in the eastern provinces and seat of one of the Great Houses. It is on the Suviltan Highway.
Vortelan	Desert region south of the Suviltan Plateau. Once a fertile region containing the Elinian capital, Malentisa.

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Appendix P: Maps of Piral

Maps on the following pages:

1. Map of the northwestern hemisphere
2. Map of the area surrounding the Suviltan Plateau
3. Map of the Suviltan Plateau

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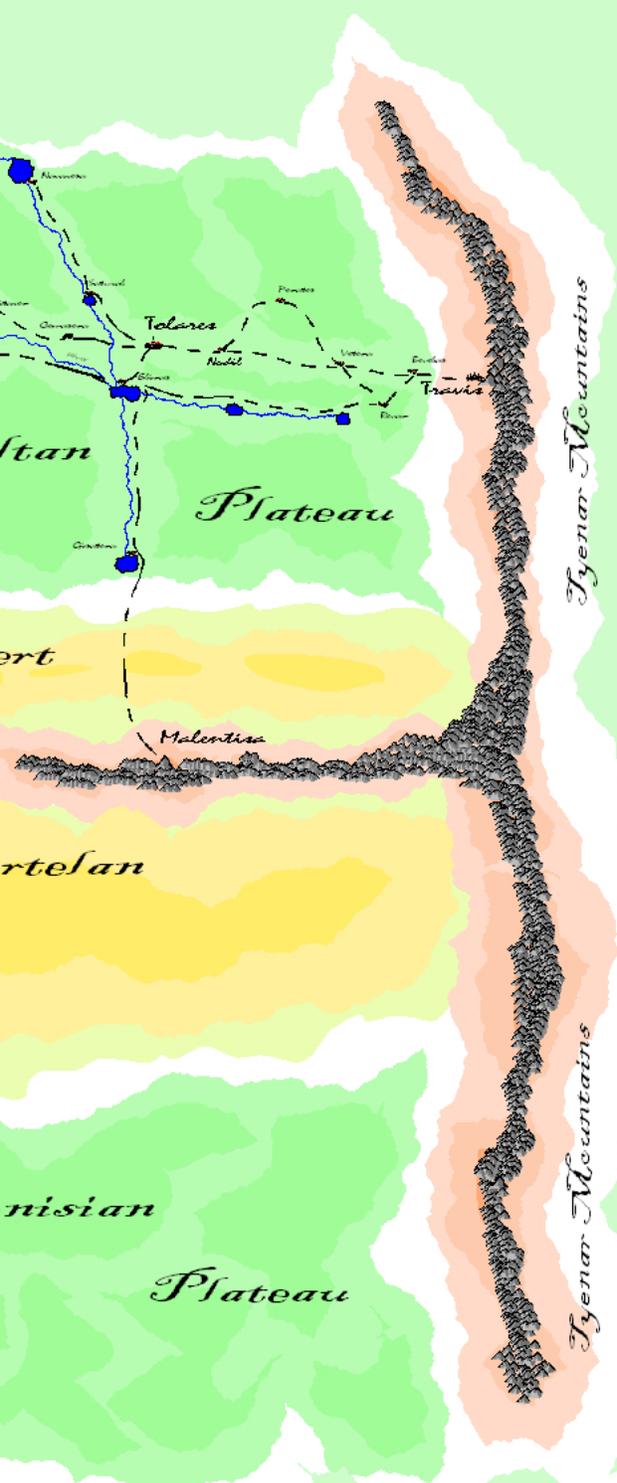
For readers of the electronic version (PDF):

Each of the following maps is spread across two pages. For that reason, they are best viewed in dual page mode, i.e. you see the even page number on the left and the odd page on the right, as with a real book. That way, you always have the entire map in full view.

If you are using Adobe Acrobat Reader, select View > Page Display > Two Page View. You might also need to check the option “Show Cover Page in Two Page View.”

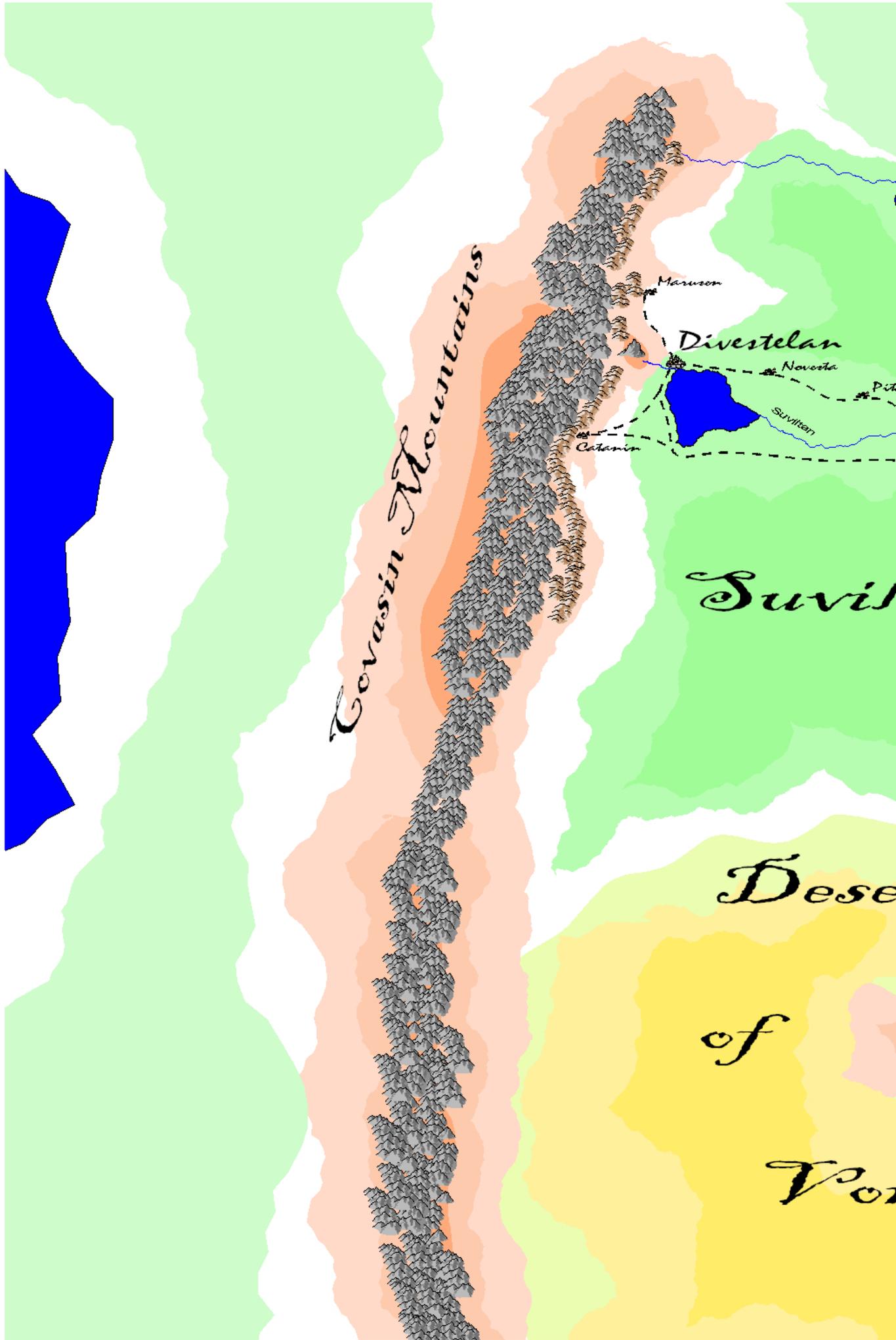


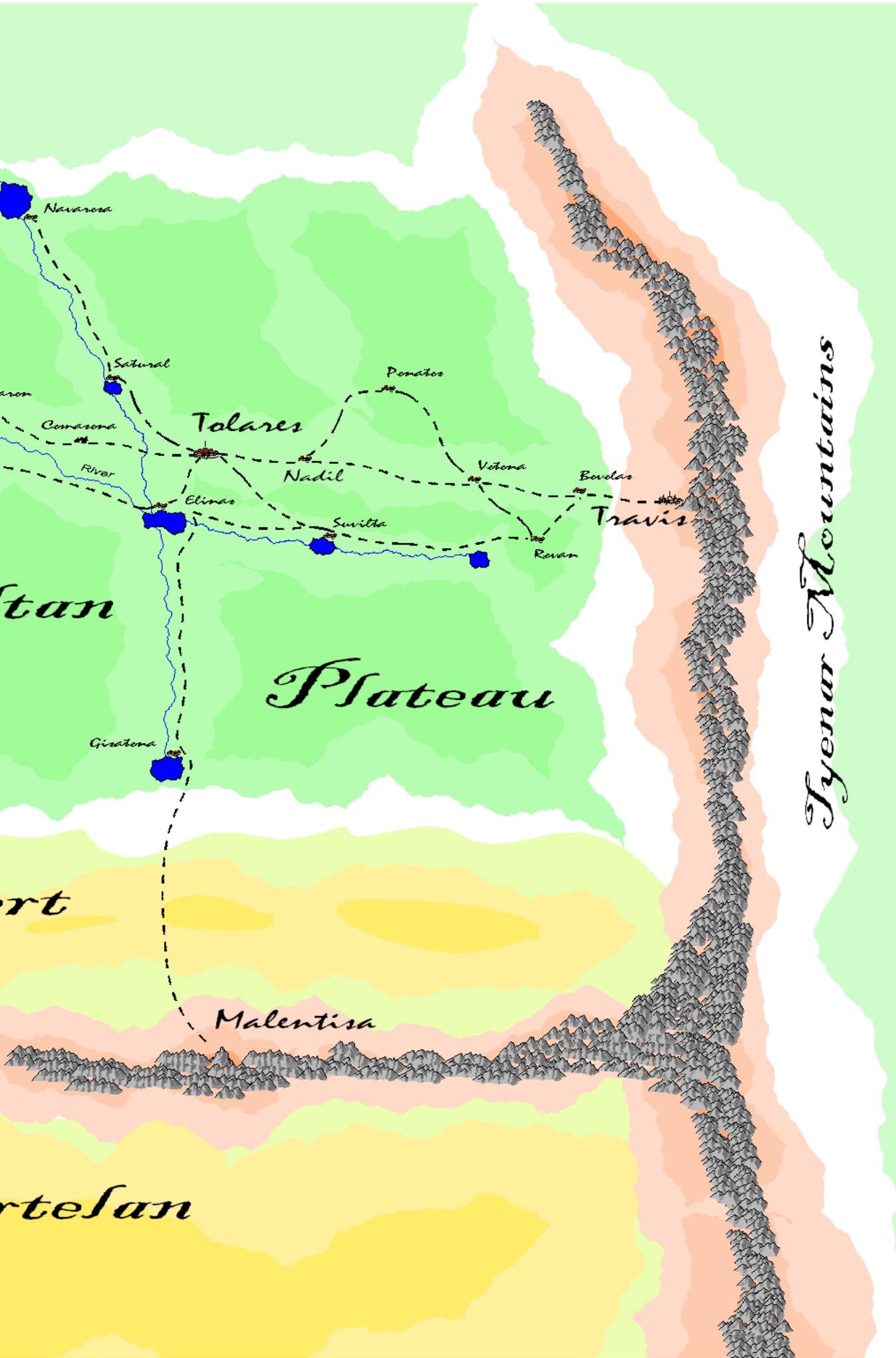
Tavaren



Chyenesar

Sumesan





Lyenar Mountains

Tolares

Plateau

Travis

Malentisa

Navarosa

Satural

Pomasos

Nadil

Votona

Bevelas

Swilla

Revan

Elinas

Comarona

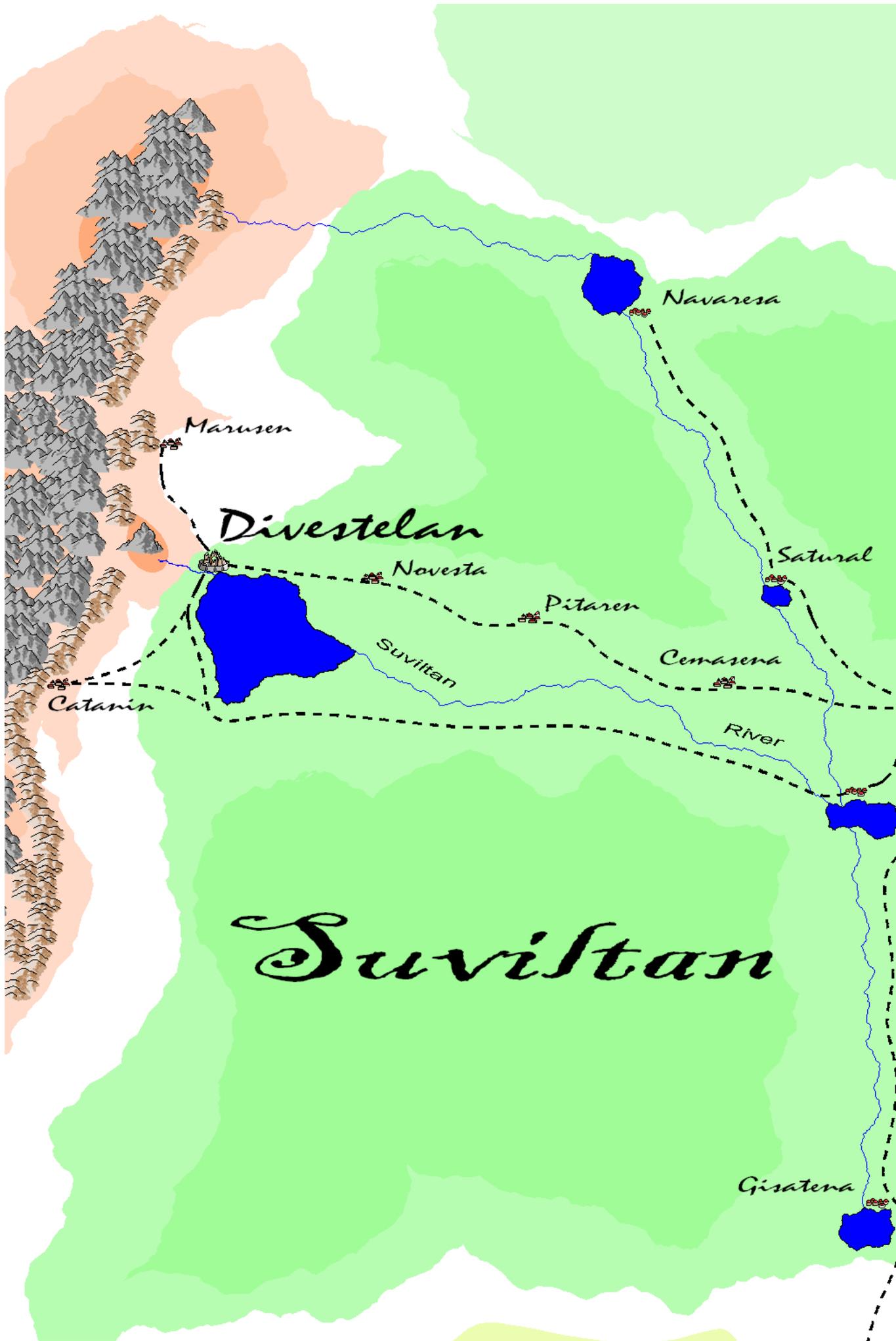
River

Giratona

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Divestelan

Suvistan

Navaresa

Marusen

Satural

Novesta

Pitaren

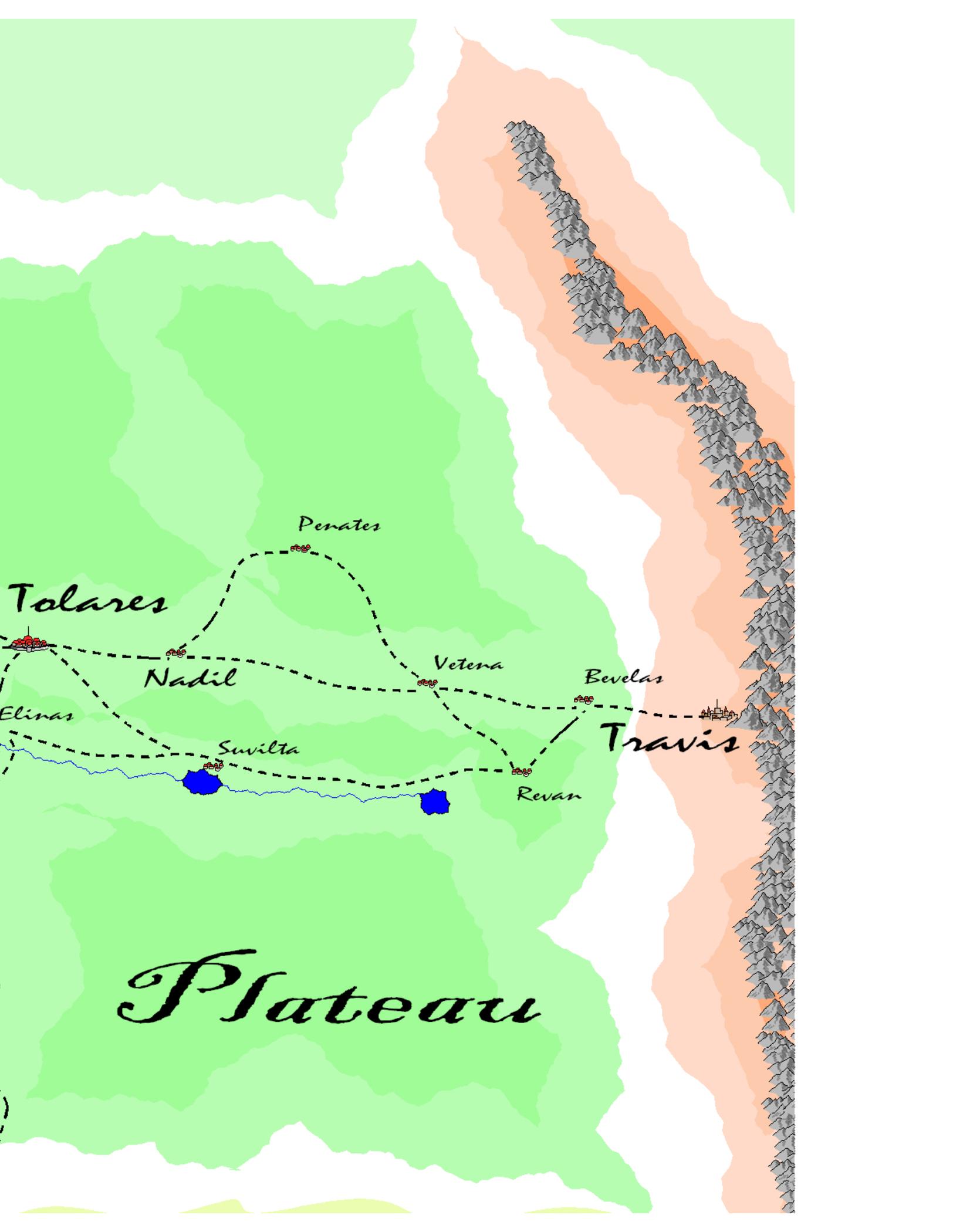
Cemaserá

Suviltan

Catanin

River

Gisatena



Plateau

Tolares

Nadil

Penates

Vetena

Bevelas

Travis

Elinas

Suwila

Revan